

## Supporting parents of teenagers

*A guide for practitioners on supporting the parents of teenagers, including the latest research about teenage development and further resources. Written by Dr John Coleman OBE, Clinical Psychologist.*

### Introduction

Support for parents of teenagers can play a critical role in helping families cope with difficult situations, and ensuring that problems first identified in the adolescent years do not spiral out of control. Yet today funding for many programmes is being cut, and practitioners who have built up expertise and knowledge of the field over the last decade are having to find other work.

In Britain we have seen the development of many exciting new initiatives, as well as the development of new materials. There has been much learning from research on the implementation of interventions, and this has enabled organisations to plan their work and to render it more effective. It is incumbent on us all to ensure that this learning is not lost in the coming years.

Since the late 1990s there has been a significant increase in the range of support available for parents of teenagers, and there is greater recognition today of the role that interventions can play. However there are many questions that are raised by these activities, including questions about different types of support, the appropriate settings for this to be delivered, the differences in need between parents of teenagers and parents of younger children, and issues to do with professional recognition and training.

How can we characterise the changes that have taken place over the last decade or so where support for parents of teenagers is concerned? The first thing to note is that there is today a greater recognition that parents of teenagers matter. They matter just as much as parents of young children, only they matter in a different way. The engagement and involvement of parents during the teenage years has critical implications for outcomes in education, health, self-esteem and future employment. The acknowledgement of this fact is one important change that has underpinned the growth in programmes of support.

A second change has been the increase in available programmes in the UK, and the growth in the numbers of practitioners with skills to deliver

programmes. These increases have led to debates about which programmes are most effective, and to concerns over professional accreditation.

It has to be noted that much of the impetus for the introduction of programmes for parents of teenagers in the UK has come from the youth justice sector. A concern with anti-social behaviour on the part of the Blair Government from 1997 onwards led many youth offending teams to develop expertise in this field. The introduction of Parenting Orders and Parenting Contracts, and the need for statutory services to be able to provide programmes of support, has had a significant impact on the field, and has undoubtedly led to innovation and to the development of a skilled workforce. This has had both good and bad consequences, a topic to which we will return below.

Two other changes that have occurred over the last decade may be mentioned. In the first place new research evidence on adolescent development has become available, and this has provided important insights with relevance to parenting. This research evidence includes, for example, new knowledge about the adolescent brain, and important findings about monitoring and supervision. The second change that can

be identified is the accumulation of evidence on what works where parenting interventions are concerned. Studies over the last ten years have identified issues to do with access, parental preferences, the involvement of young people themselves, and many other aspects of the delivery of support. The field has taken a considerable leap forward, and it is important to ensure that this learning is not lost for future generations of parents.

## Advances in the understanding of the adolescent years

There have been some notable advances in the understanding of adolescent development in recent years. This has been partly to do with developments in neuroscience, but partly also to do with some outstanding research by social and developmental psychologists. These advances are of great importance for parents, and thus also for practitioners. Let us start with the brain. It used to be assumed that most of the major developments in the brain occurred in early childhood. However with the assistance of evidence from the use of scanning techniques, we now know that this is not the case, and it has become clear that the brain goes through a period of rapid change and development from puberty onwards. Many parts of the brain which have relevance for cognition and for emotional development alter significantly between the ages of 11 and 15, and this process of change has marked effects on behaviour. Much of the emotional immaturity seen in early adolescence can be more easily understood when we recognise what is happening in the brain at this time.

There have been some other advances too relating to the physical development of young people. One good example of this is our increasing knowledge of the way adolescent sleep patterns are affected by hormonal changes at this time. The hormone that has an impact on when we get sleepy at night is melatonin. Research in the last decade has shown that melatonin levels do not rise in the same way for teenagers as they do for adults. In the evening levels of melatonin rise more slowly in young people, meaning that it takes them longer to become sleepy. Thus there is a physical reason why young people are not necessarily keen to go to bed at night, and it is important for parents to be aware of this.

In the area of family functioning an example of ground-breaking research is illustrated by studies of monitoring and supervision. In the early stages of programme development it was generally accepted that if parents could be encouraged to be better at monitoring and supervising their teenagers this could lead to a reduction in anti-social behaviour. However research in Sweden showed clearly that activities such as monitoring and supervision depend as much on the young person as they do on the parents. Thus it proved to be the case that the level of parental monitoring and supervision in adolescence was determined by how communicative the young person was, and how trust between parent and child had developed before the teenage years began. This led researchers to focus on the two-way relationship, and to underline the importance of understanding how both parent and teenager contribute to the ongoing nature of the interaction.

The notion of the two-way nature of relationships has led to a number of research initiatives. One such theme has been to do with information management. What is meant here is how young people manage the flow of information between themselves and their parents. This has proved a fruitful area of research, and has opened up questions about how young people choose what to tell and what to hold back. It has also led on to research on parents' beliefs about what is known as "the right to know". Not surprisingly there are differences in attitudes between parents and teenagers about what parents are entitled to know. This is important for understanding potential conflicts in the family, but it is also important because it offers an avenue of discussion around extremely sensitive issues, such as health, friendships, sexual relationships and so on. More research in these areas will undoubtedly be helpful in improving relationships between parents and teenagers.

It will be apparent that findings like this have implications for the content of programmes for parents of teenagers. Programmes need to be emphasising the fact that communication goes both ways, and that the role of the young person is a key component in developing effective parenting. This research on monitoring and supervision has led on to other important insights, such as knowledge about how young people actively plan and manage the flow of information that gets to

parents. These examples are only a small sample of the new knowledge that has become available from recent research. This knowledge can serve as a central resource for practitioners, and can help make parenting programmes interesting and relevant to all parents, no matter what the type of intervention.

## **New programmes, types of support and the evidence base**

It is noteworthy that in Britain 15 years ago there were very few programmes available for practitioners wishing to work with parents of this age group. When it became apparent that there was a need to develop such programmes, central government, as well as local commissioners, turned to the United States and to Australia, where there were well-developed programmes with an evidence base. Thus Triple P from Australia, and Incredible Years and Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (both from the USA), were identified as the “gold standard”, and funding was made available for training programmes which would build a workforce of practitioners capable of delivering these programmes.

However, as many commentators have noted, this approach has had its limitations. In the first place the evidence base had been developed in contexts far removed from the situation in the UK, and there were questions as to whether the material was appropriate and relevant to communities here. Secondly, in spite of the training programmes, not all practitioners liked the inflexibility required to maintain what was known as programme fidelity, and many in the field modified and altered the programmes to suit local need. Thirdly there were a number of practitioners here in the UK who were developing programmes and materials based on local knowledge and experience. Because there was not as yet an evidence base for these home-grown programmes they did not receive support from the National Academy of Parenting Practitioners established by central government. This led to resentment among practitioners who wanted to use their own programmes, or to use programmes developed by colleagues who were familiar with the needs of their clientele.

Another aspect of this situation is that support can be delivered in many different forms. Much of the

discussion around parenting support assumes that this will be delivered in group-based programmes, usually packaged as a series of weekly sessions. However there are many disadvantages to this format, and research on parent attitudes indicates that not all parents want this type of support. Some are resistant to discussing their problems in a group setting, and would prefer either one-to-one sessions, or to have materials that they can take home and digest in private. Groups also have other limitations, especially if they run for six or eight weeks. Attendance can be patchy, leading to a different mix of people attending each session. One or two dominant individuals can influence the direction of the group, and inhibit others from participating. There may be concerns about gender, and questions about how to encourage fathers to attend whilst also managing conflict between partners. All these are practical problems which can be overcome, but in general there has been an over-emphasis on group-based support, and too little attention given to alternative forms of parenting support for this group of parents.

## **Key issues for practitioners**

There has been a significant amount of learning in the past decade in relation to the delivery of programmes. Questions of access have come high on the list of topics for consideration. We now no longer think we can put up a flier in the local secondary school advertising workshops on parenting, and hope that mothers and fathers will turn up. It is recognised today that preliminary work with parents is essential so that they can understand the goals of any programme and make a genuine commitment to attendance. There is also a recognition that the more disadvantaged the group of parents, the more challenging it will be to ensure regular attendance. Thus questions of transport, child care for younger children, and the competing demands of part-time jobs are all possible reasons as to why parents, however needy, may not be able to attend regularly over a period of time.

A further question has to do with where to site the sessions. It has often been considered that schools are good places to hold parenting programmes. Yet there is a group of parents for whom experiences of school can be a serious obstacle. If they themselves were school drop outs,

or if their school experience was a poor one, the last place they want to go back to is a classroom. They may have painful memories of teachers telling them they were no good, or of feeling like failures, and they carry these memories with them. Many parents have acknowledged that they would like to attend a parenting group, as long as it is not held in a school setting. Practitioners have become sensitive to these issues, and now look for alternative venues in which to hold their group sessions.

I mentioned earlier that much of the impetus for the development of group-based programmes has come about as a result of the youth justice legislation, and the availability of Parenting Orders and Parenting Contracts for parents whose teenagers have got into trouble or not been attending school. There has been an on-going debate about whether compulsory parenting programmes can have any benefit, and it has to be admitted that there remain many conflicting opinions on this issue. Some will offer examples of parents who were resistant at the beginning, but who, after two or three sessions, will say they wish they had had this opportunity at an earlier stage. Other practitioners argue that having a mix of compulsory and voluntary attendees is an effective way to work, as each group can learn from the other.

On the other hand there are many practitioners who dislike the idea of working with those who have been forced to attend by the courts. They believe that being “punished” for the behaviour of your teenager is not a good model upon which to base learning about parenting skills. One commentator talked of the “spoiled identities” of parents who had been given orders by the courts. This writer pointed out that to give an adult a Parenting Order simply makes them feel worse about themselves, adding to their low self-esteem and poor sense of self-efficacy. There is no easy answer to this conundrum. Compulsory orders and contracts remain one feature of the disposals available to the courts, and practitioners will almost certainly have to continue working in this environment.

## Conclusion

The provision of support for parents of teenagers should be an essential part of any parenting strategy. Whilst there will always be a focus on parenting in the early years, it is critical that support for parents of older children and teenagers is not forgotten. Research shows clearly that interventions at this stage can make a major difference to the way families respond to troubled and troubling behaviour on the part of teenagers. Future problems can be averted if parents receive support during a critical phase of the young person’s development. It is also the case that parenting styles and parental attitudes are a key factor in determining outcomes for adolescents. Spheres as widely diverse as educational achievement, health risk behaviour, self-concept and self-esteem, and peer group relationships are all affected by parenting. The more engaged and involved parents are with their teenagers, and the more interest and support they can offer, the better the outcomes. The provision of support for parents of teenagers is a rewarding and valuable field of work. There is much still to be learnt, but we have come a long way in the past 15 years. Let us not lose the initiative in this important area of parenting support.

## Training in programmes to support parents of teenagers

### ESCAPE and Parallel Lines

ESCAPE is an evidence-based parenting programme which offers a flexible framework for working with parents and young people, and it has been widely used with parents in the youth justice system and elsewhere. This programme promotes a problem-solving approach in helping parents establish a positive relationship with their teenagers. Escape is available from Training Together. [www.trainingtogether.org](http://www.trainingtogether.org)

### Take 3

Take 3 is a comprehensive evidence-based parenting programme for working with groups of parents of 10–18 year olds, including parents of at risk or vulnerable young people. It has also been used extensively for one-to-one interventions with hard to reach parents. Take 3 was originally created for use within the youth justice context and then developed over an eight-year period before publication in 2008, incorporating feedback from parents and facilitators so as to hone it down to 'what works'. It is used throughout the UK by Youth Offending and Early Intervention teams, social workers, health visitors and other parenting professionals.

**Contact:** [rosie.hill@btinternet.com](mailto:rosie.hill@btinternet.com)

**Tel:** 01865-374910 or 07789-060421

[www.take3parenting.co.uk](http://www.take3parenting.co.uk)

### Challenging Years!

Challenging Years! is a short and accessible parenting programme for parents of young people in early adolescence. Challenging Years! examines the changing relationships between parents and their children as they make the transition to secondary school. The programme encourages parents to consider the new challenges their children will face as they move towards greater independence, and is ideal for running in schools and community settings.

**Contact:** [cris.hoskin@sky.com](mailto:cris.hoskin@sky.com)

**Tel:** 07590 266849

## Resources

Coleman, J (2011) *The nature of adolescence: 4th Edition*. Routledge.

Hines, G and Baverstock, A (2005) *Whatever!: a down-to-earth guide to parenting teenagers*. Piatkus

Holt, A (2010) Managing spoiled identities: parents' experiences of compulsory parenting support programmes. *Children and Society*. 24. 413-423.

Kerr, M, Stattin, H and Engels, R (2008) *What can parents do? New insights into the role of parents in adolescent problem behaviour*. John Wiley.

Lewis, J (2011) Parenting programmes in England: policy development and implementation issues. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*. 33. 107-121.

Roker, D and Coleman, J (2007) *Working with parents of young people: research, policy and practice*. Jessica Kingsley.

### Resources for parents

#### Parentchannel.tv

Parentchannel.tv has over 50 videos about parenting teenagers covering topics such as drugs, self-harming, trusting teenagers, hormones, self-confidence and careers.

[www.parentchannel.tv](http://www.parentchannel.tv)

#### Young Minds

YoungMinds is the UK's leading charity committed to improving the emotional well being and mental health of children and young people. Their website has information about the symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of common mental health and behaviour concerns, especially for parents and carers. There are lots of links to information, resources and organisations who can help. They also have a free helpline for parents.

Parents' helpline 0808 802 5544

[www.youngminds.org.uk/](http://www.youngminds.org.uk/)