Investing in Parenting Education: A Critical Review of Policy and Provision in England

Harriet Churchill* and Karen Clarke**

*Lecturer in Social Work, Department of Sociological Studies, University of Sheffield
E-mail: h.churchill@sheffield.ac.uk

**Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, Politics, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester

Parenting education has been given an increasingly important role in government policies to address social exclusion. This paper examines the basis for investing in parenting programmes and reviews the various different types of parenting education provision. It discusses the evidence on the effectiveness of multi-component and group parenting programmes in modifying parent–child relationships and the outcomes for children and young people. The paper concludes that while such programmes appear to produce beneficial outcomes, it is important that they remain linked to a strategy that does not individualise the causes of social exclusion.

Introduction

The last decade has seen substantial investment in parenting education by the Labour governments as a means of addressing a range of social problems, loosely encompassed by the term 'social exclusion'. A belief that parental practices are the key to solving social problems is a recurrent feature of social policy in England (Welshman, 2008; Macnicol, 1999), and of popular ideology of the family. This paper maps the increasing focus on parenting of New Labour's policies on social exclusion, and the research evidence on which it rests, in order to examine the adequacy of the current strategies.

Parents and social exclusion 1997–2008

Over the three Labour administrations, policies to address social exclusion have become increasingly focused on the role of parents in shaping children's early development and in controlling their children's behaviour. Measures introduced include both universal provision of parenting education and programmes targeted at families identified either as a risk to others or at risk of social exclusion: teenage mothers, families of young offenders or families involved in anti-social behaviour. Table 1 summarises principal measures introduced to combat social exclusion between 1997 and 2008, and shows the increasing policy emphasis on parenting, with a focus on certain groups of 'problem' parents, particularly since 2006. Expenditure on parenting programmes remains small compared to that on provision of care and education and on welfare benefits and measures to support paid employment. Stewart (2009: 52) shows that in 2006–7 expenditure on child contingent support and on early years education and childcare was £30.6bn and £6.4bn respectively, while total cost of the various parenting programmes identified in Table 1 in 2008 was approximately £50 m.[1] However, the investment in a variety of

Table 1   Principal measures to address social exclusion 1997–2008

	Early years	School age children	Employment measures	Benefit reform	Parenting
1997	Early Excellence Centres				
1998	Sure Start Entitlement to free part-time nursery place for all 4 year olds		New Deal for Lone Parents	Abolition of additional benefits for lone parents	Crime and Disorder Act (Parenting orders introduced)
1999		On Track (crime prevention with 4–12 year olds)	National Minimum Wage Childcare Tax Credit Working Families Tax Credit (WFTC) Children's Tax Credit Parental leave introduced (unpaid)	Child Benefit for eldest child increased Income Support rates for children under 11 increased Sure Start Maternity grant	National Family and Parenting Institute set up (now Family and Parenting Institute)
2000	Neighbourhood Nurseries initiative				
2001		Children's Fund (services for children aged 5–13 at risk of social exclusion) Connexions (13–19 year olds)			
2002			Employment Act 2002 (paternity leave, maternity leave extended, right to request flexible working from April 2003)		
2003			Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit replace WFTC and Children's Tax Credit		Anti-social Behaviour Act & Criminal Justice Act (extension of use of parenting orders; introduction of parenting contracts)

2004	All 3 year olds entitled to free part-time nursery place Children's Centre Programme announced: 3500 Children's Centres by 2010	Out of school care for all 3–14 year olds in extended schools by 2010	Education Maintenance Allowance	
2005				
2006	Childcare Act Free integrated care and education for the most disadvantaged 2 year olds in 32 LAs			Parent Support Advisors piloted in 20 LAs Family Intervention Projects (FIPs) (50 projects) Parenting Early Intervention Projects (PEIP) pilots (18 LAs) Education and Inspections Act and Police and Justice Act extend scope of parenting orders and parenting contracts
2007		Extension of paid maternity leave to 9 months	Welfare Reform Act (lone parents required to seek work when youngest child aged 12+ (from 2008) and 7+ (from 2010)	Family–Nurse Partnership (FNP) pilots (10 LAs) Respect Parenting Practitioners in 77 LAs All LAs must have a parenting commissioner and parenting support strategy as part of Children and Young People's Plan

Table 1   (Continued)

	Early years	School age children	Employment measures	Benefit reform	Parenting
2008					National Academy for Parenting Practitioners established DCSF *Parent Know How* launched Two Parenting Experts to be appointed in all LAs Parent Support Advisers in all LAs

Note: Shading indicates first, second and third Labour administrations.

parenting programmes reflects a particular understanding of the role of parents in shaping children's behaviour and development, relative to other influences, and a belief that the provision of information and of specific skills training can transform parents' practices so that they conform to current norms and values (Gillies, 2007), which will in turn reduce children's future social exclusion.

The reduction of child poverty and long-term social exclusion have been key priorities for the Labour government since early in its first term. Policies to achieve these goals initially focused on promoting paid employment as a measure to reduce child poverty. This was combined with targeted investment in services and support for pre-school children, most notably through Sure Start, to address the longer-term, inter-generational transmission of social exclusion (see Table 1) (Stewart, 2009).

Promoting children's development through Sure Start involved providing a range of services and resources directly to young children in the form of integrated care and education, but also the provision of services which sought to change parenting (particularly maternal) practices: the promotion of breast feeding, cessation of smoking in pregnancy, and encouraging parents to relate to their children in specific ways – reading to them, playing and adopting specific disciplinary strategies. The objective of changing parenting in these ways was to try to ensure that children started school 'ready to learn' and thereby to reduce the social class attainment gap, which was seen as an important factor in the reproduction of social exclusion. In the seminar series organised by the Treasury out of which Sure Start emerged (Glass, 1999), evidence was presented that demonstrated the link between high-quality pre-school provision and parenting education through US programmes such as Head Start and Perry/High Scope, and long-term reduction of the likelihood of unemployment, teenage parenthood and criminality. Parenting was identified as having the potential to 'buffer' the child from the effects of exposure to risk factors for social exclusion, such as poverty, lone parenthood or poor parental level of education (Clarke, 2006). While there was no requirement that Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) should provide parenting programmes, many SSLPs introduced them as part of the provision of support for parents. The programmes used were often ones developed in the US (Webster-Stratton) or Australia (Triple P), whose efficacy had been demonstrated through randomised control trials or similarly rigorous evaluation.

Parenting practices were also identified by the Labour government as critical to addressing one of the consequences of social exclusion – youth crime and anti-social behaviour. These problems were seen as stemming from poor parental supervision and control, and the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act introduced a new measure, the Parenting Order, under which a parent could be required to attend parenting classes as part of a response to their child's criminal or anti-social behaviour. The government's commitment to early intervention and prevention, which motivated the setting up of Sure Start, was given expression in relation to the prevention of crime, in the setting up of the On Track programme in 1999, which provided funding for interventions, including parent training, to prevent youth offending. On Track was subsequently incorporated into the Children's Fund, established in 2000, which had a broader brief to provide services to children and young people at risk of social exclusion. Twenty-five per cent of the funding was to be devoted to addressing crime and anti-social behaviour (Morris *et al.*, 2009).

These two distinct sources of policy interest in parenting – children 'at risk' of social exclusion as a result of poverty, and children who constitute 'a risk' to society because of

their behaviour – have become increasingly conflated. *Every Child Matters* (ECM) (Chief Secretary to the Treasury, 2003) identified a list of factors which research had shown to be associated with 'poor outcomes', including poverty, unemployment, homelessness, low birth weight, living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood and poor parenting. These poor outcomes include the various indicators of social exclusion, such as poor educational attainment, early parenthood and criminality. ECM also identified parenting as having an important protective role to play in helping children to overcome disadvantage (ibid: 18–20). The importance of parenting was echoed in the *Respect Action Plan* (Home Office, 2006), outlining the government's proposed policies to address crime and anti-social behaviour, and again in *Reaching Out* (Social Exclusion Task Force, 2006), the government's 'action plan on social exclusion'. Parenting has thus come to be increasingly identified as the factor that critically determines children's outcomes, and parenting education, has become a key policy measure, offered on a voluntary or compulsory basis, individually or to groups. The increased policy attention to parenting coincides with the differentiation within the concept of social exclusion, of a small minority of 'deeply socially excluded' families. *Reaching Out* and the reports reviewing progress that have followed it under the running title *Think Family* (DCFS, 2007; DCFS, 2008) identify a small minority of families who suffer 'persistent and deep-seated exclusion', with signs of disadvantage that 'appear early in life and persist long into adulthood', who face barriers that are 'not only economic but also social and cultural' and for whom New Labour's programmes had produced only modest results (SETF, 2006: 20). In this context, the problem of social exclusion seems to be increasingly equated with offending behaviour. The shift to addressing social exclusion through identifying and working with a small minority of the deeply excluded has been accompanied by an increasing preference for delivery of professionally developed and evidence-based programmes, that focus on parenting and draw primarily on work done in the US.

This new focus on the importance of parenting has resulted in a significant expansion of parenting initiatives targeting particular 'risk groups', such as pregnant teenagers (Family–Nurse Partnership), families involved in anti-social behaviour (Family Intervention Projects), or children at risk of becoming so involved (Parenting Early Intervention Programme) or 'families caught in a cycle of low achievement' (Family Pathfinders). These interventions, initially implemented on a pilot basis in a limited number of local authorities are to be extended nationally (DCSF, 2008). In 2008–9, the government introduced an £18.8m Parenting Strategy Support Grant, which includes funding for two parenting experts in each local authority. Funding has also been provided for the appointment of school-based Parent Support Advisers in all local authorities 'to work with parents to improve children's behaviour and school attendance, offer advice with parenting, and provide support for children and parents at the first sign the child or young person may be experiencing social, health or behavioural issues' (DCSF, 2007: 22). In addition to these targeted services, the government also launched the Parent Know How programme in April 2008. This directs parents to a range of free telephone, on-line or other new media advice or information services (DCSF, 2008:25).

Research evidence on the importance of early experience on subsequent developmental outcomes, in the context of an ideological commitment that it is parents not governments who bring up children, has given a central importance to parenting in the strategy to address a whole host of problems encapsulated by the term 'social exclusion'. The next section of the paper examines the research evidence which has been

so influential in directing policy attention to parenting and the allocation of resources to parenting education.

Parental influences on child outcomes

Three aspects of parental influence that emerge from psychological and sociological literatures will be reviewed here: parenting styles, the home/family environment and the inter-generational transmission of advantage and disadvantage within families. Each of these literatures indicates the utility of a wide range of possible family level interventions and services, only some of which have been taken up by the government.

Parenting styles

The 'parenting styles' literature emerged from psychological studies of child-rearing predominantly conducted in the US. The notion of 'parenting style' can refer to 'patterns of parental values, practices and behaviours' (Heath, 2009: 28). Baumrind's (1967) research focused on US families within the 'normative range' (not classified as 'abusive') and categorised parenting as 'authoritative', 'authoritarian' and 'permissive'. Subsequent studies have proposed further categorisations, for example 'traditional', 'indulgent' and 'indifferent' (Maccoby and Martin, 1983), and 'intrusive' and 'inconsistent' parenting (Feinstein *et al.*, 2008).

This literature concludes that authoritative parenting is optimal for children's socialisation and development (Heath, 2009). This parenting style is characterised as high in warmth, and responsiveness to children and as using age-appropriate parental control (based on positive guidance and reasoning). Children of authoritative parents have consistently been found to have higher levels of educational achievement, self-control, reasoning ability and empathy. They tend to be more cooperative with their peers and adults – compared to children with more authoritarian, permissive or uninvolved parents (Rutter *et al.*, 1998). Where mothers and fathers are authoritative, children also tend to adopt less rigid gendered behaviour with independence nurtured in girls and emotional sensitivity nurtured in boys (Heath, 2009). Children have been found to benefit from grandparents, relatives and teachers also modelling authoritative parenting styles (Heath, 2009).

Policy makers have been impressed by these research findings, focusing principally on the role of parents rather than grandparents or teachers. However, some important messages within the parenting styles literature have received less attention. One issue is that current policy focuses primarily on uninvolved and neglectful parenting, with less concern about the detrimental effects of 'inconsistent' or 'overly intrusive' parenting styles. Inconsistent parenting (where *parenting styles* differ between mothers and fathers or vary across time) has been linked to marital/parental conflict within families and lower self-esteem, self-control and educational achievement among children (Patterson *et al.*, 1989; Feinstein *et al.*, 2008). In a changing family context (e.g. more step-families, dual earner families) consistent parenting may be harder to achieve and sustain. Research with dual-earner families and employed mothers has found that work–family conflict may result in parents feeling they lack time, patience and availability for their children (Lewis, 2007). Although parenting norms in the UK seem to be moving towards authoritative parenting, many parents admit to not living up to these ideals in practice (Hansen and Joshi, 2008; Ghate *et al.*, 2003). Relatively little policy attention has been given to creating

the conditions for consistent parenting. 'Intrusive' parenting ('over-protectiveness', intrusiveness and restrictiveness) is associated with lower self-motivation and both internalizing and externalizing disorders, particularly among adolescents (Waylen and Stewart-Brown, 2008). Policy discourses that emphasise parental responsibility, parental supervision and educational achievements may encourage 'intrusive parenting'.

Other important issues are the uncertain policy implications of the gendered and culturally specific nature of parenting. Mother–child interactions were the focus of early research in the field, but subsequently there has been more research about fathers. For some time the received wisdom was to emphasise that the mother's (or primary carer's) authoritative parenting style is the most important, but recent studies have analysed the importance of 'father involvement', particularly fathers' impact on outcomes for boys and adolescents (Lewis and Lamb, 2007). Significant gaps in research remain and theorising the processes at work is a considerable challenge. For example, factors such as maternal health, poverty and paid work pressures are important influences on mother–child interactions. Similar factors influence father–child interactions, but additionally the quality of mother–father relationships correlates highly with the quality of father–child relationships (Lewis and Lamb, 2007). These points relate to the issue of cultural specificity, as father involvement may have become more significant for children's outcomes as cultural discourses of good fatherhood have come to prize 'intimate father–child relationships' (Dermott, 2008). Another debated aspect of the role of culture in mediating children's outcomes is that authoritarian or more traditional parenting, including the mild use of corporal punishment, can have less detrimental effects in cultures where this parenting style is normative (Waylen and Stewart-Brown, 2008). However, Phoenix and Hussain (2007) dispute generalisations about macro-level ethnic and cultural differences in parenting style on two grounds. First that there is cultural diversity *within* ethnic categories and second that the research is based on small samples and was conducted either in cultures of origin or in the US and may not be widely applicable to the UK today.

Additionally, the theorisation of the underlying processes involved is contested. It is widely recognised that child-rearing and parent–child interactions are shaped by many factors, particularly 'aspects of [parental] history together with characteristics of the child such as age or temperament . . . [social] class, culture and neighbourhood or community, and the [historical] era' (Waylen and Stewart-Brown, 2008: 4). The limitations of dominant theoretical approaches and gaps in empirical research will be returned to below.

Home/family environment

The 'home learning environment' which parents and families create, especially in the pre-school years, has been found to affect children's school achievements. This body of education research argues that alongside parental warmth, it is the 'specific educational behaviours and activities' that parents engage their children in that promote early learning and school achievement (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Educational practices include reading to and with a child, parent–child language use, modelling a positive attitude to learning, and encouraging a curious mind and independent reasoning. Once children are at school, parents can support learning by mentoring a child through their education, helping with homework, providing guidance on how to succeed at school and getting involved with their child's school in various capacities (Desforges and Abouchaar,

2003). Other aspects of the home/family environment include material conditions and child-rearing practices that promote good physical health and positive affective relationships (Feinstein *et al.*, 2008). However, as in the parenting styles research, the key processes at work, the direction of causal relationships and the relative weight of dominant factors are disputed. For example, studies give different weight to the relative importance of emotional relationships and cognitive stimulation in shaping children's educational outcomes (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Katz *et al.*, 2007).

Intergenerational transmission of advantage/disadvantage

Research into the inter-generational transmission of social advantage and disadvantage contributes a further dimension to understanding the role of parents in children's lives. The policies reviewed above have tended to draw on research into the transmission of *dis*advantage, influenced by theories of risk and resilience (Hill *et al.*, 2007; Katz *et al.*, 2007; Seaman *et al.*, 2006). A more balanced view of children's outcomes, however, requires an appreciation of the processes involved in the transmission of advantage (Brighouse and Swift, 2008; O'Connor and Scott, 2007). Capitals theories conceptualise socio-economic advantage as not only having the financial resources with which to access better material and social/educational opportunities, but as providing the means to foster subjectivities which promote personal agency, choices and entitlements, as well as benefiting from access to social networks that offer higher levels of social and cultural capital (Gillies, 2007). Limited economic, human and social capital can in turn limit parental choices and resources with which to overcome or mediate the effects of other important contexts for child development such as school choice, housing/neighbourhood quality or peer group influence (Gillies, 2007; Katz *et al.*, 2007; Seaman *et al.*, 2006).

Psychological and sociological research provides evidence that parenting styles, the home/family environment and the inter-generational transmission of advantage and disadvantage are important influences on children's well-being and development. However, there is disagreement over how these features of family life are conceptualised and their effects explained. Bronfenbrenner's (1989) ecological model of child development offers a theoretical approach which places the child and social interaction at the centre of multiple contexts influencing child development. When translated into empirical research, interaction and context tend to be defined in quite narrow terms with emphasis on observable interactions that take place in a limited range of settings, mainly the home, schools and neighbourhoods. Here family can become equated with 'home' and community with 'neighbourhood' – both of which are problematic in the context of diverse family structures, globalisation, home-based multi-media technologies and communities of interest. The concepts of 'proximal' and 'distal' are then used to refer to factors which have a direct impact on child development (proximal) and those that play a more diffuse and complex role (distal). Feinstein *et al.* (2008) reviewing this body of research in respect of children's educational achievements argued that parenting styles, the home learning environment, parental language use, adequate nutrition and activities outside the home are critical proximal factors, while parental relationships, parental health, parental beliefs and attitudes, material resources, parental education and family structure constitute distal factors. Ecological theories of child development imply the need for interventions to address both proximal and distal factors, so that

family, neighbourhood, school and broader socio-economic, policy and cultural contexts collectively enhance child and adult well-being.

An alternative theoretical approach, sociological capitals theory, understands parent–child interactions as 'relationships through which the resources of cultural and human capital are exchanged' (Feinstein *et al.*, 2008: 50). Once again, interaction and context are inextricably interlinked as subjectivity is constructed through the dynamic between individual agency, language and culture (Gillies, 2007). Capitals theory is limited though in its capacity to explain different motivations among parents (to actively invest resources towards their children), micro-level family interaction processes and the diversity of outcomes *within* advantaged or disadvantaged groups. Policy implications, however, are to recognise cultural diversity and promote parental capabilities and capitals (Craig *et al.*, 2008; Lister, 2004). The next section of the paper examines the evidence to date on the effectiveness of a variety of parenting interventions that have been introduced in light of the issues raised in this section.

Parenting interventions: an evidence-based approach?

Table 1 identified the principal parenting and family interventions implemented in England since 1997. These initiatives vary in their objectives and theoretical influences. Below evidence of the outcomes of the major multi-component and group parenting interventions will be examined.

Multi-component programmes: Sure Start and the Youth Justice Board's (YJB) Parenting Programme

Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) were set up from 1998 in deprived neighbourhoods offering 'on the door-step' early education, childcare, family support and health services to families with children under four. To combat social exclusion Sure Start sought to work with all parents and families in a neighbourhood in an inclusive and non-stigmatising way, developing a range of resources, services and activities to engage families, promote child health and support early learning (Belsky *et al.*, 2007). Initial evaluations of the outcomes for children and families from the Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) found modest positive effects for some children, but also found that the most disadvantaged children and parents had suffered some negative effects (Belsky *et al.*, 2007). However most recent findings have found evidence of more positive impacts on parenting, child development and maternal health – which are thought to be due to better established and more clearly focused services and greater exposure to them of children in their first three years (NESS, 2008). The diversity of services provided within individual SSLPs means, however, that it is difficult to identify the processes leading to the observed outcomes (Belsky *et al.*, 2007).

The Youth Justice Board's Parenting Programme is a further example of a multi-component initiative. This initiative supported 42 parenting programmes aimed at parents of young people at risk of, or known to be engaged in, offending and/or who had school attendance problems (Ghate and Ramella, 2002). The programmes varied considerably but mainly consisted of one-to-one advice and support for parents, practical support to families and group parenting courses providing advice on setting boundaries and

supervising young people, improving parent–youth communication and dealing with problem behaviour (Ghate and Ramella, 2002). Ghate and Ramella's (2002) evaluation of 34 of the programmes found positive impacts, including a reduction by almost one-third in re-conviction rates among young people in the year following their parent's participation in the programme. However, it is unclear what contributed to these results as the programme involved several different interventions with parents and young people; and families were provided with personalised family support – which was critical in reducing the detrimental effects of being compelled to take part in the programme and was key to engaging parents.

Group parenting programmes: Webster Stratton, Triple P, Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC) and Strengthening Families

Evaluations of group parenting programmes have mainly examined remedial rather than preventative interventions and programmes aimed at the parents of younger children rather than interventions aimed at parents of adolescents (Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2000). Programmes (such as Webster-Stratton, Triple-P and Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities) that adopt a social learning approach and focus on communication and behavioural management techniques based on an authoritative parenting style appear to be effective in reducing behavioural problems in younger children (mainly externalising behaviour in boys) (Moran *et al*., 2004). However, such programmes focus on parent–child interactions, but do not necessarily attend to broader contextual issues such as parental involvement in education, parental health or parent–parent relationships.

A recent evaluation of the Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder (PEIP) project in which 18 local authorities implemented one of three parenting programmes with parents of children aged 8–13 across the authority, found that all three programmes resulted in improvements to parents' mental well-being, their parenting skills and the behaviour of the child about whom they were concerned (Lindsay *et al*., 2008). Despite the differences between the programmes in training methods used, style of training and the additional issues included, there were no significant differences between programmes in the outcomes achieved. The authors raise a question about the implications of this for the importance of programme fidelity, and suggest that 'home grown' courses might be equally effective.

Where programmes for parents with adolescents have been reviewed these have predominantly drawn on US, Canadian and Australian programme data. Evaluations of programmes, such as the Teen Triple P (Australia) have reported increased emotional and social coping skills; improved reading ability, peer relations and school grades; and fewer behavioural difficulties among young people (Asmussen *et al*., 2007; Ralph and Sanders, 2006). Important features of the programme were effective partnership working between parenting practitioners and schools to enhance school-based support for parents; programmes targeted at parents with pre-teen children moving from primary to secondary school and more intensive interventions for parents of children with higher needs (Ralph and Sanders, 2006). Other programmes, where provision was less tailored to different levels of need, and parenting practitioners did not work in partnership with schools to the same degree, appeared to be less effective in improving peer relations and school grades

among adolescents (Asmussen *et al.*, 2007). These findings suggest that local provision needs to be responsive to varied needs and that the links between services are important.

Targeted multi-component programmes for individual families: Family Intervention Projects (FIPs)

Family Intervention Projects were set up as part of the Respect Action Plan and provide intensive support to help families at risk of eviction for anti-social behaviour address behavioural and other problems and improve children's well-being. The service is delivered through outreach support to families in their own home, support in temporary accommodation in the community or 24 hour support in a residential unit where the family lives with project staff. FIPs take a whole family approach, in which a key worker, with a small case-load, co-ordinates the services for a family, and uses a combination of support and sanctions to 'motivate' the family to engage with the project and change their behaviour. Work with families includes one-to-one parenting work and referral to group parenting programmes (Webster-Stratton, Triple P or SFSC) to improve parenting skills. Support with parenting is seen as a major aspect of the FIP intervention. A recent evaluation of the early outcomes reported a reduction in the level of anti-social behaviour and improved outcomes for children and young people, in terms of reduced problems at school (truancy, exclusion or bad behaviour at school) (White *et al.*, 2008).

Mothers are the overwhelming majority of participants in the various different programmes examined in these evaluations and less is known about programme impact from fathers' or young people's perspectives. The low level of engagement with fathers is recognised as an important issue in policy, particularly given the evidence noted above that father involvement in children's lives is important. The absence of fathers perpetuates parenting as mothers' responsibility and may both reflect and perpetuate the design of services around maternal needs and preferences. The relative absence of young people's perspectives on the effects of parenting programmes in the evidence base is also striking. The outcomes for children are largely examined through parental reports, using standardised scales such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Where young people's experience has been examined directly, it appears that parents may have a more positive view of changes to family functioning than young people themselves (Ghate and Ramella, 2002).

Conclusion

Since 2006, the government's strategy on social exclusion has focused increasingly on working with those families identified as 'deeply' excluded, meaning those suffering multiple disadvantages associated with 'poor outcomes', which are predominantly equated with young people's criminal and anti-social behaviour. For such families, children's poor outcomes have come to be seen as a consequence of poor parenting, resulting in children's inadequate socialisation and failure to engage with the education system. These conclusions rest on a body of educational, psychological and sociological research which identifies associations between parenting style, home environment and social capital and the inter-generational reproduction of different forms of individual adversity that result in a variety of social problems. The theorisation of the processes which lead to these outcomes remains limited in its ability to integrate individual,

social and environmental factors, and this has implications for the adequacy of policies based on such evidence. While the initial findings from evaluations of a number of the programmes introduced are positive, unless this focus on parents and individual families is integrated with policies that address the structural obstacles to social inclusion, this approach risks stigmatising families targeted by these interventions. In practice, despite the acknowledgement of the importance of engaging fathers, parenting interventions continue to target mothers in poor material circumstances, with the aim of transforming their behaviour to conform to a particular middle-class norm, with relatively little attention to transforming the wider environment in which such families live. The exhortation to 'think family' is a welcome recognition of the social nature of individual problems, but it is essential that this extends beyond the focus on parents to make sure that policies also 'think society'.

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Note

1 Authors' calculation from DCSF and Home Office websites.

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