

Never Too Early

Sue Raikes describes the Thames Valley Partnership approach to early intervention.

There is now a broad consensus that earlier intervention is an effective tool in preventing crime. This government is investing over £1 billion in Sure Start in recognition that positive intervention in the first four years will give a child the best chance in life and will in the longer term achieve social and economic outcomes in the form of improved health, less crime, and a more skilled and educated workforce. Gordon Brown and Oliver Letwin are both on record in support of preventive intervention. The public and media, too, take the view that poor parenting and teenage motherhood are to blame for many of our social ills.

But what do we really know? Research consistently highlights a range of risk factors associated with future criminality including poor parental supervision, harsh or erratic discipline, parental conflict, and separation from a biological parent (Bright 1992). Domestic violence and a parent in prison are also well documented as risk factors. (The gender of the child – statistically the most significant ‘predictor’ is rarely explored!). Also significant are low income, poor housing, deprived neighbourhoods and socially disorganised communities. Educational risk factors predictably point to low attainment and aggressive and troublesome behaviour (Utting 1996).

These risk factors do not individually cause crime, but when they cluster around a particular individual the risk of involvement in criminality is substantially increased. Programmes such as those delivered by Communities that Care and the Youth Justice Board continue to refine our understanding of risks associated with youth crime.

In terms of long-term research, protagonists of early intervention have had to rely on the High/Scope Perry Pre-school Project (Schweinhart *et al* 1993) longitudinal research in the USA which showed that enriched nursery education achieved savings in terms of crime, drug abuse and teenage pregnancy over a 15 year period. Now, investment in Sure Start is to be backed up by a national evaluation in the UK.

The question of how

There are still plenty of questions about how earlier intervention should take place, and what measurable effects we can expect. How far can we predict long term changes in the risk of criminality based on short term improvements in family functioning, educational achievement or engagement? How do we provide relevant and accessible support to families in the most deprived areas? How can we use the pooled knowledge of various agencies working with these families and communities (health

services, the police, probation services, social services, and education) to target earlier work without stigmatising individual families or children and breaking professional codes of confidentiality or ethical standards? How can we engage community members both as volunteers and service users? How can programmes working with parents genuinely reflect cultural diversity when they continue to be based on white middle class notions of good parenting?

These are some of the questions that the Thames Valley Partnership addresses through its early intervention initiative. We seek practical, low cost solutions. Our work centres on our experience of community safety and our own research on early intervention.

The Thames Valley Partnership's early intervention programme

In 2001 we published *Never Too Early: an evaluation of methods of early years intervention*, based on an examination of eight early intervention programmes working with families in disadvantaged communities in Oxford and Slough (Thames Valley Partnership 2001). The quantitative and anecdotal evidence suggests that the younger the child, the more pronounced the effects on behaviour. The most successful programmes were age specific and targeted pre-school children. Programmes for school age children also had an impact, but it was less marked. We looked at a range of programmes including structured cognitive behavioural based work, play therapy, whole school behaviour programmes and literacy. Programmes using cognitive and social learning approaches showed the greatest effects.

We discovered that motivation for parents to participate comes not just from a concern about their children, but because involvement in a programme provides company, support and activity outside the home. Being part of the group was, for many, the first time parenthood had produced social opportunities instead of limiting them. The recognition that parenting is a difficult, wearing job was enough to keep some parents coming, even when they felt there were few changes in the child's behaviour. The programmes were not generally seen as stigmatising in the way that professional interventions in family life often are. The use of volunteers and community members added local links and lessened any embarrassment parents may have felt about taking part.

Our conclusion is that an ideal strategy offers a layered approach to the provision of services. It

would include universal support for all children in the early years and a more targeted approach for those who continue to have problems. Targeted programmes such as parenting support groups are most successful when offered through a universal access point – an acceptable place where parents would naturally seek support and guidance – somewhere it is OK to admit that parenting is hard and children can be problematic.

Parallel work on reducing exclusions from school revealed striking similarities. The report, *Mind the Gap* (Thames Valley Partnership 2001), again suggested a layered approach with interventions that needed to be taken in the classroom, by the school as a whole, by specialist services and by the local education authority. Again, the method of reaching out to children and families who need support seemed more important than the type of programme on offer. The method used, whether drama-therapy, work based learning or cognitive behavioural group work, was less important than the offer of real engagement and individual attention.

The transition from primary education to secondary school emerged as a crucial point for positive, inclusive intervention. All children find the transition a challenge. The most vulnerable and those already failing educationally in primary school may never effectively re-engage with education unless they are offered additional support at this crucial transitional stage.

Working in partnership

Our aim is to apply some of that learning and experience and to link it with the broader community safety agenda. We wish to demonstrate our commitment to early intervention as an important aspect of community safety, relevant not just to the most deprived areas, but to estates and neighbourhoods where young people's behaviour is a source of concern. Disadvantage in the Thames Valley, as in many areas, is characterised by pockets of deprivation concealed by the general affluence of the area as a whole. Because they are hidden, these areas are not eligible for Sure Start or neighbourhood renewal funding. New initiatives must rely on redirection of existing money and the improvement of existing services. Our emphasis is on promoting collaboration between professionals and community organisations working in these neighbourhoods so they can develop the layered approach and the combination of universal and targeted services that our work suggests is important. This requires bringing together statutory agencies, voluntary organisations and the community. In the case of earlier years work, the focus is on positive support for children under 11 and their families.

Experience so far

The neighbourhood renewal strategy (Social Exclusion Unit 1998) suggests that across the country it is the poorest, most disadvantaged and needy

communities that receive the poorest local services. For years we (and others) have suggested that community safety would be more effective if it focused on individual geographical areas, harnessing the commitment and resources of the key agencies in developing a vision and strategy with the community.

Our work is at an early stage but we can already speak with experience on the different features of disadvantage and the need to develop all these initiatives from the bottom up.

We have been welcomed as an honest broker because of our commitment to working through existing locally based structures and our ability to pull in the key strategic players. This reflects our unique position as a partnership of statutory and voluntary organisations in the Thames Valley.

We have learned that the small amount of money we bring can go a long way when used sensitively as pump-priming for getting things off the ground and harnessing ongoing commitment from statutory agencies. An example of this is the baby clinic set up in response to the concerns of local teenage mothers. Very small amounts of funding for a launch and basic equipment was matched by the offer of premises and a reorganisation of the working practices of local midwives and health visitors.

And you can't get much earlier than that! ■

Sue Raikes is Chief Executive of the Thames Valley Partnership, a charity which brings people and organisations together to work for safer communities. The Thames Valley Partnership works with statutory and voluntary organisations and the business sector across the three counties of Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire - an area which includes 18 local authorities and 16 community safety strategic partnerships.

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