

# Media coverage: Empowering Parents and Empowering Communities project (EPEC)

## 'I've stopped shouting' How better parenting can improve a child's mental health. Bibi van der Zee reports

**A**sa parent it can sometimes feel as if you are drowning in conflicting information about your child's requirements; what they should be eating, what they should be learning. But there is one area where we might all like a little more help; how to improve parenting skills that can be of long-term benefit to their mental health.

One in 10 children in the UK suffers from a diagnosable mental health disorder, and mental health issues for young people are an increasingly urgent concern. Now a pilot project in Southwark, south London, has found that teaching parents skills and techniques to better care for their children is having impressive consequences. The Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities course offers training in parenting, then teaches the mothers and fathers how to pass on what they have learnt. The results, for families in one of the most deprived boroughs in the country - where children have an above average likelihood of mental health problems - are being described as "inspirational".

Hunaida Osman took the original course at the Maudsley hospital and now teaches the techniques to other parents. "I was definitely the sort of parent who got angry easily and just shouted, 'Stop that,'" she says. "I've got much better at explaining why I don't want my children to do something, and at praising them when they do something right. And it's been great for the parents I've taught too; for some families who are on a low income, living in crowded conditions, with children who are playing up, you really need a bit of help and support in the best ways to deal with those kids."

Nicola Williams, another parent teaching the course, says those whose

children have mental health issues have been particularly pleased. "There was one mother who'd had a lot of trouble with her son. She came along for a couple of sessions, but she didn't have any faith in what the course could do for her. She didn't really want to get involved in it at all.

"We gave her a handout which was about a really simple technique, using little mood faces to show what sort of mood you're in; smiley faces if you're happy, that sort of thing. And it was amazing. Her son used them when he got home from school every day, and

she said just knowing what mood he was in made everything much simpler."

Dr Crispin Day of the Institute of Psychiatry is evaluating the course as part of a long-term study. "About half the children whose parents are on the course have difficulties which would be equivalent to a diagnosed disorder, but the parents who go to the group are reporting that their children are showing a significant reduction in the severity of their behaviour problems."

Day has been running several groups simultaneously and early results are promising. For example, when parents were asked to say how concerned they were about their children on a scale between one to 10, levels on average dropped from approximately five-and-a-half out of 10 to two-and-a-half. Parents also filled out the Eyberg child behaviour inventory, which gives a score indicating how likely it is that the child may need clinical help (a score of 127 and over); the average score of the attending group dropped from just above 125 to 106.

### Lessons to learn from the course

#### Start with yourself

You need to know that you are good enough. Think of it like a jug of water;

you can't keep emptying yourself out

to look after children around you without filling yourself up again.

**Remember what it's like to be a child** Think back to your own childhood and recall how it felt when you said to your parents you were upset because no one wanted to play with you at breaktime. Then, as a parent, respond accordingly. Spend time with them and do something they like doing for a change, instead of trying to be in charge. Don't undervalue the importance of this; it can immediately shift things.

#### Descriptive praise

Be specific about what they have done, instead of just saying "good boy/girl". Learn to tell them what you want them to do instead of saying what you don't want: "Hold my hand tight", not "don't run into the road".

#### Explain your behaviour

It's important your child understands why you're doing what you're doing, so make sure you explain. And try to understand why they are behaving as they are.

#### Use sticker charts and star charts

Tangible rewards can teach and encourage self-discipline and end bad behaviour.

**'One mother said just knowing what mood her son was in made everything much simpler'**



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE COURSE

Parent and teacher ... Nicola Williams with her children

G2 - Guardian newspaper: 24 August 2010

## Other parents know best

A peer-to-peer training scheme is helping parents of children with mental health issues. **Chloe Stothart reports**

### PROJECT DETAILS

- **Project name:** Being a Parent
- **Aims and objectives:** A parenting class, run by other parents, uses psychological therapies to help those with children exhibiting mental health problems.
- **Numbers of service users:** 198 parents
- **Cost of project:** £250 to take a parent through an eight-week course.
- **Launched:** 2006

Like many inner city areas, Southwark in south London has high levels of child mental health problems. Ten years ago, a study of 253 under 16s in the borough found nearly 72% had at least one moderate to severe mental health problem, and nearly 37% had three or more.

In response to this, Caroline Penney, a specialist trainer with the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust, set up a parenting programme for those with children aged two to 11. "A lot of children in Southwark do have mental health issues or will get them, possibly because the parenting is not brilliant or because of the environment they live in," she says.

The eight-week course covers general parenting skills but also relies on some specialist psychological therapies that have been found to help reduce or prevent mental health problems in children by helping parents cope with the stresses of parenthood and modify their child's behaviour.

Unlike many parenting programmes, Being a Parent is taught by other mothers and fathers who have been through the classes themselves and have faced up to similar parenting problems.

### LESS STIGMATISING

Penney thought that a class taught by parents would feel less stigmatising than one run by children's services professionals. She was right. Not only do they help to make the participants feel at ease, but they also spread the word. "By empowering local parents to run those groups we get to many more parents that way," she says. "It is led by someone who has come from the same community, their children go to the same schools – that builds the community up."

The *Institute of Psychiatry's* evaluation of the scheme, which began in May 2009 and

### PUT IT INTO PRACTICE

- Use parent-trainers who are part of the community themselves and can give positive recommendations of it.
- Ensure the parenting programme is linked in with other children's provision so it is part of the local community rather than a parenting course parachuted in from nowhere.
- Employ outreach workers to advertise the course in children's centres, schools and other agencies.
- Ensure the environment is supportive for those parents who may have to face up to their personal history or issues in order to help their own parenting.

will end in March 2011, has found parental stress fell and children's behaviour improved after the course was completed. There was a 43% fall in parents whose stress level could merit clinical help while the number of children whose behaviour was in the clinical range halved. These improvements "compared favourably" with similar trials involving professional therapists, according to the evaluation.

The dropout rate was also low, at 13%. Dr Stacey Thomson, a post doctoral researcher on the team at the *Institute of Psychiatry*, said a dropout rate of 20% plus would usually be expected.

The course is open to all parents, but so far up to 70% of those involved have children with behaviour that could merit a

clinical intervention. A few of the children do have diagnosed problems, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder being the most common, but most do not.

Parent trainers undergo 10 more days of training to run classes and are paid about £450 to run an eight-week course. To ensure all is well, the sessions run by the parent-facilitators are supervised every fortnight by Penney and her job-share partner.

The stigma associated with parenting courses was a hurdle to overcome for participants. "When it started people were a bit more suspicious but now I think they know it is a good course," Penney says. "They know they won't be made to feel a disaster and will get good skills and enjoy it."

Some parents, particularly those who had difficult childhoods themselves or who find parenting a struggle, might find it painful or difficult to analyse their own upbringing as part of the course. The key to helping them is the supportive environment, says Penney.

### SECURE FUNDING

However, perhaps the biggest challenge was attracting secure funding. Until Guy's and St Thomas's Charity gave a two-year grant of £225,000, the project had led a hand-to-mouth existence.

The programme also receives about £50,000 from Southwark Council. The money covers all costs: venue hire, a crèche, refreshments, facilitators' payments, two part-time outreach workers who publicise the course to parents, two part-time trainers and an administrator and the evaluation of the project by the *Institute of Psychiatry*. It costs about £250 to take a parent through the eight-week course, which Penney believes is cheaper than many other parenting courses. So far 198 parents have completed the course and 24 have trained as facilitators.



Penney would like to roll out the scheme nationally, after she has gathered evidence over a longer period. A group of parents has already met welfare reform minister Lord Freud to discuss this. No pledges were made about funding a roll-out, but it was felt compatible with the Big Society idea.

"My job now is to think about how to take that forward," Penney says.

### CASE STUDY

#### 'I feel like I'm sharing what worked for me'

While running a parent and toddler group, Nicola Williams, 28, decided she would like some training on her own parenting skills.

As a mother of five children, aged between two and 11, she admits the free crèche and two hours' break from the kids was an attraction, but she says she learned a lot from Being a Parent. It boosted her confidence in the things she did right, and taught her new techniques that improved her children's behaviour.

Her middle child threw tantrums and she felt she was "constantly telling him off". But his behaviour improved massively after she guaranteed him her exclusive attention for at least 10 minutes after school every day.

She learned to praise her children, which turned out to be especially beneficial when she wanted them to get dressed rather than play or

scrub with each other.

After the course, the trainers asked whether she would be interested in becoming a facilitator and she has now run three courses.

"I am so glad I did it," she says. "I feel like I am sharing what worked for me; I do not feel like a teacher."

Parents in her groups have many issues. They range from children who refuse to sleep in their own beds to those displaying aggressive behaviour. One mother, who thought her son's aggression was due to autism, learned to ask him about his feelings, using pictures to draw the information out of the reticent boy. He was later referred to child mental health services.

"She needed a lot of extra help, more than we could give. But the techniques we taught her really worked," says Williams.



"By empowering local parents to run those groups we get to many more parents that way"  
CAROLINE PENNEY, SPECIALIST TRAINER

Community Care magazine: 9 September 2010



**Special Report**

## What's your parenting style?

**Y**our child has finished playing and the floor looks like a bomb site. You ask him to clear his toys away but he refuses. Do you sigh and do it yourself? Shout until he tidies them? Bribe him with the promise of sweets? Or do you get down to his level and calmly explain why you want the toys put away?

The first response is passive, the second aggressive, the third manipulative and the final approach is assertive.

Which type are you? Caroline Penney is the specialist trainer on a course called Being a Parent, in Southwark, south London.

She says: 'A parent can be one of the parenting types or all four at different times, but parenting styles tend to be hardwired. Parents often follow the pattern they have experienced. So a person who was smacked or yelled at as a child may



Caroline Penney

reflected in their own child's behaviour.

Caroline says: 'If your child is saying, "I'll only eat my dinner if you promise to take me on a trip," they've probably learnt it from you!'

She adds: 'Aggressive parenting is easier to spot. You know if you're shouting too much or if your time with your child is unpleasant rather than enjoyable — or if your child seems frightened of you.'

What are the effects of different styles on children? She says: 'Obviously aggressive parenting frightens the child but passive parenting can also make the child feel unsafe. The child doesn't learn about rules or boundaries so they push and push to try to find some. They need boundaries to feel secure.'

The best approach, Caroline believes, is to try to be an assertive parent — fair, firm and

go on to do the same.

'On the other hand, a parent may veer completely from what they experienced to try not to be like their parents — so someone who experienced aggression may go to extremes to be very passive to break the cycle.'

How can you recognise which parent type you are? Passive parents will do anything for a quiet life. Manipulative parents can often see their approach

**'Kids need boundaries to feel secure'**

explaining your actions.

'If for example your child leaves wet towels on the floor, don't just pick them up yourself but don't yell or bribe either. The key to

being assertive is clarity.

'Be specific about the problem. Say: "It's upset me that you've left the towels on the floor."

**Then explain how it**



**Be specific about the problem**

affects you. "Now I'll have to wash them again."

'Then say what you want. "Next time you can help me by picking up your towels." That's assertive parenting.'

So far 200 parents have taken part in the Being a Parent course which may soon be rolled out across Britain. It covers a range of issues including setting boundaries and self-esteem as well as parenting types.

Caroline says: 'In the sessions we use role play to discover the different parenting types. One person is the parent and another plays the child.

'The parent approaches a situation in different ways — starting off aggressively, shouting at the child to clear the toys away, next being manipulative, then passive, then finally assertive, talking to the child firmly on his level.

'At the end the "child" is asked how he felt during each example and it is interesting how it brings home to a person how it feels as a child to be smacked, for instance, or yelled at, or simply allowed to do nothing.'

**Julie Cook**

Take a Break magazine: 14 October

# Media coverage: Empowering Parents and Empowering Communities project (EPEC)

## Parenting skills key to improving mental health

PARENTS can sometimes feel as if they are drowning in conflicting information about their child's requirements - what they should be eating, what they should be learning. But there is one area where we might all like more help - how to improve parenting skills that can be of long-term benefit to a child's mental health.

Mental health issues for young people are an increasingly urgent concern. A pilot project in Southwark, south London, has found that teaching parents skills and techniques to better care for their children is having impressive consequences.

The Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities course offers training in parenting, then teaches parents how to pass on what they have learnt. The results, for families in one of the most deprived boroughs in England - where children have an above average likelihood of mental health problems - are being described as inspirational.

Hunaida Osman took the original course at south London's Maudsley Hospital and now teaches techniques to other parents.

"I was definitely the sort of parent who got angry easily and just shouted, 'Stop that!'," she says.

"I've got much better at explaining why I don't want my children to do something, and at praising them when they do something right. And it's been great for the parents I've taught, too; for some families who are on a low income, living in crowded conditions, with children who are playing up, you really need a bit of help and support in the best ways to deal with those kids."

Nicola Williams, another parent teaching the course, says those whose children have mental health issues have been particularly pleased.

"There was one mother who'd had a lot of trouble with her son. She came along for a couple of sessions, but she didn't have any faith in what the course could do for her. She didn't really want to get involved in it at all," she says.

"We gave her a handout which was about a really simple technique, using little mood faces to show what sort of mood you're in; smiley faces if you're happy, that sort of thing. And it was amazing. Her son used them when he got home from school every day, and she said just knowing what mood he was in made everything much simpler."

Dr Crispin Day, from the hospital's Institute of Psychiatry, is evaluating the course as part of a long-term study.

"About half the children whose parents are on the course have difficulties which would be equivalent to a diagnosed disorder, but the parents who go to the group are reporting that their children are showing a significant reduction in the severity of their behaviour problems."

Day has been running several groups and results are promising. For example, when parents were asked how concerned they were about their children on a scale between one to 10, levels on average dropped from about 5½ out of 10 to 2½.

Parents also filled out the Eyberg child behaviour inventory, which gives a score indicating how likely it is that the child may need clinical help (a score of 127 and over); the average score of the attending group dropped from just above 125 to 106.

## THE BASICS

**1: Look after yourself:** You need to know that you are good enough. Think of it like a jug of water: you can't keep emptying yourself out to look after children around you without filling yourself up again.

**2: Remember what it's like to be a child:** Think back to your own childhood and recall how it felt when you said to your parents you were upset because no one wanted to play with you at recess. Then, as a parent, respond accordingly. Spend time with them and do something they like doing, instead of trying to be in charge. Don't undervalue the importance of this: it can immediately shift things.

**3: Descriptive praise:** Be specific about what they have done, instead of just saying "Good boy/girl". Learn to tell them what you want them to do instead of saying what you don't want: "Hold my hand tight", not "Don't run into the road".

**4: Explain your behaviour:** It's important your child understands why you're doing what you're doing, so make sure you explain. And try to understand why they are behaving as they are.

**5: Use sticker and star charts:** Tangible rewards can teach and encourage self-discipline and end bad behaviour.

Sydney Morning  
Herald:  
2 Sept 2010

# Expert help in mental health issue hot spot

PARENTS have been trained by experts to work as counsellors in a borough with a high rate of childhood mental health problems.

The South London and Maudsley NHS trust (SLaM) launched the project, which will see parents helping other mums and dads to cope with the struggles they face raising their children.

The project, launched on Friday, is being run in Southwark because the borough suffers twice the national rate of childhood mental health problems.

SLaM hopes the project may also help tackle antisocial behaviour and help bring people together.

Nichola Williams, a Camberwell mum-of-five who became a parent facilitator after taking SLaM's course, said: "I've always had a lot of comments about my parenting skills because there are so many of us.

"It's easy if you're a stay-at-home parent to think your skills are small, or unimportant.

"But by bringing the skills you've

**By LINDSAY BURNS**

learnt back into the community you can make a real difference."

SLaM has so far trained 24 parents to run 10-day parenting courses for their peers, and is lobbying for the scheme to be taken up nationally.

The parents are recruited by SLaM staff from children's centres and primary schools.

The experts teach the parents how to deal with issues such as defiance, naughtiness and destructive behaviour.

Dr Crispin Day, SLaM's parent and child support centre head, said:

"It's a fantastic way of helping parents to help themselves with the trials and joys of bringing up kids."

Mrs Williams lobbied Lord Freud, minister for the Department for Work and Pensions, on Friday at the House of Lords to try to get more Government backing for the scheme.

*[lindsay.burns@slp.co.uk](mailto:lindsay.burns@slp.co.uk)*

South London Press: 13 July 2010