



Parenting and support

gathering evidence • informing action



Informing service provision

The research summarised in this briefing will be used by voluntary and public sector agencies to assess what action needs to be taken based on the evidence presented. About Families will work with these agencies to develop, implement and evaluate action plans based on the needs they identify.

Acknowledgements

This briefing, and report it is based on, were researched and prepared by Karen Mountney for the *About Families* team, managed by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, with input and advice from Parenting across Scotland, Capability Scotland and an Evidence Review Panel of experts in the fields of families and disability:

Susie Fitton, Senior Policy Adviser, Capability Scotland

Dr Jeni Harden, Centre for Population Health Sciences, University of Edinburgh

Elsbeth Maloney, Senior Policy and Consultancy Manager, Capability Scotland

Clare Simpson, Project Manager, Parenting Across Scotland

Research with families affected by disability was carried out by Scotinform on behalf of *About Families*.

About Families supports voluntary and statutory sector organisations to develop evidence-based services to meet the changing needs of parents and families, including those with disabilities.

About Families evidence reports and briefings can be downloaded free from

www.aboutfamilies.org.uk

If you use any of the evidence in our reports to inform your services, we would like to know about it. Please contact karen.mountney@ed.ac.uk.

If you think *About Families* could support you to use these research findings in your service planning, please contact Karen Mountney at karen.mountney@ed.ac.uk.

About Families is a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Parenting across Scotland and Capability Scotland.

Parenting and support

Given the importance of support for parenting, *About Families* asked what research could tell us about how families seek, experience, and manage support from friends, family and formal services. The full report (with references) is available at www.aboutfamilies.org.uk.

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What is parenting support for?

What families define as problems or needs is often different from service providers' definitions. Family support professionals tend to focus on emotional support and behavioural change, whereas service users are more likely to highlight issues of income maintenance, childcare, leisure and education. Parents see professionals as providing practical support around specific areas of children's lives (such as education and health) rather than the broader skills-based support addressed by parenting classes.

Accessing professional family support can be associated with fear, stigma, and parental failure, and people weigh up costs and benefits of seeking support. Parents can be concerned over issues of privacy, independence, and being seen as unable to cope. Seeking help 'outside' the family can be seen as for severe problems only, and a last resort.

People deal with stresses in a variety of ways which may not involve talking about them. Men are less likely to confide in others about emotional matters while women tend to express concern about over-burdening others. People can feel ambivalent about speaking to strangers about personal issues.

Social support from family and friends

Effective social support is essential for successful parenting and can buffer the effect of stresses and difficulties arising from being a parent or other areas of life. However, the ways in which social support can help parents manage are complicated, and an absence of

Key points

- **What support is for:** how families define their own problems or needs can be different from service providers' definitions. People weigh up the costs and benefits of seeking support, and using professional family support is sometimes felt or seen as failing by some parents.
- **Social support:** having effective social support is essential for successful parenting, helping parents to deal with stresses and difficulties that arise within family or other areas of life. However, an absence of social support does not always predict problems.
- **Networks of support:** parents in lower-income households, in social housing, or living in areas of high deprivation are less likely to have satisfactory networks and have lower levels of support.
- **Family and friends:** parents see support from family and friends as the natural first port of call. However this can be variable and can bring its own problems. Not wanting to impose, considering grandparents too infirm to care for children, lack of money, negative attitudes from families, having complex support requirements, and life events such as separation are all important factors in the level of support available.
- **Service delivery:** services and information are most effective for parents when they are joined-up, straightforward, responsive to different circumstances, abilities and backgrounds, build on what parents already know, and delivered through trusting and supportive relationships.
- **Barriers to using services:** families can face a range of practical, material, social and cultural barriers to accessing and engaging with services. Families affected by disability, those from minority ethnic communities, and fathers, can face particular barriers.
- **Family context:** parents generally want to receive help if it is appropriate to their needs. Most barriers to engaging with services are not of parents' making; numerous factors, such as stress, poverty, ill-health, and social isolation, can combine to undermine parents' involvement in services.
- **Formal support with a social element:** including a social aspect to services, like group-based support, can help to increase parents' levels of informal support and break down barriers to formal service use. However, combining social and formal support is complex, and not appropriate for all families.
- **What do we know about supporting parents and families?** Much of the existing research on engaging parents in formal services is from the perspective of service providers rather than those using services. Evaluations of services often assess attendance and completion rates rather than outcomes for parents and families. There is little research which explores the characteristics or perspectives of non-service users. It is not clear how social support can be best enhanced for those parents who need it. Most research relating to parenting and support focuses on white, non-disabled, women. Generally, different family forms are not referred to.

support does not always predict problems. For some families though, an absence of social support can lead to emotional, mental and physical ill health, which may impact on parents' ability to care for both themselves and their children.

Parents in lower-income households, in social housing, or living in areas of high deprivation are less likely to have satisfactory networks and have lower levels of support. Low-income minority ethnic and lone mothers in particular tend to have smaller social support networks.

Parents see support from family and friends as the natural first port of call. Most parents receive support from their own parents, mainly in the form of childcare and buying things for their children.

Family contact is more frequent, and relationships stronger, when parents live near their extended families. Of grandparents, the mother's parents (and particularly her mother) usually have more contact than other grandparents.

Friends are an important source of practical support and advice and parents tend to make friends with other parents. New parents who do not have or make friends with people who also have children can become isolated. Postnatal support groups are particularly important, but are often for mothers which can exclude new fathers and inhibit them from developing similar networks.

Support from family and friends is neither static nor problem-free. Some parents do not want to impose, consider grandparents too infirm to care for children, or perceive advice as interference. For some, lack of material resources, such as transport, can mean family are difficult to reach. Life events such as separation from a partner or becoming a carer can destabilise social support networks. Families affected by disability can experience negative attitudes from informal support networks, and specialist support needs can influence the level of support others can provide.

Women are more likely to generate, organise and maintain social support networks, often with other mothers. However, we need to know more about how fathers access and experience social support in parenting.

Support from formal services

Engaging parents in services is about more than just recruitment. Engagement is a process, comprising:

- 'getting' parents (persuading parents to attend the service in the first place);
- 'keeping' them (persuading them to attend sessions regularly and complete the course); and
- 'engaging' parents (making it possible for them to participate actively with what the service has to offer).

There is no one single method for achieving meaningful involvement.

Parents generally want to receive help if it is appropriate to their needs. Most barriers to engaging with services are

Definitions of support

Support for parents comes from a variety of sources. Often this is broadly grouped into:

Informal: from family, friends and neighbours, arising from parents' own pre-existing 'natural' networks.

Formal: organised services, often needs-led, and provided by the statutory sector alone or in partnership with the voluntary sector.

Social support: refers to social relationships with both individuals and organisations that have the potential to provide emotional and practical support, and is known to play a significant role in parenting. Generally, the type of social support referred to in this briefing relates to family and friends (informal support). Where social support is received through organisations, this is referred to as 'formal social support'.

Barriers to inclusion: refers to factors about parents or the context in which they are living which make them less likely to access services.

Successful engagement: refers to the process by which services reach out to parents and continue to provide a service to them over time.

not of parents' making; numerous factors, such as stress, poverty, ill-health, and social isolation, can combine to undermine parents' involvement in services.

Parents prefer joined-up services, and simple service delivery which offers straightforward practical tips and skills. Services are more effective when they respond to the different needs of different parents.

A 'strengths based' approach, which sees parents as the experts on their children and accentuates existing positives, can support successful engagement.

Group work is often well received, particularly by mothers, but is not appropriate for all parents. Groups can be difficult to sustain both during and beyond the intervention. Involving both parents can help - but not always in the same group.

Advice and information is more effective when responsive to different circumstances, abilities and backgrounds. Parents prefer information to be related to their individual circumstances, and information and support that can build upon what they had already tried, takes account of their own beliefs and preferences, and enhances their parenting capacity, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach.

Trusting and supportive relationships between staff and parents can be more important than sharing attributes such as gender or ethnicity. Having said that, services which appear to reflect parents' own world can help to encourage them to attend in the first place.

BME families: families from black and minority ethnic communities can face a range of barriers to accessing services, including language, fear of stigmatisation, and services that are not compatible with their own culture.

Disabled parents: the needs of disabled adults who previously required little support can change when they become parents. Support offered to disabled parents is not always appropriate to their needs, which can increase pressure and stress. For example, paid carers may not be suitably trained, or the time allocation may be inflexible. In addition, refusing one form of support can mean families are not eligible to receive an alternative. This can influence decisions over use of services in the future.

Parents of disabled children: some parents of disabled children find that developing strategies for communicating with professionals (such as being assertive) can help them to access the kind of support they need. This means that some parents feel more able to communicate effectively than others.

Fathers: a range of individual, social and institutional factors can hinder men's engagement with family services. Many parenting services are aimed at mothers, with many fathers viewing mainstream preventive services as not relevant to them. The overwhelmingly female environment (both staff and service users) can also be off-putting. Men may not access information on available support directly. For example, women are more likely than men to be in places where they would find out about opportunities in their local family centres. Men and women may have different needs in relation to childrearing support, have different coping strategies and communicate in different ways. It is not sufficient, however, to generalise services for men as they too have different needs. For example, young fathers from vulnerable backgrounds can feel excluded from parenting support by virtue of their age as well as gender.

Social aspects of formal support

Parents who use formal services less do not seem to make up any shortfall by relying more heavily on informal support. Disadvantaged parents – particularly those who are unemployed or in lower socio-economic groups – are significantly more likely to have overall lower support.

Formal social support tailored to parents' needs (such as befriending schemes, home visiting or small, professionally facilitated groups) may help to increase parents' levels of informal support and break down barriers to formal service use. Those parents without a network of family and friends, and those who do not engage with parent support groups or similar, could be identified at assessment.

Combining social support and formal support is complex, and different families have different needs. Strengthening social networks may not be appropriate for all families - networks can be unsupportive as well as supportive, and not all parents are able to sustain networks by reciprocating support. Some researchers have questioned the extent to which meaningful social support can be replicated in formal support.

What could help? Research suggests that good practice would include:

Service delivery:

- A holistic approach which recognises family circumstances.
- A strength-based approach.
- Support which is joined-up, individualised, and builds on existing knowledge, rather than 'one size fits all'.
- Trusting and supportive relationships.
- Ways of addressing the range of practical barriers which can prevent participation in services include providing transport; running services at convenient times; using comfortable, non-stigmatising, welcoming, accessible and conveniently located venues; providing a crèche; promoting services; and reducing costs.

BME families: recruitment strategies and interventions that are meaningful to parents from different communities; recognition of cultural variation both within and between ethnic groups, and of the full range of barriers that may face BME families.

Disabled parents: timely, accurate and accessible information; and responsive, flexible, culturally appropriate and imaginative support which fits in with, rather than takes over, family life.

Parents of disabled children: above all, for people to see the child first and the condition after.

Fathers: creating 'male-friendly' environments, delivering services in ways which reflect men's communication and coping strategies, recognising that different fathers have different needs, contacting fathers directly rather than through their partners, and representing fathers in resources developed for 'parents', can help to engage men in mainstream support services.

Social aspects of formal support: exploring meaningful social support during the assessment process, and tailoring support to families' circumstances.

Research on parenting and support

This briefing is based on a longer report. A range of publications were drawn on, including literature reviews of existing research, qualitative and quantitative research findings, Scottish and UK Government reports, research and reports by the third sector, as well as statistical data. Also, a survey and interviews were conducted with disabled parents and parents of disabled children.

A breakdown of the research used, and references, are available in the full report. Download it free at www.aboutfamilies.org.uk.