

Making sense of support: how parents view, experience and manage support for their everyday parenting



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Making sense of support: how parents view, experience and manage support for their everyday parenting

A range of policy initiatives have been introduced in Scotland with the aim of supporting families, increasing parenting capacity, and facilitating early intervention (for example, Early Years Framework; parenting programmes such as Triple P, Mellow Parenting and Webster Stratton/Incredible Years). The messages promoted are that parenting is a difficult occupation requiring expertise; all parents need help at times; and it is the responsible parent that seeks support. However, explorations of how parents view and experience support are limited. This small study of six parents aimed to gain insights into how parents conceptualise, experience and manage support in their parenting role in everyday life.

Background

UK policy-makers present parenting as central in determining outcomes for children and society, and therefore appropriate for policy intervention (Wasoff and Hill 2002; Gillies 2005).

However, explorations of how parents conceptualise and experience support are limited. Evaluations of support services tend to measure outcomes in terms of attendance rates rather than meaningful engagement with services (Katz et al 2007; Geddes 2011).

What families define as problems or needs are often different from service providers' definitions, which suggests that service provision may not align with parental need.

Parents prefer support from family and friends (Edwards and Gillies 2005). However, this informal support is related to availability of resources and networks, and can be variable and difficult to sustain (Edwards and Gillies 2004; Brownlie 2011).

Accessing professional parenting support has been seen as associated with parental failure and stigma (Bradshaw and Marryat 2010). Therefore, assuming that inadequacy in social support will lead to parents' seeking professional support is simplistic (Anderson and Brownlie 2011). Beliefs and attitudes around confiding and seeking support are important, and men and women have different needs (Brownlie 2011).

The study

Research comprised interviews with six parents participating in the Growing Up in Scotland first birth cohort study. All participants lived in Edinburgh with their partners, and had an eldest child aged around 7 years, and were white, non-disabled. While the study intended to compare two contrasting groups of parents determined by age and education levels, the limited size of the study means it is not possible to explore differences relating to gender or social class in any depth. All 'older mothers'

Key points

- Parents' experience of support operates within a complex web of personal resources and wider opportunities and constraints. Services are not necessarily provided in ways which align with parents' understanding of their own needs and cultural orientations towards support. An undifferentiated approach to providing parenting support may not be appropriate for all families.
- Availability of childcare, in whatever form, appears to be central to how working mothers feel they are managing in their everyday parental role. Out of school care is important; however, this is combined with informal childcare to limit the amount of time children spend in formal settings.
- Family, particularly grandparents, are a key source of informal support for working mothers. Availability is affected by material resources and health. However, time spent with grandparents is not just about childcare – building relationships is important.
- The amount and type of childcare and support needed changes as children grow older and develop their own social networks and independence.
- Local social networks are important for parents in a range of ways, and outweigh other factors about housing such as space. Accessing advice informally from friends and neighbours contributes to general well-being as a parent.
- Support networks are maintained through effort and reciprocity.
- Working mothers manage family life through flexible working, planning and organising. While partners play a role, mothers are the 'gatekeepers' of family life and the networks that support it. For full-time parents, family life is concentrated on the home rather than external or arranged activities.

– who were aged 36 or older at the birth of their first child – (Ann, Beth, Carol, Diane) have degrees, and work part- or full-time. The two non-working parents were both aged 25 or under at the birth of their first child. Elaine has a degree, while John has no further or higher education. Pseudonyms are used.

How does this research contribute to what we already know?

This exploratory study was small-scale and only tentative inferences can be made. However, it appears to support other research suggesting that parenting practices, and the extent and nature of support sought, are subject to a range of cultural and structural constraints.

Activating and sustaining support networks requires continual effort, and is influenced by the resources available. Reciprocal

support networks are built on trust and obligation, and parents develop and call on relationships with friends and neighbours based on mutuality not only in the absence of, but in addition to, traditional family ties.

Services are not necessarily provided in ways which align with parents' understanding of their own needs and cultural orientations towards support. An undifferentiated approach to providing parenting support may not be appropriate for all families, and may result in dissonance between service provision and parental need. Some families may therefore encounter conflict with the notions of 'successful parenting' against which they are judged by policymakers.

Findings

What is 'support'?

Parents participating in the study overwhelmingly conceptualised 'support' as childcare, in whatever guise. The exception was Elaine, the younger full-time mother, who did not use childcare. For Elaine, support meant maintaining her well-being as a mother through social contacts made at, for example, toddler groups.

Formal out-of-school care

All the older working mothers, but none of the younger full-time parents, use out-of-school care (e.g. after school clubs and holiday clubs). These clubs are important in helping mothers to manage day to day, and linked to their employment in two key ways: firstly, they enable mothers to work full, or close to full, days; and secondly, mothers arrange their working hours so that out-of-school care is not needed every day. Informal childcare (facilitated by their own or husband's flexible hours; working less unpaid overtime; working part-time; grandparents; or taking annual leave during school holidays) is also used so that children do not participate in activities "for the sake of it".

The younger full-time parents do not use after school or holiday clubs. For Elaine, playgroups and nursery are not considered an absolute necessity but are used if available, in part for the benefit of her child, and in part for the benefit of meeting other mothers.

Extended family

Family are a key source of informal support for all working (older) mothers, but not younger full-time parents. Family support can be experienced in terms of both presence and absence.

For the older mothers, flexible support from grandparents is important. Its availability is supported by material resources (e.g. ability to travel, grandparents having spare rooms for overnight stays or holidays) and grandparents being in good health. This implies that childcare may be vulnerable to life events (such as ill health), which is known to vary across income groups and material circumstances (Ridge 2009).

The younger full-time parents do not receive childcare support from family, either because it is not available or not felt to be needed. For one younger parent this absence was felt acutely, and older mothers with family support reflected that those parents lacking support must as Carol says,

Struggle a lot more.

For most interviewees, spending time with grandparents is not only (or at all for the younger full-time parents) about childcare. Allowing children and grandparents to build relationships is considered important,

I've never relied on any of that for childcare. For me the benefit of [child] staying with his gran is...spending some time with his gran. (John, younger full-time dad)

Even if we...don't need a babysitter we might say 'would you like to take the kids. (Diane, older mum with regular grandparental childcare)

Social networks: friends and neighbours

All parents referred to some level of social support from friends and neighbours, although the level, activation, and perception of support varied.

Social networks developed at ante- and post-natal groups are a key source of support for all mothers interviewed, and persist as children grow older. Aspects of support are practical (e.g. childcare, collecting children from school, helping out in an emergency), a "social life", and friendship (including emotional support).

For the older mothers (but not younger full-time parents), school is an important way of making contact and friendships with other parents, which can also support their children's social life (e.g. meeting people who are arranging birthday parties). School-gate networking opportunities can be obstructed, though, if mothers cannot pick children up from school due to working hours.

Children's choices are a key element in creating social networks for the older mothers who make friends not only with other mothers, but with the mothers of their children's friends. In contrast, the younger full-time parents did not refer to making friends with their children's school friends.

Children's choices also influence the type and extent of childcare needed over time. For example, parents in both groups mention that less adult supervision is needed as children mature, that children spend more social time with friends and need fewer organised activities, while at the same time more after school activities are available as they grow. Children's growing social independence, in turn, increases parents' own social independence. However, other demands on parents increase as children mature, such as supervising homework.

Neighbours can generally be called on for some level of support (even if just in an emergency) by all the parents. Local social networks are important for parents in both groups, and for some more important than moving house to get more space. As Diane puts it,

I would find it really hard to build that up again.

A key factor in the extent and type of social support from neighbours appears to be the configuration of the neighbourhood

itself. Older working mother Carol and younger full-time father John both live in cul-de-sacs with communal green space, which encourages and facilitates strong and enduring local connections between both parents and children. Advice and practical help (such as ‘keeping an eye out’ for children out playing; briefly minding children while the parent runs an errand) are key. Parents can opportunistically meet each other while children are out playing, and,

Just chat about things...you know, health issues, just things like nits, you know, stupid things like that. (Carol)

This suggests that parents with few local connections might lack opportunities to access this kind of everyday advice, which might seem too small or ‘stupid’ to contact formal services about. This is particularly important since research reports that adults view formal support as for severe problems (Anderson and Brownlie 2011), to be used as a last resort (Broadhurst 2003) and as associated with parental failure and stigma (Bradshaw and Marryat 2010). Being able to access advice in person and informally (almost casually) seems to contribute to general well-being and feeling supported as a parent.

Reciprocity

Differences arose around attitudes towards, access to, and mobilising of reciprocity between the two groups of parents.

Both younger full-time parents emphasised self-reliance rather than reciprocity. Although, as outlined above, John receives and provides everyday practical support and advice from neighbours, he sees this as just the way things are in a close community, rather than ‘support’.

The older mothers generally have access to, and can both mobilise and return, large amounts of reciprocal social support on a regular basis. They are acutely aware of reciprocal processes, underpinning which is a very strong sense of fairness in terms of not taking advantage of other people, not over-burdening others, and ensuring favours are returned in some way. How and when they need and can return favours is influenced by their own availability and working hours.

Reliability in any reciprocal arrangement is important. Unreliable help is seen as stressful, and having a wide network to call on is generally felt to be helpful.

Carol and Diane include grandparents in their reciprocal support, returning favours by helping with DIY, taking them out, and spending time with them to

Try to give a bit back for what they give us. (Carol)

Ways of managing

As well as support from extended family and social networks, the older working mothers actively manage family life through flexible working, planning and organising. The effort required to sustain family life was palpable across all their accounts, giving the impression that life is very busy. Ann refers to the “logistical nightmare” of organising after school activities. This busyness extends beyond the working and school week, with children’s activities also scheduled at weekends.

The partners of three of the older mothers play a key role in managing childcare and taking children to and from school through flexible working, and (to a lesser extent) contributing to housework. However, these older mothers remain the ‘gatekeepers’ of family life and the social networks that support it, taking charge of arranging childcare and scheduling activities, even if their main support is from paternal grandparents.

These older mothers also refer to socio-economic factors which help make life easier, such as having a car or employing a cleaner. Parents in both groups mentioned practical aspects, such as having a supermarket and other facilities (chemist, library) close by.

In contrast, the younger full-time parents did not refer to managing schedules or arranging activities for children (either as after school care or at weekends) and family life is concentrated on the home. While these parents refer to parenting practice routines such as bedtime, they do not refer to scheduling family life in the way that the working mothers do:

I just arrange things that are compatible...we just organise my life around the children rather than do it the other way. (Elaine)

Policy implications

Policies which extend grandparents’ working lives are likely to impact on grandparental flexible childcare in a significant number of families. This may in turn impact on parents’ own availability to work, particularly lone parents. In addition, social interaction between grandparents and grandchildren may diminish.

Affordable transport and housing large enough to accommodate grandchildren for overnight stays is important in facilitating childcare and supporting relationships. This is particularly significant in light of recent UK welfare reform discussions over permissible numbers of ‘spare’ rooms for social housing tenants (the so-called ‘bedroom tax’).

Policies which require social housing tenants to move location for employment, or to reduce housing costs, may severely diminish parents’ social support networks built up over time, while also reducing parents’ ability to support older or infirm relatives. Policymakers may overlook the positive aspects of social ties in low income neighbourhoods in attempts to break what they perceive as cycles of disadvantage.

Availability of childcare appears to be central to how working mothers feel they are managing in their everyday parental role. Where family are unavailable due to the impact of policy-related areas (such as working age), lack of resources, or ill-health, other forms of appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare is needed.

Social support is important to parents in ways that cannot necessarily be replicated in professional settings. However, social connections made possible by, for example, configuration of neighbourhoods, suggest there are other ways of influencing social support.

Given that families and friends are generally seen as the first port of call for support, parents may only seek professional support when their own resources prove insufficient (if at all), offering a challenge to family policies aiming for early intervention.

Support and advice provided may reflect middle-class notions of ‘successful parenting’ (see Gillies 2005). In reality, parenting is shaped by the resources available and wider structural opportunities and constraints, and different parenting practices and support are relevant to different circumstances.