

Improving the information to support parents and organisations that work with families: executive summary

The project

The Child Psychotherapy Trust (CPT) was funded by the Family Support Grant to consult parenting and family organisations on how best to provide information on parent-child interactions.

Judith Stone was engaged in a freelance capacity to carry out the research, make recommendations based on the outcome and produce new editions of all the leaflets.

The research

- **Survey** 74 organisations (33% of those circulated), reflecting a wide range of users, completed questionnaires about the current leaflets and how they use them with parents.
- **Focus groups** Parents' focus groups were held at:
 - Contact a Family, Southwark, London
 - Newark Family Centre, Nottinghamshire
 - Goole Home-Start, Humberside.

Achievements

The project succeeded in:

- involving 77 organisations in evaluating CPT leaflets, including three groups of parents
- confirming that the leaflets reach organisations working with disadvantaged children and families
- enabling these organisations to give feedback to help CPT to improve the leaflets
- giving them an opportunity to suggest topics for future leaflets
- identifying the support that workers need to use the leaflets more effectively with families
- producing new versions of 13 leaflets, edited and designed to be more attractive to parents
- identifying the media that organisations believe to be the most effective in supporting parents.

Findings of the research

Families

- **How many parents the leaflets reach** The 39 organisations that responded to this question reached a total of 14,527 families in the previous year.
- **Local networks** 40 of the organisations are part of local initiatives, such as Sure Start.
- **Family background** The majority of the organisations work with disadvantaged families. Fewer than one-third of them provide a service to refugee families and recent immigrants.

- **Parents** Almost all the organisations support parents who have emotional problems, financial problems and few, if any, educational qualifications.
- **Children with special needs** More than two-thirds of the organisations work with families of children with special needs.

The leaflets

- **Age-range** Six out of the 13 current leaflets are particularly addressed to parents of under fives. Up to two-thirds of the organisations also support the families of school-age children.
- **General approach** The leaflets are generally given a positive welcome:
 - A health visitor said: *The authenticity of the Child Psychotherapy Trust lends credibility to the advice and strategies offered to parents.*
 - A consultant psychiatrist in a CAMH Service said: *Keep up the important work of raising public awareness of children's emotional 'inner world' and consequent needs.*

However, parents in two of the focus groups felt that some of the leaflets were 'condescending' and assumed that they were quite ignorant and inexperienced as parents.

- **Reflecting family life** The leaflets need to recognise the realities of parents' lives and other demands within the family. Parents of children who don't 'fit in' want advice on how to achieve social acceptability and have some kind of social life..
- **Style and presentation** The leaflets assume a high level of literacy and are too long and wordy for many families. Parents in the focus groups said: *They don't use everyday language – they sound like they're talking to professionals ... very medical – textbook style.*
- **Other media** Oral and visual resources are valuable for the use of community languages.
- **Cultural sensitivity** Leaflets mainly reflect white British culture, although *'the leaflets are as sensitive as it is possible to be in a generic sense'*. Two organisations that work with minority ethnic families said that there were no problems and that all families find the leaflets useful.
- **Topics for future leaflets** There were many suggestions for new topics.

Using the leaflets with parents

- **Distribution** Many organisations emphasised that the leaflets must be used alongside personal contact, support and follow up from staff.
- **Overall response** The leaflets make parents feel they are not alone.
- **Increasing understanding** These responses sum up many other comments:
 - *Helps to give the 'fuller picture' of difficulties they may be encountering.*
 - *Volunteers and parents comment that the leaflets give them food for thought.*
 A parent in one of the groups said that she now understood the baby's point of view.
- **Changing behaviour** The leaflets help parents to manage difficult situations. They *'create an atmosphere to help change take place'*, and are a useful back-up for parents at home, although they cannot provide the whole answer on their own.

Using the leaflets with staff and volunteers

- **Training materials** Many organisations use the leaflets for training staff and volunteers.
- **Support for staff** Many staff need support from CPT if they are to make the most positive use of the leaflets in their work with parents.

Recommendations

It is recommended that the Child Psychotherapy Trust should:

- take active steps to develop strategies for supporting the families of refugees and recent immigrants
- encourage organisations to use their existing networks to share CPT information on the child's emotional development.
- continue to develop the *Understanding Childhood* series of leaflets with a regular publication programme for new topics, and new editions of existing titles to keep them up to date
- review the age balance of the issues addressed in the leaflets
- consider the use of video in community languages
- ensure that all materials are appropriate to children with special needs
- give all writers a clear written brief for their topic and a guide to presentation
- produce free sheets of suggestions on using the leaflets with parents and outlining a training session or group discussion with staff or volunteers.
- consider the possibility of marketing the leaflets more actively as training materials
- involve users in evaluating the leaflets on a regular basis.

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