

# Parenting Orders - Empowerment Not Punishment?

**Helen Watson describes Sunderland Youth Offending Service's experience of piloting Parenting Orders.**

**L**abour's flagship Crime and Disorder Act 1998 introduced Parenting Orders. Orders can be made in the following five circumstances: where the child has been made the subject of a Child Safety Order; where a child or young person has been convicted of an offence; where an Anti-Social Behaviour Order or Sex Offender Order has been made; or, where an adult has been convicted under Sections 443 or 444 of the Education Act 1996 for the non-attendance of a child at school.

The Parenting Order consists of two major elements: the first, and core, requirement is that the parent attends counselling or guidance sessions no more than once per week for no longer than three months; and, where this is deemed appropriate, the imposition for a period of up to one year of additional requirements of relevance and desirable in the interests of preventing any repetition of behaviour (for example this might include requirements to ensure that a child attends school).

## **Young people and family disruption**

The debate on Youth Offending has long been characterised by the emphasis placed upon the link between young people committing crime, family disruption and/or inadequate parenting. This preoccupation with the family and crime has been a critical component within the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, as evidenced in

the Government White Paper which preceded it: "The single most important factor in explaining criminality is the quality of a young person's home life, including parental supervision" (Home Office 1997:5). Relevant government guidance also states that the Order must be viewed in the wider context of government policies to strengthen family life.

Criminological research has established a compelling case for working with parents to influence children's behaviour in the immediate and longer term. Inadequate parental supervision has been strongly associated with offending. For example, Graham and Bowling's (1995) study demonstrated that 42 per cent of juveniles who had low or medium levels of parental supervision had offended (against 20 per cent for those who had high levels of supervision), and emphasised the importance of the quality of the parent/child relationship. Research such as the Utting et al (1993) study has also highlighted the significant stress caused by wider social and economic problems, such as unemployment, poverty and ill health, which can also impact on the ability of parents to control their children, notwithstanding their recognition that parenting support should be offered.

## **Professional cultures and working practices**

Piloting the Parenting Order has been a steep, exciting learning curve. The Order evoked an emotional, sometimes negative response from professionals, particularly in the early stages of the pilot. This can be viewed against a backdrop of academic commentaries which have characterised the Parenting Order as a criminalisation of inadequate parenting (Muncie 1999). The 'breach factor' seems to have been the real point of contention — really without cause, as in 124 Orders made to date, only three per cent have been returned to Court for breach, resulting in, for example, a fine of £50 and not the maximum of £1,000.

## **Partnership working**

Prior to January 2000, all Parenting Programmes in Sunderland were delivered within the Youth Offending Service. (Since that time, the Service has entered into a direct partnership with Barnardo's through the Sungate Project). Initial findings suggest that the involvement of a neutral voluntary sector child care agency is having a constructive impact in persuading parents to attend programmes on a voluntary basis. Where possible and appropriate, the voluntary route is preferred if a parent is indicating commitment to a programme, but where doubts may arise, in circumstances where the assessment by the responsible officer strongly indicates a parenting issue, a Parenting Order may be sought. Initial findings in Sunderland have suggested that a history of parental offending and deviant attitudes is much more likely to be challenging and less amenable to change than working with parents who may be in conflict with their children and/or using harsh and erratic discipline.

## **Practice issues**

A number of practical issues have to be considered in relation to the operation of Parenting Orders. Comprehensive assessment of parenting issues is central to the matching of parental needs with appropriate programmes. Flexibility through a menu of options has been the key. The groups have undoubtedly been assisted through a relationship being developed between one of the facilitators and a parent before the course starts. In an ideal situation, both parents would attend the same course at the same time. We have utilised a range of materials, including Parent Network, the internationally researched video based programme of Webster-Stratton, and the Sue Miller and Joe Ward 'Let's Talk Parenting' (1999) course. The style of facilitation is also critical, with facilitators, through their own approach, modelling the authoritative (ie. reasoned control and warmth) or assertive style of



Facilitators have operated within a philosophy of building relationships, modelling pro-social behaviours and empowering. Parenting programmes, particularly in combination with other interventions with young people who offend, can and do work. Whilst there are still many gaps in our knowledge base and many unanswered dilemmas, a promising beginning has been made. Let the final

parenting, which is the preferred model. The 'Let's Talk Parenting' programme in particular, used cartoon characters to good effect in bringing a message to life (eg 'Easy Eddie' represents passive, uninvolved parenting; 'Vera Victim' and 'Aggressive Bastard' typify other undesirable styles, with 'Positive Pete' manifesting the desirable, assertive model).

The issue of gender has been problematic in Sunderland. Whilst we have wished to work with equivalent numbers of fathers and mothers, the reality has been somewhat different. Out of 124 Parenting Orders, 22 (17.7 per cent) have been imposed on men. It is mainly women who attend Youth and Education Courts with their children. It has certainly been a cause for concern that Parenting Orders and parenting issues are being seen as the sole preserve of mothers. It may also be inadvertently buying into patriarchal assumptions in the north east, with parenting being seen as 'women's work'. The government may need to consider what the longer term outcome of this unintended targeting of mothers for parenting intervention may be.

One unanticipated outcome arose from a youth group set up by

parents (post-course), which has had an impact on crime and disorder rates in the area. In terms of reoffending rates, work within the Service to map outcomes linked with Parenting Orders has been promising. A survey of Orders linked with youth offending at the end of the pilot demonstrated the following outcomes. Of the 33 young people, (most of whom would be defined as persistent offenders), 55 per cent had reoffended, but 45 per cent had not. In addition, of those who had reoffended, 34 per cent had reduced the gravity of their offending (measured by gravity factors). This is regarded as a promising start, particularly given the age (predominantly 14 to 16) of the young offenders, and their previous offending careers.

### On reflection

The experience of utilising the Parenting Order and developing parenting programmes in Sunderland has been positive. Whilst parents may initially be angry and hostile where a Parenting Order has been imposed, this usually dissipates upon meeting and joining with others in a similar position. Many parents have gone on to enjoy and to benefit from the experience.

words rest with Jan, one of the first parents to experience a parenting course. "The youth justice has educated me and it made me educate the kids. Since then, everything has worked with me and my son. Slowly, but surely, I feel as if we're getting somewhere." (Freely, 1999).

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