

# Supporting families, preventing violence: the evidence base

September 2021





## Who are we?

The Youth Endowment Fund is a charity with a £200m endowment and a mission that matters. We exist to prevent children and young people from becoming involved in violence.

Many organisations have this calling. Our unique role is to build the evidence base and support a movement to put that knowledge into practice. That means that we do more than just fund and evaluate promising programmes. We'll establish a consensus about what works and share the news, so that we can make sure that young people get the very best support possible.

## What's this briefing about?

When children live in homes where there are challenges like conflict or domestic abuse, alcohol or substance misuse or where other family members are involved in crime, they're more likely to become involved in violence. Our conversations with people working to keep children safe – and young people themselves – have made it clear that we should focus on finding out what works to help families facing these types of challenges. There's also clear evidence that interventions to support families could be effective in preventing children becoming involved in violence. But lots of the evidence is international rather than UK-based, and many of the underlying studies have limitations.

That's why we're investing up to £10 million in our grant round, **A supportive home: helping families to overcome challenges.**

By funding programmes in England and Wales, **we can build our knowledge** of how best to support families, including children in the care system, who are significantly overrepresented in the youth justice system. We hope to answer the question:

*Which approaches are most effective in helping families and carers to create a supportive home environment for 6 to 14-year-old children (6-18 years old for looked-after children and those with special educational needs and disabilities), reducing the likelihood of them becoming involved in violence?*

But before we open applications, we needed to make sure that we're as clear as possible about the types of programmes we want to fund, so that we're building on the latest research evidence. That's why we commissioned our partners at the Early Intervention Foundation to conduct a review of what the evidence already tells us about different types of family support programmes. This briefing is a summary of their findings.

## Who is this briefing for?

This briefing is useful for anyone interested in family support programmes and how they can help support children and keep them safe from involvement in violence.

It covers four types of family support programmes:

- 1 Parenting programmes** (including programmes for foster carers or people working with children in residential care), which help parents / carers and their children to develop positive behaviours and relationships.
- 2 Family therapy interventions** (including for children in foster care), which offer structured forms of therapy to support whole families.
- 3 Programmes to reduce parental conflict**, which are specifically designed to improve relationships between parents or carers.
- 4 Domestic abuse interventions**, which are specifically designed to prevent and reduce harm to children and adults.

And for each, it outlines:

- What these programmes include
- What the evidence says about how effective the programme is
- Some relevant case studies, to show you what these programmes are like in practice

This briefing contains four case studies, which highlight examples of promising programmes. We want to build on the current evidence, particularly where programmes already show promise of positive impact for children. But including these examples does not mean that these programmes are guaranteed Youth Endowment Fund funding, either through the A supportive home grant round or through other funding streams. All of our funding decisions are based on an assessment of applications, so that we make sure we're investing in projects we can learn from.

If you're thinking of applying for funding through our grant round, [A supportive home: helping families to overcome challenges](#), we think it'll be a useful resource to help you think about the evidence that supports your proposal.

For more information about the grant round, read the [appendix to our 2021 prospectus](#) and our full [2021 prospectus](#). You can also find useful information on [our website](#).

# Parenting programmes

## What is it?

Parenting programmes support parents to strengthen their relationships with their children and promote positive development. They aim to help parents to:

- Develop a caring and responsive relationship with their child.
- Develop awareness of their child's behaviour and respond in a positive, consistent, and non-violent way.
- Support the child to develop social and emotional skills.

These approaches to parenting could help children to manage their emotions and support positive behaviour. Research has demonstrated that children who develop behavioural difficulties are more likely to become involved in crime and violence.

Parenting programmes often work with parents of young children who behave in a challenging way. The age of the children varies by programme, but most evaluations have focused on parents of children aged 3 and 8 years old.

Programmes can work with individual parents but are often delivered to a group of parents in multiple sessions over several weeks. Most are delivered by trained facilitators in a community setting. However, there are also some online programmes which use pre-recorded demonstrations and activities. Common activities include:

- **Group discussions** for parents to share the challenges and successes they experience in their relationships with their children.
- **Demonstrations** of positive interactions with children. For example, parents might watch a video of an interaction between a parent and child then discuss and reflect on the child's behaviour and the parent's response.
- **Role play exercises.** For example, some parents in the group might perform the role of a child who is refusing to share a toy with another child. This gives other parents the opportunity to practise different strategies and receive feedback from the programme facilitator and the rest of the group.
- **Practical homework** for parents to complete in between sessions. For example, the programme facilitator might ask parents to practise strategies at home with their child and share their experiences at the next session.
- **Online forums or in-person discussions** which encourage parents to share strategies they have been using.

## What does the evidence say?

There is evidence that parenting programmes can be effective at reducing behavioural difficulties, which are associated with later involvement in violence. There is also some evidence that they can protect children from engaging in substance misuse. However, there is a lack of research which directly measures the impact of parenting programmes on crime and violence. Based on the current evidence, our best estimate is that parenting programmes could lead to a small reduction in violent crime. That's

why we want to invest in finding out more, through our [A supportive home: helping families to overcome challenges](#) grant round.

Parenting programmes tend to focus on issues before they become firmly established. For parents with more complex challenges, such as domestic violence or problems with their own mental health or substance misuse, family therapies may be more appropriate.

Some of the things that successful parenting programmes have in common include:

- **Supporting positive relationships and behaviours.** Programmes which helped parents to develop positive skills, rather than only focusing on their negative habits, tended to be more successful.
- **Interaction.** The majority of the successful programmes were delivered through interactive sessions. This often involved facilitators demonstrating strategies through video or in-person role play, opportunities for parents to discuss strategies, and opportunities for parents to practise strategies during sessions or at home.
- **Trained and qualified facilitators.** Nearly all the effective programmes required trained facilitators with experience of working with children and families.
- **Structure and consistency.** Effective programmes tended to have well-specified goals, were delivered weekly and provided lesson plans and manuals that could be easily and consistently used by facilitators.
- **Avoiding stigma.** Parents who were instructed to attend a programme often reported stigma about being a 'bad parent'. However, parents who were invited to attend reported that the invitation felt like an acknowledgment of difficulties and an offer of support.

## Generation PMTO Group

Generation PMTO Group works with families of children who have been identified by their schools, the police or others as being in need of support (for example, that might be because they've committed a low-level offence like shoplifting, or they're misusing substances like alcohol or illegal drugs). Children are typically aged between 3 and 16.

Practitioners use an interactive approach during parenting classes. This could include group problem solving, role play, homework assignments or video modelling to engage parents actively in learning to apply the techniques they're being taught at the session when they get home.

The programme is delivered either in a group or one-to-one setting, based on the needs of the family involved. It is typically delivered in an outpatient health setting, at home or in a community centre.

An evaluation found evidence of improvements in children's behaviour, mental health, and social skills, and reductions in the number of children arrested by the police. Several of these improvements have been demonstrated nine years after the delivery of the intervention ended.

# Family therapy

## What is it?

Family therapy is a structured psychotherapy that takes place between a therapist and the family. Several family therapy programmes have been rigorously evaluated. These include:

- **Brief strategic family therapy**, which is a rehabilitation programme often used where parents have difficulties with substance misuse.
- **Functional family therapy**, which aims to improve communication and positive interactions between children and their parents or carers. It also helps parents to supervise their children effectively and set clear boundaries.
- **Multidimensional family therapy**, is another substance abuse prevention programme. It was developed for children and young people who have offended, misuse substances or have other behavioural difficulties.
- **Multisystemic therapy**, which is designed to support positive changes in the various social systems (like home, school, community, friendships) that surround a child.

These programmes are typically delivered by trained therapists or psychologists and tend to work with families of secondary school age children with more complex needs. They often focus on how the family and the therapist can work together to achieve better outcomes. They often also identify other influences on a child such as their friends and the wider community.

While parent education and training programmes are often delivered in groups, family therapy tends to work with individual families. They are also often delivered in natural settings such as the family's home, where the child and family will feel more comfortable.

## What does the evidence say?

Some forms of family therapy have been found to reduce child involvement in crime and violence, particularly in the USA. For example, evaluations of both multisystemic therapy and multidimensional family therapy have suggested they can protect children from involvement in crime and violence. Other family therapies, such as functional family therapy, have been shown to reduce more general behavioural difficulties, such as aggression or substance misuse, while also improving a child's mental health.

However, we still don't have a lot of evidence about how these programmes might work in the UK. That's why we want to fund promising family therapy programmes as part of our upcoming grant round, [A supportive home: helping families to overcome challenges](#).

Some of the things that successful family therapies have in common include:

- **Preventative and positive goals.** Successful therapies tend to focus on improving children's lives by introducing positive changes (for example, by helping their whole family to get better at communicating).
- **Trained and qualified facilitators.** Practitioners were professionally qualified to deliver the intervention and were often therapists or mental health professionals.

- **Structure.** Therapy should be tailored to the specific needs and issues of each family, but programmes also seem to benefit from having a clear structure. This could include a starting point of engaging with and motivating the family, assessing a family's strengths and difficulties, developing specific goals, and supporting a family to regularly make these changes in their day-to-day life.
- **Sticking to the core programme.** Practitioners should take care to ensure the core elements of the programme are followed. Any necessary contextual adaptations should be made with caution.

### **Multidimensional Family Therapy**

Multidimensional Family Therapy is a targeted intervention for families where children and young people have specific difficulties with their behaviour or mental health

Families work with a qualified MDFT therapist to develop problem-solving skills. The therapist has a series of therapeutic conversations with the children and parents (both individually and together) and family sessions where the therapist facilitates conversations among all members of the family. If relevant, further conversations can take place involving the wider community.

The programme is delivered either in a family's home or in a clinical setting.

An evaluation suggested that the young people who took part in this programme were less likely to be arrested. However, this study took place in the USA and need more evidence about how MDFT could work in a UK context.

# Programmes to reduce parental conflict

## What is it?

These interventions are specifically designed to improve the relationship between parents (rather than between parents and children). They typically focus on the way parents manage conflict, communicate with each other, and how this affects their parenting. They help parents to learn how their children can be drawn into parental conflict and refocus their attention on supporting their children. Parental conflict programmes can work with families where the parents are still in a relationship, or families where parents are separating or have already separated. Programme activities could include role play exercises, demonstrations of positive interactions with children, and therapy.

## What does the evidence say?

We're still learning about the impact of these interventions. While evaluations have shown that interventions can help parents to develop stronger relationships, there hasn't been much research on the impact of parental conflict programmes on children.

That's why we want to invest in these programmes through our [A supportive home: helping families to overcome challenges](#) grant round. We want to see if supporting parents to develop positive relationships could protect children from later involvement in violence.

The available research suggests that sometimes there are barriers to getting parental conflict programmes right. These include:

- **Acceptability.** Couples might only seek help when they're at a point of relationship breakdown, because of the stigma involved in having relationship difficulties. This means that, by the time parents manage to seek support, their relationship difficulties may be entrenched. One way to overcome this might be through partnership working, or training mainstream statutory services to help their staff identify the signs of relationship difficulties at an early stage. Frontline practitioners, particularly health professionals, are important in helping to identify parents who might need support.
- **Availability.** Relationship support provision available in the UK is often fragmented and families tend not to know about services that are available. Using outreach workers and counsellors who understand the parents they're trying to reach may address this problem.
- **Accessibility** of support. The cost of accessing parental support services, obtaining childcare and lack of out-of-hours provision have been commonly highlighted as barriers and are likely to disproportionately affect families with lower incomes. Making use of the voluntary sector to provide affordable or free services at convenient times is one way to overcome this.



## **New Beginnings Programme for Divorced and Separating Families**

The New Beginnings Programme for Divorced and Separating Families works with families where the parents are divorced or separating and the child is between the ages of 3 and 12 years-old..

It supports parents to develop strategies for managing conflict and anger, with the aim of reducing children's exposure to harmful conflict between parents. The programme involves group discussion, skills demonstration videos and roleplay.

Evaluations have shown that parents' participation in the programme leads to positive changes for their children, including reduced behavioural difficulties and better mental health.

# Domestic abuse interventions

## What is it?

Evidence shows that exposure to domestic abuse, such as by witnessing intimate partner violence, can make it more likely for children to later become involved in violence themselves. Domestic abuse interventions aim to prevent and reduce the harm resulting from domestic abuse to adults, and to offer support to any children who might have been exposed to intimate partner abuse. These programmes also help children to understand that domestic abuse isn't their fault.

These programmes can include a wide range of different activities:

- **Advocacy**, which involves providing domestic abuse victims with emotional and social support.
- **Helping parents** to understand the impact that exposure to domestic abuse has on their children.
- **Psychotherapy** to help adults to rebuild their relationship.
- **Practical help** for victims of domestic abuse to access help and support.

These approaches work with parents who are victims of abuse (most often mothers or women who are carers), either one-on-one or with their children. They typically work with families where domestic abuse has already happened.

## What does the evidence say?

These types of programmes can be effective at reducing harm for adults who've experienced domestic abuse and there is some initial evidence that they can help reduce behavioural problems in children. But there's a lot less evidence about whether they can help prevent children from becoming involved in violence in the future. That's why we want to fund some of these programmes through our [A supportive home: helping families to overcome challenges grant round](#).

Initial research has suggested that programmes have been more successful in achieving adult and child outcomes when:

- They work with families with a specific need for support.
- They focused on both the adult victim of abuse and the child, rather than only on adults.

### **Domestic Abuse, Recovering Together (DART)**

Domestic Abuse, Recovering Together (DART) works with mothers and children aged 7 and 14-years old who have experienced or witnessed domestic abuse.

Mothers and children attend weekly, two-hour sessions, over 10 weeks. For the first hour, mothers and children work together and then in the second hour take part in activities in separate groups. At the end of each session, they join together again.

The programme is typically delivered in children's centres or in schools.

An evaluation suggested the programme reduced behavioural difficulties among the children who took part. Mothers also demonstrated greater self-esteem and confidence towards their parenting and reported that they gave more affection to their children.

# Acknowledgements

This briefing is based on an evidence review conducted by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF).

## About EIF

EIF is an independent research charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

For more, visit [www.EIF.org.uk](http://www.EIF.org.uk) .



