

Poverty

Evaluation of the 'You First' programme for young parents

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You First was developed by Barnardo's and funded by the Scottish Government. It targets vulnerable parents aged 21 and under, with a child under the age of one, who live in the 15% most deprived areas in Scotland. It aims to provide a boost for young, first time parents by increasing the support that they receive from their peers, the community and existing local services. The evaluation explored the benefits of the You First programme and the ways in which these could be maximised through effective delivery. This document presents the main research findings, and focuses on the key factors for policy and practice to consider in order to maximise the effectiveness of future schemes of a similar nature.

Main Findings

- You First showed potential as all parents who completed it appeared to have benefitted in some way. The three most widespread benefits were: the development of a social network; increased confidence; and greater interaction between parents and their babies.
- You First was successful in attracting parents previously defined as 'hard to reach'. This stemmed from three main features of the referral process:
 - parents were given the choice to attend You First: it was not mandatory
 - You First was open to those aged 21 and under, meaning that parents were not intimidated by the prospect of attending a group with older parents
 - a cohort of parents started the group sessions at the same time. This helped them feel less nervous about attending the first session.
- You First created a supportive and caring atmosphere that was greatly appreciated by parents. This was achieved through:
 - the high level of encouragement and reassurance parents received from the You First facilitators
 - focusing on what parents were interested in and not just what they 'should' be doing
 - peer support from other parents at the group.

- Overall, the delivery of You First worked well, but was more successful in some areas of learning than others. The methods of learning that seemed most effective were:
 - those involving practical skills and active engagement in a subject
 - those that did not involve too much paper work
 - explaining to parents the benefits of doing something rather than simply telling them that they should do it.
- The programme tried to encourage parents to plan for the future in three main areas:
 - finding services to arrange childcare and providing short-term financial support to aid the transition back to work
 - seeing education in a more positive light and thinking about gaining qualifications
 - identifying other local groups for parents to attend after You First.

Introduction

In its Early Years Framework, the Scottish Government committed to addressing the inequalities faced by children and their families. One way in which it aims to achieve this is through a greater focus on early intervention schemes for those who are most vulnerable.

One such scheme is You First, an early intervention initiative designed by Barnardo's Scotland, which offers short-term support to first time parents. The Scottish Government provided funding for a pilot of You First to be delivered by Barnardo's Scotland in East Lothian, Midlothian and West Lothian in three phases during 2010/2011.

Programme details

In the pilot stage, You First was intended for first time parents who were aged 21 or under, had a child of less than one year and lived in the 15% most deprived areas of Scotland. The parents were identified and informed about You First by their health visitors¹. If they were interested in attending, a You First facilitator would visit them at home to discuss it further.

During the pilot, 9 cohorts were recruited and each group ran over 20 weeks. A total of 77 parents were involved in the programme, 52 of whom completed it². Each group ran once a week for 16 weeks and individual home visits took place at the beginning and end. Each group session ran from 10.30am until 3.30pm. The day comprised both parent only activities (a crèche was provided for this portion of the day) and parent and child activities. A person-centred approach was taken to the delivery which, among other things, meant that the parents

¹ Throughout this paper, the term 'health visitors' is used to refer to Public Health Nurses. This reflects the terminology used by evaluation participants.

² We have defined 'completing the programme' as attending at least one of the last two sessions.

could choose what topics and activities were covered. All parents received £5 per week towards travel expenses and, in 7 of the 9 programmes, a financial incentive of £20 per week. Parents also completed an SCQF Level 4 qualification, the Youth Achievement Award.

Methodology

The evaluation used a mixed methods approach but mainly comprised qualitative research with You First participants, professionals involved in the delivery of You First and local stakeholders.

Overview

You First showed positive signs of helping the parents who attended. Sixty-eight per cent of those who started You First completed it. They all appeared to have benefited in some way, at least saying that they had learnt something to some degree, and were pleased that they had attended.

You First parents benefited to differing extents. The three most widespread benefits were: the development of a social network, increased confidence and greater interaction between parents and their babies. In addition to these, You First also delivered benefits that had a big impact on just a few of the parents (e.g. raising educational aspirations) and smaller benefits that many parents found useful and informative (e.g. home safety).

The design and approach of You First were key in delivering the above benefits. The sections below outline the different features that contributed to this and indicate areas in which further improvements could be made.

Attracting 'hard to reach' parents

Lack of engagement with support services was one of the main drivers behind Barnardo's decision to develop an initiative specifically targeted at vulnerable young parents.

You First was successful in attracting and, to some extent, retaining parents. Several features of the referral process helped to achieve this.

Health visitors

Using health visitors as the main source of referrals appeared to be the most practical method. They were well placed to identify the most appropriate areas in which to run You First programmes and already had established relationships with the eligible parents. There was a consensus among the professionals involved that the parents did need this type of support.

Offering an optional service

Another important feature of the referral process was the opt-in nature of You First which established that this was a strength-based programme; parents did not feel they were being approached because they were doing something wrong

or were a 'bad' parent. Instead it aimed to help them develop their strengths, identify areas that they wanted to build on (whether parenting skills or wider life skills) and provide them with the tools to do so.

Targeting young parents

You First parents frequently referred to their reluctance to attend groups for fear of being judged or looked down on, especially by older parents. The age range of You First was therefore vital in securing attendance. Some parents reported that they would simply not have attended if they thought that older parents would be there. Indeed, meeting parents of their own age was one of the factors which they found most appealing.

Professionals sometimes have concerns that targeting services can lead to a feeling of stigmatisation among service users. However, there was no evidence to suggest that any of the You First parents felt stigmatised by the age range of the group. This may be because the referrals were carried out on a locality basis (i.e. once an appropriate area was selected, parents who were of the right age and had a child under one were asked if they wanted to attend).

The cohort approach

Parents were also attracted to the fact that the group was run as a cohort. Almost all reported that they were nervous about attending the first session. However, they felt less nervous knowing that everyone would be starting at the same time. Some said that they would not have attended an existing group where everybody else already knew each other.

The financial incentive

In terms of recruitment, it appeared that the financial incentive was an 'added bonus' rather than a reason for deciding to attend. The scope of the evaluation meant that our ability to assess the impact of the financial incentive on attendance was limited. However, given that it comprises a substantial proportion of the cost involved in running You First, it is the authors' view that there is not yet sufficient evidence to justify the expense.

Engaging parents - creating the right ethos

Creating the right atmosphere and using appropriate delivery methods were crucial in engaging parents once they had attended.

You First was successful in cultivating a supportive atmosphere. Parents felt welcomed and thought that the facilitators cared about their welfare (discussed in more detail below). This helped improve parents' self-confidence and supported their learning.

Supportive facilitators

Key to developing this supportive ethos was the extent to which facilitators provided parents with encouragement and reassurance. They spent a great deal of time building a rapport with the parents. They took the time to get to know them as individuals and showed a sustained interest in their lives. Parents received weekly communications from the facilitators to find out if they were able to attend the group and they appreciated the continuity of this contact. From a practical standpoint, this also helped ensure attendance. Parents felt that they were able to go to the facilitators at any point if they wished to discuss something in private or ask for advice.

The strength-based approach

In addition to attracting parents to You First, this approach was particularly important in building the right ethos throughout the group sessions. As the parents felt that society viewed them critically simply for being young parents, the non-judgemental atmosphere at You First helped many to overcome their insecurity and believe in their abilities as a parent.

Peer support

Another aspect that helped to create an appropriate atmosphere for the group was that the age range was restricted to young parents. Meeting other young parents was one of the key drivers in improving confidence for parents. Simply knowing that there were others in their situation, and spending time with those who understood what they were going through, helped parents to feel that they were doing 'fine'; they could discuss their experiences and share any problems that they had.

Balancing challenge and support

However, there was, occasionally, a tension between facilitators providing information that they thought parents should know and the person-centred approach (see below for more detail on the person-centred approach). This mainly arose in relation to healthy eating and diets. The facilitators tried to build healthy eating messages into lunch times and encouraged the parents to feed themselves and their babies healthy foods. Parents were resistant to some of the messages and felt that they were being told what to do (which is not an untypical reaction from the public in general to health improvement messages).

The non-judgemental style that the facilitators adopted was important in keeping parents engaged. However, in order to drive home important health improvement messages, it may be necessary to challenge parents more often. Striking the right balance between the two is difficult and careful consideration should be given when addressing this issue.

Engaging parents - successful delivery methods

Person-centred approach

The person-centred nature of You First meant that the content was shaped by the parents. In the main, they were happy with the topics covered because they were able to choose what was included from four predefined areas: health and well-being; finances; stages of development and a personal project. Individuals' choices were collated to identify the subjects that were most popular, overall. In general, this did not cause any problems as there tended to be a great deal of agreement on topics. Allowing the parents to become involved in the design of the sessions helped them to focus on the things they were interested in, took the emphasis away from what they 'should' be doing and helped build self-confidence.

Flexibility

You First was designed to be flexible for parents. As long as an external speaker was not involved, they could change the order of the topics week by week. There was also scope to introduce new topics that had not occurred to them at the start of the group sessions, although this did not happen often. Facilitators used a one-to-one 'planning for the future' session as a platform to uncover any wants and needs parents may have found difficult to articulate in front of the group. This was used to provide parents with information, link them to local services or deliver a session on a particular topic.

Learning methods

Overall, the most successful learning methods appeared to be those that involved practical skills and active engagement in a subject. They did not engage with subjects that involved a great deal of paper work. For instance, in Phase 1 the baby first aid sessions consisted of a health visitor talking the parents through different healthcare scenarios and what they should do in those situations. In the subsequent phases, facilitators made these sessions more practical and parents had the opportunity to try out CPR and other practical emergency health care skills, which proved to be more popular.

You First was effective in communicating the importance of reading, singing and interacting with babies from an early age in order to improve their development. While parents had previously thought that their babies were too young to benefit from reading or singing, they did seem to take on board messages about the importance of these activities for their child's development. This proved successful as, rather than simply telling parents they should read or sing more, the reasons *why* this aided their babies' development were explained.

Learning has been less widespread in other areas, for example, financial capability. While some parents picked up money saving tips, on the whole, they were not implementing a wider budget plan or improving their core financial capabilities. Further consideration could be given to making things more practical and relevant to parents (e.g. by involving them more in budgeting for the group sessions).

Ensuring positive transitions for parents

It is important to bear in mind that You First was not simply about the immediate benefits. It was a booster programme designed to help parents develop in the future and aid their transition into positive future pathways such as work, education or other groups in the community that could provide them with support.

Planning for the future

Several aspects of You First were designed to enable parents to decide what they wanted to do in the future and how they could achieve this. Near the start of the group work, parents took part in a session called 'planning for the future' to encourage them to think about what they wanted to do. After the group sessions had finished, they had a one-to-one home visit with a facilitator that was intended to consolidate their future plans and enable their transition in to positive future pathways. The facilitators also communicated to the parents they were still 'a person, not just a parent', and that they could aspire to work, further education or any other goal they have (including shorter term goals such as learning to drive).

You First had mixed results in this respect. While it did have an impact on the mindset of some parents about what they could achieve (parents reported that they knew that there were options open to them in the future, and that they knew where they could go for assistance if they wished to pursue those options), it was too early to tell if this would translate into action. Parents, for the most part, talked positively about the future planning elements and had goals for the future. However, they perceived the final home visit more as a form filling exercise and it did not seem to consolidate the previous work on planning for the future. More consideration should be given to whether this visit is the best way of supporting parents through the transition.

There were three main pathways that You First tried to promote to parents: gaining employment, entering further education and attending other community groups that could provide them with further support.

Employment

One of the aspects of You First that aimed to help parents go back to work was the crèche. It gave parents the chance to test formal childcare in a safe environment, giving them the confidence to do so in the future. It helped one parent make the decision to return to work, having previously been unsure about doing so. In addition, the facilitators linked parents to services, such as Working For Families, who could support and advise them. While many of the parents who returned to work had planned to do so before attending, these services were valuable in helping to arrange childcare and providing short-term financial support to aid the transition.

Education

There were a small number of parents who felt You First encouraged them to see education in a more positive light and think about completing more qualifications. However, this was mainly down to the encouragement of the facilitators rather than completing the Youth Achievement Award. Parents found the paperwork onerous and felt there was a lack of clarity over what the qualification offered. More consideration should therefore be given to finding a qualification that better meets the needs of the parents.

Attending other groups/services

Simply attending You First was beneficial to some parents in increasing their confidence to go on and attend other groups. Professionals from other groups and services also came to talk to the parents about what they could offer. A small number of parents had gone on to attend other groups in their local area. However, the uptake of such services was not high. To some extent, this was due to parents still not having the confidence to go to something on their own, particularly if there would be older parents attending. However, low service uptake may also have been due to the fact that what was available in their area was not appropriate. The nature of the groups available may not have been what parents were interested in (e.g. singing) or lacking in focus/activity (e.g. groups based purely on socialising/‘meeting other parents’). As previously mentioned, the high level of structure and support at You First was very successful in engaging parents and it may be that other groups and services do not deliver this to the same degree.

This document, along with full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or on 0131-244 7560.



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