



Promoting Positive Discipline:

The Evaluation of the Alternatives to Physical Punishment Training Project – A Summary

Introduction

This report outlines the key findings taken from an evaluation of the Alternatives to Physical Punishment Training Project established as a result of a partnership between the Parents Advice Centre (PAC) and Save the Children, two founding members of the Children are Unbeatable! Alliance (CAU!). The Children are Unbeatable! Alliance campaigns for a change in legislation that will provide children with the same legal protection from assault as adults. CAU! has also been lobbying the Government to lead on a public education programme to stop children being hit by informing parents and carers of effective non-violent methods for disciplining their children.

The Alternatives to Physical Punishment Training project started as a pilot initiative in mid July 2003. Initially the trainer was employed part time for 17.5 hours per week, but in response to high demand this was increased to 28 hours from January 2004 and the project extended to run to the end of June 2006. The evaluation of the project covers the period April 2005 to October 2005.

The project's primary aim is to stop children from being hit by adults as a form of discipline. The training package was designed to provide those working with children with an understanding and awareness of children's rights, with guidance and knowledge of best practice methods in dealing with children's behaviour, and also to enhance their ability and confidence in sharing that information with others, particularly parents. The theory underpinning the project is that, as staff become more confident in talking to parents and using their training to explore options of behaviour management, knowledge about alternatives to physical punishment will pass from trainer to child care worker to parent (cascade training) and achieve real change in children's lives both at home and in their child care settings.

Methodology

The project evaluation comprised the use of three different questionnaires administered to the participants of 18 sessions (120 participants in total). The questionnaires involved:

- a) a pre-course evaluation form to collect baseline data on what participants wanted out of the training, their expectations and knowledge prior to the course;
- b) a short course feedback form administered at the completion of the 12 hours training;
- c) a post-course evaluation follow-up questionnaire delivered four months after the training to ask if/how the participants had used the training in their work and what (if anything) they had found useful to their work.

120 participants completed the short course feedback assessment, 113 completed the initial pre-evaluation form (94%) and 73 completed the follow-up evaluation form (61%).

Key Findings

Prior to taking part in the training programme, participants identified a number of gaps in their ability to manage children's behaviour.

Many participants clearly stated they were not fully equipped to manage challenging behaviour or to assist parents in managing their own children's behaviour. This was the case for participants working in all sectors.

- Those attending the course hoped to gain advice on best practice in dealing with children's behaviours (90%), knowledge about methods of discipline to use with children (87%), to gain up to date information on methods to manage children's behaviour (81%) and skills to assist parents in developing ways to cope with children's behaviour (78%).
- The most challenging issues reported by participants prior to completing the training were how to deal with disobedience, tantrums or aggressive behaviour (17%); how to change parents attitudes to dealing with their children's behaviour (11%); and being able to get parents and staff working together to manage behavioural problems (10%).

Four months on from completing the training, all participants reported gaining knowledge and/or skills in managing children's behaviour from the course.

This included:

- best practice in dealing with children's behaviours (90%)
- methods of discipline to use with children (87%)
- methods to manage children's behaviour (81%)
- alternatives to physical punishment (73%)

Moreover, almost two in three reported that they had used the new approaches in their work since completing the training course. The breadth of knowledge displayed after completing the course in terms of the range of techniques available to them indicated that they had developed a much wider knowledge of alternatives to physical punishment as well as a balanced approach using more positive reinforcement techniques.

A majority (85%) of participants said the course had helped them in their work with children.

They reported that the course gave them greater confidence, a better understanding of behaviour, a range of different strategies and skills to use, better knowledge about techniques and enhanced their ability to work with children and identify their needs. Two thirds of participants reported that the course helped them with managing children's behaviour in direct caring work.

Seven in ten (71%) participants working with children reported that the course had helped them to advise and support parents.

Participants who said the course helped them reported that they were more confident to give advice and guidance to parents, were more able to reassure parents and also to share concerns and doubts.

- 78% had gained skills to work with parents in developing ways to cope with children's behaviour
- 71% said they had developed methods of working with parents and influencing their behaviour

While prior to completing the training, many participants clearly felt ill-equipped to advise parents on managing their children's behaviour, afterwards 71% stated that the course had helped change this. Participants reported finding it less daunting to speak with parents on this issue, and feeling that they had useful information to pass on to parents.

Seven in ten (71%) participants stated that they had developed knowledge they could share with parents about alternatives to physical punishment.

This has impacted on the numbers of participants talking with parents about alternatives to physical punishment – increasing from 36% prior to completing the course to 47%. However, while this is an improvement it remains a concern that more than half have not talked about this with parents.

More than half of participants (55%) stated that the training had changed their opinion on how children should be disciplined.

This suggests that a majority of participants may not have come to the course as strong advocates of positive discipline, but that this changed for many of them through the process. The survey suggests that gaining insight into children's behaviour and learning techniques to manage it were important in changing the attitudes of participants.

Of course, many of those who said that they had not changed their opinion may have already been convinced that positive discipline is the best way of managing children's behaviour prior to the course. It could also mean that they are still advocates for physical punishment.

Recommendations on the training project

The training should be adapted to meet the requirements of other potential participants.

The need for training in positive parenting and alternatives to physical punishment is not specific to those working with young children. This course should be adapted to suit the particular requirements of people working with older children and teenagers, as well as children with a diverse range of needs, including those with disabilities.

The course could be delivered directly to parents.

While participants on the course have been drawn largely from people working with children, a number of parents also attended and found it very useful in dealing with their own children.

Regular refresher training sessions should be offered.

This would ensure that they are aware of the most up to date information and techniques available. This would also enable childcare workers to seek further advice on any difficulties they have experienced since completing the course.

General recommendations

Training in positive discipline techniques should be provided to all people working directly with children.

This evaluation has highlighted a worrying gap in the confidence, knowledge and skills of childcare workers from all sectors in positive discipline techniques to deal with challenging behaviour. As a matter of urgency training in positive parenting and alternatives to physical punishment must be rolled out to all childcare workers across all sectors, and integrated into core training in the future.

Childcare providers must accept the responsibility to promote positive discipline approaches with parents.

Despite reporting increased confidence in talking to parents about alternative forms of discipline to physical punishment, more than half had not talked to parents about this issue three months on from completing the course. Childcare providers must take responsibility for promoting alternatives to physical punishment with parents, instead of leaving it to individual members of staff to do this on their own initiative.

Copies of the full report can be obtained from: www.savethechildren.org.uk/northernireland

Roundtable Workshop

The Evaluation of the Alternatives to Physical Punishment training project was released on 8 November 2006 at a roundtable meeting organised by the Children are Unbeatable! Alliance. Represented at the roundtable were the following organisations: Office of Law Reform, Department of Education, DHSSPS, Children's Services Planners for NHSSB and SHSSB, the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI), NCH, NSPCC, Childline, Barnardos, Parents Advice centre (PAC) and Save the Children.

After presentation of the findings of the evaluation, participants discussed the challenge of promoting positive discipline, and made the following conclusions:

- Positions around physical punishment are deeply entrenched. Therefore the fact that 55% of participants said that they had changed their mind on this issue was remarkable, and points to the potential of training to change attitudes and, ultimately, protect children from being hit.
- It is very difficult for parents to ask for help as they are fearful of triggering child protection procedures, or being labelled problem parents. Training in positive discipline needs to be non-judgemental of parents, and marketed in a very positive way – ie not about 'here is what you shouldn't be doing', but 'here are things that you can do to help your children behave well'.
- Parenting courses should be offered widely and not solely to 'problem parents'. For example, an invitation to parenting courses could be included in Bounty Packs.
- The Government needs to lead on a campaign promoting positive parenting – which has clear consistent messages 'it is wrong to hit children' and 'there is parenting support available'.
- This clear message about it being wrong to hit children needs to be communicated clearly to all statutory staff, and they also need to be communicating this clearly in their work.
- There needs to be provision of parenting support in place before a campaign is conducted, otherwise parents will be looking for support that is not available. Therefore, preparation, in the way of putting in place training on positive parenting (including positive discipline) needs to start well in advance of any campaign.
- Positive parenting (including positive discipline) should be a key element in training for all childcare workers in a similar way, but separate, to child protection training. This needs to be refreshed on a regular basis.
- Schools could help to support the promotion of positive discipline, by communicating with parents about discipline methods within the school, possibly as children start primary school and secondary school. They could also offer parenting classes, perhaps through extended schools programmes.
- Research and evaluation needs to continue to be conducted into the outcomes of positive parenting approaches in the short and long term.