

Why Don't We Listen? Parents of high-level offenders asked for help before their child's first offence

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Abstract:

This paper will draw on research that looked at parenting interventions as a form of crime prevention. It involved a case-study of over 140 families and questionnaires with parents attending a Youth Offending Team and parents attending a voluntary parenting group. The data indicates that a large majority of parents of 'high end' offenders had called for help before their child's first recorded offence. The help was often sought from statutory services but with negative results. This paper considers how professionals can support families earlier and more effectively.

Key words: Early intervention, targeted support, Troubled Families, Parenting support

Introduction:

The Department for Communities and Local Government describes 'Troubled Families' as those presenting with:

- High level offending / anti-social behaviour
- School exclusion
- Worklessness
- High cost to public services

Before the Troubled Families agenda (and before Family Intervention Projects) the Youth Crime Prevention agenda had Parenting Orders as the statutory intervention for families (usually for individual parents to attend a specific programme). The use of parenting orders and their impact on crime prevention was the focus of a thesis that this paper draws on (Vlugter, 2009).

Data for the thesis included a case-study of 148 families with a child made subject to a youth court order and parents were either on a Parenting Order (21), attended voluntary support (43), were referred for parenting support but did not engage (39) or had a child living at home under age 16 years but was not referred for support (45).

Questionnaires were also completed with parents attending a first appointment at the Youth Offending Team (40) and parents attending parenting groups (14).

The data revealed that the cases where a Parenting Order was made could be described as ‘troubled families’:

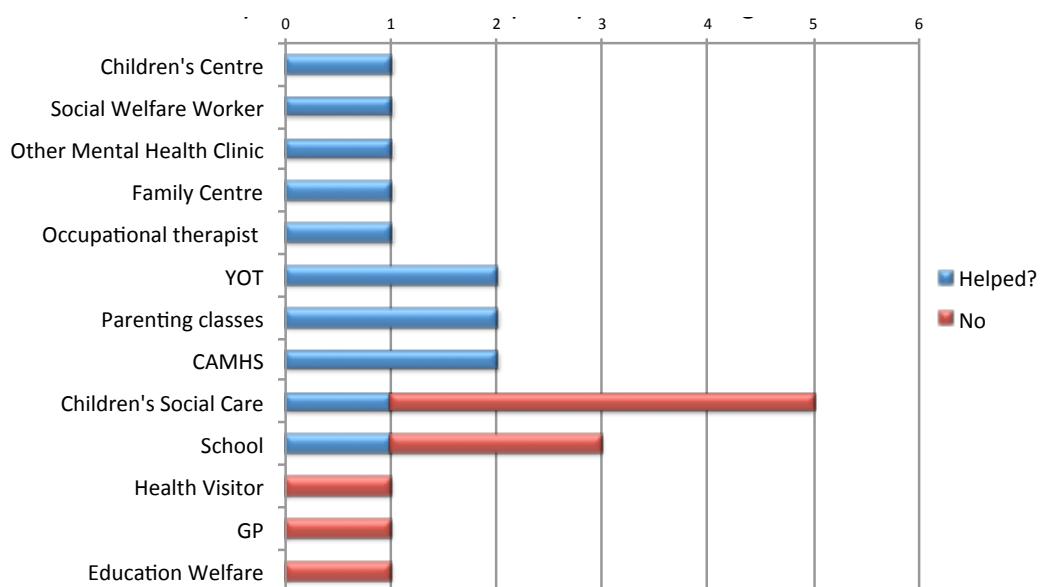
- Most orders were made due to a concern about the persistent or serious offending combined with the young person’s age (average 14 years old).
- These cases had the highest proportion of ‘persistent young offenders’
- Most parents had been offered voluntary support through the Youth Offending Team but had refused this support
- Most parents with a child on a youth court order experienced personal and family concerns but those on Parenting Orders had higher levels of deprivation (57% versus 27%) and the highest proportion of compounding social needs.
- Several parents on orders had previous involvement with ‘helping agencies’ (81%) and many had self-referred to Children’s Social Care about their child’s behaviour (52%).

This begs the question: **Why were they so reluctant to attend a parenting programme if they had been asking for help?** A number of authors argue that even when parents seek assistance with their child’s behaviour, they may not perceive a problem with their parenting and may be reluctant to attend a parenting programme (Ghate and Hazel, 2002; Ghate and Ramella, 2002, Holt 2010). Buchanan (2000) asserts that parents are more open to help and advice during particular transitional periods and that the level of trust a parent feels in those working with them could be more influential than the programme itself (also see Crowley, 2001). Flint and Hunter (2010: 206) reflect that parents may be ‘keen’ to engage in support when it is ‘packaged in a way as to represent a break from their previous negative relationships with state agencies’.

The case study was then sub-divided into four different groups based on levels of recorded offending by the young people: one to two offences (n=44), three to four (n=42), five to eight (n=32) and over nine offences (n=30). The average number of offences for the total sample was five offences, with twenty-two young people committing just one offence. The highest number of offences committed by one young person was twenty-three offences. There was only one other young person who had committed over twenty offences.

The data found that most areas of need (personal, family and social) were significantly more prominent in the high-end offending groups. Of particular note is that 80% of the high-offending group had prior involvement with 'helping agencies', compared to 30% of the low-offending group. Where families went for help varied (from voluntary to statutory services) but based on the results from questionnaires completed by parents attending a group and attending the youth offending service, the common agency was Children's Services. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Where did they go for help? Were they helped?



These figures are drawn from parents attending groups (n=14) and asked to list who they went to and whether they received the help they were seeking.

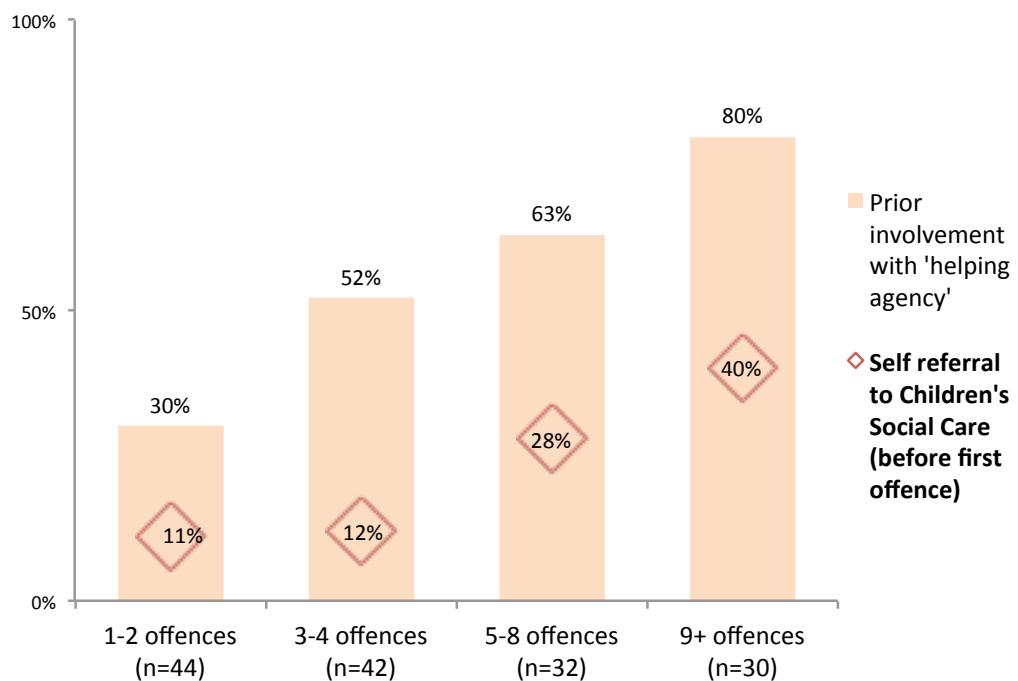
This raises the question of **why Children's Social Care is the least helpful?**

Looking at the answers from parents first attending the Youth Offending Team, fifteen out of the forty parents had previous involvement with Children's Social Care but only 20% said they were the most helpful. Looking at the comments, parents spoke of:

- inconsistency between workers
- a sense that workers did not care
- workers did not consider the child as an individual
- three reported that no actual support was given
- in one case "situation made worse"

Children's Social Care was however also chosen by three of the parents as the most helpful, commenting that practical support or avenues for further support to follow up had been given. Looking at the case-study sample, Children's Social Care is a key gateway for support. See Figure 2.

Figure 2 – prior involvement and self-referral from the case study (n=148) subdivided by level of offending by the young people



So what do 'troubled families' need?

It depends ... Unsurprisingly, the evidence suggests that parents' most value practical assistance or advice that is *relevant to their situation* and having someone who will:

- listen
- respect them
- communicate well with them

A possible way of looking at support options is to consider the expectations we have for ourselves and for parents. What we expect parents and families to provide for children is also what families expect from us as professionals.

Parenting programmes say:

- Special time – knowing child – safe engagement
- Clear instructions – positive discipline – realistic expectations
- Boundaries
- Consistency
- Self-care

Good Social Work practice:

- Compassion
- Engagement
- Active Listening
- Clear boundaries
- Consistency
- Organised
- Self-care

A key message from parenting programmes is for parents to **role model, based on a positive relationship.**

Conclusion:

Role modelling good parenting practice through a professional relationship, that involves engagement as well as realistic expectations, clear communication and reliable practice, may help to address some of the behaviours presented by families who are considered a ‘troubled family’. However, these are already established within good social work practice and this paper argues that the opportunities to avoid the ‘troubled family’ are being presented by the families themselves when they call social workers for help.

This therefore raises the question: **why don't we listen?** Agencies receiving these early calls from parents struggling with a child’s behaviour are in a difficult position of balancing thresholds with timely support and transparent assessments with engagement, whilst holding a number of complex caseloads. Yet it appears that families are identifying for themselves children who may be at risk of persistent offending (and their own risk of becoming a ‘troubled family’). Not taken seriously, left ignored or handled without care is likely to cause a lot more harm and concern than if we were to supply the resources early to respond positively as a Corporate ‘Relative’. Certainly before we become a Corporate Parent.

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