

The parent trap

Poor parenting is blamed for many of today's social problems. So what can we do to improve children's prospects?

The poet Philip Larkin famously wrote, '*They f**k you up, your mum and dad. They may not mean to, but they do.*' Read through a few of NPC's research reports and you will see the truth in Larkin's words. Problems in early life often herald problems in later years. For example, two thirds of boys with a convicted parent go on to offend, while 45% of women in prostitution were sexually abused as children.

Children are at greatest risk of abuse in their own home. They are most likely to be seriously injured or die at the hands of their parents or carers. Child abuse, unsurprisingly, has major impacts that last into adulthood. One study found that abuse in the first five years of life nearly tripled a child's likelihood of having multiple physiological, behavioural and academic problems at school. There is also a strong link between childhood abuse and offending later in life. In one research report, nearly three quarters of young offenders imprisoned for a 'grave crime' had reported some form of childhood abuse.

Parenting is at the centre of what often seems to be a nebulous mass of issues that cause social problems. Parents can affect every aspect of children's lives, from how sociable and educated they are to their mental health. Because of this, one of the areas that NPC is keen to research this year is parenting.

The parent-child relationship in infancy and early childhood affects a child's relationship with their peers for years, including how popular he or she is. And, showing the links between subjects, bullying and peer pressure are some of the major factors that cause a child to truant.

Bad parenting lasts for life

Poor parenting in early life has been associated with a two thirds increase in delinquent behaviour. For example, 80% of boys who have a poor relationship with their father become young offenders, compared to 43% of boys with a good paternal relationship. Again this has a knock-on effect. Young offenders are often affected by mental health problems—the high suicide rate among young offenders shows the high price they can pay.

A child's educational achievements are also linked to his or her parents. Perhaps surprisingly, parents have a bigger impact on children's results in primary school than do variations in the quality of schools. For example, research has shown that children whose parents read to them become better readers. And in later childhood, parents shape the aspirations and motivations of children by acting as role models. Parents who are involved with their child's school are likely to have children with higher achievements.

With all these links between a good early start and a good long-term future, it is easy to see why parenting has become a hot political topic. This government has poured a great deal of money into this area, opening over 3,000 Sure Start Children's Centres offering childcare and support for parents. But not everyone is willing to open up to the state; many parents are frightened of asking for help from a nurse or GP in case this leads to official interference in their family. Charities often relate better to people than statutory organisations because they aren't seen as judgemental.

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How charities can help

Charities like Family Action run projects such as Building Bridges that supports families where a parent has a mental health problem. Family Action helps develop parenting skills, and also works with

children to help them understand their parent's mental health problems. Normally, the children of parents with mental health problems are twice as likely to experience a childhood psychiatric disorder, but an evaluation of Building Bridges' beneficiaries found a statistically significant improvement in the levels of depression in children under the age of 11.

'...if you want to help children, you should really help the parents.'

Charities also lead the way in carrying out research and piloting new approaches, helping to improve the practice of parenting across the country. For example, the WAVE Trust researched the causes of violence and ways to prevent it for nine years—culminating in the WAVE report. This report argued that a lack of empathy is the most common cause of violence. Amongst the interventions it highlighted were two parenting programmes:

- The first is **attunement**. During a first pregnancy, expectant mothers and fathers receive coaching on how to empathise with their babies, how to ensure a child's emotional development and how to parent in a non-violent manner.
- The second intervention was the **Nurse-Family Partnership**, a programme devised in the US. It pairs first-time mothers with nurses who visit them regularly until the child is two. The nurses teach mothers about better health during pregnancy, as well as how to care for their children once they are born. They also instill in mothers a sense of ambition for the future and a vision to achieve their goals. The benefits from this programme can be seen over the course of many years. There is a reduction in child abuse and neglect, reduced behavioural and intellectual problems at the age of five, and a reduction in arrests when the child is aged 15 compared to the control group. Thanks in part to WAVE's efforts, the Nurse-Family Partnership is now being rolled out across the UK.

How donors can help children by helping their parents

Family life in the UK has changed remarkably over the past few decades. In 1972, only one in fourteen children lived in a one parent family. Today, that number is one in four. And seven out of ten couples with children both hold down jobs. People don't have the strong community links that existed a generation ago to help parents. So it becomes even more important for charities and other organisations to step in to help.

In NPC's experience, one of the most popular charitable sectors for donors is children. But our experience has also shown that, if you want to help children, you should

really help the parents. Otherwise you may be leaving it too late to help without costly interventions. There are effective ways to help people to become better parents. And charities tell NPC that parents generally welcome someone who can help them cope with bringing up their children.

Philip Larkin continued his famous poem about parenting with the sentiment *'Man hands on misery to man. It deepens like a coastal shelf'*. But it doesn't have to be that way. Instead we can intervene early—giving parents the skills they need to succeed and so giving children the support they need to live fulfilling lives.

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NPC's research is funded by grants. If you are interested in funding our research into parenting or would like to discuss the project further please contact Angela Kail on 0207 785 6322.