

How can we encourage parents to take part in programmes to boost their children's development?
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Many preschools, nurseries and health visitor clinics run training and intervention programmes that are designed to help parents boost their children's development. These programmes can have a positive influence on a range of child and family outcomes, from improving children's language development to changing caregivers' parenting behaviours. However research shows that many families, particularly disadvantaged families, never engage with these programmes, or engage only sporadically. This is problematic because participation is central to the effectiveness of such programmes. If families do not take part, or only take part occasionally, the effectiveness of the programme is considerably reduced. In this briefing, we outline some of the most important barriers to participation according to recent research. We then discuss proposed solutions.

Barriers to participation in intervention programmes

a. Are parents aware of the programme? It is surprising how many families do not know what intervention programmes are available to them in their local area, especially families who do not regularly attend health visitor clinics or formal childcare providers. Research shows that, for these parents, informal networks (friends and family) are very important in introducing them to relevant programmes, but many families lack these informal networks (Winkworth, McArthur, Layton, Thomson, and Wilson, 2010). Other work shows that it is quite easy for families to misunderstand the purpose of intervention services, particularly those provided by local authorities. For example, some families may think that Sure Start services can only be accessed by disadvantaged families (Coe, Gibson, Spencer, & Struttaford, 2008). This is important because the same research showed that, when these caregivers had been correctly informed about intervention services, many saw the benefits and said that they would use them in the future.

b. How do parents feel about the programme? Even when families have been told about relevant interventions, they may be wary about taking part. This is especially the case if they feel they have been targeted because they fit a specific demographic profile (e.g. are working class, on a low income, not university educated; Winkworth et al., 2010). This is particularly relevant to interventions which focus on changing parenting behaviours in some way. For example, Vanobbergen, Daems, and Van Tilburg (2009) found that parents who received a 'top 10 reading tips' leaflet as part of an intervention designed to promote 'reading for pleasure' reported that this leaflet made them feel as though they were being assessed on their own ability to read. As a result, many parents chose to ignore the leaflet. In this sense, interventions may become more of a hindrance than a help to families if they aren't pitched in the right way.

c. Where is the programme being held? The location and setting of the programme may discourage families from taking part. Visiting 'third spaces' like libraries/community centres (where many interventions and services take place) requires confidence, particularly if these spaces are unfamiliar to families (Coe et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2014). Alternatively, many educational programmes involving families may take place in educational settings such as schools. This seems like a sensible strategy at first sight, because children are more likely to succeed academically when their caregivers are more engaged in their child's schooling (Harris & Goodall, 2008). However, if families do not frequently engage with their child's school, or do not feel comfortable in an educational environment, this setting is likely to discourage them from taking part.

d. What are the stresses and strains of everyday life? Perhaps the most pervasive, and difficult to counter, barrier, is of a very practical nature: finding the time. Whittaker and Cowley (2012) reviewed the factors associated with poor engagement with various types of parenting support programmes and reported that 'personal life/practical factors' such as lack of time and working commitments strongly influenced attendance and engagement with the programmes. This is particularly the case for low income families, who are likely to have additional stresses in their everyday lives linked to having a lower income. Such stressors leave caregivers with both less time and less energy to engage in intervention programmes (Snow, Dubber, & de Blauw, 1982; Waldfogel, 2002). An additional factor to remember is that some low income parents, particularly self-employed parents, do not have the same paid leave privileges as higher SES parents (Heymann & Earle, 2000). This is a strong disincentive to participate and engage in interventions.

Solutions

Clearly, families face a number of powerful barriers that affect the extent to which they are likely to participate in intervention programmes. The research literature suggests three promising solutions:



i. *Build rapport with families.* It is crucial that practitioners spend time building rapport with families. Barley and Bath (2014) advocate the use of a mandatory ‘familiarisation period’ when working with young children and families, before the intervention starts. This allows families to become familiar with the setting and staff before deciding whether or not they wish to participate in the intervention, and provides practitioners with an opportunity to alleviate some of the misconceptions that caregivers may have about specific aspects of the intervention. In the barriers section above, we gave the example of parents misinterpreting a shared book reading intervention designed to promote reading for pleasure for a book reading lesson in which they felt scrutinised about their own reading abilities. This could be tackled, very simply, by practitioners explaining to caregivers that the shared book reading intervention is just something to help parents and children learn to enjoy books together, because this is one of the best ways to give children a love of reading that lasts throughout their life.

There are different ways to build rapport. Many researchers and practitioners have engaged parents through the use of multiple ‘soft-entry points’ such as open days, taster sessions and coffee mornings. These provide families with the opportunity to become familiar with both the location and staff (Koerting et al., 2013). Similarly, ‘buddy scheme’ initiatives, in which families are encouraged to bring friends or family members along with them to ‘taster’ events, can be useful (Cortis, 2012, Smith et al., 2014). The effectiveness of such schemes has not yet been evaluated sufficiently by researchers, but these schemes seem a promising way to give prospective families the confidence to participate and engage in intervention programmes.

b. *Schedule the intervention in comfortable, accessible locations and at convenient times.* ‘Personal life/practical factors’ such as lack of time and working commitments strongly influence attendance and engagement in interventions. Additionally, if projects are located at inconvenient times or locations, this also discourages families from participating (Smith et al., 2014). Therefore, simply scheduling the intervention in locations which are accessible for families and times and days of the week which are convenient for them, is likely to minimise some of the practical barriers associated with participation and engagement.

c. *Involve target parents in the design stage of the programme.* It is often very difficult for practitioners to anticipate how families will react to an intervention, or what barriers to participation there may be in a particular community. Engaging groups of target parents at the design stage can be extremely effective to counter problems before they arise. This can be achieved by co-production of the research (where a small group of parents work together with the practitioners every step of the way), focus groups (where groups of parents discuss the practitioners’ plans at strategic stages in the design process), or even through more informal methods such as school-gate discussions.

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