

Foróige Tallaght Strengthening Families Evaluation

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'It is aptly named strengthening families, because I think it really strengthened our family and helped us communicate better' – SFP Parent

Abstract

This paper presents findings from an evaluation of the Strengthening Families Programme (12-16 years). Pre and post questionnaires were carried out with 6 parents (female; aged 59-30 years old) and 6 young people (3 female, 3 male; aged 12-16 years). Questionnaires included the following measures: strengths and difficulties questionnaire and children's hope scale for the adolescents and the parent-child relationship scale and parenting scale for the parents. Two focus groups were also carried out, one with the parents (5 female) and one with the adolescents (5 participants; 3 male, 2 female). The findings indicate that for the parents there was a statistically significant increase in the parent-child relationship scale. Furthermore, there were statistically significant decreases occurred across parenting styles of laxness, over-reactivity and parenting scale total. Positive trends were observed for a reduction in hostility, this however did not reach significance. The results of the Children's Hope scale indicate positive trends for an increase in agency, pathways and total children's hope. There were no statistically significant changes in relation to the SDQ measures for the young participants. Decreasing trends were observed on some measures and increasing on other but these were marginal. Qualitative findings indicate that the parents felt they learned a great deal, improved their ability to communicate, improved their relationships with their children use consequences and were supported by their peers in problem solving. They expressed sadness at the ending of the group. The young people also felt that their communication skills and relationships with their parents had improved. This study indicates some corroboration with prior studies in relation to the impact on improved parenting skills.

Introduction

The Strengthening Families Programme was developed in the 1980's by Dr. Karol L. Kumpfer. It is a programme developed to enhance parent-child relationships, reduce risk factors and develop protective factors. It aims to strengthen family's ability to deal with challenges by improving parenting skills, improving family relationships and developing young people's life skills (Hodgson, 2004). The programme is made up of 3 elements; One hour Parent Training Programme held with parents while adolescents engage in Teen's Skills Training Programme. The second hour, the families participate together in a Family Skills Training Programme the entire programme is run over 14 weeks and participants share a meal together before the training commences.

Prior evaluations of SFP have found the programme to be effective in reducing risk factors for later alcohol and drug use, mental health problems and delinquency by increasing family strengths, children's social competencies, and improving parenting skills (Kumpfer et al., 2002).

A Cochrane Collaboration Systematic Review carried out by Foxcroft et al., (2003) highlighted the Strengthening Families Programme 10–14 (SFP 10–14) as one of the most effective interventions for primary prevention of alcohol misuse in young people. Other evaluations of the programme in the USA have demonstrated that it is effective in preventing youth's tobacco, alcohol and illicit drug use (Spath et al., 2004). While a study carried out in Sweden found no significant differences in alcohol, tobacco, illicit drug use and norm-breaking behaviours between the intervention and control groups (Skarstand, 2013). When a search was carried out for strengthening families programme as family support no relevant articles emerged, highlighted the dearth of exploration in this area.

Within the context of this evaluation the degree to which the strengthening families programme contributed to enhanced family support including; parenting skills, parent-child relationships, adolescent strengths and hopefulness were explored. Pinkerton, Dolan & Canavan (2004) define family support as: 'both a style of work and a set of activities; which reinforce positive informal social networks through integrated programmes; combining statutory, voluntary community and private services, primarily focused on early intervention across a range of levels and needs with the aim of promoting and protecting the health, wellbeing and rights of all children and young people in their own homes and communities, with particular attention to those who are vulnerable or at risk' (Canavan & O'Brien, 2005, p21).

Methodology

A mixed method approach was taken in this study including quantitative and qualitative measures. Using a mixed methodology approach enables the researcher protect against bias by triangulating to ensure that they are getting an accurate picture. Cohen et al., (2008, p.14) describes triangulation as 'the use of two or more methods of data collection in the study of some aspect of human behaviour'. This approach he continues 'attempts to map out the richness and complexity of human behaviour by studying it from more than one standpoint'

Sampling

All participants, parents and adolescents, involved in the SFP course were invited to partake in the evaluation, this included 6 families. For the pre and post questionnaires 6 parents (female; aged 59-30 years old) and 7 young people (4 female, 3 male; aged 12-16 years) completed questionnaires. One of the young people's questionnaires was spoiled so left out of the analysis.

For the qualitative aspect of the study, two focus groups were carried out to explore in detail the perception involvement in the programme had on the participants. One focus group was carried out with the parents (5 female) lasting 40 minutes and one with the adolescents (5 participants; 3 male, 2 female) lasting 20 minutes.

Data Collection

Pre-questionnaires were administered to participants by key workers prior to involvement in the programme and post questionnaires were completed at the end of the programme. Questionnaires included the following measures: strengths and difficulties questionnaire (SDQ) and children's hope scale (CHS) for the adolescents and the parent-child relationship scale (PCR) and parenting scale (PS) for the parents.

The two focus groups were carried out on the awards night and recorded. The parent's focus group lasted 40 minutes and the adolescents was 20 minutes.

Analysis

Data was analysed using SPSS statistical software and Nvivo for qualitative analysis. For paired-T tests there were 5 complete sets of data for parents and 5 complete sets of data for young people.

Results

Quantitative Findings

The findings from the study are outlined as follows:

A higher score in the parent-child relationship scale indicates a more positive relationship with the child. The results of this scale indicate that at post-assessment the parent-child relationships were statistically significantly improved from the perspective of the parents. See table 1.

Table 1. Paired T Test Results of Parent-Child Relationship Scale

Time	Parent Child Relationship Scale
1 (n=5)	17.20
2 (n=5)	19.80
Significance	.049*

*P<.05 significant

Statistically significant decreases occurred across laxness, over-reactivity and parenting scale total. Positive trends were observed for a reduction in hostility, this did not reach significance. See table 2.

Table 2. Paired T Test Results of Parenting Scale

Time	Laxness	Over-reactivity	Hostility	Parenting Total
1 (n=5)	4.240	4.200	2.400	3.826
2 (n=5)	3.040	3.360	1.866	3.120
Significance	.050*	.036*	.317	.047*

*P<.05 significant

There were no statistically significant changes in relation to the SDQ measures. Decreasing trends were observed across hyperactivity as well as an increased trend in pro-social behaviour. Emotional symptoms and total SDQ demonstrated an increased trend, while conduct problem score and peer problems remained unchanged. See table 3.

With regard to how these compare to the authors categorization, emotional score of 4 is in the slightly raised category, which is where the participant's score remained. For hyperactivity symptom a score of 0-5 is in the close to average category, which they were after the intervention. For conduct problems a score of 0-3 is in the close to average category, which they maintained. For peer problems a score of 0-2 is close to average, this score remained the same. Pro-social behaviour moved from 7 slightly raised to closer to an average score of 8. Total SDQ score includes all measures except pro-social behaviour. A total SDQ

score of 0-14 is considered close to average and 15-17 is slightly raised.

Table 3: Paired-T Test Results of SDQ for Young People

Time	Emotional Symptom Score	Hyperactivity Symptom Score	Conduct Problem Score	Peer Problem Score	Pro-social Behaviour	Total SDQ
1 (n=5)	4.00	5.40	3.00	2.40	7.00	14.80
2 (n=5)	4.60	5.00	3.00	2.40	7.60	15.00
Significance	.468	.621	1.00	1.00	.501	.936

*P<.05 significant

The results of the Children’s Hope scale indicate positive trends for an increase in agency, pathways and total children’s hope, however no statistical significance was observed. See table 4.

Table 4: Paired-T test Results of Children’s Hope Scale

Time	Agency	Pathway	Total Child Hope
1 (n=5)	9.00	8.00	17.00
2 (n=5)	9.40	8.40	17.80
Significance	.477	.374	.338

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings indicate that the programme was very well received with a number of interesting themes emerging.

‘The course was fun, the kids were having fun and we were having fun. I’m going to miss it’ – P5

Communication Skills

Communication was mentioned as the biggest impact that the programme had. The parents felt that it they were better able to communicate with their children and other people in their lives. For some they mentioned that it was the first time they were ever really clear themselves and didn’t know how to be.

‘I would never really communicate with adults and not even properly with my child... they taught us how to communicate with them, before with was a big

effort and a screaming match and now it we just talk and go back and apologise. It definitely works' – P2.

Some parents really felt that it really enabled them to listen to their children so that they could understand where they were coming from. They also realised it wasn't always their children who were in the wrong, that sometimes they were too. 'Instead of shouting "get out", you are saying "I feel..." so it is all about communication and listening' – P4

For the young people they also felt that they found it easier to communicate with their parents about things. 'I've got more confidence in myself and its easier for me to communicate than before' – YP3

Peer Support & Solidarity

The parents expressing a sense of relief that they didn't feel on their own, that there were others in the same situation that they could share their challenges with and learn from. They mentioned really enjoying the company of others, and felt they got lots of tips from each other on how to deal with the various challenges that came up. For the parents there was a sense of support from other parents and the facilitators. They felt supported in dealing with the challenges that they face in everyday life. The parents felt that they were sending a message to their children that 'we want our relationship with our children to work, that we are with them we are not against them' – P1

'When I didn't come to this course, I was like a ranging lunatic, I didn't know what to do with a teenager, you think you are a teenager too sometimes, then you realise right I am the adult here and these are the steps I need to take with the help of the group' – P5

Learning Skills

They liked getting feedback on what they were doing as they felt that this strengthened their ability to follow through particularly when they saw that other people could do it. They then felt their confidence increased.

Relationships Improved

They enjoyed coming back and meeting with their kids during the programme and felt that this developed the bond between them. It meant that the young people were on the same page as them and knew what was happening. They also said it made it easier to build the relationship and practice the new skills they were learning. They felt that the time helped to build their relationship as well as having the ability and maturity to apologise first. Something they didn't always do beforehand. 'It feels better when you do apologise' –P3.

Another parent felt that the programme help her open up to her husband more and improved their relationship, something she was very happy about. As well as this one participant felt that she adopted family values from others in the group that she didn't have before and thought this improved her family relationships.

Respect

For other parents they felt the programme helped them to encourage their children to respect what other people have to say. 'You are entitled to your opinion and to express your opinion but you have to respect other people's opinion if you like it or not' – P4.

More Time

The parents felt they would have liked it to have lasted longer, some felt that they were only getting to grips with some of the ideas and implementing them now but would like the support of the group to maintain the positive steps they have made. There was a sense of nervousness at not having the group to come and share their challenges after the final week would be over. The participants suggested either having the course longer or having refresher courses for them to link into. They felt they needed more information as their children continue to grow and change. Participants wanted to make sure they could keep the momentum going and knew that other challenges were going to come and wanted as much support as possible to do the best they could.

Gratitude & Trust

One parent was really touched by the fact that her daughter was grateful for what she did for her, she said 'I appreciate you doing that mammy' and continued with 'all the stuff I've been doing for her and she never recognised it and now she does and knows the importance of rewards and we are both acknowledging the good that each of us are doing' – P1.

For another parent she commented that the programme had helped to build trust in their relationship. 'Myself and my son had real trust issues, we passed each other by in the house and now it's great' – P3

Child Behaviour Change

The parents felt that their children were calmer and better able to communicate. Each parent said that their child, as well as themselves were able to acknowledge when they are wrong and are willing to apologise.

One young person highlighted that it taught him to restrain his anger and find the positive in what was happening. 'I can control my anger better now and I can see other ways of dealing with stuff' – YP5

Parents Behaviour Change

The parents talked about finding it easier to parent their children. Even having the option of walking away. All the young people felt that their parents had improved over the course of the programme. One participant said 'they were better at rewarding us, better at understanding us and they were better at controlling us, but in a good way'-YP1.

Another said that overall their communication with their parent had improved. 'I have a better relationship with my mam, I don't live with my ma but we used to only spend 20 minutes on the phone now I could spend 2 hours'- YP2

For the parents who are living with their parents they felt that their own parents could see the benefit of being involved in the programme.

Diffused Arguments

One parent talked through an incident with their child in a fast food outlet where her daughter wanted too many things which they didn't have the money for. She said that 'typically my daughter would have a tantrum when she could only have one thing, then I sat down, remained calm and looked at a newspaper. After a while my daughter came over and said "that wasn't really good behaviour, I'm sorry" - P1. The parent talked about how delighted and amazed she was that 'we handled it together'. She felt that was a really positive experience for both of them.

Consequences

The parents really liked that the consequences were used instead of punishments. However they did find it difficult to follow through on. Particularly, as many mentioned growing up in families where there were no boundaries, so they were learning them for the first time. One parent also described that as her relationship with her children's father had broken down that she felt guilty over that and would find herself giving in a lot. This process she felt was helping her to put boundaries on her relationship and get the most out of her kids.

Drugs and Alcohol Talk

Most of the parents reported that their children didn't attend the drugs and alcohol talk. They wouldn't have noticed any particular change in relation to drugs/alcohol. They reported that mostly they were against smoking, drugs and alcohol and that it wasn't a particular issue. One parent highlighted that it did give their child a chance to decide whether that was a choice they wanted to make for themselves 'It made her think, does she want to go down that road?, she realises that she has a choice'-P1. *The focus of this evaluation wasn't to assess how the programme impacts drug and alcohol use, more to assess its impact in relation to family support.*

Social Skills

The parents commented that their children seemed to get on well with the other participants in the adolescent group. They noticed that their children were more social, voiced their opinion and less shy than they were before. One parent felt that her child's belief in herself improved, that she 'came out of her shell'-P3.

Another parent described how their child was better at engaging with others and more in control. 'He would throw himself on the ground for 2 hours and have a meltdown, and I would be like, what's wrong with him, but he seems a lot calmer and actually loves coming here, now he gets on with others'-P3

Perspective

Overall the parents felt like it gave both them and their children a different perspective so that they could see other ways of dealing with things. 'It gives us a break, and gives them a break so they can share what they are going through so they don't feel that they are the only ones going through this. He doesn't feel like he's alone and realises he's not always getting into trouble either that others are too. He realises that me ma doesn't just nag at me' -P2

Solving Problems

Most of the parents felt that the programme helped them to get perspective on their problems and helped with giving them as a family strategies to deal with challenges as they arose. One parent highlighted that her son would also try to solve problems with his grandparents but she was trying to encourage him to leave them figure it out for themselves and not get involved.

Programme Content

For the parents they felt that the role-plays were very realistic, which really helped them to come up with new ways of dealing with challenges. While the young people liked the group work they did with their peers, one suggested that they could have gone into more detail that some of it was a bit simple. Some participants wanted more games. Overall they enjoyed the content of the programme highlighting that the best things that arose again and again were the improvement in communication, the ability to follow through with consequences, the space for my time and the family dinner. They felt that they would maintain these four elements over the coming months and were really appreciative of the impact the programme had in their lives. The participants (parents and children) both complemented the bus and were very appreciative of the fact that it was taken care of for them. The young people liked the programme, mostly making new friends, the dinner together, the staff and that they had fun.

Improvements

When asked if there were aspects they would like improved there was very little. They all felt that the family meetings were too formal. The formalness of the family meeting didn't seem to work for the participants particularly as it

required a chairperson and it was one of the first things that got dropped. Also the complexity of some of their living situations e.g. living with parents and siblings meant that having an entire family meeting might be too awkward and have too many opinions.

The parents and young people also didn't like was the name 'My time' they felt it was a 'bit icky' [P4] and 'cringe' [P2 & YP1] at the start. If the name was changed then perhaps everyone would find it easier. They did however really like the 'My time' element to the programme.

Challenges

Overall the parents were very happy with the programme with the only major request to have the course longer. For the young people they felt that the programme went on too long for them and they didn't like that it was on a Tuesday. Some young people would have preferred it to have been at the weekend as they were tired after school. However, for others they wanted to be with their family, so during the week worked best. Some of the parents also felt that the time of the evening was a challenge as their kids were just in from school and they had to go out straight away to get there on time.

Some of the young people said it was hard when not everyone showed up for the group. They also said that it might be better to break the group into boys and girls instead of age group separation of having 10-12's separated from 12 plus.

Recommend the course

All the parents in the focus group agreed that they would recommend the programme to other parents. One parent said she had already recommended it to 4 friends. Two others said they would actually like to come back and do it again.

The young people said they would recommend the programme, particularly if they had challenges with their families. Other participants thought that it looked like their families were doing ok so might not need it.

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the strengthening families programme facilitates a gap in education and confidence that parents have in parenting their children. While the sample size is small the findings from the parent's perspective indicate that there are statistically significant improvements in parenting style and parent-child relationship. These findings corroborate other evaluations which have indicated significant improvements in parenting skills (Kumpfer et al., 2002).

A number of independent evaluations carried out in Ireland however have yet to corroborate improvement in outcomes for the young participants (Sixsmith, 2011). This may be due to the size of the study, the measures used or indeed the content of the programme itself. It may also be the variation in pre-test/post-

test used in Ireland versus the retrospective pre-test/post-test used in Kumpfer evaluations. Something that the Swedish study also experienced (Skarstand et al., 2013). This highlights the need for further investigation in the context of Ireland, which may highlight a need for further adaptation of the content to yield greater improvements in child behaviour, perception and outcome.

Recent work has begun to incorporate mindfulness techniques to enhance the strengthening families programme (Coatsworth, et al., 2015). They carried out a large RCT including 432 families found that Mindfulness-Enhanced-SFP was as effective as SFP in improving a number of dimensions. They also found that in some areas MSFP boosted and better sustained the effects of SFP, especially for fathers. This study provides intriguing evidence for the contribution of mindfulness activities to parent training.

Finally, there appears to be a distinct lack of longitudinal research into the effectiveness of the strengthening programme which also needs to be addressed. Each year significant sums of money are spent on the Strengthening Families Programme in Ireland, without the relevant evidence to indicate that the programme is having an impact in the long term for example at 6 month and 1 year follow-up it may prove difficult to continue to sustain such funding. As such it is recommended that a large scale evaluation of the strengthening families programme take place that includes a longitudinal element.

Recommendations

1. Set up an SFP alumni group that could be parent led focusing on a different topic each evening and strategies to support ongoing implementation. It is clear that for the parents of this programme they got immense value from the parent interaction, comfort of knowing others were experiencing the same thing and could benefit from ongoing support to maintain and grow their ability to parent their teens.
2. Simplify the language in some areas e.g. my time was a strange name and jarred with them. Potentially call it our time or seek suggestions for a more fun or engaging term.
3. Change the name and structure of the family meeting. Perhaps call it a family chat and focus on two things. 1) What's going well, 2) what can we improve?

Conclusion

The study concludes that there is evidence to suggest that the programme has a positive impact on parent-child relationship and parenting skills which were corroborated by the qualitative findings. While positive trends in improvements were observed for the young people, these did not reach statistical significance. The small numbers in the study require interpretation of the findings with caution. A larger scale study incorporating a number of centres running the SFP is required to ensure that it is adequately responding to the needs of families,

particularly young people. It is positive that the parent's skills improve significantly and their qualitative narrative backs this up, however the degree to which the programme has a measurable effect on the young participants largely remains unknown and requires further investigation.

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