

October 2008



Action for Children briefing

Early years services and emotional wellbeing – what parents want

Summary

Our findings help to shed new light on parents' attitudes towards the role of the state in supporting parents to raise children, their experiences of Sure Start Children's Centres (SSCCs) themselves, as well as support for children's resilience and emotional wellbeing in general.

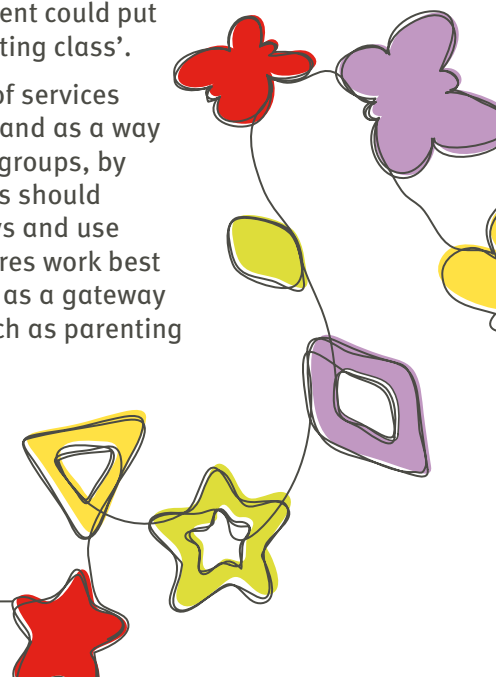
- ▶ Parents recognise that their child's social and emotional development is the bedrock for their overall 'wellbeing' – 79 per cent of parents agree that 'children need to be emotionally tough to get by in today's world'.
- ▶ However, parents use a very different language to politicians and professionals. They describe emotional wellbeing and resilience as good social skills, confidence, the ability to bounce back and school readiness. They view emotional wellbeing in terms of the social and emotional ability to cope.
- ▶ The debate about the role of the state is a very real one, and has an impact on what services people use and how they view them. While 51 per cent of adults agree that 'government should do more to help parents bring up children', 38 per cent disagree.

However, 76 per cent of parents with children under five believe the government could do more.

- ▶ This backs up the massive support for Sure Start Children's Centres – 85 per cent of the adults we surveyed agree that most parents find these centres useful. Furthermore these services should be universal, with 90 per cent agreeing that they 'should be for all parents, not just the well off or those with particular problems'.
- ▶ People most in need of Children's Centres were put off from by the stigma attached to being a bad parent or from a deprived background – 60 per cent of people in social class DE said that 'being labelled a bad parent could put people off taking a parenting class'.

Therefore, universal provision of services should be valued both in itself and as a way of increasing take-up in target groups, by reducing stigma. These services should engage parents in positive ways and use everyday language. These centres work best when they are used by parents as a gateway to further targeted support, such as parenting or self-esteem classes.

This briefing is based on primary and secondary research carried out for Action for Children by BDSR, an independent research consultancy that was formerly part of Opinion Leader. The full report is available from www.actionforchildren.org.uk and information about the authors can be found at www.branddemocracy.co.uk. The survey results quoted in this briefing are based on the results of a UK survey of 1180 adults, carried out over 23 and 24 January 2008 by BDSR.



Is emotional wellbeing important to parents?

‘Their emotional stability as a child, really it’s what sets them up.’ Manchester participant

Parents consider the emotional wellbeing and the social development of their children of central importance. In some cases, they rate emotional wellbeing as being more important than other aspects of children’s development, such as educational attainment.

This view is backed up by our own survey work, which found that 75 per cent of adults agree that ‘children need to be emotionally tough to get by in today’s world’.

But parents do not use the same language as politicians, academics or professionals. The parents Action for Children work with do not see emotional wellbeing or resilience in abstract terms, and tend to use their own words or phrases to describe the concepts. As such, they connected emotional wellbeing and resilience to behaviours and competencies or life-stages in their children’s own development.

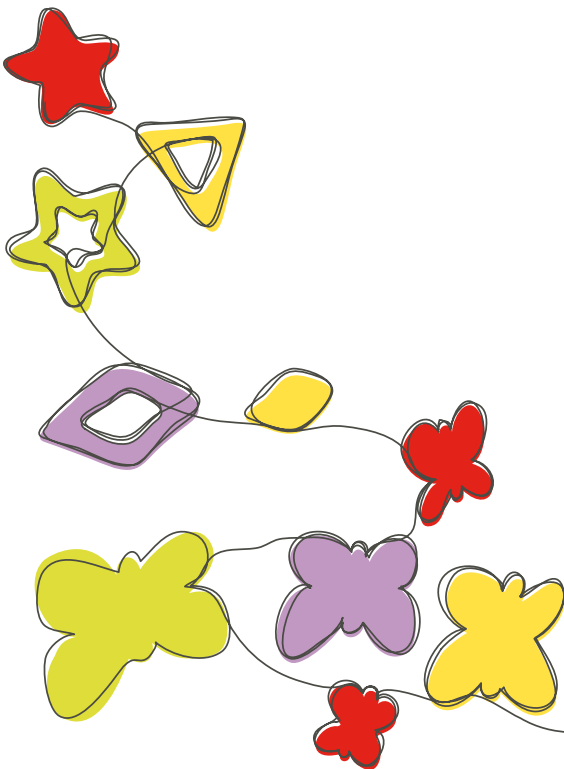
Signifiers of healthy development

Parents often thought that children who were developing good social and emotional skills would be able to do a mixture of the following things:

- be able to share and play
- be able to be sociable, independent and not clingy
- be able to respect other children’s feelings and, as one mother put it, ‘not go around bashing other kids’ (Non-Sure Start user, Manchester)
- possess confidence, both social and physical
- be able to ‘bounce back’ from problems

The protective factors talked about in resilience research tend to be framed by parents in terms of school readiness: being able to behave appropriately with other children and with adults, and having confidence and social skills. These are seen as assets to be fostered by parents providing support and encouragement, and being confident and consistent role models.

So, parents place a high priority on their child developing social and emotional skills, seeing these as the bedrock for their development, school readiness and later success in life. In our groups, there was awareness that ensuring children have a supportive and stable environment in which to grow is perhaps the most important aspect of a child’s early years. Nurseries, SSCCs, playgroups and any semi-structured social situations are considered key sites for children developing these skills, bringing them into contact with other children and adults.



‘I think that’s what they need in school, they need confidence to start off with...’ Non-Sure Start user, Manchester

Parents want a ‘supporting government’, not a ‘nanny state’

One of the most pressing debates around early years services and emotional wellbeing is around the appropriate role of the state in the highly private realm of personal development. On the one hand, some see emotional health as akin to physical health, and do not see any particular issue with state-financed services designed to boost child development in this field. Others, arguing for a more rigorous distinction between public and private spheres, see such programmes as a form of nanny-statism and intrusion into private life.

It was perhaps significant then that all the parents we interviewed saw parenting first and foremost as their responsibility. However, most of the parents involved in the research also saw an important role for the state, working alongside parents. Just as they believe that the state has obligations to them, so they realise that they have obligations to society and their children. At a practical level, this means doing what most parents do – from showing up for appointments at Children’s Centres to taking responsibility for their children’s behaviour.

In line with their responsibilities, the parents we interviewed also considered themselves as the most important influence on their young children’s lives. Some talked about parenting as one of the hardest jobs to do, with no job training (‘Having a child is very hard’ – non-Sure Start user, Liverpool; ‘You get no preparation other than nine months of feeling sick and tired’ – non-Sure Start user, London).

Many spontaneously brought up the role of the media in promoting or undermining the principles of positive parenting, and referred to TV programmes such as Supernanny and House of tiny tearaways. The media – including the internet – certainly have an important role to play in conveying positive messages and directing parents to the right help and information.

Parents, however, were clear that they could not develop all aspects of their children’s lives on their own and that it was important for there to be safe spaces in which children could develop their social and emotional skills. Sure Start and nursery schools were often seen as important here.

‘There is a fine line between overstepping the mark and making people feel ‘whoa, what on earth are you doing interfering’, and they’ve got to get the balance right.’

Sure Start user, Liverpool

‘You can’t give your children confidence and security if you're not confident and secure yourself.’

Sure Start user, London

as long as it takes

‘Sometimes you’d sit at home and you’d think, what can I do, where can I go? I’ll go for a walk around the block, do you know what I mean? And there was no one that was really interacting with us, and it’s only since she started going to nursery now that I’ve actually noticed a development in my child. Because she was very shy as well for the first 12 months, wouldn’t go to anyone, wouldn’t even acknowledge people, she’d just bury her head in me. But now she’ll go to the girls at the nursery.’ Manchester parent



While there is massive support for Children’s Centres, there is less support for government involvement.

While 51 per cent agree that ‘government should do more to help parents bring up children’, 38 per cent disagree.

There is a big difference between parents and non-parents – 63 per cent of parents agree, compared to 44 per cent of people who don’t have children under 18.

Conversely, only 27 per cent of parents with children under 18 disagree, compared to 44 per cent of non-parents. Parents of younger children agree more.

Although 76 per cent of parents with children under 18 agree, this falls to 53 per cent for parents of children aged 11–15.

What kind of services help?

Participants in our focus groups supported universal provision and the range of services found in Sure Start Children’s Centres. This was reinforced by the massive support for Children’s Centres in our wider general survey – 85 per cent of people agreed that ‘most parents would find these sorts of centres useful some of the time’. The figure is 85 per cent among both parents and people without children under 18.

We also looked at attitudes to some of the key programmes that help build up children’s emotional wellbeing. Some participants responded positively to the idea of parenting programmes, although time was often flagged up as a limiting factor on their likely use of services. Many identified parenting programmes as being particularly useful for first-time parents in order to give them confidence, as well as tips and skills on ‘good’ parenting.

Action for Children Lancashire Parenting Service – Preston Parenting

David’s story

David has three children, one of whom has ADHD. His partner had been attending sessions at the programme for some time and had suggested that he go along to a ‘Dad’s session’. He was sceptical at first, feeling as though it wasn’t the sort of thing for him. Going along to the centre’s parenting course for dads has helped him and his relationship with his children and partner in a very short space of time. David has been along for just three sessions but says that ‘the kids always used to bully me into doing things... it’s stopped me shouting at them... I play with them now – I never used to play with them.’ He says that the course has helped him start to learn how to deal with his children without having to shout at them or smack them. He has also seen the positive benefits for himself, saying that the session had given him the opportunity to meet some new people. He said that the real spur for making him go along was asking himself: ‘How do I help myself help Chloe with her ADHD without having to shout at her and stuff.’



‘I really don’t like people coming into my house telling me what to do.’ Sure Start user, Manchester

While other types of service have proved very successful, attitudes towards them is mixed. For example, nurse–family partnerships (NFP), a home visitation scheme targeted at vulnerable mothers, drew parallels to health visitors. While some did not like the thought of being told what to do in their own home, others said they were more likely to listen and act on advice given to them in their own home.

Stigma and other reasons not to use Sure Start

Sure Start is a service in transition, moving from being a service targeted at the most-deprived communities to being a universal service available in every community. This raises some issues around the social acceptability of using these centres and the subject of stigma. Our research found that some people did see Sure Start as a service for those ‘at risk’ or who were ‘vulnerable’, and non-users in particular considered such services as being for ‘disadvantaged’ children and parents.

People most in need of Children’s Centres are put off from attending them due to the perception they’re either a bad parent or from a deprived background – 60 per cent of people in social class DE say that ‘being labelled a bad parent could put people off taking a parenting class’.

For many, this stigma meant that they themselves would be unlikely to access the facilities provided because they associate them as being for people in need (ie not themselves) and would not like their children to mix with who they perceived to be ‘problem’ children:

‘You wouldn’t think “oh, I’ll take my child there” because you’d think, well, you wouldn’t really want them to integrate with children that were having behavioural problems, to start with.’

Non-Sure Start user, Manchester

These participants fell into an ‘it’s good for families at risk, but not for me’ group; they tend to suggest that they would be unlikely to ever use these services.

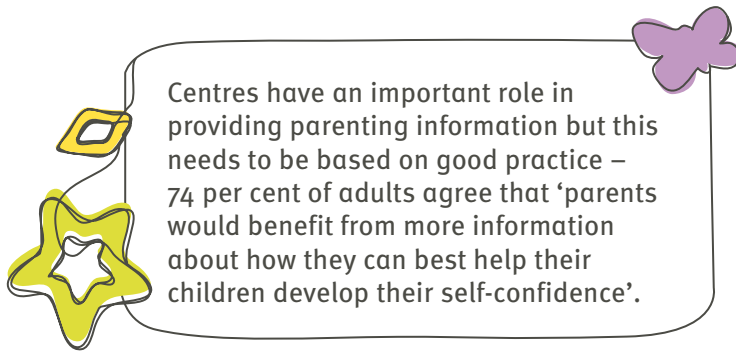
Time was another factor identified by non-user parents, who identified the fact that – especially if they were working – they were already time poor in respect to spending time with their children, and were more likely to prioritise spending quality time with them in their own time than attending a course or programme:

‘I suppose it’s all well and good kind of going to classes for things but, I mean, it’s about time... I have got two children under two at the moment, they’re not quite two, and I work full time, my husband works full time, so it is really hard to find that kind of happy balance, so you try to spend as much time as you can with your children’ (Non-Sure Start user, London)

‘So the time that I’m not in work, I don’t want to go the Sure Start, put them in the crèche. I want to be doing something with them, so I go home and feel like I’ve... I go home and feel, oh, we’ve had a nice day together.’

Non-Sure Start user, Liverpool

So, parents would like such services to be available to all on a voluntary and flexible attendance basis. Time-poor working parents in particular identified the need for on-the-spot parenting advice and tips at SSCC.



Key recommendations

A number of recommendations for central and local government, service providers, the media and parents flow from this work. Some of these relate to the way the concepts discussed in the research can be communicated to parents and the wider public. Others relate to how services could be better configured, based upon the views of the parents consulted. A minority refer to the direction policy on children’s services could take.

- ▶ Parents accept that parenting, first and foremost, is their responsibility. Therefore, we believe that this should be recognised and parents asked to sign up to an implicit contract with service providers, accepting their responsibilities as service users.

- ▶ Parents sometimes need support from outside, and so governments should encourage Children’s Centres in developing emotional wellbeing programmes, and secure further investment in the kinds of interventions that have been shown to be successful.
- ▶ Councils should ensure that every prospective and new parent is informed about the services available at their local Children’s Centre, and take steps to increase awareness of Children’s Centre services, especially among first-time parents.
- ▶ Service users have a role to play in communicating with parents in a language that they can readily engage in and which they do not find stigmatising. Similarly, services should be encouraging existing service users, particular those from key target groups, to act as advocates for services with their local and cultural communities.
- ▶ We also found that the media play a key role in informing parents, and so we call on public service broadcasters to make sure that influential programming provides advice grounded in good practice, and non-broadcast channels are used to help parents locate services that can help them in their parenting.

For more information about our work, please contact the Action for Children Public Affairs team on **020 7704 7132** or at **publicaffairs@actionforchildren.org.uk**

