

## Current Research

### Benefits of community based parenting groups for hard-to-manage children: Findings from the Family Nurturing Network trial

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**Summary:** This study arose from Family Nurturing Network's (FNN) commitment to evidence based practice, and their wish for an independent randomised controlled trial of the effectiveness of their work. The FNN is an Oxford-based charity carrying out parenting interventions for troubled children and families. The organisation has adopted a well-known group parenting intervention from the USA – Webster-Stratton's 'Incredible Years' programme - because of its strong evidence base for helping children with antisocial behaviour. However, the FNN wanted to know if this intervention would be effective in the UK voluntary sector, delivered in local community settings, using well-trained but non-specialised staff.

Families seeking help with their child's behaviour problems can self-refer or be referred to the FNN by any professionals in contact with families, such as GPs, health visitors, social workers, child mental health teams. Families who agreed to take part in the research study were randomly allocated to join either the next FNN parenting group, or to go on the waiting list and begin a group 6 months later, the FNN's normal waiting list time.

The sample consisted of 76 families with 2-9 year old children, who were assessed in the home on three occasions:

1. at recruitment (before any families had participated in the intervention)
2. 6 months later (after the first group had finished)
3. follow up 18 months after recruitment

A range of assessments of child behaviour and parenting were used, including questionnaires and interviews with the parents, and independent direct observations of parent-child interaction in the home. The researchers visiting the homes were unaware of which families were receiving intervention. Well-established and validated methods were used for recording and measuring child behaviour, parenting and family well-being, including the Eyberg Child Behaviour Inventory (Robinson et al., 1980), Parenting Scale (Arnold et al., 1993), Parenting Sense of Competence (Johnston & Mash, 1989) Beck Depression Inventory (Beck, 1972), as well as observational measures of child behaviour problems, parent-child conflict, harsh parenting and positive interactions (Gardner, 1994; 2000; Gardner et al., 1999).

A wide range of families undertook the intervention: 47% were headed by a single parent; 5% by a single father; 69% of carers showed signs of at least mild depression; 64 % were on benefits and 60% in manual jobs, or unemployed. 18% of families had a parent in a professional job. In 74% of families, the child causing the most concern was a boy. The average behaviour problem scores in the children were extremely high. For example, their average score was 22 on the Eyberg problem scale, compared to a clinical cut off of 11, and a general population average of 4 or 5. This means that these children are at high risk for school failure and later offending.

The results showed that families who took part in the FNN parenting intervention improved significantly in many key areas,

compared to families on the waiting list. Thus parents reported improvements in behaviour problems of the referred child, and of their sibling, and in their perception of their parenting skills. According to independent observers, who were unaware of which families had attended parenting groups, children showed less non-compliance and negative behaviour (e.g. yelling, destructiveness, hitting) in the home. There were marked reductions in the amount of parent–child conflict, and parents were less likely to use negative discipline strategies. Parents were more likely to engage in positive interactions with their child (e.g. praise, joint play, positive discipline strategies). In addition, children spent more time in independent constructive play. Effect sizes ranged from 0.45 (medium) to 0.73 (large). The intervention did not appear to improve parental depression, but did improve parents' sense of confidence and effectiveness in their parenting. Importantly, these improvements were maintained at 18-month follow up.

Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with the intervention itself and with its effects. Thus 91% of parents liked the groups; 97% felt they had learned useful skills; 75% felt that their child's behaviour had improved; 88% felt it had helped with other family problems, in addition to helping the referred child. It is worth noting that social factors did not appear to predict behaviour problem outcomes. Thus families headed by a single parent, on benefits, or with manual jobs, were just as likely to do well as other families. Furthermore, families with younger children were just as likely to do well as those with older children, and the same applied to those with more severe versus less severe behaviour problems.

## **Conclusions**

This randomised controlled trial, involving 76 families, shows that the Family Nurturing Network parenting intervention is effective in improving child problem behaviour and parenting skills, and in helping parents to feel more confident in their parenting. Parent satisfaction is high. These findings are based on both parental report and direct observations in the home. Importantly, the effects are maintained at 18-month follow up. Results are similar to those found in trials in the US, and the findings suggest that it is possible within a voluntary sector organisation to provide accessible and very high quality practice, backed up by evidence from randomised controlled trials, which meets the needs of parents facing severe behaviour problems with their children. This study is an important addition to the growing body of evidence about what works for which families, and in particular for reducing the potential for antisocial behaviour in society, without stigmatising children.

A full report will be available soon and can be sent by e-mail to those interested.

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