



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

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Overview

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

- 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

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

- 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



Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families

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

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

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



Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 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

- 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
