Finnovative approach.

Parenting

Linda Hoggan

"Just what we need"

For week nine of our programme for parents, we had asked everyone to bring in something that was meaningful to them. One person brought in photos of her children, another a necklace given to her by her mother, another a set of dolls. Then, encouraged and supported by the others in the group, one parent nervously removed from a bag a neatly folded pair of jeans, which her late father had been wearing when he died. This was the first time she had been able to look at them and she found in the pockets some touching and forgotten personal reminders of his everyday life, including a poem to herself and her sister, which she asked one of us to read aloud to the group.

It was a highly emotional moment and signified just how much trust and connection had been built up among this group of parents, many of whom had never given such support or experienced such acceptance in their lives before.

Although our groups are open to any parent, when we devised our “Just What We Need” programme we were particularly mindful of those who need, want or are told to get help but don’t feel comfortable about joining other parenting groups. We were aware that some parents are resistant to attending parenting courses and attaining the skills that they want or know they need; or they do go, but drop out soon after the start. For instance, many parents who have ‘attendance at parenting courses’ identified as part of a child protection plan’ still find it difficult to attend, even though they care very much about their children.

From talking to parents, we know that resistance to group attendance operates at many levels: some have never been a member of any kind of group, so they can’t imagine what will happen and the prospect is unsettling or scary. Some see courses as enforced education and they don’t ‘do’ education. Some have very low self-esteem, and so are usually terrified that they will be judged and that whatever they have been doing as parents will be seen as wrong; even being given ‘techniques’ to help manage children’s behaviour (which is what most parenting courses do) can sometimes seem like a criticism. And, while skills such as listening, encouraging young children with praise, playing with them and setting boundaries are hugely important, they are hard to carry out if you have never known what it is like to be listened to, to receive praise or any other positive attention, and you don’t even know how to set boundaries around yourself. It is even harder to put new behaviour plans into action when too many of your own needs are not being met. In our experience, parents are sometimes unable to make good use of other parenting programmes due to their own overwhelming needs and heightened levels of emotional arousal. Good intentions soon vanish if there is little emotional capacity to spare.

Back to basics

It was only after studying the human givens approach that we realised that, if we wanted to be able to reach all parents and enable them to build the confidence to take part in other programmes, we needed to go back to basics – in other words, use the human givens as our framework. Our aim was to raise participants’ awareness of emotional needs, to help them realise that maybe they were getting many of these met in unhealthy or negative ways (sometimes, even through their children), and to discover how to meet them in positive ways instead. Through doing so, we hoped also to raise their awareness of their children’s needs, and how these could be better met. As we know, unless we recognise and can meet our own needs adequately, it is very hard to recognise and help meet those of others. Tellingly, many of our parents expressed complete amazement that their children had the same emotional needs as they themselves did.

It felt very important to us that what we devised should not be a ‘parenting programme’ – the very words may convey to highly anxious, self-critical parents that they are inadequate – but a ‘programme for parents’. Ivan Tyrrell, principal of MindFields College, suggested we describe each individual group as a ‘parent pod’ – the term originating from the small, close social groups that dolphins live within. Within each parent pod, we offer a therapeutic approach to parenting, based around universal human needs.

The programme itself is called “Just What We Need” Programme for Parents and it focuses on a different need each week, making it relevant and meaningful for anyone experiencing emotional distress. It helps parents to understand what their emotional needs are and to identify their unmet needs and their strengths and skills – their resources. The aim is for them to get their emotional needs met through participation in the group, in addition to learning new ways of perceiving difficulties and challenges, and identifying and setting their own goals for change.

We structured the programme in line with the
Building rapport

We knew that, in order to engage parents in the programme, we needed to spend time building trust through rapport before it had even begun. Given some parents’ resistance to the idea of attending courses, we couldn’t just put out flyers about the programme and expect that parents would turn up. We planned to hold our first programme (comprising 12 three-hour morning sessions once a week, for a maximum of 12 people) in a children’s centre, attached to a local primary school, so we chatted to mums in the playground, gave out leaflets and encouraged them to come to an introductory session – no commitment required.

At this session, we explained emotional needs and, for those interested in the programme, arranged to make home visits, to carry out an emotional needs audit (a sheet on which people scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high) how well needs such as those for security, attention, connection, status and achievement are being met in their lives). People who were reluctant even to attend the introductory session were, however, happy for us to visit them at home to carry out the audit. This was a highly successful way of starting to build rapport. Being in their own homes helped people relax and also gave us an opportunity to meet them in their own environment, and, often to observe how they related with partners and children. For those uncomfortable with too much eye contact (which can often feel threatening) sitting side by side, focusing on the audit, removed this pressure, yet still enabled us to start building a relationship. The audit also helps us start some valuable information gathering. Many parents have told us that it was the home visit that persuaded them to take the plunge and attend the programme; because they already knew us and we them, on their arrival they don’t find the situation so daunting. So far our participants have been mostly female, but we hope to encourage more men, particularly by running an evening course.

We continue to work on building trust and a meaningful relationship by making support phone calls to participants throughout the programme.

We create a relaxed, safe and welcoming environment, as unlike a classroom as possible, setting the chairs out in a circle and sitting in amongst everyone as part of the group ourselves. To whet curiosity and provide something to focus on, we put on everyone’s seat an intriguing picture that relates to the need we are focusing on in that session (see example below, left). This soon sets up a positive expectation. Although we provide pens and folders and sheets of paper for reflections, we make it clear that people don’t have to write anything down, unless they choose to, to avoid raising anxiety around their literacy abilities, and taking account of different learning needs.

Concrete and colourful

As a very useful piece of information gathering, we ask everyone at the start of each session to complete a wellbeing scale from 0–10. One week a cartoon image of dark clouds signifies a 0 and a bright sun a 10, with all permutations in between; another week we have a picture of a beaker, marked full, at the top, and empty, at the bottom; on another, we have a set of steps. We always model what we do, so one of us might say, “I’m a 6 this morning because I was looking forward to seeing you all again today but I had a disturbed sleep”. Completing the scale is a useful way of showing just easily our moods can be changed by external events (“I would have been a 7 but, after the way that ***** bus driver spoke to me, I’m a 4!”) and that we can take responsibility for seeing things differently (taking another perspective) and for letting such feelings go, once we know how to.

We wanted to make the ideas we were sharing concrete and highly visual. So, in our first session, as a means of understanding the concept of the human givens, the group compiles an outline of a person using jigsaw pieces, each representing a need and a resource. As we go through and discuss each – what they are, what happens when...
we don’t get them met, etc – we fit them together with Blu-Tack. Eventually we have a complete figure of a person (see right).

To convey the idea of innate human resources, we literally provide a toolbox, out of which we take our ‘tools’. For empathy skills, we use a pair of slippers to demonstrate stepping into someone else’s shoes; to introduce the idea of pattern matching, we show three different styles of dolls’ chairs, to explain how, once we experience something, we don’t need an exact match to recognise it again – and how mistakes can sometimes occur, as a result of a mismatch. For positive and negative use of the imagination, we make use of two pictures of islands – one sunny and calm, the other being menacingly circled by a shark. A miniature flushing toilet helps explain the role of dreams in discharging unexpressed emotional arousal, allowing us to start afresh each day. We explore the observing self in a practical way, by looking at it from the point of view of common shared experiences: “Think about the last time you lost your temper and suddenly found yourself thinking, ‘Why am I behaving like this?’” Parents relate to this, and the understanding can then be built on.

Parents also quickly come to understand how emotional arousal swamps the brain’s ability to think; we use the metaphor of a beach ball floating on the sea, the part in the water representing the emotional brain and the part above representing the thinking brain. The more pressure put on the ‘ball’ to push it down into the water, the more overwhelmed and emotional and less rational we become. And then when we let go – whoosh, explosion!

Seeking an overarching metaphor for the idea of getting needs met through positive use of our innate resources, we chose a ‘tree of nurturing’, which, in turn, sparked off an idea for illustrating the power of setting and achieving goals. For our tree, we put a single bare branch in a pot. Each session we give everyone a small coloured paper shape (on the first week, a leaf, later a blossom, a flower, a ladybird, and so on) on which we invite them to write a goal to achieve in the following week. Each leaf-goal is attached to the branch. At the end of the programme, our tree has blossomed with 150 colourful shapes, a powerful metaphor for how each individual and the group as a whole has flourished (see picture on page 33). To reinforce the idea of nurturing and needs in the first week, we also give everyone a small plant. Some people choose to make looking after it their goal for the week; we also give everyone a small paper tree, we put a single bare branch in a pot. Each session we give everyone a small coloured paper shape (on the first week, a leaf, later a blossom, a flower, a ladybird, and so on) on which we invite them to write a goal to achieve in the following week. Each leaf-goal is attached to the branch. At the end of the programme, our tree has blossomed with 150 colourful shapes, a powerful metaphor for how each individual and the group as a whole has flourished (see picture on page 33). To reinforce the idea of nurturing and needs in the first week, we also give everyone a small plant. Some people choose to make looking after it their goal for the week. Relaxation and story time

Sessions are structured to provide short slots of information giving, of around 15 minutes or less, broken up by simple ‘energisers’, such as a getting-to-know-you exercise, where participants throw a soft ball to each other around the group, whilst saying one another’s names, or activities in which people are encouraged to explore their understanding of the need under discussion. Initially the exercises are carried out in pairs, with the person sitting next to them, as this feels less exposing for many people. We never ask people to pick partners, as we know from long past experience that doing so can create instant anxiety – who should I choose and will anyone want to choose me? (This, in itself, can be enough to deter some from returning to a group.) We ensure they mix, however, by giving out different coloured cards, stones or sweets and asking everyone with a red or a blue or a yellow sweet or stone to work together.

Relaxation and story time

Relaxation has to be approached extremely carefully – we suggest people focus on one of their hands or a ring if they don’t feel comfortable enough to close their eyes. In the first week, the aim is only to enable people to experience being still for a few minutes (even that is a huge challenge for some) and to become aware of their bodies and the rhythm of their breathing. The next week we introduce 7/11 breathing (the simple method of breathing in to a count of 7 and out to a count of 11, to ensure relaxation by making the outbreak longer than the in-breath). Then gradually we introduce visualisation exercises, starting with visualising one’s own front door and progressing to rehearsing goals and accessing positive resources through guided visualisations. We follow up with a story related to that day’s need. For instance, at the first session on needs and resources, we tell a story about ‘inner gardens’, full of flowers, weeds or both, which we inherit from our parents, and how we have to do some inner gardening to enable us to pass on flower-filled gardens to our children. From the second week onwards, we start sessions by recapping what we did the previous time
and seeking feedback on any changes, thoughts, or experiences and how people had got on with their goals. At the second session in our first programme, one woman told us that her goal had been to go into a friendly looking café that she passed every day while taking her children to school. Lovely food smells always wafted out and she wanted to go in and have breakfast there but felt she would be judged for being by herself. She didn’t pluck up the courage until the day before our next session, when, to keep her commitment to the group, she felt she just had to do it. She went inside and, to her pleasure, was immediately greeted by someone she knew. She ordered breakfast, found she was comfortable about sitting and eating alone and reported this with triumph: she had taken control.

**Goal setting**

We introduce the goal-setting session by asking people to think of anything, big or small, that they would like to change about their behaviour and then discuss it with another person. What would they need to do to achieve it? Could they do it in one go? Or would the goal need to be broken down into more manageable chunks? What might be a barrier to achievement (for instance, getting round the supermarket without giving in to children’s tantrums for sweets)? How could they anticipate how to handle that? We talk about ‘PANTS’ – the need to make goals positive, achievable, need-oriented, timed and specific – and illustrate it with a picture of a pair of boxer shorts. The concept has to be repeatedly reinforced. Sometimes parents set a goal that requires a drastic change in their own or their children’s behaviour. This provides the opportunity to discuss the fact that too sudden, or unrealistic, changes or expectations are unlikely to be successful. Small changes enable parents and children to experience success.

**Need by need**

Security is the first need to which we devote a whole session. Participants realise that it means many things, from feeling safe at home to not being bullied to having enough money. We also work on our perceptions of security in unsafe neighbourhoods. Hearing a noise outside may feel threatening but is not the same as being threatened. Sometimes the fear is greater than the reality and, if we wrap ourselves and our children in cotton wool, we don’t learn valuable strategies for coping. Conversely, reckless behaviour that seems to result from not caring about one’s own safety may emanate from a feeling that no one else cares about our safety. It is illuminating for the parents present to think about this in relation to their own feelings and behaviour and it leads into a discussion about boundaries and consistent behaviour in parenting children.

Because our aim is to raise awareness of the impact of met and unmet emotional needs, and we introduce this as new information, people are less likely to feel criticised for what they don’t know. For instance, in our session on attention, people work in pairs, one trying to tell the other something while the other fiddles with her phone or blatantly isn’t listening. Of course, they experience not being listened to as unpleasant but, even though they felt angry whenever that had happened to them in the past, they might not previously have been able to identify that giving attention means stopping what you are doing and looking at someone. “Oh, I feel guilty now,” someone usually says, thinking about how they also ignore their children. We reassure them that it is not about blame and that awareness creates the opportunity to choose to do things differently in the future. (At the attention session, we give everyone a little jar of hand cream, so that they can also give good attention to themselves. Small gifts of this kind are always received with much enjoyment.)

Focusing on needs enables us to cover an enormous amount of territory, without the group feeling that they are being told how to parent. For instance, when we look at control, not only do we encourage participants to consider whether they and the people in their lives have too much or too little control, and the impact of that, but we also discuss parenting styles in terms of control and look at the fears behind them (“If I don’t come down on him really hard, he will be out of control”; “If I am too hard, he won’t love me”), which then leads into considering another option – negotiation, consistency and clear boundaries.

In session six, by which time we have gelled very well as a group, we explore emotional connection, friendship and fun by going on a community outing (using The Energizer Bus, provided by the council – see page 34). Participants are encouraged to suggest a number of places to visit;
one group chose the Peace Temple in Milton Keynes, which it would never have occurred to some to visit before, and then to go for coffee and cakes to a self-sufficiency café, run by people with learning disabilities. This was challenging on more than one level – some of the group members were anxious about how they themselves would react; in fact, they learned a lot about the universality of emotional needs, and some declared they would bring their own children there. This experience showed parents that they could pattern match to their environment and yet choose to respond differently from their previous way.

**Locking the door**

Some needs provoke particularly lively discussion. For instance, a variety of views are expressed, in session seven, on how much privacy we and our children need: when it’s appropriate for a child to lock the bathroom door, to open their own mail, to go on computer sites unsupervised, to go to the doctor on their own, etc. Sometimes people become aware of how their own past experiences may inappropriately be colouring their current beliefs – for instance, someone who became pregnant as a very young teenager may be overprotective and over-controlling of her teenage daughter’s freedoms. At that session, we give out candles, as a gift to symbolise the need for calm and privacy.

To investigate connection to the wider community, we create a group collage in session eight, to encourage parents to explore what exists in their community and identify any barriers to taking advantage of it or making new things happen. As a result, in one of our groups, three parents successfully set up a football group for children on their estate; individually, they would not have been confident enough to do this.

After looking at meaning and purpose in week nine, as described at the start, we move, in our next session, on to status, and this is also particularly thought provoking. The aim is to help people see that we do not have fixed roles. The picture on each parent’s seat that week is of a tiger who had lost her own newborn cubs suckling orphaned piglets wrapped in the skins of her own cubs, reinforcing that status is about recognising and celebrating strengths and abilities – and not about the big house and the big car.

And people do genuinely come to see that the big house and the big car don’t necessarily mean that the owner has it sorted. Sometimes, as they can see for themselves, people who are highly articulate and have an enviable home, car and job emotionally have few riches at all. One activity that week is for parents to decorate a T-shirt shape so as to reflect, on the front, how they see themselves and, on the back, how they think others see them. There are no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ ways of doing this. We encourage parents to focus on positive attributes, and use reframing where people find this difficult. Some examples include caring, friendly, loving, approachable (on the front) and good friend, honest, reliable, shy and capable (on the back).

In another much enjoyed activity, everyone has a pot containing 12 beads of one colour (each different from anyone else’s) and a thread to make a bracelet. People have to move around the group, recognising and feeding back a strength in each other and offering a bead (“I give you a bead because you are good at listening”). By the end of the activity, everyone has a bracelet made up of 12 differently coloured beads. With people who are often unused to receiving compliments, this provides a powerful means of getting positive statements to ‘stick’; the embarrassment of receiving ‘strokes’ is counter-balanced by the concentration on the bead exchange.

**Human bingo**

The last need covered is competence and achievement. At some time during the previous week, we take time to talk to everyone, asking about skills and achievements, big or small, such as the ability to swim or dance or cook, speak another language, sing in a choir, win a race, show more confidence or, in one case, end a family rift, which are not common knowledge in the group. From these we create a ‘human bingo’, putting these personal traits on a grid instead of numbers. Everyone than asks questions about each other’s competencies, strengths and achievements in order to complete it – another opportunity for communication and connection and a great way to focus...
on the range of abilities we all have and which are often overlooked or dismissed as unimportant.

Celebration, evaluation and plans for the future are the focus of our 12th and final session. (We always arrange reunions and many parents keep their new friendships going.) This time the wellbeing scale is completed in a physical form—we put 10 paper plates on the floor and people are asked to initial the plate that denoted where they were at the start of the programme and where they are now. There is a strong surge towards the high-numbered plates, a physical movement which reinforces, in a literal way, the enormous emotional strides they have made. All have at least doubled their original sense of wellbeing by the end of the programme. It is an emotional moment. But we say, "This isn’t magic. You don’t need to come here to experience this wellbeing. You now know how to create it for yourselves, using your toolbox of skills and resources." The emotional knowledge they go away with is more adaptable and of much wider applicability than just knowing how to manage their children.

No drop outs

What has confirmed for us the value of this programme is the marked lack of people who fail to complete it. Drop-out rate can be high on some parenting programmes. Although occasionally someone fails to show up at the start, we have never yet had anyone drop out once the group was established.

At the end of the programme, not only have participants gained a greater understanding about their children’s needs and behaviour, but they themselves feel nurtured, understood and not judged. Our programme can be a stepping stone (some choose to go on to take the type of parenting course that they would have struggled with before) or it can successfully be an end in itself. Significantly, it seems to mean a great deal to those who participate. One parent proudly put up on her bedroom walls her certificate of completion and the pictures we had provided that illustrated needs. Another mother said, “This is the first time I’ve ever come to a group and not felt awkward.” And although there is no pressure or expectation for people to ‘self-disclose’, another told us half way through, “This should be called a therapy group. This has done more for me in five weeks than two years of counselling!”

Our thanks to Kevin McDonagh, parent support worker, and Lisa Hales, educational psychologist, both from Milton Keynes Behaviour and Education Support Team, for working with us on developing and delivering this programme.

From September, Linda Hoggan and Carmen Kane will be running a four-day training course, through MindFields College, for human givens practitioners who would like to deliver this programme. Please contact MindFields College on 01323 816590 for more information.