

Supporting parents in the poorest communities: policy challenges and practical solutions

Presentation to the Children in Wales Conference to mark
Parents' Week and UN Eradication of Poverty Day
October 17th 2007, Future Inns, Cardiff Bay

Dr Deborah Ghate

Thomas Coram Research Unit
Institute of Education, University of London

Research evidence for this talk

- **A nationally representative study of parents in poor neighbourhoods (2002, for DoH)**
 - Survey of 1,754 parents, randomly selected across Britain, from the 30% poorest areas as identified by the Poor Parenting Environment Index, specially developed for the study

- **A review of the international evidence on What Works in Parenting Support (2004, for DfES)**
 - c2,000 studies, organised under categories of outcome (parents, children, both)

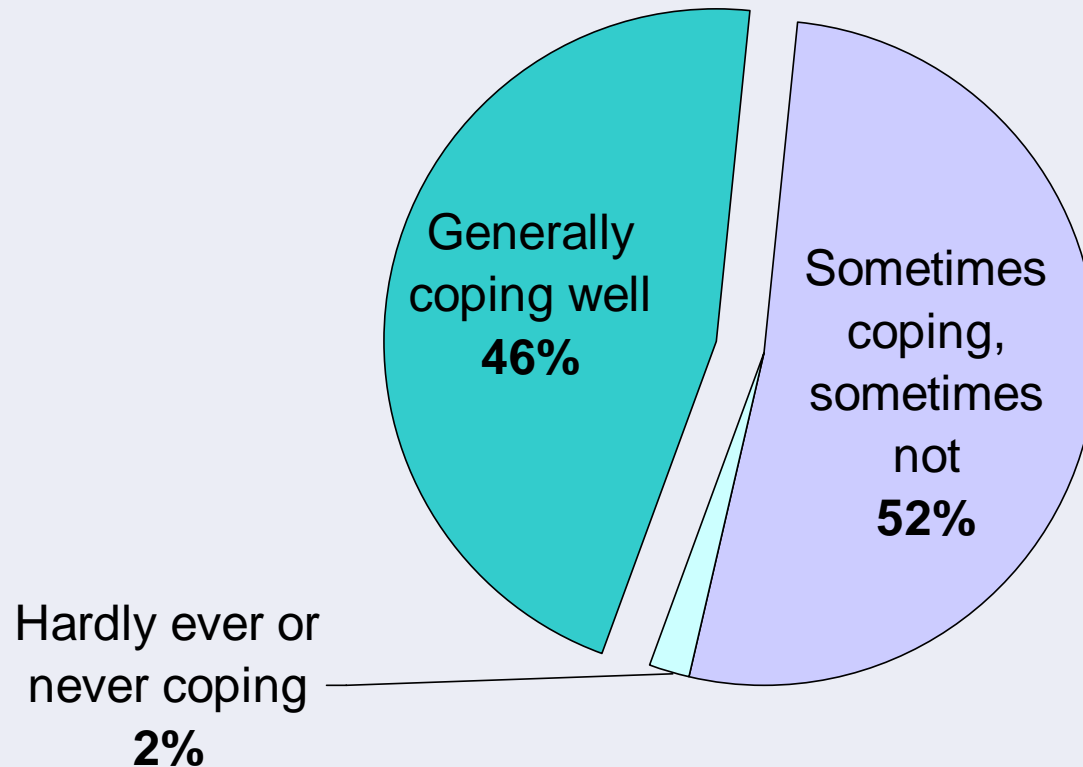
The background

- Research suggests that it is normal for parents to wish for more help or support at some time
- But for parents living in poor neighbourhoods, this may be especially acute...

The policy challenges

- In a study of 1,750 parents in the 30% poorest neighbourhoods in Britain, **nearly half (47%) felt ‘unsupported’ to some extent** (currently, often or sometimes wished they had ‘additional help or support in being a parent’)
- **One in ten ‘often’ wished for help**
- **Only a third (35%)** said they had **never** wished for more help/support since becoming a parent

Coping and not coping with parenting



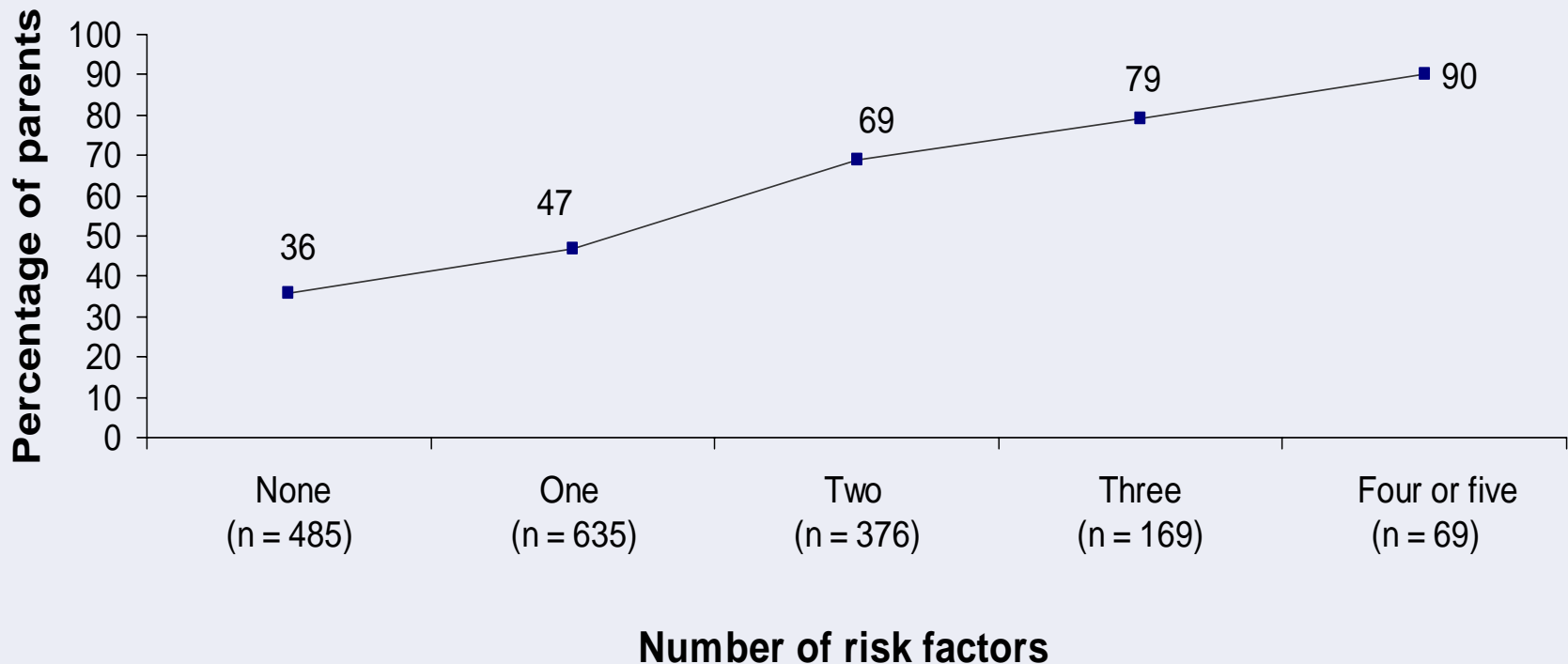
Base = 1,736. Source: Ghate & Hazel (2002)

Key stressors for parents in poor environments

- o 'Difficult' child (child behaviour problems)
- o High level of current life problems (financial strain, housing, relationships, etc)
- o High Malaise score (poor parent mental health)
- o Lone parent
- o Number of children (large family)

Cumulative impact of stressors on coping

Not coping with parenting, by cumulative burden of problems



The practical solutions

- Fortunately, we now know:
 - Supporting parents can have measurable benefits for children and for parents in their own right, and
 - A considerable amount about good practice in supporting parents

- There are key messages from research especially relevant to parents in poor neighbourhoods

- Three key stages in the process:
 - Getting
 - Keeping
 - Engaging

 - *Plus:* Following up

Getting (persuading parents to make initial contact with a service)

- Advertising and marketing
- Outreach work, and persistence over time
- At least one home visit
- Pay attention to **practical** factors
 - Child care facilities
 - Transport and location
 - Non-stigmatising, comfortable and welcoming venues
 - Delivery at convenient times
 - Provide useful facilities (e.g washing machine and tumbler drier)

Keeping (persuading parents to stay in touch long enough to experience what the service has to offer)

- Pay attention to **design** factors:
 - ‘Multi-modal’ services (groups, 1-2-1, home visits, telephone)
 - Flexibility to respond to individual needs around a consistent ‘core’ service offer
 - Duration and intensity tailored to levels of need
 - Delivery that accommodates different learning styles
 - interactive (not didactic)
 - use of multi-media
 - care with written materials

Engaging (persuading parents to stay involved long enough to benefit from the service) [1]

- Pay attention to **relational** factors
 - ‘Trusted’ local professionals (esp for ‘hard to reach’ groups)
 - Trained staff
 - Ensuring that user feedback is incorporated into changes to the service, and that this is conveyed to users
- Relationships between service providers and service users are at the heart of support

Engaging (persuading parents to stay involved long enough to benefit from the service) [2]

- Pay attention to **environmental, cultural and contextual** factors
 - Stressed parents find it difficult to benefit fully from parenting support services:
 - Awareness of parents' personal context and circumstances
 - Good interagency working practices for onward/outward referral
- **Diversity** issues
 - e.g awareness of issues for fathers
 - balance cultural sensitivity with awareness that within-group differences may be as substantial as between-group differences

What do parents want from support services?

A 'user definition' of support

“...‘support’ means that you are still in charge; the parent is still in charge and you are just asking for help, advice and whatever but you are the one in charge. You are not handing over your kids to someone else to take over. You are still in charge of them.”

In summary: key policy challenges for the next few years

- Addressing the multiplicity of needs of parents in poverty in an effective, joined-up way
- Addressing the poor image of support services amongst some families – especially the poorest
- Learning how to work in real partnership with parents
- Supporting services to implement robust, evidence-based work with families whilst still responding to local and individual needs
- Realising that we're in this for the long haul: building sustainable services with sustained funding, and not seeking 'quick fixes'

Outputs from these studies: more information

What Works in Parenting Support: a review of the international evidence

Moran P., Ghate D., and Van der Merwe A (2004) *What works in parenting support? A review of the international evidence* Research report 574, London: DfES www.dcf.gov.uk & www.prb.org.uk

Searchable online database of key studies also available at www.prb.org.uk

Parenting in Poor Environments: stress, support and coping

Ghate D and Hazel N (2002) *Parenting in poor environments: stress, support and coping* London : Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Summary of key messages from the available on line at www.prb.org.uk

Dr Deborah Ghate

Thomas Coram Research Unit
Institute of Education, University of London
27/28 Woburn Square
London WC1H 0AA

0207 612 6955

d.ghate@ioe.ac.uk