

# The Incredible Years Parenting Programme

## Believe in children



**Barnardo's**  
Northern Ireland

**No.12** Policy and  
practice briefing

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'I thought the programme was excellent and it was of great help to me. I learned how to approach problems in a positive way and I received so much support from the leaders and other mums.'

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## Introduction

Barnardo's has a long-term commitment to high quality practice that is both effective and evidence-based. Over the last year in Northern Ireland we have developed our practice in parenting programmes using the Incredible Years Parenting Programme.

Parents are a major influence on children's lives. Families are now under more pressure than ever before, facing an increasingly complex set of responsibilities and demands (Quinton, 2004). A parent's ability to cope with these additional pressures can be influenced by a range of issues that may include family conflict, marriage breakdown, mental health and other potentially difficult life events. Providing families with the right kind of support at significant points in children's lives can be crucial.

# The Incredible Years Parenting Programme

International studies and research from the UK points towards the value of evidence-based interventions at the earliest possible stage in a child's life (Barlow et al, 2007). Not only are early interventions more likely to be effective, they are also likely to be cost effective in the long term. When a child's anti-social behaviour is left untreated, the behavioural problems are more likely to persist into adulthood and result in costs that may be up to 10 times more than for children who receive appropriate support (Scott et al, 2001).

## About this briefing

Over the last few years, there has been growing interest in using evidence-based parenting programmes with proven research records. Parenting programmes can be broadly defined as formal interventions designed to facilitate parent-child interactions and to equip parents with the necessary skills to carry out their parenting role. Such programmes may be offered preventatively or when more serious difficulties have been identified. Although there are a number of parenting programmes available, not all can show evidence of positive outcomes for children and families (Belsky et al, 2006).

The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE, 2006) has published guidelines for parenting programmes for the treatment of conduct disorders. Only two programmes meet the NICE guidelines, one of which is the **Incredible Years BASIC Parenting Programme**. Barnardo's Northern Ireland has considerable experience of delivering support services

to families who are facing difficulties. As research into the Incredible Years Parenting Programme has shown evidence of effectiveness across diverse parenting populations, many Barnardo's Northern Ireland services have chosen to implement this programme. This briefing outlines our progress at the end of the first year of implementation.

## What is Incredible Years?

The Incredible Years Parenting Programme was developed by Carolyn Webster-Stratton within the University of Washington Parenting Clinic. The programme, aimed at children aged 3 to 12 years, is founded on social learning theory and consists of at least 12 weekly, two-hour group sessions delivered by skilled practitioners. Overall, the Incredible Years Programme aims to:

- promote positive parenting
- improve parent-child relationships
- reduce critical and physical discipline and increase the use of positive strategies
- help parents to identify social learning theory principles for managing behaviour
- improve home-school relationships

The programme uses a collaborative approach, encouraging parents to learn from each other. Methods used include role play, modelling, group discussion, homework and reviewing DVDs of family behaviour. Practical support is an important element of each group, and to promote attendance parents are offered transport, snacks and crèche places.

## Fidelity

Fidelity describes the quality or integrity of the programme's implementation by ensuring that it is delivered in the way that it was originally developed. Programmes are unlikely to achieve the same results as published research unless they are delivered in the same way with all original elements present. Key components of fidelity include:

- **adherence and quality** – keeping to the format of the original programme, using methods and the materials devised by the programme developers
- **exposure** – the length and frequency of the sessions offered
- **participant responsiveness** – how well parents are engaged in the programme
- **differentiation** – the programme can be tailored to meet the specific needs of the group of parents as long as all the key elements are present.

To enable agencies to maintain fidelity, Incredible Years Programmes provide all course materials, including DVDs, handouts and books along with evaluation questionnaires for parents. Barnardo's group leaders are skilled and experienced professionals from multidisciplinary backgrounds. All group leaders have completed Incredible Years training and have the opportunity to participate in supervision.

## Research evidence

The Incredible Years programme has been described as the most carefully evaluated group-based parenting programme (Taylor et al, 1998). Indeed, the Incredible Years Programme has a vast amount of research literature, with many randomised control trials (RCT) showing its efficacy (Webster-Stratton et al, 2009). Such research has indicated sustained positive



outcomes for maternal health and wellbeing as well as child social, emotional, behavioural development and wellbeing.

Studies across the UK have yielded very promising results, similar to those found worldwide (for example, Scott et al, 2001). Currently a three year national evaluation entitled the Incredible Years Ireland Study, is being carried out by Archways, in association with National University of Ireland, Maynooth. Very positive initial findings are reported both in terms of short-term outcomes and predicted longer-term cost benefits (McGilloway et al, 2009).

### Diverse parenting populations

While the Incredible Years Programme has primarily been used with parents of children who display varying degrees of social, emotional and behavioural problems, increasingly it is being applied

to more diverse parenting populations. For example, positive outcomes have been documented from trials of the Incredible Years Programme with parents of children who have learning disabilities (McIntyre, 2008) and with foster carers (Nilsen, 2007).

Webster-Stratton (2007) has provided guidance on adapting the Incredible Years Programme to suit a range of families, including children with: ADHD; reading difficulties; language delays; attachment problems; internalising disorders; and divorcing parents.

The Incredible Years Programme is based upon a common set of principles which, when applied sensitively to a particular parenting context, can yield extremely positive outcomes. As Barnardo's works with families from all backgrounds with diverse needs, it is vital that any parenting programme used has a proven record with a wide range of families.

## Policy context

- Every Child Matters, **Parenting Support: Guidance for Local Authorities in England (DfES, 2006)** advocates the need for investment in interventions that have shown evidence of effectiveness. Providing families with the right kind of support at significant points in children's lives is highlighted as a key government aim. Seventy five per cent of parents also said that such support would be appreciated. This policy is underpinned by the principle that outcomes for children can be improved when parents are provided with appropriate support.
- **Reaching Out: An Action Plan on Social Exclusion (Cabinet Office, 2006)** also references the Incredible

Years Programme under recommendations for intensive early support for families most at risk.

- The Incredible Years Programme has been successful across 11 Sure Start areas in Wales (Hutchings et al, 2007). Indeed, the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) has recently funded the implementation and evaluation of the Incredible Years Programme as part of its **Parenting Action Plan (WAG, 2005)**.
- The Regional Family and Parenting Strategy's **Families Matter: Supporting Families in Northern Ireland (DHSSPS, 2009)** also highlights the importance of family support being offered in the form of early intervention and prevention. This document calls for the availability of high quality parenting programmes for all parents.

## Incredible Years in Barnardo's Northern Ireland

**'I learned a lot... about play and praise. I can't wait to have some special time and learn how to listen and watch my son instead of taking over. I've learned to give him control back instead of demanding to do it my way.'**

Barnardo's Northern Ireland has provided accredited training for staff across a range of our services. The following services have fully implemented Incredible Years Programme Groups:

- Child Bereavement Service
- Professional Fostering/ Children's House
- Newry Family Resource Centre
- Strabane Family Centre
- Tullycarnet Family Project
- Parenting Matters.

## Case study

Cathy is a parent to two boys, Nathan aged five and Joel aged 10. Cathy's partner died five years ago. Since then, she has juggled parenting on her own within the context of her own and her children's grief. Cathy also works full-time to maintain financial stability for her family.

Although Cathy felt able to cope with her own feelings about losing her partner, she found Joel's grief difficult to manage and at times his behaviour was problematic. Cathy joined an Incredible Years group with Barnardo's Child Bereavement Service to help her to understand how to manage Joel's behaviour.

Midway through the programme, Cathy was made redundant. She found this very stressful as she was worried about how she would provide for her family. In spite of her worries, Cathy successfully completed the Incredible Years Programme. She now says that she is pleased that she managed to continue with the group as it has helped her to regain control of her situation. Cathy reports that she regularly uses the attention and ignoring principles that she learned through Incredible Years and says: 'The Incredible Years is like having a tool kit to help you manage all the different situations in parenting.'

Cathy also regained her confidence and successfully applied for a part-time job which enables her to spend more quality time with her children. As part of the Incredible Years Programme, parents are encouraged to undertake projects with their children. Cathy believes that this idea has really helped her; she decided to grow vegetables with her children. Her vegetable patch has overtaken her whole garden!

To date, 78 parents have completed an Incredible Years Programme. The groups have helped parents and carers to manage a range of behaviour problems including swearing, temper tantrums and physical aggression.

In order to demonstrate that our work makes a difference to children, young people and their families, parents completed the Eyberg Child Behaviour Inventory (ECBI). The ECBI is a standardised measure consisting of 36 items, measuring both the intensity and the degree to which parents find child behaviour problematic. From this, two scores are obtained: an intensity and a problem score. Generally higher scores are indicative of higher levels of behaviour problems.

A statistical examination of the results shows that the Incredible Years Programme makes a statistically significant difference to both Eyberg scores. Figure 1 illustrates the average Eyberg intensity scores before and after the groups and Figure 2 shows the

Eyberg problem scores before and after the groups. These statistically significant differences both had large effect sizes (0.44 and 0.54 respectively). This means that the impact of the intervention was substantial (Cohen, 1988). In other words, in all groups, children's behaviour showed improvement.

### Feedback from parents

**'It was really good to get a glimpse of other parents' difficulties with their children – I didn't feel so isolated.'**

**'I loved this class. I loved the two teachers. I will miss my new friends. I hope there are other classes like this one.'**

**'It lets you gauge if you're doing a good job, it has actually helped with my child's behaviour.'**

**'It is very helpful to be able to talk about things and get reinforcement that I am doing it**

**right and also to get tips on how I could do things differently.'**

Parents were asked to tell us what they thought about groups using the Incredible Years Parent Satisfaction Questionnaire. Figure 3 shows the average feedback on the overall programme, the teaching format, techniques and group leaders. Overall, parents reported high rates of satisfaction across all elements, but in particular group leaders received very high rates of feedback, reflecting the collaborative nature of the programme.

Parental attendance rates in general reflect parents' positive attitudes towards the groups with an average retention rate of 83 per cent. In cases where parents did not attend the full programme a variety of reasons were given. These included personal circumstances, family illness and issues relating to the timing of groups.

## Feedback from practitioners and managers

Practitioners and managers were asked to complete a short Barnardo's questionnaire on their experiences of the Incredible Years Parenting Programme. Overall group leaders and managers expressed enthusiasm for the programme and voiced a desire for opportunities to run future groups. In particular, practitioners highlighted the usefulness of the manualised structure, alongside the support and training provided. Practitioners reflected upon their own learning, and also valued the positive feedback from parents. Managers welcomed the opportunity to implement evidence based programmes within their services.

Concerns and challenges were also identified by both practitioners and managers. The main concern for managers was the need for additional resources to enable them to continue delivering the programme with fidelity. Practitioners' key concerns centred around the need for locally based practice supervision from accredited Incredible Years mentors.

## Conclusion

Results from the implementation of the Incredible Years Parenting Programme within Barnardo's Northern Ireland has further added to the evidence base surrounding its efficacy with a diverse range of parents. These included families who are providing fostercare, experiencing bereavement, living within areas of social need and/or experiencing extreme stress. The collaborative approach inherent in the programme sits comfortably within the wider Barnardo's ethos. The Incredible Years Parenting Programme recognises and fosters parenting ability while simultaneously offering support to develop new skills.

Figure 1

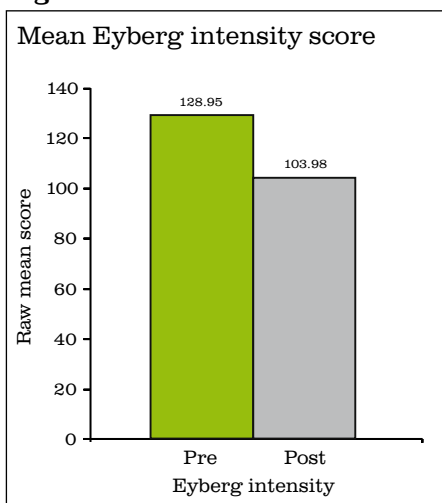


Figure 2

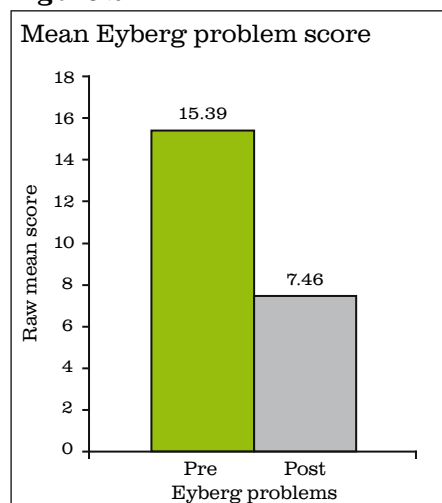
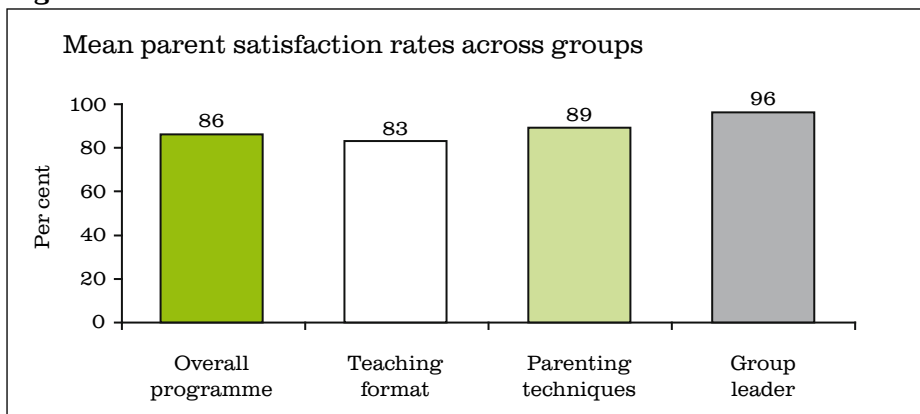


Figure 3



**'This is a great programme and every parent should try it. I learned and gained so much.'**

## Recommendations for policy and practice

- Early intervention strategies should be prioritised by allocating three per cent of the budgets from health, education and youth justice to early intervention initiatives.
- An audit of existing parenting programmes should be carried out, to evaluate their effectiveness and ensure that practitioners delivering family support services are receiving appropriate training and skills development.
- Increase the availability and accessibility of effective parenting programmes, such as the Incredible Years Parenting Programme.
- Increase the number and level of Sure Start Programmes across Northern Ireland.
- Pilot programmes of intensive, family support services based on models of best practice for the most vulnerable children and their families.



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