Should parenting be taught?

SUE McGAW argues that parenting classes are long overdue. Charlie LEWIS worries that they are yet another attempt at social control.

The government is placing great importance on parenting education and support. Just witness the development of the Ministerial Group on the Family in 1997, and subsequent initiatives such as the National Family and Parenting Institute, a national free phone helpline for parents and a new £540 million Sure Start Programme. Within the classroom setting, parenting education will become a reality for many teenagers and school-leavers. As part of the personal social and health education (PSHE) programme being rolled out across schools, they will be taught about the nature of marriage and its importance for family life and raising their children. As prospective or actual parents, they will receive a range of services to support them in their parenting, of which teaching will be one component. The evidence suggests that such an approach is long overdue.

Over the past decade there have been noticeable changes in family composition and family life that appear to have affected parenting practices and the way children are being raised (FPSC, 2000). Social mapping has identified that women are marrying and having children later in life, and more people are cohabiting, divorcing and remarrying. Frequently, women now work when their children are pre-school-age: nearly 70 per cent of mothers in two-parent families with dependent children work full or part time, and 50 per cent of lone mothers (National Family and Parenting Institute, 1999). Clearly, increasing numbers of parents are under pressure to adapt to new family situations.

At the same time, findings from parent consultations and surveys reveal that whilst the majority of parents are coping well with family life, most experience some difficulties in their parenting at some time, with as many as one fifth of parents experiencing quite severe problems at various stages of their child’s development (Lloyd, 1999; Roberts et al., 1995). A survey by the National Family and Parenting Institute (2001) reported that nearly seven in 10 people saw parenting as something to be learnt, but nearly one in three parents would not know where to go for help. Nearly half called for teaching about parenting in schools; a third called for parenting classes for new parents and over 40 per cent saw a benefit in parents getting together with other parents. Families also asked for recognition of the pressures of balancing work and family life, greater financial support, and a change in people’s attitudes towards children and families. Such surveys are likely to underestimate the numbers of parents experiencing problems, with limitations inherent in the way that they are designed and conducted, and barriers deterring some parents in their reporting.

Despite the abundance of parental education programmes available, many parents are not receiving adequate support throughout the critical stages of their children’s lives. Mainstream services have been biased towards younger children with the needs of adolescents and teenagers taking a lower priority. Also, services that limit their provision to general advice have been viewed as lacking by many parents who are seeking resolutions to particular problems (Roberts et al., 1995). Moreover, general advice can be inadequate for many parents who have special needs that arise, for example, from educational, social or cultural differences. They may require a single intensive programme, or combination of programmes (often with a taught component) to help them acquire, maintain and generalise new parenting skills and practices over time.

Parenting is no easy business, and it is incumbent upon us as parents – and as professionals involved with parents – to consider the factors that might make the experience particularly difficult. However, I have strong doubts that this necessarily leads us to the conclusion that parenting should be ‘taught’. I have three main reactions to Sue’s statement that ‘the evidence suggests that such an approach is long overdue’, and her conclusion that vulnerable parents require intensive intervention programmes. Firstly, the idea that we need to learn how to parent has to be understood within a long-term historical view. Sue depicts recent changes inspired by the Ministerial Group on the Family as the inspiration behind parenting education on a wide scale. She argues for a programme to be ‘rolled out across schools’. But how new is this idea? I remember well the research in the 1970s of John Balding in Exeter. My reading of his data was that parentcraft education in schools during that period did not have a dramatic impact on the skills of teenagers. They reported such classes as being irrelevant to their life experiences and immediate expectations. Since that time the average age of first parenting has risen from the mid-twenties to around thirty – lengthening the gap between school and a need to know about parenting.

My second concern surrounds who...
needs parenting education. Moves to teach parenting skills are not usually aimed at all children. In the wave of courses in the 1970s, participants were largely selected because they were less academic and because they were in ‘low-ability’ groups and more likely to become parents earlier. Parenting education then, as now, was regarded as a mechanism for social change – targeted at ‘problem’ groups of lone mothers who do not fit the norm of having children when they are almost into middle age. As Schlossman (1976) pointed out, parenting courses are about making the poor and disadvantaged less of a problem for us – not about providing support for the most needy. He conducted a historical analysis of parenting programmes over a century ago and found that the same focus upon deviant individuals who choose to have children at the wrong time or in the wrong circumstances. It is easier to pathologise the poor and disadvantaged rather than to think about how to provide resources to help people meet their aspirations.

This brings me to my final concern: what have recent initiatives been about? I think that the issue of teaching parenting is really about how we perceive and react to the needs of the most vulnerable social groups. Recent government initiatives have been mixed up over their understanding of the family and politicians’ role in ‘helping’ parents. For example the 1997 Green Paper Supporting Families, which launched the initiative for joined-up policies concerning the family, appeared to be ambivalent about the role of the state in effecting change at the family level – in some paragraphs facilitative, while at others prescriptive or even proscriptive. My reading is that the move to teach parenting in school is yet another attempt at social control, like many of the proclamations against parents that the Home Secretary is making in his bid for electoral support for the most needy. He conducted a historical analysis of parenting programmes over a century ago and found that the same focus upon deviant individuals who choose to have children at the wrong time or in the wrong circumstances. It is easier to pathologise the poor and disadvantaged rather than to think about how to provide resources to help people meet their aspirations.

Essentially, Charlie and I are singing from the same hymn sheet, though we may be hitting different notes at times. Both of us give support to the notion of empowerment, choice, education and support to families in the community, but appear to part our ways with regard to the taught component. Basically, I view teaching as an option that needs to be available to parents, though it should not be mandatory. Charlie appears more fundamentally opposed to teaching.

He argues that parentcraft programmes in the 1970s did not make a dramatic impact on the skills of teenagers. As far as I am aware, this topic is infrequently taught in schools and hardly ever in its ‘pure’ form. Historically, sex education has been the main topic available to teenagers, which is far removed from the ‘implicit’ and ‘explicit’ parenthood curriculum currently mooted by advocates such as Hartley-Brewer (1998). She argues that parentcraft should be undiluted ‘by any other single PSHE programme, such as “life skills” or health or “relationships” and needs to have its own, clearly identified rigorous syllabus within a time-specific module as part of a coherent PSHE programme’. There is little evidence that parentcraft has been delivered in this way previously.

A further point is that the PSHE programmes are still in the experimental stage. We are learning from school programmes (such as that on sexual health, which appears to have failed to reduce the increasing rate of teenage pregnancies) that their efficacy would increase if they adopted an integrated approach involving parents (OFSTED, 2002). The research indicates that half of sexually active 13- to 15-year-olds have never discussed the subject of sex with either of their parents (Hill & Boydell, 2001), and that parents continue to hold expectations that schools will address this topic within the health-education curriculum (Balding, 1992). So, helping parents (through advice or teaching) to take responsibility for educating their children on matters such as sexual health or parentcraft seems relevant. I might add that John Balding’s later research actually found that girls (Year 11) rated parenthood and child care as their top priority for teaching (out of 49 topics) – albeit at home or in school. There is also a growing body of research that reports positive outcomes (for children, as well as parents) when teaching is offered directly...
to parents, in a group format or on an individual basis (e.g. Scott et al., 2001; Webster-Stratton & Herbert, 1994).

In response to Charlie’s remark about ‘paranoid parenting’, I have to ask: What is new about separation anxiety and a tendency for parents to want to overprotect their offspring? The vulnerability of the young and the anxieties of parents to render them safe as the attachment and ‘separation-individuation’ processes become established are well known. Furedi (2001) accuses authors of child-rearing manuals – and public campaigns designed to frighten parents – of being responsible for parents’ paranoia, but as far as I am aware, there is an absence of reliable data to substantiate such a claim. He also acknowledges that in order for parents to worry less about what can go wrong, they need freedom to ask whether ‘what they are doing matters’ and ‘what the child might learn from an experience’.

Traditionally, parents would have benefited from the child-rearing experiences of their extended family and neighbours to dampen their anxieties and free them up to make informed choices about risks. Changing patterns in family composition, with a rise in single parenting and increased social isolation, means that this support (and the opportunity to learn from others) is often unavailable to many parents now. What does Charlie suggest?

Moving on to Charlie’s comments about ‘who needs parenting education’, my understanding of the ‘political’ scene is that the government’s various departments are not always as effective as they could be, with poor lines of communication and mixed messages to parents and professionals alike. However, I am unconvinced that they are working towards a ‘nanny state’ just for political gains, though undoubtedly there will be some of those. The government’s broad sweep approach to parenting education and support encompasses all parents (Parentline Plus, Home-Start visiting schemes, etc.), with specific programmes being developed for those families who are particularly vulnerable.

My anxieties relate to the rapid roll-out of government initiatives such as Sure Start and Connexions, the difficulties experienced at ground level as to what form parenting education and support should take, and the decisions regarding who is best placed to deliver this. Hasty government policy making and strategic planning appears to have resulted in large financial commitments being made to new family-support projects soon after the launch of the Supporting Families initiative, but before the results of the national mapping of services for families survey were known. As a result, there is a lack of continuity across programmes. Families have benefited from guidance, support or ‘teaching’ from one programme and then become excluded from another on the basis of the child’s age or a move to another ward in the same town. This haste may have resulted from the government’s desire to respond rapidly to parents (regardless of their vulnerability) whose need for guidance and support (and sometimes ‘teaching’) has been identified nationally.

I like Sue’s image that we are singing from the same score. I would support her statement that parentcraft classes in the 1970s tended to be taught badly in the class and were aimed at girls who, it was felt, should be taught these basic skills. Secondly, I agree that parents are becoming increasingly socially isolated. Thirdly, I share her sense of concern about the government’s often hasty reaction to problems that they perceive in the contemporary family. However, I still feel that there are one or two aspects of these shared concerns that might produce a little dissonance between us.

I will take up these points in reverse order. While government initiatives about the family over the past five years have the feel of immediacy and haste about them, we must not forget that these replaced an administration that neglected families because it so resolutely denied the relevance of government support for those who ask for it. ‘There is no such thing as society’ still rings in my ears some 15 years after it was uttered.

On the second and first points listed above I am concerned that we underestimate parents’ resources to overcome the stresses and strains of their very difficult task. We perhaps also overestimate our abilities to intervene in a way that empowers rather than depowers the people we aim to serve; and we might begin that process of alienation if we feel that an intensive programme of secondary school education in parenting skills is the panacea. We have tried to solve social problems in school for 150 years now, and the evidence is not resoundingly positive. Sue cites some of the studies in which parents report that they found courses helpful, but there are many ways of interpreting such reports. Hawkins and Roberts (1992), for example, point out that parenting courses make dads play with their babies and feel happier about parenting, but do not necessarily make them more involved in the difficult and less rewarding aspects of parenting.

I’m all for popular debate about the difficulties of parenting, for allowing teenagers to develop and express their views about the family and their future as parents, and for providing a sound network of support for parents experiencing problems. I just worry about the propensity to feel that we have all the answers, while certain parents – namely, young parents, ‘elderly’ parents, and fathers – do not.

References

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