



ParentingNI



Queen's University
Belfast

SUPPORTING PARENTS, SUPPORTING TEENAGERS

Parenting NI have developed a programme that can help parents tackle the challenges that come with bringing up adolescents.

The Parenting UR Teen programme was subjected to independent evaluation by the Institute of Child Care Research at Queen's University, Belfast. The study was funded by Parenting NI, with a grant from Atlantic Philanthropies. This report provides a summary of a larger and more comprehensive report.

KEY MESSAGES

- Parenting UR Teen can help improve outcomes for parents, their teenage children and overall family functioning.
- Results showed that Parenting UR Teen enhanced parental well-being, reduced parental stress, improved relationships between parents and teenagers, and made a positive difference on some aspects of teenagers' social functioning.
- Parents from the programme group, did better on measures of communication, problem solving, and family cohesion. They had lower levels of parent-teen stress compared with those who did not receive the programme.
- There was no change in some things such as parent's knowledge of where their teenagers were, or what they were doing.

- Parents who attended the programme
- reported feeling reassured that they were not on their own and were doing a good job with their teenagers.
- Parents said the programme gave them a much better understanding of their own parenting and helped them to become more effective parents overall.

INTRODUCTION

Teenagers experience significant changes. Amongst the things they have to negotiate are puberty, and associated physiological, psychological and social changes. They have to work out who they are, and this can entail 'trying on' a range of identities. It is a challenging time for parents too, as their offspring tackle this major developmental stage, completing their physical growth; developing new cognitive

skills; learning to manage a range of complex emotions; thinking independently; and establishing their own personal values (Christie and Viner, 2005; Fenwick and Smith, 1996; Call and Mortimer, 2001; Flynn, 1999).

Adolescence can 'throw' even the most competent parents into turmoil, with the stresses and strains associated with parenting adolescents being particularly challenging (Coleman 2011). Despite the real need for support, little help is available for parents of adolescents. The majority of parenting programmes are still geared towards 'early years' interventions (e.g. Triple P, Incredible Years, Roots of Empathy), with the teenage years being largely overlooked. The Parenting UR Teen programme aims to address this gap, and is one of the few programmes available in the UK for parents of adolescents.

PARENTING UR TEEN

Parenting UR Teen is a group-based programme delivered over eight 2 hour sessions. Underpinned by Family Systems Theory, the programme promotes authoritative parenting throughout. In each session, trained facilitators introduce a range of relevant topics, followed by group discussions of homework tasks and problem solving scenarios. Sessions cover issues such as parenting styles, teen development, self esteem, rules and consequences, conflict and problem solving.

THE RESEARCH STUDY

Parenting UR Teen was evaluated using an experimental design, in which study participants were allocated either to the Parenting UR Teen Programme or a wait list control group. Parents in the wait-list control received the programme approximately 2 months later. Randomisation was used to create two broadly equivalent groups of parents (comparable in known variables such as demographics, family size, religion and in unknown factors), thereby enabling us to attribute changes to the impact of the programme, rather than any systematic differences between the two groups, or other explanations such as the passage of time.

SUPPORTING PARENTS,

Data were collected from 145 parents attending the Parenting UR Teen programme across 14 locations in Northern Ireland. All participants completed two questionnaires, one prior to the start of the programme; the other at the end of the programme (post-test). Waitlist parents also completed a third questionnaire in week 8, after receiving their programme. The 'index' child of each parent (either their only teenager or the teenager about whom they were most concerned when registering for the programme) was also involved at the stage of programme delivery and completed a pre-test and a post-test questionnaire, either by postal or online survey.

THE FINDINGS - PARENTS

The study findings suggest that Parenting UR Teen can improve outcomes for parents, their teenage children and the family as a whole. The programme:

- enhanced parental well-being
- improved the parent/teenager relationship and decreased levels of stress
- increased perceived parental competence and reduced feelings of guilt.
- made a positive difference on some important aspects of teenagers' social functioning, such as decreased moodiness.

In particular, the programme had a positive effect on parents' mental health. It reduced parental stress, feelings of social alienation and the feelings of guilt and incompetence that can so often beset parents.

In terms of conflict; the programme led to lower levels of overall distress, and reduced conflict about school, meals and eating. Compared with parents in the control group, parents who participated in the programme reported greater improvements in communication, problem solving, and family cohesion. They also reported less stressful relationships with their teens.

Parents who participated in the programme were less likely to:

- interpret their teen's behaviour as malicious;
- think that their teen's bad behaviour would end in disaster or ruin;
- feel their teenager should behave flawlessly at all times.

'Programme parents' were more likely to exaggerate positive family characteristics and minimise negative characteristics – so there may have been a 'halo effect' from participating in the study.

The programme did not seem to have an effect on teenagers' self-reported levels of social isolation. However, it did make them less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour. The overall adolescent domain score was also improved in the programme group. There was no change in parents' knowledge about where their teenagers were, or what they were doing, but it is generally recognised that parents are, to a large extent, dependent on what their teenagers are willing to share about their activities.

WHAT PARENTS SAY

Fifty two parents who had participated in the programme agreed to be interviewed.

They told us that attending the programme made them more aware of their own parenting, and how this had influenced their approach to their children. This often led to a change in attitude, coupled with a better understanding of what it means - and what it takes - to be an effective parent:

“I’m probably not as passive, I would be a bit more authoritative and if I do say something I stick to it now because I realise that if you don’t, well there’s no point”

“It gave me a good grounding for communication, my communication skills were much better with her and still are”

The programme also offered support to the parents by ‘normalising’ adolescent behaviour and helping to reassure them that they weren’t on their own:

“I think that was a good thing about the course, it normalised a lot of the behaviours because everybody was throwing up the same type of things, the bickering and the fighting and the bad language...it’s all fairly typical and that was soothing to us because everybody seemed to have similar issues”

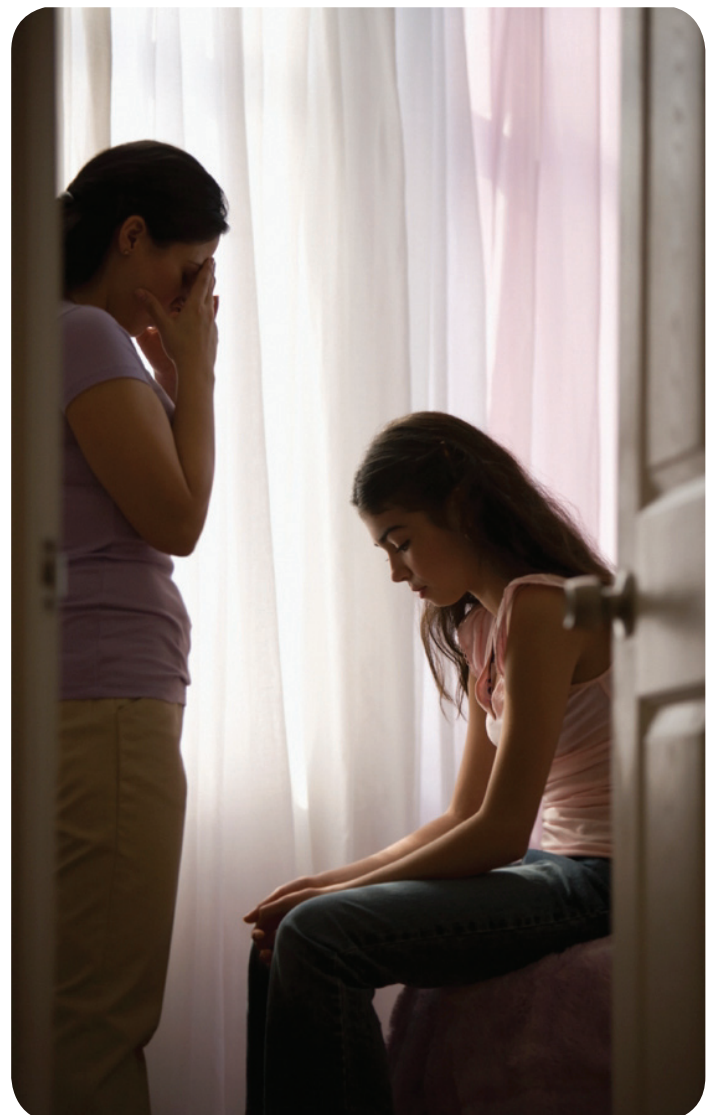
SUPPORTING TEENAGERS

“It is stressful and you think what am I doing wrong as a person, so it’s so nice to hear other parents and you realise you are not alone and you’re not doing anything wrong and coming to the session, it’s not that you are a bad parent and that you have to go, it was because you care”

Finally, many parents put forward suggestions for change, including actively seeking to involve fathers and teens in the programme sessions, adopting a wider recruitment strategy to ensure more people are aware of the programme and making more support available for parents of adolescents generally :

“It would have been an excellent opportunity for couples, for mothers and fathers to go on”

“I told him everything that was happening but I would have loved for him to hear it from somebody else, together”



“Getting it out there to the wider community – what I thought was interesting was that considering that I worked in health and social care if I hadn’t of heard about the course through [name] who is a trainer in the [service], I don’t think I would ever have come across it, nor any of my colleagues”

“There is so much around early years and drop in centres for young mums and first time mums and single mums and dads and all that there, but when you get to 10 or 12, you’re left in no man’s land. And I think it would be ideal if more of this type of support was offered rurally...there’s bound to be issues going on beyond every door in my street with teens and you suffer in silence”



PIOEERING, HIGHLY VALUED WITH AN EXCITING FUTURE

Building an evidence base takes time. Parenting NI has pioneered a programme designed to support parents facing the challenge of parenting adolescents. The programme certainly seemed to work for the participants in this study, and what they said indicated that the programme was reaching the people it was designed for. But any new programme needs more than one evaluation.

The study was rigorous, but faced the same challenges as other evaluations. For example, not all parents provided data at each of the stages of the study, and this means the study is not as powerful as it might be. But even if all the participants had provided data, we would still need further research to ensure that the programme can be delivered to a high standard to a wider population, by a wider range of facilitators. Parenting NI is keen to develop this very promising programme further, to improve its content and make the delivery more effective, so ongoing monitoring and evaluation will be important. But the signs are indeed very good!

CONCLUSIONS

The study provides convincing evidence of the effectiveness of the Parenting UR Teen programme. The results indicate that this intervention can bring about positive changes in parental mental health and stress. The benefits are not restricted to the parents. The results indicate that the programme can enhance family life by improving parent adolescent communication and lowering levels of distress. The findings were based on short term assessments of outcomes, but nonetheless illustrate the impact/importance of an intervention for parents of adolescents. It reminds us that it is ‘never too late’ to effect positive change. Further research following up the longer term outcomes for families would be beneficial. Parenting UR Teen is a programme that fills an important gap – supporting ordinary parents whose children are negotiating their adolescence.



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