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Key words: parenting skills, adopters, praise, self-esteem, discipline

At the suggestion of service users, Oxfordshire Social Services recently commissioned an experimental 'parenting course' for their newly approved adopters. Facilitators Liz Gilkes and Ivana Klimes discuss this project, which was run for Oxfordshire Adopters by the Family Nurturing Network, an organisation now well established in Oxfordshire. The course offered a programme for parents to learn how to best support their children's development and learning, how to manage difficult behaviour and foster self-esteem, and how to care for their own needs. It was evaluated by means of a questionnaire completed by all participants. The results were so overwhelmingly positive that Oxfordshire Social Services now plan to offer these courses as a rolling programme to all their new adopters.

Introduction: how the project was devised

The idea for a parenting course for adopters came from adoptive parents themselves in Oxfordshire. Currently, the social services department hosts a county-wide support group to which are invited all adoptive parents living within the county, including those who have adopted through local voluntary agencies. A representative group of adopters meet regularly with staff to plan these meetings. This group of adopters identified the need to have some training in practical parenting skills at the start of the adoption process, both for those with a new placement and for those approved but still waiting. The adopters’ request very much mirrored the findings of recent research on supporting adoption, as well as current government policy in relation to parenting.

Nigel Lowe and Mervyn Murch (1999) reported that there is a great need for better support to adoptive parents. This is particularly so now that older and more troubled children are being placed for adoption from care.

Lowe and Murch see the success of placing older children out of care for adoption as depending in part on how well children and adopters learn to live together. They maintain that:

The primary task of adoption support should be defined as enabling adopters to learn as rapidly as possible the skills of parenting children who have experienced extraordinary and often turbulent child-hoods. (Lowe and Murch, 1999, p 436)

Many adopters view the process of adoption as a pathway to ‘normal’ family life, not supervised or supported by social workers nor with adopters seen as their ‘clients’. What some adopters fear about the conventional approach is that adoption support is really covert supervision. If the adoption task is viewed as a learning process rather than one to be sup-ervised by the professional ‘experts’ such as social workers, doctors and lawyers, then training in parenting is needed rather than supervision by experts.

Lowe and Murch (1999) believe that moving away from a traditional social work intervention to a more educational approach:

. . . creates a more equal partnership between the adopters and their children on the one hand and the professional service providers on the other, in which all are engaged in the common enterprise of establishing a well-functioning family. (p 436)

Certainly the conclusions of the Lowe and Murch study would support the view which we took in Oxfordshire that a parenting skills programme for adopters could be seen as an essential building block in the path to adopters becoming successful new parents, rather than an optional addition to conventional social work support offered to adopters.

The provision of parenting courses has
grown since Smith and Pugh’s (1996) survey of group-based parenting programmes in the UK; they have been promoted through government policies aimed at reducing social exclusion, raising the achievements of vulnerable children and preventing antisocial behaviour.

Parenting programmes can be grouped according to their primary focus on changing either children’s (difficult) behaviour or relationships within the family. In practice this distinction disappears as an effective parenting programme inevitably affects both child behaviour and family relationships. Programmes are also designed to reflect the needs of parents according to the child’s age. For instance, some courses are designed for parents of children under two, two to 12 years or teenagers. Some ‘universal’ programmes are suitable for all situations, others are aimed at parents whose children have behaviour problems or at those with multiple problems and very low self-esteem.

Mindful of these considerations, we linked up with the Family Nurturing Network (FNN) which had already been tried and tested in Oxfordshire, to help us in what would be a pioneering new project to devise and deliver a parenting programme for new adopters. The FNN is a voluntary organisation, set up in 1994 with the backing of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. The Network has been working towards the enhancement of parenting and nurturing of young vulnerable children in order to improve their development, mental health and prospects, and to reduce (potential) antisocial behaviour in the future.

The FNN team have had several years’ experience of running parenting programmes for groups of parents, using the Incredible Years Parent Training Programme (Webster-Stratton et al, 1989). This is one in a series of materials developed and extensively researched with more than 1,000 families over 20 years by Carolyn Webster-Stratton, at the University of Washington, USA. Results of randomised controlled studies have repeatedly shown this programme’s effectiveness in enhancing parenting skills, and improving children’s behaviour and social adjustment.

The principles and skills taught are appropriate for working with all parents, either for prevention or as an intervention for parents of children with significant difficulties. These may range from emotional and behavioural problems to developmental delays, low readiness for school, and being at risk of abuse or neglect. The FNN team considered this programme to be also suitable for adoptive parents.

There was no difficulty filling all the places on offer when our parenting course began and the learning experience was embraced with great enthusiasm and commitment by the first group of participants.

Course programme
The course was run over ten two-hour evening sessions for a group of 20 adoptive parents. It was based on the Incredible Years Parent Training Programme, a comprehensive video-based programme for parents, professionals and other adults who are living or working with children between two and eight years of age. The programme presents step-by-step guidelines for playing with children and helping them to learn, using praise and rewards, setting clear boundaries and dealing with non-compliance and difficult behaviour. The components of the programme build upon one another. There is an emphasis on strengthening relationship skills before moving on to discuss discipline strategies.

The objectives of the programme are:

- to promote attachment, self-esteem and co-operation in the family;
- to promote parenting competencies;
- to recognise children’s temperamental differences and developmental needs;
- to understand how to promote children’s social skills and good peer relationships;
- to learn how to encourage children’s language development and academic skills;
- to foster effective management of anger, communication and problem-solving;
● to understand how to use discipline without violence.

With parents, the material can be covered in ten two-hour sessions. Key principles are illustrated with brief video clips of parents interacting with children in situations of daily family life. After each clip, course participants discuss important points and practise new skills in role-playing exercises. There is plenty of time for group discussion, and opportunity to raise individual concerns and share experiences. ‘Home practice’ is set every week in order to encourage participants to consolidate their learning between sessions. Typically, this involves trying out a particular skill and noting the child’s response to it, eg involvement in child play without taking over, giving specific and labelled praise, giving clear commands and so on. Parents receive handouts and have access to the book, The Incredible Years: A troubleshooting guide for parents (Webster-Stratton, 1992), which accompanies the programme.

Course participants
All those approved adopters waiting for placements and all those with children in the first year of placement were offered places at a ‘taster’ session before the course started. From this group, the first 20 to register an interest were invited to the full course. There were eight couples and four mothers whose partners could not attend due to work or childcare commitments. None of the parents on this course were single or from minority ethnic backgrounds. This was not unusual given that Oxfordshire has a very low percentage of people from minority ethnic backgrounds in its population, and given that few single people apply to adopt generally. It must be added that both a single person and a mixed race couple attended a subsequent course.

Of those attending the course around half had children already placed, ranging in age between nought and five years; the other half were awaiting placements. Two couples had children placed with them during the course. Attendance was very high throughout and a ‘reunion’ evening for all participants was arranged three months after the course ended, to review progress with them.

Course evaluation
At the end of the course, all participants were asked to complete a questionnaire so that the course could be properly evaluated and so that we could decide whether it had helped this group of adopters in their approach to good parenting.

We were hoping to find out whether the course content was relevant both for people waiting for a placement and those with children already living with them. We also hoped to discover whether it would change the way this group of adopters approached the challenges of parenting their new children, most of whom were likely to have suffered some degree of trauma in the past.

Questionnaire
The questionnaire was completed by all 20 course participants. Their replies were overwhelmingly positive. Certain themes emerged from the replies which will be explored below.

Relevance of the course to adoptive parents
The participants were asked how relevant the course was to them as adoptive parents. All replied positively, some pointing out that the course would be relevant to all new parents – not just adopters:

Very relevant [for any parent]. I think adoptive parents have a strong sense of wanting to get it right and the course was reassuring and confidence building.

We don’t have a child yet but feel it was very relevant and has prepared us for when we do get a child. It’s given us ways of dealing with a child’s behaviour and the confidence.

It’s a shame something like this cannot be available to all parents. It was very relevant for me as a person hoping to adopt within the next few months.

Understandably in view of the origins of the programme, several said that the
usefulness of the course was applicable to both birth parents and adopters:

At first I wasn’t sure about the idea of the course and didn’t know what to expect, but ended up really enjoying it. I would recommend anyone to do the course as it gives good ways of dealing with a child’s behaviour and you meet other people in the same situation as you, which is good. The course has given me more confidence when dealing with children.

Most parents of birth children have said to me, ‘I could have done with something like that when my children were small’.

Confidence in responding to children’s behaviour
Nearly everyone stated that the course had increased their confidence. It was clear from the answers that course participants were feeling a lot more sure about dealing with a range of behaviour problems from children and had learned a number of strategies to help them in the future.

One parent gave the example that she was now ‘able to ignore a shouting child in a pushchair in public’. She went on to say that she was now confident she was doing the right thing and did not need to be embarrassed about him. ‘It’s normal behaviour and will pass’, she wrote.

Other replies on the same theme were as follows:

Certainly – mainly in the central importance of praise and encouragement. Also that consistent follow-through is so crucial to help the child [and parent] feel more secure.

I would now know when to reward my child [after good behaviour, not before it]. I would have a better idea of how to deal with bad behaviour [ignoring, diverting, time out].

Parenting techniques and skills
Everyone agreed that their knowledge of parenting skills and techniques had improved. All demonstrated that they had indeed taken on board the reasons behind the strategies suggested for improving behaviour and had also understood the central importance of praise and play:

Very much so. After applying the theories and practising these on my son, we have really seen good results. The course provided me with insight and clarity.

Yes – ability to play and let the child lead. Focusing attention on the child, concentrating on encouragement and praise.

Yes, as I now have different ways of dealing with a child’s behaviour – like playing with them, praising them as well as using distraction/ignoring techniques and commands, time out, etc.

Prior to the course, I was familiar with many of the techniques of good parenting, but working as a group with other prospective parents helped me to improve my practical working knowledge, rather than just knowing the theories.

As homework was given after each session for participants to practise at home on their children, or other people’s if they were waiting for a placement, there was an expectation from course leaders that participants should put their newly learnt skills into practice straight away. All those participating in the course felt they had developed new skills in parenting:

Absolutely – most weeks’ homework results were very rewarding. I found that our relationship with our son has really been enhanced. I’m able to apply new skills, eg positive encouragement and clear instructions.

Yes, when my nephew did not want to go home and started to get upset I used distraction to encourage him to put on his shoes.

The value of clear commands, the pleasure side of giving praise and following the child in their play!

Particular aspects of the course
Respondents were asked which part of the course was most helpful and what they
liked most. A few simply commended the course as a whole:

*All of it. Different parts will become more relevant as my children get older.*

A lot of replies featured the value participants found in being with a group of people in the same situation, as well as being able to swap ideas with others, learn new ones, and share experiences. In other words, the benefits from the course derived as much from the exchanges with other parents in the group as from the formal training:

*Being part of a group of enthusiastic participants and receiving positive feedback on homework from the course facilitators.*

*Learning from each other’s experiences; there were some very moving accounts from parents who have already adopted children!*

However, the training itself was highly valued, with some emphasising the way this was combined with home practice:

*The homework structure and its constant presence. Obviously the course itself fed into the home practice and vice versa.*

*Finding out that what we were being shown does work.*

Parents liked the way they were encouraged to participate as adult learners:

*Not feeling like you were back at school . . . lots of discussion and idea swapping.*

Suggestions for improvement

Participants were also invited to say what they liked least about the course. Most did not make comments, but three participants suggested that they would like to have learned more about the problems specific to adopted children.

*To cover different aspects that might occur to an adopted child, e.g. how to cope with events that have happened in their past.*

There was a divergence of views between those with children and those without children already placed with them. The latter found the homework tasks difficult as some could not be used on ‘borrowed’ children.

*It was sometimes difficult to put the theory into practice without my own children, e.g. I couldn’t use ‘time out’ or star charts on other people’s children.*

There were also some replies along the lines that role playing was not a favourite part of the course:

*I didn’t like the role play . . . But having said that, I do feel there is some benefit from acting out what you have learnt.*

One suggestion for improvement was that the course could be split into two – the first part to be taken before having children placed, covering simple techniques that could be practised on other people’s children. The second part could then be taken when children were placed – covering the aspects which could be practised on children in placement, such as ‘time out’ or star charts.

Indirect benefits from the course

Participants also described how the course helped with other general, personal or family issues not directly related to their child. Some described spin-offs which participants had not expected, but nevertheless had found very positive in their personal lives. For instance, two reported positive changes in their relationship with their partners:

*Nurturing my partner and applying a positive attitude has improved our relationship – we tended to take each other for granted somewhat after 17 years!*

*My husband and I have found more time to sit down and discuss our approaches. I have been able to share ideas from the course and it feels we are even closer as a result.*

In another instance, a transfer of learning had taken place to their work:
It has helped at work when giving out praise and encouragement with great results.

Discussion

It will be interesting to see in the months and years ahead what impact the course has had on this group of new adopters as they begin the task of parenting their adopted children and helping them through the different stages of childhood and adjustment to their new lives. We hope to follow up their progress to try to evaluate the long-term effects of attending this course at the very beginning of their separate journeys through adoption.

Although the course content is aimed specifically at helping parents with children in the two to eight age group, its relevance extends well beyond the boundaries of this group as it teaches the principles of behaviour management which can be applied to children of up to 12 years old and beyond. The techniques taught can certainly be used with older children placed for adoption, many of whom function at a developmental and emotional level far below that of their chronological age.

The great majority of children currently placed for adoption from care in Oxfordshire fall into the age range for which the course is aimed, and it was felt to be quite appropriate to concentrate on teaching parenting skills which would be relevant immediately, rather than spending a lot of time on considering the parenting skills needed for the teenage years.

We will certainly be giving thought to developing more training for adoptive parents facing the adolescence of their adopted children. As yet this is an underdeveloped area of provision. However, the course content and our target group of adoptive parents, who were all approved to adopt children within the age group the course provided for, seemed a good enough match to invest in, with the hope of results in terms of new skills and confidence in parenting for the future and hopefully, fewer adoption breakdowns in later years.

The group who attended the course are now all firm friends who meet up together socially and are able to offer each other invaluable support. There are also opportunities for those still waiting for a placement to see for themselves the progress their fellow adopters are making with their new children.

Although all those participating in the course had their own social workers who would remain available to offer support, both during and after the adoption process, none of these social workers would have had the time or training to teach the skills on offer over the 20 hours the course took to deliver. Also, social workers rather than outside trainers running the course could make it less acceptable to adopters, who might not feel able to discuss problems freely with staff connected to the agency who placed their children.

Certainly many current social work courses seem to have very little content in terms of teaching child development and behaviour management in the depth needed for social workers to be able to pass on this knowledge to parents and those caring for troubled children. Of course, parenting courses cannot solve all the problems of adopted children and their new families, and do not try to remedy any lack of specialist resources in the education or health services for adopted children.

In delivering parenting courses, trainers need to be aware that frequently children’s behaviour problems may well predate the placement and trainers need to ensure that adoptive parents should not feel blame in these cases. What parenting courses can do, however, is give new parents the skills and confidence to change both their and their adoptive children’s behaviour through the techniques taught and practised during the programme.

The future

It is now hoped to offer this course as a regular rolling programme to other new adopters in Oxfordshire and to offer similar training to new foster carers, too. The parenting skills taught at this early stage could well have the effect of preventing future breakdown and providing children with well-prepared new parents who have the practical skills to put ‘good-enough parenting’ into practice from day one.
We are already in the process of planning next year’s courses and hope to include training for family placement workers, as well as offering new courses for foster carers and residential childcare staff caring for children on a more time-limited basis. We want to achieve greater consistency and continuity of advice and support to parents, in particular when they may be going through a difficult time with their child’s development and behaviour.

One adoptive parent summed up his thoughts about the course as follows:

The things taught on this course are really things that every parent would benefit from, not just the lucky few like us, or just for those for whom things have got ‘out of hand’. I think it should be offered nationally to new parents as a key set of skills for family life.

Note

The authors can be contacted for further information about setting up the course and the training that the FNN can provide for both parents and professionals. Liz Gilkes is at Oxfordshire Social Services, Mountfield House, Wimblestraw Road, Berinsfield, Wallingford, Oxon OX10 7LZ, Tel 01865 340687; Ivana Klimes is at The Family Nurturing Network, Temple Court, 109 Oxford Road, Oxford OX4 2ER, Tel 01865 777756.

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