Developing the *Incredible Years* Webster-Stratton parenting skills training programme for use with adoptive families

**Kay Henderson** and **Norma Sargent** report on the development of an adoption-specific parenting skills programme which took as its starting point the widely used *Incredible Years* package by Carolyn Webster-Stratton. Four courses of the BASIC Incredible Years programme were run at Coram Family for adoptive parents. During these sessions notes were taken of adoption-related material which arose in discussion and during individual interviews with participants. Additional material for trainers and parents was developed by staff from Coram Adoption Service and the Anna Freud Centre. The courses were also evaluated and parents reported feeling significantly less stressed and more competent after the training, found their children more pleasurable and reported significant reduction in the children’s levels of hyper-activity, conduct disorder and behavioural difficulties. The value of combining proven behavioural management strategies with consideration of the specific challenges facing adoptive parents is highlighted.

**Introduction**

The widespread lack of support for adoptive parents was highlighted by Lowe and Murch (1999) and (post) adoption support was subsequently identified in the Prime Minister’s Review of Adoption (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2000, p 16) as a way to prevent adoption breakdown and help families adjust positively. The Adoption and Children Act (2002) and Adoption Support Services Regulations 2005 now place a duty on local authorities to maintain a core set of adoption support services, a variety of which are developing (see Argent, 2003). These should include ‘services to support the relationship between the adopted child and their adoptive parents (eg training for the adoptive parents to meet the child’s special needs’). Parenting skills training programmes have been shown to be effective for a range of difficulties when used with biological families (see Barlow, 1997; Scott, 2002; Barrett, 2003; Moran et al, 2004 for reviews) and offer a framework for the development of adoption support (eg, Gilkes and Klimes, 2003).

However, older children being placed for adoption have often experienced abuse and neglect in their family of origin, frequently followed by changes of carer during a period of foster care (Quinton et al, 1998). They bring emotional and behavioural difficulties into their new families that seem to differ in important ways from the types of difficulty seen in intact birth families and that may require different parenting approaches. This is acknowledged in the Practice Guidance on Assessing the Support Needs of Adoptive Families (Department for Education and Skills, 2005) which states that:

> The particular issues associated with parenting children with the emotional and behavioural difficulties associated with maltreatment, separation and loss need to be addressed through more specialised approaches to developing parenting skills. (p 48)

Such specialised approaches as are currently available (eg Adoption UK’s *A Piece of Cake* parent support programme) tend to have a ‘relationship focus’ (Smith and Pugh, 1996) and have not (yet) demonstrated the same evidence base for their effectiveness as the more traditional ‘behaviour-based’ programmes currently being used with biological families.

The Parenting Skills for Adopters training project was conceived in order to build upon one of the most widely-used

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* The research reported in this article was carried out with the participation of Jeanne Kaniuk, Head of Coram Adoption Service, Miriam Steele of the Anna Freud Centre and Jill Hodges of Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, London.
programmes – the *Incredible Years* by Professor Carolyn Webster-Stratton – with particular additions and amendments tailored to meet the specific challenges faced by many adoptive families (for more information on the Webster-Stratton programme see www.theincredibleyears.com). It was felt that the proven behavioural management strategies of the *Incredible Years* package would help parents to feel more confident and in control and allow a ‘breathing space’ in which to think about the specific issues related to adoptive parenting.

The research project was funded by the Headley Trust and took as its starting point the BASIC Parent Training Programme from the *Incredible Years* range. This is targeted at parents of children aged three to eight years and involves a series of 250 video vignettes to be shown to the parent groups and discussed, as well as role play among the parents. The programme also provides a problem-solving guidebook, parent weekly ‘refrigerator’ notes (ie top tips and reminders), weekly assignments for parents to practice new strategies and weekly session evaluations.

Parents attended the training at Coram Family on Saturday mornings for 12 weeks and a crèche was provided for their children. This was considered a vital element as it enabled both parents to attend the course and jointly apply the material to their parenting. Each weekly session began with a round-up of how things had been in the previous week for each family and discussion of how the ‘homework tasks’ had gone. Then the material from the Webster-Stratton course was covered, with discussion and feedback from parents.

**Development of the adoption-specific material**

The parenting groups were run at Coram Family by Norma Sargent, an experienced adoption support worker trained in Webster-Stratton techniques, assisted by another member of Coram’s adoption staff. A researcher from the Anna Freud Centre sat in during the group sessions, taking notes of the discussions and highlighting issues raised by the parents that were not specifically addressed by the *Incredible Years* material, but which seemed pertinent to adoptive parenting. Parents were also interviewed individually around the mid-point of each course, and again at the end, to ascertain their thoughts about the relevance of the material to their particular circumstances and to gather ideas about possible additions to the course material. Potential additional material was then discussed among the research group and developed by Norma Sargent. This material was included in the programme presented to the next group, and so on, in an iterative process over the course of the development phase. Evaluation of the courses was undertaken by completion of widely used valid and reliable questionnaires by all parents, before and after participation on the parenting course.

Four parenting groups were run in this way from 2001 to 2004. Participants were drawn mainly from Coram’s Adoption Service but were also referred from the Catholic Children’s Society (Arundel & Brighton, Portsmouh and Southwark) and the London boroughs of Haringey and Hackney, via Great Ormond Street Hospital and the Tavistock Clinic.

**The characteristics of the parents (see Table 1)**

In total, 42 parents started the four parent training courses. Data are presented here for the 35 who completed it – 21 mothers (60 per cent) and 14 fathers (40 per cent). Almost all the parents were part of a couple (97 per cent) and the majority were white (82 per cent). Twenty-two parents (63 per cent) had no previous experience of parenting prior to the placement of their adoptive children; the others had parented either older adoptive (14 per cent) or older birth children (23 per cent).

**The characteristics of the children (see Table 2)**

A total of 36 ‘target’ children were identified by the families who participated in the four courses, slightly over half of whom were girls and two-thirds of whom were white.

The range of age of the children at the beginning of the course was large.
These demographic details give some sense of the complex make-up of the families who attended the courses. Parents came from a range of backgrounds, the majority having no previous parenting experience. Their children had ranged in age at the time of placement from approximately six months to eight years old and had been with their parents for up to ten years. Almost two-thirds of the children within these four parenting skills training groups had been placed with a biological sibling, presenting their parents with the additional and unique challenge of having to parent two newly placed children of different ages (and sometimes gender) and cope with their different developmental needs (Bird et al., 2002).

Main additions made to the Incredible Years parent training programme
The Webster-Stratton package consists of four programmes which build on each other:

1. Play;
2. Praise and reward;
3. Effective limit setting and dealing with non-compliance;
4. Handling misbehaviour, time out and problem solving.

The adoption-specific course covered all this material but added in consideration of adoption-specific issues. Other topics which were relevant to adopters but not to biological families (and were therefore not in the original Webster-Stratton programme) were also included at appropriate points (see Table 3).

1. Play
The issue of play is a central component within the standard Webster-Stratton training package. Parents are encouraged to give attention (the ‘attention principle’) to their child’s play in a non-directive way, following the child’s lead and building up positive time spent together (‘money in the bank’ in Webster-Stratton terms). Parents are encouraged to set aside ten minutes each day to play with their children and are asked to report back to the group on this experience. The

(approximately three to eleven-and-a-half years old), with an average age of seven years. The range of age at placement was between five months and four years, with an average of just over four years old; these children had been in their families from five months to ten years with an average of just under three years. The majority of the children (64 per cent) had been placed simultaneously with one sibling.
first three sessions of the course are focused on play, using video vignettes, role play and group discussion to help parents to make use of non-directive play and descriptive commentary as ways of giving attention to their child.

i) Play of previously maltreated children

The play of children who have experienced maltreatment in their early lives has been shown to be different from that of children who have not experienced abuse or neglect (Main and Solomon, 1986). Parents reported that their children’s play was very different from that portrayed in the Incredible Years video material. Some children seemed unable to play at all, or were unable to play imaginatively. In addition, parents raised concerns about the levels of aggression, violence, death and catastrophe in their children’s play:

She hits her toys to make them go to sleep before she goes to bed. And we wonder if she is trying to tell us with toys, that she’s acting it out because she can’t tell us.

Parents questioned whether this play reflected actual early experiences and were concerned that it was often repetitive and distressing to watch. Responses to such play also varied, with some parents feeling a need to prohibit expressions of violence much as they would in a real-life interaction. This facilitated the first major addition to the material, which was to explain play and its function for maltreated children to the parents. The course material needed to help them understand why their children may be playing in these ways and to reflect on their own responses to such activity. Material was developed to assist their thinking about ways to help the child work through some issues in play. Parents found these explanations and discussions reassuring in helping them deal with their children’s play:

[Child] was very aggressive; he was always killing his toys and chopping off the heads. We talked a lot about that kind of play in the course, and that it was OK. That really was helpful because then I used his play to become quite close to him.

ii) Using play to ‘teach’ children and ‘help them catch up’

A second issue linked to the ‘play’ theme, which illustrates the special quality of the adoptive parent–child relationship, was the parents’ acute awareness of how much their children had ‘missed out on’ in early life. Some parents had difficulties in resisting the temptation to use play as a teaching vehicle to help the child ‘catch up’ (Desmarais, 2004). This led to greater emphasis being placed during subsequent courses on the importance of just ‘being there’ and paying attention to the child’s play, following rather than leading, and limiting the parents’ tendency to take over the play, using it to show the child ‘how to do it’. Giving attention in this way hopefully promotes attachments and raises the child’s self-esteem (Slade, 1994). For many of these children it was a relatively unfamiliar experience to have someone showing close and sustained positive interest in what they do, without seeking to interfere. This builds on Webster-Stratton’s idea of non-directive play, but amplifies it and emphasises its value for these children, and was found by many parents to be especially helpful:

It’s a brilliant tip to get down to the child’s level, for me not to always be trying to educate them because of what they’ve missed out on. That it’s OK to step

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Webster-Stratton topic</th>
<th>Adoption considerations around that issue</th>
<th>New ‘adoption-specific’ topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Play</td>
<td>Impact of maltreatment</td>
<td>Regression</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not using play to teach</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Praise and reward</td>
<td>Praising anything that goes well</td>
<td>Recreation of previous patterns</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Coping with praise ‘backfiring’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limit setting</td>
<td>Not confusing ignoring emotionally</td>
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<td></td>
<td>withdrawing</td>
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<td>Handling misbehaviour</td>
<td>Using time out</td>
<td>Emotional regulation</td>
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During the development of the programme, the topic of regression would sometimes be raised when considering the children’s play. Within the new programme, discussion of regression can be included here or it can form the basis of a separate session, additional to the basic Webster-Stratton format.

Additional topic: regression
Regression is a topic very specific to children with early experiences of neglect and abuse as it focuses on their need to experience or re-experience infantile behaviours. It arose powerfully and spontaneously within early group sessions. Parents varied in their response to regressed behaviour: some parents felt it was quite natural for their children to want baby care, feeling that it enabled them to form a closer bond with the child. Others were more anxious that their children would ‘get stuck’ in an infantile stage which could make them unacceptable in the eyes of their peer group and could make the adopters look inadequate as parents. Parents often perceived their role as helping their children catch up on their development and initially found it difficult to understand that allowing, or even encouraging, some dependency in the short term might facilitate more appropriate independence later.

The new material produced as a result of discussion of regression with the parents in the early groups suggests that it is important to help adopters think about what has happened in their children’s lives and link this to the child’s need ‘to be babied’. The impact of poor or erratic care in infancy from birth parents, possibly followed by an inevitable emphasis on independence and self-care in busy foster homes, may result in a child being prematurely independent and capable of doing things for themselves. However, emotionally they may need the experiences of being dependent and having parental help before they can move on to genuine independence. Parents need reassurance that children rarely get stuck in these baby stages, but can indeed regress and then move on more confidently to age-appropriate behaviour (Winnicott, 2002):

...to actually have the need to be a baby or to be a little toddler... in order to move on is something a lot of people, including myself, would fail to understand the significance of... allowing them to do that.

Discussion could also cover practical tips about what to buy and use as ‘props’ and how to contain the behaviours in appropriate settings. The group heard of one family where an adopted seven-year-old asked for a cot for herself for her birthday present. Her parents bought one and she slept in it (rather squashed in!) for some months before moving back into a ‘big’ bed and suggesting that a newly-born cousin might like to have her cot now.

2. Praise and reward
The use of praise is an important technique within the Incredible Years parenting skills programme. Webster-Stratton suggests that if you want to see your child repeat positive behaviour you should give praise and attention. She asks parents to give specific praise for small things the child has got right. It can be as simple as ‘Well done, you ate your dinner up so nicely’ and this can be particularly helpful for children with difficult early life experiences as it will help build self-esteem and a sense of competence in the child.

Parents found this emphasis on being specific very helpful:

...very effective... we hadn’t previously used it to change behaviour, and so very effective and a delight to see the children’s faces when they are given praise.

i) Praise which ‘backfires’ and triggers disruptive behaviour
Children who have felt ‘worthless’ in their family of origin might have particular difficulties accepting praise and may in fact behave in ways that will deliberately disrupt a positive interaction. For these parents, praising their child often ‘backfires’ and triggers disruptive behaviours. The expected
negative interaction is, paradoxically, reassuring to the child because it is familiar. From the child’s point of view it is better to be in control of something ‘going wrong’ than to wait for the expected rejection or criticism.

Helping parents understand this and giving them strategies to continue to find something, however small, to praise is vital. The focus of this addition to the existing programme is in helping the parents to develop strategies that allow the child to be praised without this leading to disruptive behaviour. Webster-Stratton does cover physical reinforcement but the new material, introduced in the Coram addendum, focused more obviously on suggestions of how to praise without provoking disruptive behaviour. This might be with a physical gesture like a thumbs-up, eye contact, using a rhyme or a handshake. There was also discussion of parental memories of being praised as a child and how they had felt then, as well as helping parents in praising themselves as adults and parents. The need to find a way to give praise without it ‘backfiring’ was a common issue for so many adopters that it meant that the group discussion and role play were of particular value and support:

It’s our mainstay – constant praise – try to encourage good behaviour and ignore the bad behaviour.

ii) Children’s ability to ‘re-create’ previous interactions
While giving consideration to the child’s tendency to try to disrupt positive interactions (which might lead to praise) we aimed to increase awareness about the child’s ability to ‘re-create’ experiences from their family of origin within their new family setting, through discussion. One family commented ruefully, ‘we didn’t use to shout before’ – and this led to consideration of just how adept adoptive children can be at recreating earlier (usually negative) experiences (see Hughes, 1997). This awareness will hopefully help parents feel less daunted by the child’s negative response and more confident in their parenting.

3. Limit setting and time out
Among other management strategies for changing child behaviours, Carolyn Webster-Stratton advocates the careful use of ‘ignoring’ and of ‘time out’ in her programme. For previously maltreated children, who may have experienced considerable neglect, the appropriateness of such strategies may seem questionable. However, discussion in the groups suggested that the families were often already using their own versions of these techniques, sometimes in some desperation. The programme encourages parents to identity small and very specific behaviours, such as swearing or sticking out the tongue, to ignore. Discussion was encouraged of the difference between this technique and parents emotionally withdrawing from the child, usually because they were feeling overwhelmed. The positive benefits of targeting a specific behaviour, while staying in contact with the child, were highlighted.

The use of ‘time out’ was also carefully analysed with parents revealing that they often send the child out of the room when they themselves are feeling almost out of control. The Webster-Stratton approach of carefully explaining to the child exactly what would happen – what would trigger a ‘time out’, how many warnings they would be given, how long ‘time out’ would last and how the child had to behave during ‘time out’ – helped parents to lay down boundaries and keep calm themselves. For children from chaotic backgrounds, who might often have been subjected to unpredictable parental behaviours, this could feel safe and reassuring. The group also gave consideration to the parents’ own need for ‘time out’ and how to organise ‘calming down’ breaks for all the family members. Finally, there was useful discussion of where a child should be sent for ‘time out’ – an issue which needed thinking about when children might previously have been locked in rooms or other places as a punishment. Many parents reported finding this careful definition and ‘unpicking’ of terminology and actual behaviours very helpful, allowing them to change their practice and employ techniques which began to show positive results.
Out of everything, that was the best thing that helped to calm things down in the house a lot, because before things get too bad, we can just say to him, 'Go and have some time out.' It defuses the situation.

Additional topic: emotional regulation
Children who have experienced neglect or maltreatment during their infancy are likely to be less able to recognise, cope with and regulate their feelings (Cicchetti et al., 1991). The adoption-specific material included discussion of these difficulties and strategies to help children. For instance, parents might use a chart showing lots of facial expressions to help children identify and label their own feelings and actively name feelings and sensations for them – for example, 'This is your warm cozy bed', 'You must be feeling sleepy', etc. Group leaders are also encouraged to help parents discuss their own feelings of anger at being the subject of their child's aggression, focusing specifically on how surprising these can be for some parents. Webster-Stratton offers useful techniques to 'lower the temperature' when parents feel themselves becoming angry. What is particularly valuable about these groups is the shared experience of adoptive parents dealing with distressed, angry children and being able to acknowledge this together.

Through carefully listening to the group discussions during the parent training sessions, and to the interview material from families, relevant additions were made to the Webster-Stratton programme. Facilitator notes were developed on how to help parents discuss the topics that have been outlined above, and additional notes were also developed for parents. A list of useful books and academic references concerning topics specific to adoption was developed for trainers. Parents were also provided with a list of additional reading, including children's books, that might assist parents in talking with their children.

All the new material has been discussed with Carolyn Webster-Stratton and developed with her permission and approval. She is alert to all children's need to develop secure attachments and her programme is designed to encourage positive parent-child interactions to this end.

Evaluation of the programme
The basic Webster-Stratton course provides weekly session-evaluation sheets that the parents are asked to complete. Participants on the four courses tended to rate the sessions either 'helpful' or 'very helpful', with some parents occasionally commenting that they found the video-clip illustrations rather less helpful.

In addition to this, a more rigorous evaluation was undertaken to assess the effectiveness of the intervention. It was decided that the focus of this evaluation should be two-fold: a consideration of how the parents felt about themselves as parents and of how they represented their child(ren).

To evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, parents were asked to complete two questionnaires, before the course and immediately after it, and again one year later. The first of these, the Parenting Stress Index (PSI – Abidin, 1986) is divided into domains relating to child characteristics and parent characteristics. The scores in each domain are totalled to give a Child Total, a Parent Total and a Total for the whole questionnaire that gives an overall evaluation of parenting stress. At the start of the course, 20 parents (61 per cent) felt significant levels of stress, while 13 (39 per cent) of the group reported stress within normal limits (data were missing for the remaining two parents).

Closer examination of the sub-scales of the PSI, however, reveal that most of this stress was being reported as generated by child characteristics rather than parent ones. Twenty-four (73 per cent) of the parents scored above the normal range in terms of stress experienced as a result of characteristics/behaviours of their child(ren) (the Child Total score), with nine (27 per cent) scoring within the normal range. However, only three (9 per cent) cited high levels of stress associated with their own role as a parent, the vast majority of parents (30 or 91 per cent) reporting stress within the normal limits on the Parent Total Score.

This would support the idea that for
many adoptive families the difficulties which the child brings as a result of earlier adverse experiences present considerable challenges, as high scores on the child domain suggest a child with behaviours that are making it difficult for the parent to fulfil their parenting role.

Further analysis of the specific child and parent domain codes tended to reinforce this conclusion. Twenty-four (73 per cent) of the parents reported finding that their interactions with their children did not produce a good feeling in the parent about him/herself. The child was failing to reinforce the parent in their parenting role. Twenty-three (70 per cent) of the parents reported high stress because their children displayed physical, intellectual or emotional characteristics which were at odds with the parents’ ‘hoped-for’ child, while only ten (30 per cent) scored within normal limits on this sub-scale. Twenty-two parents (67 per cent) found the child’s level of demanding behaviour difficult to manage and 22 (67 per cent) were highly stressed by her/his moodiness. Twenty (61 per cent) felt highly stressed by the child’s inability to adapt to changes in her or his social or physical environment. Fourteen (42 per cent) also reported feelings of stress due to the child being so easily distracted.

Even though 63 per cent of participants were novice parents, only four (12 per cent) rated themselves as significantly stressed because of a lack of a ‘Sense of Competence’, one of the parent domain sub-scales. Six (18 per cent) of the parents felt significantly socially isolated and three (10 per cent) had recently experienced stressful life events, such as changes of job or house or death or illness in the immediate family, prior to the beginning of the course. However, 21 (64 per cent) felt high levels of stress because they did not feel sufficiently attached to their children, with only 12 (36 per cent) parents not reporting this as problematic.

The analysis of the sub-scales of the Parenting Stress Index therefore suggests that parents, on the whole, reported themselves as feeling able to cope, relatively healthy and energetic and well supported by their spouse. However, two-thirds reported high levels of stress associated with the (non) developing attachment relationship with their child(ren) and with a range of child characteristics, the most important being a lack of positive reinforcement from the child and a sense that he or she differed in important ways from the child the parents had wished for.

The second questionnaire completed by parents was the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1994) that assessed aspects of child behaviour on a three-point scale: ‘not true’, ‘somewhat true’ and ‘certainly true’. These correspond to ‘no concern’, ‘some concern’ and ‘high concern’ about the particular behaviour. For the purpose of analysis, ‘somewhat’ was collapsed into ‘certainly’ to give a ‘none versus some/high concern’ dimension. The analysis on the SDQ was based on questionnaires completed by all the participants on the course. Therefore, in the case where both mother and father participated they would both have completed a questionnaire about each ‘target’ child. This means that the analysis of the SDQ is based on 61 potential questionnaires (n = 61) but as not all the parents completed the SDQ and some failed to complete certain questions, the number analysed is variable.

In the pre-course measurement, the SDQ results showed that 64 per cent of parents reported their adopted children as causing some or high concern on the total score of the SDQ with 36 per cent reporting no concern. Seventy per cent considered that their children exhibited symptoms of hyperactivity, 88 per cent of parents felt their children had conduct problems causing some or high levels of concern and 58 per cent reported that their children were experiencing difficulties in relationships with peers. Just over a third (34 per cent) of the parents reported their children as having problematic pro-social behaviour, ie not being considerate of other people’s feelings, sharing toys and treats or being helpful to others, and 65 per cent answered that the children caused some or high concern over emotional symptoms.
Parents’ responses after the course
Parents completed a second copy of both questionnaires at the last session of the course and their pre- and post-course scores were compared. After the course, the parents’ overall levels of stress decreased, although this change just failed to reach statistical significance. However, statistically significant improvement was found on the levels of stress reported as being associated with child characteristics generally. Parents reported feeling significantly more competent after the course, found their children significantly more positively reinforcing, and reported significantly fewer difficult life events. Other improvements were recorded on the domain of Child Acceptability, although this result did not quite reach statistical significance.

These results suggest that parents felt less stressed overall after the parent training programme, were less troubled by life events and felt significantly more competent. They found their children’s characteristics less stressful, found interactions with their children) more positively rewarding and felt that their child was more akin to the child they had imagined parenting. Dimensions of parenting stress which did not seem to be significantly affected by participation in the course were the parents’ sense of being attached to their child and their report of the child’s level of demanding behaviour, distractness, lack of adaptability and moodiness. While a lack of improvement in attachment is disappointing, it is perhaps over-ambitious to hope that the programme would have discernible effects in this domain after only 12 weeks.

A surprising finding was that parents reported feeling more socially isolated as the course came to an end. During the programme they had been involved closely with a group of other adoptive families in a setting of mutual disclosure and empathy. The course was facilitated by experienced adoption social workers who had a real understanding of adoptive family difficulties and of the special challenges faced by adoptive parents. Considering many of the parents commented that ‘ordinary’ biological families tended not to understand their situation, and often proved unhelpful to talk to, it is perhaps to be expected that families would experience a sense of loss and loneliness at the imminent termination of the group. Group-based programmes may be more effective (Moran et al, 2004) and offer valuable non-stigmatisising support (Scott, 2001). As one parent commented:

*You know that they’ll [the group members] understand what you mean and it’s safe to say that. There’s nowhere else you could say that.*

The fact that the families came from a 35-mile radius of London makes continued meeting difficult for all but a few. Each group had a six-month follow-up meeting that was always well attended. Every group has said they would like further sessions but finite resources make this difficult.

The second questionnaire, the SDQ, also showed some statistically significant improvements reported by parents after the course. The overall level of concern fell significantly with levels of hyperactivity and conduct disorder also notably reduced. There was no significant improvement on parental report of either emotional symptoms or (lack of) pro-social behaviours.

**Conclusion**
The evaluation of the programme using the questionnaires was able to demonstrate considerable positive benefits for the families who attended. Parenting stress levels overall fell and there were significant improvements within the parent–child relationship. Parents reported feeling more competent after the course, finding their children more rewarding and less difficult to manage. There were reductions in parental reports of conduct disorder and hyperactivity and a reduction in the general level of behavioural difficulties reported by parents among their children. However, the course failed to improve parental feelings of attachment towards their adoptive children and how demanding or moody they found their child. Rather sadly, but
perhaps unsurprisingly, parents reported high levels of a sense of being socially isolated at the end of the course. Our hope is that if the parents can maintain use of the strategies learned on the course, and hence maintain the more positive interactions with their children, over time more secure patterns of attachment will develop.

During interviews and the group sessions, parents reported feeling supported and understood by the group and valued the experience of being with highly trained adoption social workers and other adoptive parents. In the words of one parent:

*I was so stunned that other families were also feeling like that. The course gave me a lot of support just by realising that we were not the only ones.*

A number of parents confirmed the need for an adoption-specific approach to parenting skills. As one mother commented:

*I think it reminded me again that they’re not the same as everybody else’s children, and that they need a little bit more than your normal birth children would do. And I think you forget about that because you just get caught up in the day-to-day stuff, and you mix with normal children and normal families and you tend to treat them the same without sort of stepping back and thinking.*

As the DfES practice guidance on assessing the support needs of adoptive families’ now acknowledges:

*The additional parenting tasks and challenges involved in adoption require enhanced or ‘parenting plus’ skills, resilience and considerable emotional resources. (p 24)*

This course provides an effective tool to help parents develop their parenting skills and improve their interactions with their children. However, for many troubled children who have suffered chronic neglect and abuse, it is unlikely to be the only intervention needed. Many children will need individual support in the classroom and therapy in addition. Nevertheless, this intervention does enable parents to feel more effective and positive in their role and hence makes an important contribution to supporting the adoptive family.

Rushton and Dance (2002) highlighted the need for more training for practitioners working with adoptive families. The Anna Freud Centre and Coram Adoption Service have developed ‘training for trainers’ to enable workers already trained on the Webster-Stratton BASIC Incredible Years package to become familiar with the additional adoption-specific material so that focused adoptive-parent trainings can become more widely available. Those interested in attending such a course should contact Kay Henderson at the Anna Freud Centre (kay.henderson@annafreud.org).

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