

POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR IN THE EARLY YEARS

PERCEPTIONS OF STAFF, SERVICE PROVIDERS AND PARENTS IN MANAGING AND PROMOTING POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR IN EARLY YEARS AND EARLY PRIMARY SETTINGS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR IN THE EARLY YEARS:
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Aims and objectives

This research project explored perceptions of staff, service providers and parents in managing and promoting positive behaviour in early years and early primary settings in two local authorities. The project sought to identify the extent to which behaviour of young children, aged 0-6 years, is of concern to practitioners and service providers, and any relevant factors in terms of children's or family circumstances or conditions. The study explored the approaches and interventions that practitioners and service providers use to manage behaviour and promote pro-social behaviour, and the extent to which practitioners feel skilled and prepared for the issues children present in their setting. The same issues were explored in parallel with parents.

Key factors looked at in supporting children's positive behaviour included the specified areas of transitions between different types of provision or different stages of education; information sharing between professionals, and with families and multi-disciplinary/inter-agency working. Additionally the project team focused on some emerging factors through a twinned case study approach - a case study of early years settings, and a set of themed case studies which included under-threes, learning environments, children's well-being and involvement, inter-agency and multi-professional working, and transitions.

Four key questions were addressed:

- What is the extent and nature of behaviour difficulties among children in early years and early primary settings?
- What strategies do parents and practitioners use to promote positive behaviour?
- What practices can be identified by staff and parents as successful in relation to supporting transitions from nursery/pre-school to school?
- What effective approaches to training and support can be identified for staff in early years settings?

2. Methods

Two local authorities: Edinburgh City and North Lanarkshire, agreed to host this research. Between the two local authorities a range of urban and rural early years settings was represented. The study design aimed to recruit a sample of 2000 children and their early educators and families, with 1000 in each of the two local authority areas, spanning 4 age strata: 0-3, 3-4, 4-5, 5-6 (Primary 1) across a range of social areas. Forty-one settings, provided by the local authorities to meet the study sample requirements, took part in the study – 23 in North Lanarkshire and 18 in Edinburgh. In each local authority, nursery settings included 0-3 provision as well as 3-5 classes, schools and centres, including partner providers. The numbers of settings involved from each authority were different because of the variation in total numbers of children in participating nursery classes and primary classes. The families of all children in any participating class or room group were invited to take part in the study. Two of the Edinburgh settings provided access to groups of ‘hard to reach’ parents, who, because of, for example, alienation, service resistance, or being part of a minority group, would not normally involve themselves in services or research of this kind. These two settings were not otherwise involved in the study. In this way a sample of settings that were typical of each local authority across a range of social areas were included in the study, enabling findings to be generalisable to similarly urban and rural parts of Scotland.

Investigative tools comprised standardised and customised questionnaires to parents and professionals, interviews, observations, focus groups, documentary information and case studies. Common measures were used across the age strata, in pre-school and primary, and by practitioners and parents. These common measures included the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), a customised Adult Strategies Questionnaire, and customised Transitions Questionnaires. Additionally parents completed the Daily Hassles Questionnaire (Crnic and Greenberg, 1990) and practitioners completed the Leuven Well-being and Involvement Scales (Laevers, 1994).

Questionnaire packs were issued to a total of 1969 child families through the individual local authority settings. Settings were given posters and leaflets to display to indicate their involvement in the research and questionnaire packs were handed out to parents. Settings were asked to encourage parental responses. There were 729 parental returns (37%) and staff collected data for 1253 of the children (64%). These return rates compare well to the expected return rate for questionnaires of 40%, and enable representative findings to emerge. Most of our analysis is based on the final merged parent and final merged staff files, which contain the core number of cases for which we have complete returns across measures. For the child level data collected by staff the number of complete common cases varies from 1208 – 1230 depending on the combination of measure. It should be noted that numbers of cases sometimes vary due to incomplete data on a few control variables. In terms of the parent data, the number of cases included in the final file used for analyses was 603 (Boys N=306, Girls N= 297).

Over half of responding parents were in the 30-40 age group, 77% of families in the sample were living as a two-parent family, of whom 26% were reconstituted families. Just over half of the responding parents were working either full or part-time. Most parent returns were completed by mothers. 61% of respondents were home owners, 37% rented their home. The largest groupings reported for either highest or most recent educational attainment were 15% qualified to standard grade, and 13% qualified to first degree level. 78% of respondents' ethnic origin was white British.

3. Key Findings

3.1 What is the extent and nature of behaviour difficulties among children in early years and early primary settings?

There was considerable consistency in data emerging from all measures indicating that parents and staff perceived that the majority of children generally displayed positive behaviour.

Parents' perception of the extent to which children's behaviour was perceived to be positive and normal ranged across measures from the overall general rating of 58% in the Daily Hassles measure, to 81% in the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) in relation to emotions, conduct, hyperactivity and peer relations. Overall parents did not find dealing with their children's behaviour and needs to be a 'hassle' (Daily Hassles Questionnaire)

Staff perception of the extent to which the behaviours presented by children were perceived to be positive, with no difficulties, ranged across measures, from 63.3% of children for overall rating of behaviour on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (TSDQ), to 75.6% in the relation to the domains of emotions, conduct, hyperactivity and peer relations in the TSDQ.

For both parents and staff, perceptions about emotional development, response to others (pro-social), conduct, peer relationships and concentration (hyperactivity) showed mainly low levels of perceived difficulties. Parents and staff felt very positive about the emotional domain of children's development and peer relationships. Parents were markedly more positive than staff, however, about how their children responded to others. In contrast, the vast majority of practitioners perceived children's conduct to be normal while parent perceptions placed nearly 20% of children in the borderline range, with a further 20% causing more concern.

About 60% of children were perceived by staff to display characteristics of well-being, such as self-confidence, self-esteem, receptivity and flexibility, within the setting (Leuven Well-being and Involvement Scales for Young Children, see Annex 3). Children overall were perceived to be experiencing higher levels of well-being than involvement according to the staff who work with them. Involvement includes concentration, energy, creativity, persistence and satisfaction, and in the view of staff, 19% of children were at

a low level in terms of their involvement in the early years setting, 30% were at a middle level, whilst 51% of children were experiencing high levels of involvement.

Overall the extent of concern about behaviour difficulties in young children aged 0-6 in early childcare, pre-school and primary settings compared to earlier studies is fairly stable, with approximately 20% of children perceived as presenting with difficulties that cause some concern. When asked by means of the Parent Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (P-SDQ) about the children's behaviours in relation to emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity and peer related problems, parents reported that 81% fell within the normal range of behaviour, with 18% of children being seen as having borderline or severely concerning behaviour (8% and 10% respectively). While staff identified 76% of children as being in the normal range, 24% were considered to have some behavioural difficulties. Of these 13% were viewed as borderline and 11% as severe. Previous studies, using comparable assessment measures, have reported 15% of 3 year olds to be considered by parents to present mild behavioural problems and a further 7% considered to present with moderate or severe behavioural difficulties (Richman et al., 1982), and 17% of 4-7 year olds being perceived by teachers as having mild behavioural difficulties, with a further 16% viewed as having definite behaviour problems (Tizard et al, 1988). Therefore the findings of this study are broadly in line with other studies.

Only at the level of behaviour perceived to be causing severe difficulties were boys considered to display more difficulties than girls: for parents, 12% of boys and 7% of girls were indicated to present with a severe level of difficulty in terms of the total average difficulties on the 4 negative domains of the SDQ. About twice as many boys (14% of all boys) were considered by practitioners to be in the severe level in comparison to girls (7% of all girls) on the 4 negative domains of the SDQ

In terms of parental perceptions the highest number of children presenting in the borderline and severely concerning range in any age strata is 3 year olds. More staff reported having 'a lot' of concern about children's behaviour across all age strata in the areas of conduct and concentration (about 33% of responding staff in each case) compared to the areas of relationships or self-esteem (about 16% of responding staff in each case). At 3 and at 4 years, twice as many staff (34%-37%) reported 'a lot' of concern in the area of emotions, compared to at 0-3, and 5 and 6 years.

There were significant positive correlation between perceived levels of well-being and higher parental age range. This fits with findings from the total difficulties score on SDQ, where it was found that the younger the parent the higher the level of perceived difficulties in the areas of their children's emotions, concentration, behaviour or being able to get on with other people.

3.2 What strategies do parents, practitioners and service providers use to manage behaviour and promote pro - social behaviour?

The Parental Adult Strategies Questionnaire (PASQ) tapped into the strategies parents use in relation to their children's behaviour. Parents and practitioners were first asked in the questionnaire about any difficulties they perceived in their child's behaviour in a range of areas e.g. concentration, relationships, self-esteem, sleeping, eating and appetite, and were then asked to comment on what strategies they used to handle their child's behaviour in these areas. Perhaps unexpectedly in the light of some of the other results reported, parent reports showed no noticeable differences between boys' and girls' behaviour in terms of the level of challenge in coping with it, despite the fact that boys were perceived to present more difficult behaviours overall.

Parents described a wide range of strategies in their overall management of their children's personal, social and emotional behaviour including responding in generally positive ways, getting involved, removing distractions, encouraging friendships, praise, establishing routines. Overall the main strategies reported as used by parents when faced with difficulties in the area of behaviour are: time-out (16%), explaining that behaviour is not acceptable (14%) and reprimands and punishments (10%). While many parents use a range of strategies in meeting their children's difficult behaviour, a number of areas were identified by parents in which they would like more help, including dealing with tantrums, support and advice on dealing with 'power struggles', dealing with illness, help with safety, and managing sleeping and eating difficulties. The most frequently mentioned areas where help was indicated to be needed were behaviour in general (16%), managing their children's eating (8%) and managing sleeping routines (6%).

Staff made use of a wide range of strategies for managing behaviour. Ten approaches were the most commonly used: praise and encouragement, positive reinforcement (such as rewards), positive behaviour policy and strategy, consistency between staff, responsiveness, modelling good behaviour, explanation, observation, communicating with parents, and parent workshops.

Staff noted communication with parents and parent workshops as being amongst the most common strategies they used in managing behaviour and promoting positive behaviour, and 99% of parents also felt it is important for nurseries, schools and families to share information that can support positive behaviour. They felt that feedback between staff and parents is important (53%), that this enables consistency (16%), and that good communication enables school support (12%).

3.3 What practices can be identified by staff and parents as successful in relation to supporting transitions from nursery/pre-school to school?

Most parents (76%) thought the transition experience into nursery, within nursery and into school would be mostly positive for their child before their child moved, and slightly more found it actually was (78%). About 7% of parents thought the move had only been partly positive for their child. A small percentage of parents (1.5%) did not expect the transition to be positive at all, and two thirds of these parents felt the same following the transition.

Schools and nurseries were perceived to provide considerable support. Parents found that visits (21%), and pre-entry visits (9%), staff support (17%), and information given by the setting (11%) and shared with the setting (4%) provided good support at this time. Parents indicated that they would appreciate an increased focus on visits and pre-entry visits and staff support, as not all parents felt these were sufficiently available.

In relation to emotional, personal and social development in 117 individual child progress records in four case study settings, 38% of the children were perceived to be in the skilled category for all aspects of development and 57% to span the developing and skilled categories. The aspects where substantial numbers of children were in the developing category include: play cooperatively (31%), recognises others' feelings, needs and preferences (20%), confident in relationships (33%), concentrates at an appropriate level (26%), commits to task and completes it (22%), exercises self-control (22%). The finding that overall 95% of these children are considered to be either appropriately skilled or developing skills in these areas would be in keeping with general age expectations. It may be helpful for Primary 1 staff to recognise that it is in these areas that children at transition may need continued support in developing their skills.

3.4 What effective approaches to training and support can be identified for staff in early years settings?

Over half the early educators participating in this study reported high confidence in working with young children presenting with behaviour that caused concern. Nearly half of the staff respondents indicated that they felt quite well skilled to support children's behaviour, 44% felt very skilled, with only 7% feeling only slightly skilled.

Staff reported a variety of sources of their skills in managing behaviour: 52% drew from their own work experience, 30% attributed their confidence to previous qualifications, 25% drew support from their colleagues, 17% had found ongoing CPD helpful, 16% used a range of known strategies, and 8% drew on their own personal knowledge of individual children.

Whilst staff confidence is a positive factor, 85% of staff indicated that they felt in need of some level of training: 71% felt they could benefit from a bit more training, and 14% felt strongly in need of this. Particular areas of training need mentioned were behaviour management strategies and working with children with additional support needs.

4. Conclusions

There was considerable consistency in data emerging from all measures that parents and staff perceived that the majority of children generally displayed positive behaviour. Parents and practitioners consider a minority of young children (around 20%) to have some behaviour difficulties, with about 10% of children considered to have severe difficulties, which represents a fairly stable level of expressed concern compared to earlier studies. More boys than girls are placed within the level of severe difficulty by both parents and practitioners.

Over time concepts of 'need' have changed, and recent advice and legislation in Scotland has led to a broader concept of 'additional support needs': one which states that children who, for whatever reason, need additional support if they are to develop to their fullest potential – whether such need is temporary or continuing over time. Children with behavioural difficulties are included in this broader concept. In this study the group of children perceived by staff to have definite or severe difficulties, which in a number of cases may have been present for as much as a year or more, can be included in this wider definition. Although acknowledging the need for continued training, nevertheless staff report confidence in their own skills with this group, and consider that such needs are able to be met by appropriate provision, team efforts, and well timed intervention.

There is variety in early childhood environments in that in some settings the provision of daily activities scores fairly low in terms of quality of provision, as measured by the ECERS. Taken with the findings of the relatively low levels of involvement and concentration reported for about 50% of children, this finding sits alongside the HMIE (2006) report that suggests staff in early years settings should focus more on the learning needs of individual children.

The case study focus indicated that greater attention needs to be paid to some features of 0-3 provision in line with 'Birth to Three – Supporting Our Youngest Children' (Scottish Executive, 2005). Increased efforts to take advantage of inter-agency support and collaboration are also needed in some settings. Transitions are challenging for some children, and, with anticipated changes in curriculum design, an opportunity exists to address this challenge in ways that are helpful to children. Development opportunities for staff are needed to further this process.

Given that all behaviour occurs in context, and with the widening of perceptions of young children's lives beyond service provision, the sharing of information and support between professionals and parents has been affirmed as being considered to be valuable and essential. Parents and practitioners show considerable similarity in their perceptions of the positive behaviour of young children, but with some differences in view in relation to particular areas of conduct and how children respond to others. Although many practitioners express confidence in their skills, about 85% indicated that they felt the need for some additional training in relation to supporting children's behaviour.

It is suggested that early years settings need to incorporate more challenging and engaging activities for young children in order to promote their increased involvement in the learning environment. Promoting positive behaviour is a shared endeavour, this means that the early years sector, both pre-school and primary, needs to find innovative ways of building on current good practice to provide and maintain an inclusive approach for all children and their families.

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