

Research Summary:
Who Wants Parenting Classes and Why?
The Primary Years

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Executive Summary

Background

- This independent study, which examines parental attitudes to parenting classes in an English Local Authority, was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Academy.
- The research compares the views of parents in higher, middle and low-income areas about the challenges facing them in raising their children and the value of parenting classes run through primary schools.

Challenges in raising children

- Some parents in all areas express confidence in their own parenting ability; however, they also identify different challenges depending on the areas in which they are raising their children.

Attitudes to parenting classes

- Support for the provision of parenting classes is greatest amongst socio-economically disadvantaged parents: 82% in low-income schools think schools should provide this, compared with 66% in middle-income schools, and 44% in higher-income schools.
- Desire to attend parenting classes is also greatest amongst socio-economically disadvantaged parents: 55% in low-income schools want to attend, 38% in middle-income schools and 35% in higher-income schools.
- Parents using higher-income schools are more likely to rely on networks of other mothers than want to attend formal parenting education.
- Parents in middle-income schools see willingness to attend parenting education as a sign of good mothering.
- Parents in low-income schools are more likely to want to attend, but stigma and lack of confidence can reduce participation.

Policy implications

- There is unmet demand for parenting education aimed at parents of primary school-aged children.
- Parents, particularly those in lower socio-economic groups, want to see provision of parenting education through trusted local primary schools.
- These classes need to be provided on a 'universal' rather than targeted basis to remove stigma about attendance.

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Background

The report focuses on parents' attitudes to the changing role of primary schools in an English Local Authority. The research was led by Professor Sarah Holloway and Dr Helena Pimlott-Wilson of Loughborough University, and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and the British Academy.

The research was undertaken in primary schools serving higher, middle and low-income communities. The higher-income (HI) schools had an average of 2.5% of pupils claiming free schools meals, while the FSM average was in the mid-teens in middle-income (MI) schools, and 39% in low-income (LI) schools.

Fieldwork included a large-scale questionnaire survey (1724 distributed; 42% response rate) and 45 follow up interviews with parents from higher, middle and low-income schools.

Challenges in raising children

Parenting: Some parents in all areas express confidence in their own parenting ability, seeing themselves as doing a good job in the raising of their children:

Me personally, I don't think we have any major problems with the kids, I mean they are pretty grounded.... (HI parent)

I've got my family around me, you know I'm not, I like to think that I'm quite a good mum. (MI parent)

I don't think we struggle, they're pretty good kids (LI parent)

However, they also identify challenges they have to face, and these vary depending on the areas in which they were parenting.

Higher-income: Parents in higher-income areas tend to think their children lucky to be growing up in a materially privileged environment, but express some concerns about materialism and pressures on children to succeed:

I think they're extremely fortunate to be able to live in this kind of environment, have all these opportunities, be run around all over the place to do whatever they want to do...they are extremely fortunate. (HI parent)

I guess the only challenge is the competitiveness as they get older, and maybe...the spoiltness, are they going to become spoilt, that's my biggest challenge....which is quite a nice one to have really isn't it?! (HI parent).

Middle-income: Parents whose children were at middle-income schools express some financial concerns, but were most worried about the social variability in their areas. They were concerned both that they did not want to mix with all the varied parents in their area, and that their children would be led astray:

I don't want to get myself involved with some people, I just, those I need to know, I need to know, and those that I don't, just stay out of the way. (MI parent)

I'm terrified he'll get in with the wrong crowd, I mean I see some of the kids around here and I think mmm I really don't want, oh God that sounds so snobby doesn't it, I really don't want him socialising with some of them. (MI parent)

[Daughter], she goes on park doesn't she, but I suppose you have to let them, I'm not too happy about it sometimes, because if you saw some of the people on [named] Park you'd understand, but...! (MI parent)

Low-income: By contrast, parents whose children were at low-income schools saw very clear cut distinctions between better and worse parts of their neighbourhood, and what they saw to be good and bad families on individual streets. As in middle-income areas, this leads to concerns that children might be led astray:

[T]hese on the outskirts is quite [alright], you know here, but go into the middle of that estate it's really not good.....a lot of drinking, drugs, arguments, fighting, there's litter, it's not nice! (LI parent)

I mean not everyone's likeoh you can spot a smack rat now, but not everyone is, maybe they're in that sort of situation you know, they live on like [named street] and it's not very nice, but they are like us in the sense that they want to get out but they can't sort of thing. (LI parent)

[N]ot to be led astray is a big challenge, especially for my eleven year old, not to be led astray by other children doing what they shouldn't be doing really.... Some of the kids smash the windows in the bus shelter; it's forever being smashed, and spray painting bins and setting bins on fire.... (LI parent)

Attitudes to parenting classes being provided through primary schools

School-based parenting classes: Support for the provision of parenting classes is greatest in schools serving more socio-economically disadvantaged parents (see Table 1). 82% of parents with children in low-income schools think schools should offer this service; 66% of parents in middle-income schools see them a good idea; while only 44% of parents in higher-income schools consider this a valuable service. Desire to attend parenting classes is also greatest amongst socio-economically disadvantaged parents. 55% of parents whose children attend low-income schools said they would attend such classes, compared with 38% in middle-income schools and 35% in higher-income schools.

Place matters: These figures emerge from different neighbourhood contexts and while there are broad class differences in our data, with more socio-economically advantaged groups being less keen on provision and use, the

area you live in and the type of school your child goes to also matters. People from a higher class background whose children attend low-income schools tend to be in favour of parenting classes, while parents with a lower social class position tend to be less in favour of parenting classes if their children attend a higher-income school. The nature of advantage or problems you experience in a neighbourhood and school, rather than simply individual social class, appears to lie behind these patterns.

Table 1: Percentages of parents who think primary schools should provide, and who would use, parenting classes (Source: questionnaire survey)									
a. School	HI			MI			LI		
Should be provided	44			66			82		
I would go	35			38			55		
b. Variation within parental class by type of school used	Class 1			Class 2			Class 3		
	HI	MI	LI	HI	MI	LI	HI	MI	LI
Should be provided	45	63	85	36	75	81	42	65	83
I would go	33	33	42	41	46	53	32	39	59

Higher-income: Parents in higher-income areas are less keen on parenting classes through primary schools both because they think there are few problems in their area, and because if they personally experience challenges they will turn to the well-developed mothering networks that exist in their areas for advice:

I'm not sure that many people have that many serious problems with behaviour in the school; I think generally behaviour is of a pretty good standard within the school, so I wouldn't imagine there'd be a big need for that (HI parent)

I wouldn't sign up to it [parenting classes]....because I don't think that I struggle particularly, and when I do struggle, because we all struggle.... I would use my friends as a network to resolve those issues and talk that through, who know me, because I don't think there's a right and a wrong as well, and it's like 'Well have you tried this?'.....I think that most people have got a network of friends and would do it in that way....other mums are very similar to me, and whether they work or don't work, they've got a network of friends and they use that. And because of the type of values we've got, the family and the kids are important, so it is a topic of conversation (HI parent).

Middle-income: Parents in middle-income areas are somewhat more positive about parenting classes. Parents are still more keen to rely on family networks, but parenting advice for children of primary age is welcomed when it is needed. This group appear largely confident about meeting other parents at classes and

tend to portray their willingness to think about parenting as a badge of good mothering:

Yeah, if my child was going through something, you know, any advice is welcome isn't it?...Yeah if I was stuck and didn't know what to do or, you know then yeah I'd be open to trying new things. (MI parent)

I've done most of the things [parenting classes] they've offered....people that tend to put themselves forward to do these things, are the people that are already bending over backwards to make sure the kids have got everything. (MI parent)

Low-income: Parents in low-income areas are statistically the keenest on parenting classes. In some cases this is simply because parents think others in their area would benefit from the service, as they do not consider them to be doing a good job:

There's some parents, they just basically have kids for money [state benefits] and just can't be arsed to look after their kids.....they can't be bothered to do anything with them, and not bothered whether they run round streets or not. (LI parent)

There is also considerable demand from parents who can see the benefit of parenting classes for themselves. However, even though they think they could benefit from parenting classes the stigma around using the service, and confidence issues, can make attendance difficult:

I mean I'd probably only ever do sommat [something] like that if I were having a major problem with one of the kids and probably needed help sorting it out....I think if you care about your kids then you'll do the most you can, and there's probably some people down at school that probably don't care as much about their children. (LI parent)

I always think that you know if you go there, people's going to think oh you're a bad parent, do you know what I mean? I think there's a lot of stigma attached to them...[continues later] you know kids aren't stupid, and they're like 11 year olds, 'oh your mum's had to come in to parenting classes'. (LI parent)

Policy implications

There is unmet demand for parenting education aimed at the parents of primary school-aged children. Parents, particularly those in lower socio-economic groups, welcome the provision of parenting education through local primary schools.

To maximise attendance the stigma around participating in parenting classes needs to be removed. This can only be achieved by providing classes on a 'universal' rather than targeted basis.