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FAMILY SUPPORT**



**THE SUPPORT NEEDS OF PARENTS
Responding to their
CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR**



*Report on research findings completed by Dept. of Social Studies, Carlow College (St. Patrick's)
for BARNARDOS, CARLOW JUNE 2008*



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*Primary research and report commissioned by **BARNARDOS, CARLOW**
and completed by Dept. of Social Studies, Carlow College (St. Patrick's)
Research team: Roisin Stewart and John McHugh, JUNE 2008*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Aim of the Study

Barnardos Family Support Project in Carlow is supported and informed by a multi-agency advisory group representing voluntary and statutory agencies and the local community. The collective experience of the member agencies of this group and that of the local community coupled with increasing anecdotal evidence, suggests that an increasing number of parents in the general population are experiencing difficulty with regard to managing and responding to their children's behaviour. The primary aim of the study was to examine the perceived stress of parents of 10-14 year olds and how best they could be supported. This age group was focused on as it is through these years that significant changes are experienced – transition from childhood to adolescence, transition from primary to second level school. The underlying question being posed by the research is if there are specific supports required by parents at this time in their child's/family life.

With consideration of the specific roles, responsibilities and limitations of existing service providers both statutory and voluntary it was agreed that further information was required in order to establish on one hand the extent to which families in Carlow are 'under pressure' trying to respond to problematic behaviour i.e. maintain adequate boundaries with their children, and on the other models of good practice in parent support.

A literature review was commissioned by Barnardos to identify models of good practice and subsequent learning in order to inform current service provision and the development of new services where relevant. The study was funded and supported by Carlow Area Network Development Organisation (CANDO) Carlow RAPID and the Department of Social and Family Affairs. The review of literature was carried out by Siobhan Bradley of the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER) at Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). Subsequently, primary research, which was informed by the findings of literature review, was undertaken by Roisin Stewart and John Mc Hugh from the Department of Social Studies at Carlow College, St Patrick's in relation to the support needs of parents who have not yet accessed existing services. This final report includes a summary of the key findings of the literature review* as well as the findings and analysis and key recommendations arising out of the primary research.

(*The full literature review is available on request.)

Rationale for the Study

Barnardos Carlow Family Support Project was established in 2001 in partnership with the South Eastern Health Board to develop a range of support services for families living in Carlow. The project, which is neighbourhood-based is supported by Carlow Town Council from which the premises is rented. It is now well embedded in the local community and provides universal and targeted services catering for different

thresholds of need. Its methodologies are strengths-based, solution-focused and child-centred, based on current best practice in Family Support. The Mission statement of the project is:

Working together with families in Carlow to promote the well being of children, young people and their families.

An advisory group informs the development of the project and consists of local voluntary, statutory agencies and community representation. The experience of the agencies represented on this advisory group recognises that behavioural problems in children are regarded as the most prevalent of disabilities in society today.¹ While we know of the difficulties facing families already in contact with the services, anecdotal evidence suggests that a much wider group of parents are finding it difficult to cope with their children's behaviour. This is not surprising in the context of rapid societal change which affects the family and its functions.

The changing nature of family includes circumstances which result in increased numbers who parent alone, who parent children from previous relationships, who experience separation and divorce. The support previously available from traditional institutions such as community and extended families for the parenting role has largely been eroded. This has partly led to the need to recreate such supports and social networks through family support services. The dilemma for modern parents in balancing work and childcare is a source of stress for many parents particularly those on low incomes who cannot afford spiralling childcare costs.

The external influences on children and young people including media, technology and affluence and increased anti-social behaviour generally all contribute to making a parent's task more challenging. The experience of schools in relation to managing behaviour has been widely represented by the teacher representative bodies who have consistently lobbied for further supports to be made available within schools in order to develop an adequate response.

It was decided that this issue warranted investigation focusing on families in Carlow, and how services might best respond in order to reduce the impact on parents while supporting them to encourage pro-social behaviours and positive life choices for their children.

Research Questions:

1. To establish a more informed understanding of the extent to which parents in the general population perceive themselves to be experiencing stress or pressure resulting from either their children's behaviour or the way in which they cope with their children's behaviour.
2. To establish and map the level of support /information needed by those parents in order to reduce that stress/pressure.
3. To establish the extent to which parents are aware of existing local services and whether they would feel able to access those services.
4. To identify any barriers to accessing existing support services

¹ (Cummins & McMasters 2006 discussed this issue in depth)

5. To establish which of the needs identified by the research are/can be met within existing services/resources
6. To identify existing models of best practice

LITERATURE REVIEW

The spectrum of child behavioural problems varies from very mild to clinically problematic, and their definition and nature expand beyond the term 'behavioural problems' to incorporate mental/psychological and emotional health problems. Often the behavioural problem is a manifestation of a deeper emotional/mental health problem. The most prevalent types of disorders disclosed in children in Ireland are, emotional disorders, oppositional, defiant and conduct disorders (ODD), attention deficit disorder, with or without hyperactivity (ADD & ADHD), major psychiatric disorders, developmental delay and autism, eating disorders and anti-social behaviour e.g. drug and alcohol abuse. What follows here is a summary of the findings of a comprehensive review of literature that address the issue of child behaviour.

- It is estimated that a fifth of the child and adolescent population may suffer from psychological problems at any given time. A 2004 Irish study found 17% of two to five year olds, 10% of six to twelve year olds and 26% of 13 – 18 year olds screened positive for a mental health problem (Cummins, McMaster, 2006). Almost half of these (43%) had an anxiety disorder, a quarter had oppositional defiant disorder and just over a fifth had ADHD.
- Research suggests two key entry points in the development of behavioural problems – early childhood and early adolescence with potentially different risk factors associated with each (Bartusich, Lynam, Moffitt and Silva, 1997). The most significant age difference is that ADHD is more common amongst children, while conduct disorder is more common amongst adolescents (Martin & Carr, 2006).
- Early behavioural disturbance has been cited as one of the strongest predictors of later problems, including psychological difficulties, involvement in crime and antisocial behaviour (Rutter, 1989; Kolvin et al. 1990). Children who exhibit particularly high levels of externalising behaviour problems early in their lives are at high risk for intensifying to lying, bullying and fighting in middle childhood, and more serious behaviours such as cruelty to animals, vandalism and aggressive criminal behaviours in adolescence (Hann, D., Borek, N., 2001).
- Adolescence is a key stage of life development when children require an understanding of life challenges they face and need to develop basic skills to cope with difficult emotions. It is a time of increased risk of poor mental health with anxiety, depression, psychosis, eating disorders, and substance misuse becoming more prevalent, as well as an increasing risk of deliberate self harm and suicidal behaviour (Department of Health & Children, 2006).
- Some young people begin to exhibit problem behaviours during early adolescence. In such cases, entry into conduct problems generally occurs through associations with peers. However, placing too much emphasis on peer pressure, may lead parents to underestimate their own

influence on children, which, though it varies at different ages, has been shown to affect young people's long term behaviour (Oyguard et al., 1999).

- Risk factors for behavioural problems include maternal factors (age of mother, smoking/alcohol consumption during pregnancy, maternal stress), family factors and processes (parent's relationship status, parenting approach, family income, family history of problem behaviour) and the community (neighbourhood, peer influences and school).
- For every risk factor, an increased exposure to risk is found to relate significantly to an increased likelihood of reported involvement in problem behaviour. Conversely, the more young people are exposed to protective factors, the less likely they are to report taking part in antisocial activities (Beinart, S., Anderson, B., Lee, S., Utting, D., 2002). Protective factors directly reduce a risk, buffer an individual against the effects of a risk, disrupt the mediating factors associated with the risk and prevent the initial occurrence of the risk factor (Cummins, McMaster, 2006).

Assessment and Intervention

- Early identification of behavioural difficulties and early implementation of family support programmes promote better mental health outcomes for children at risk of behavioural, emotional and mental health problems. In Ireland, childhood emotional, developmental disorders, behavioural problems and mental illness are under recognised and often remain untreated. This under recognition may adversely affect the child's behaviour, emotional well being and educational attainments, as well as affecting family, friends and society at large (Cummins, McMaster, 2006).
- Currently, secondary and tertiary services are inequitably distributed across the country, not all teams are fully resourced and some geographical areas lack provision altogether. Waiting lists are often long, a situation which is not unique, even in developed countries. There is consequentially a need to develop alternative approaches to reduce the prevalence of child and adolescent mental health problems and to provide assistance and support as early as possible where problems arise. The earlier support is accessed the better.
- There are a wide range of community care services that deliver care at primary level in the community. Less intensive interventions are usually offered within a primary care context initially and only if youngsters do not respond to these, should more intensive interventions be offered, or referral made to secondary or tertiary services (Martin, Carr, 2005).
- A particularly successful means of supporting families is to focus on parenting behaviour. Mental health problems can have a significant and adverse impact on children, adolescents, parents and families. It is therefore important that interventions provide broadly based help for the parents

and families of young people with problems as well as the young people themselves (Sawyer et al., 2000).

- Parent behaviour can set the stage for children to develop and use coping skills that make them more resilient, or conversely can place children at risk for problems (Blout, 1989). Preventative work with families has been identified by numerous sources as the most effective means of avoiding severe long term problems (Pugh et al., 1994; Kamerman & Kahn, 1993). The development of effective parenting skills has been considered as the primary mechanism for change in child conduct disorder, through the reduction in the severity, duration and manifestation of the disorder².

Recommendations for Supporting Parents

- Parents of children with behavioural difficulties bear a heavy burden and stress and depression as well as familial and marital discord often develop. Great emphasis has been placed on programmes which address parents' situation and needs. Treatments must take account of the fact that parents and family members suffer considerable burdens and stresses even while the behaviourally disturbed child is of pre-school or primary school age. A central issue relating to treatment is how it affects the family as a unit, and what kinds of benefit are obtained (Morch et al., 2004).
- Family disorganisation and lack of knowledge or motivation may prevent young people with psychological problems and their families from proactively engaging with health and/or other support services. Community based, attractive, accessible, evidence-based training programmes may be used as a vehicle for identifying children at risk, and engaging with families of children with mental health problems. With young children, engagement should target parents. With adolescents, services may directly target teenagers, as well as their parents. A variety of professionals, including family doctors, P.H.N.'s, pre-school and school staff may all play a role in helping parents engage with such programmes.
- The age of the child will very often affect the type of support required by parents of children with behavioural problems.
- Research indicates that parenting programs have been positive, with significant changes in parents' and children's behaviour and parental perception of child adjustment. Research suggests that parents who have participated in parent training programs are successful in reducing their child's level of aggression by 20 - 60 %³.

² <http://www.adhd.com.au/conduct.html>

³ <http://www.adhd.com.au/conduct.html>

- Model programmes with proven results include the Webster Stratton Incredible Years Programme, Positive Parenting Programme, Mellow Parenting, Strengthening Families Programme and Multi Systematic Therapy.
- Evaluations of these and other programmes have highlighted several factors which parents reported as beneficial in supporting them in coping with their child(ren)'s behaviour. These include:
 - The group dynamic of several parenting programmes: parents found it very encouraging to meet other parents who understood the problems they faced with their child. It was a great benefit to be able to talk honestly and openly about the difficulties they had to deal with, in a supportive group environment.
 - The qualities of group leaders: parents were generally *very satisfied with group leaders* and were most impressed with what they perceived as the leaders' positive personal qualities including warmth, optimism, enthusiasm, supportiveness, attentiveness and humour.
 - Programme content: assistance to communicate adequately with their children about what is happening and why, provision of help for their own distress, support for and information about parenting, opportunities for developing skills for containing and managing conflict, encouragement to foster regular contact for children with extended families on both sides, and with children's friends and help to make arrangement for the future, including encouragement to foster involvement of parents in their children's lives (Morch et al., 1999).
- Follow up studies also highlighted the following factors which parents believed would be of benefit in future programmes:
 - Maintenance of small group sizes: in designing programmes, small courses of no more than ten parents were thought to be most effective. This is because they encouraged more open communication and involvement.
 - Follow up booster sessions: where these excited parents specifically noted their benefit and where they did not, many expressed a desire for follow up or 'booster' sessions (Morch et al., 1999).
- One of the major problems that parenting support programs face is that they do not reach all the families that need support. There is a clear challenge to be more successful with regard to recruitment and engagement of parents. A key point of contact, therefore, in terms of the provision of advice regarding community supports for children who experience behavioural problems is through local GPs, pre-school, primary and post primary schools and other contact points with which parents have regular contact. In response to low recruitment rates, an assertive approach has been developed in the US, including home visits, meetings at the family's convenience, written contracts, and concrete problem solving as well as incentives such as free transport, crèche facilities, meals and prize draws (Kosterman, Hawkins, Spoth, Haggarty, Zhu, 1995).

- It is recommended that supports for parents include:

- assistance to communicate adequately with their children about what is happening and why (good communication between parents and children)
- provision of help for their own distress (supportive and appropriate parenting)
- support for and information about parenting (reduction/minimising parental distress)
- information about and opportunities for developing skills for containing and managing conflict (minimal conflict and no involvement of children in parental disputes)
- encouragement to foster regular contact for children with extended families on both sides, and with children's friends (optimal living and visiting arrangements for children)
- help to make arrangement for the future, including encouragement to foster involvement of parents in their children's lives (successful fostering of children's relationship with other parent and wider kin).
- (Hawthorn, Jessop, Pryor, Richards, 2003)

Services which directly address the needs of the child are also pivotal, if child behavioural problems are to be effectively addressed. The impact on children of programmes designed for parents is necessarily indirect and mediated by parents. It is therefore essential to recognise that in addressing the support needs of parents of children with behavioural problems, a simultaneous/parallel response to the needs of children who exhibit behavioural problems is essential.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter evaluates the individual issues taken into account during the planning and implementation of this study. This includes the selection of the research methods used; sample selection; the processes involved in obtaining permission to conduct the study, gaining informed consent from the participants involved; and the collection and analysis of the data. It also addresses the ethical issues that needed to be considered.

Methods of Data Collection

The methods of data collection used in this study were Questionnaires and Focus Groups. The use of the questionnaires enabled the researcher to contact a high number of parents of children within the 10-14 age groups. The combination of closed and open questions within the questionnaire facilitated the researcher in gathering both quantitative and qualitative data in relation to the research topic. The Focus groups allowed parents and professionals working within the local services, to elaborate on their own experiences and contribute towards the collective account of the particular phenomenon.

The Research Schedule

The researcher met with the advisory group of Barnardos, Carlow to discuss their aims and objectives of the research and to identify the target group needed in the sample selection. In consultation with the advisory group a pilot questionnaire was designed. To meet with the key objectives of the study the questionnaire was divided into three sections:

1. **You and Your Family** –demographic information of the parents/families.
2. **Your Role as a Parent** –parents identify their perceived stressors and the impact these have on their children and themselves.
3. **Support Systems for you and your family** –parents identify their current support systems; explore their knowledge of existing local support services and possible barriers to using these; and identify services that they would like to see operating in their local community.

A pilot questionnaire was distributed to a selected sample of the target group, parents of a class of 5th year pupils in one of the local primary schools. The principal of the school was contacted and after the permission was granted from the school, the selected sample of parents with children at the school was provided with a copy of the questionnaire and a cover letter.

On completion of this process and in collaboration with Barnardos it was agreed that the questionnaire was valid for the purpose of the research (see Appendix 2). The remaining Primary Schools and Secondary Schools within Carlow Town were contacted and after permission was granted by the principals and in some cases the Board of Management of the schools the remainder of the questionnaires and the cover letter for the parents were distributed to 5th and 6th classes of four Primary

Schools (N=247) and one 1st Year and one 2nd Year classes of two of the Secondary Schools in the town (N=113).

At the beginning of each questionnaire the respondents were advised to read each question carefully and follow the instructions as to how each question should be answered. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured. Each questionnaire was to be returned to the school in a sealed envelope (provided) for later collection.

Participation in the Parent Focus Groups, to be held at a later date, was on a voluntary basis. Respondents were asked to write their name and contact details if they were willing to take part. Again they were reassured that their personal information would be treated in strict confidence. A list of parents (N=23) willing to participate was compiled and these were contacted by phone.

The Focus Groups were conducted in a neutral venue, Carlow College, - a practical choice for the parents and professionals due to convenience to the town and the availability of free parking. Two focus groups involving parents were organised and 14 parents committed to attend. Each parent was reminded by the researcher of the date, time and venue for the group by text or phone the day before the group was scheduled to take place. 7 parents participated in the two groups held.

The Professional Focus group consisted of a selected sample of service providers working within the local community. In consultation with the Advisory Group of Barnardos a number of agencies operating within the community were contacted and asked to participate in the research project. The services represented were: Carlow/Kilkenny Parent Support Programme; Addiction Advice Group; CANDO; Carlow Town Council; Askea Boys National School; Askea Girls National School; St. Fiacc's National School; Carlow Vocational School.

A list of guide questions (see Appendix 3) which were consistent in all of the groups was used. The use of guide questions added to the overall effectiveness of these sessions. The respondents appeared to be comfortable and willing to engage in the exploration of the topics presented.

The Sample

The sampling selection method used for the questionnaires and the focus groups was 'Purposive Sampling', that is, the sample was selected for the study because they permitted inquiry into and had in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest. The sampling frame for this study was an appropriate sample of parents of young people attending formal education settings i.e. Primary Schools and Post Primary Schools within Carlow Town and within the catchment-area that Barnardos provides a service for. In the initial discussion with the Advisory Group it was suggested that parents of young people currently attending non formal education settings i.e. Carlow Youth Training Centre, Youth Services etc. should be included in the sample. However, to ensure an information rich data with a minimum amount of variable discrepancies within the sample, it was agreed to focus specifically on parents of young people aged from ten to fourteen years of age.

Four Primary Schools were identified: Holy Family Boys National School, Askea; Holy Family Girls National School, Askea; St. Fiacc's National School, Graiguecullen; Carlow Church of Ireland National School, Carlow. Questionnaires were distributed to the parents of children attending all the 5th

and 6th classes within these four schools. The Post Primary Schools selected were: Presentation College, Carlow and Carlow Vocational School (VEC), Carlow. Initially it was intended to approach all of the 1st and 2nd Year classes of both schools. However due to time constraints of the research project and the slow return of completed questionnaires it was decided to select the parents of all first year pupils attending the Presentation College and all second year pupils from Carlow Vocational School. A total of **N=360** questionnaires were distributed to the selected sample of parents within the Carlow town area.

The sample selection for the Professional focus group consisted of relevant local agencies working with children and young people and families within the catchment area. The Advisory Board and the researcher compiled a list of professionals to be asked to participate in the research. Ten representatives of services operating in Carlow were approached to participate in the group. This consisted of: a G.P; Juvenile Liaison Officer for the local area; Carlow/Kilkenny Parent Support Programme; Carlow Youth Services; Addiction Advice Group; CANDO; Social Work Department, Carlow/Kilkenny; Carlow Town Council; Principal/teachers of the local schools. Seven of these services were represented at the professional focus group. A number of the services unable to attend the group were offered the chance to submit their views on the discussion topics via e-mail and their contributions added to the collective data.

Data Analysis

It is the researcher's task to make sure the appropriate data is collected and then truthfully and objectively interpreted and presented within the research findings.

The data analysis for this research consisted of both quantitative and qualitative analysis:

Quantitative Analysis

This involved a simple coding of the data collected from the responses to 'closed' questions contained in the questionnaire. For example, questions that consisted of set answers such as:

Do you find the parenting role stressful? (Please tick the appropriate box)

Not at all

Sometimes

Quite a lot

Great deal

As a parent do you feel you need more support to help you deal with your child/children's behaviour?

Yes

No

Not Sure

The researcher was able to analyse this data by using statistical analysis frequencies of similar responses and representing the data as a percentage of the aggregate data. This data was also open to content analysis by the researcher and contributed to the identification of themes within the research.

Qualitative Analysis

This involved the analysis of the data collected from the 'open' questions contained in the questionnaires and the data gathered from the three focus groups i.e. the written and spoken words of the respondents. This procedure of analysis is based on the principles of Grounded Theory and is derived from the work of Glaser and Strauss (1967) and consisted of the researcher analysing the data through the identification of themes, patterns, similarities and differences.

Frequency of responses were highlighted within each sample group and created tentative themes for the research. This method was repeated for each school and focus group involved in the research. The researcher then examined the data collectively and identified similarities between each sample group. This assisted in establishing a more robust identification of the themes. Significant statements that pertained to the views of the respondents were extracted from the transcripts during open and multiple coding. Subsequently, the researcher was able to identify four main themes and the sub-themes within each were then organised.

Credibility of the research

Due to budgetary and time constraints it was not possible to consult or engage with every parent in the Carlow area. However, using the established structures and local knowledge of the Advisory Group to identify the sample group the researcher was able to ensure that a good cross section of parents and professionals working within the area was involved in the research.

The researcher has provided a detailed audit trail of the sample selection, research schedule and the data analysis involved in the study. The additional notes taken during the focus groups and the decision of the researcher to code the questionnaire data herself assisted in maintaining continuous contact with the data and provide a truer representation of the respondent's experiences. This research is not irrefutable and the researcher is aware that it is by no means indicative of all parents viewpoint of perceived stressors and supports they may require.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical issues relating to social research were given due consideration by the researcher in this study, in particular Informed Consent, Risk of Harm and Confidentiality/Anonymity.

Conclusion

The method of planning for, gathering data and the processing of the data was an important aspect of this research study. The ethical issues, data collection and analysis, sampling and the research process have all been discussed at length to provide the reader with a detailed synopsis of the research methods used to conduct this research.

DATA PRESENTATION AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The primary aim of the study was to examine the perceived stress of parents of 10-14 year olds and how best they could be supported.

Sample Profile

360 questionnaires were distributed to a sample of parents within the Carlow Town area, 138 parents participated in the study (38% return of the total sample group). Of the number of questionnaires distributed, the primary schools provided a much higher return rate than the post primary schools- of the 247 questionnaires distributed to the primary schools, 124 were completed (50% return rate); of the 117 distributed to the post primary schools only 14 were completed (12% return rate). Due to the low return rate from the post primary schools comparative analysis of the data was not possible.

The respondents consisted of 11 males and 127 females, the majority of respondents (91%) were categorised as being within the 31-60 years of age (Refer to Table 1) and 74% stated they were married (Refer to Table 2).

Table 1: Age Groups of Parents

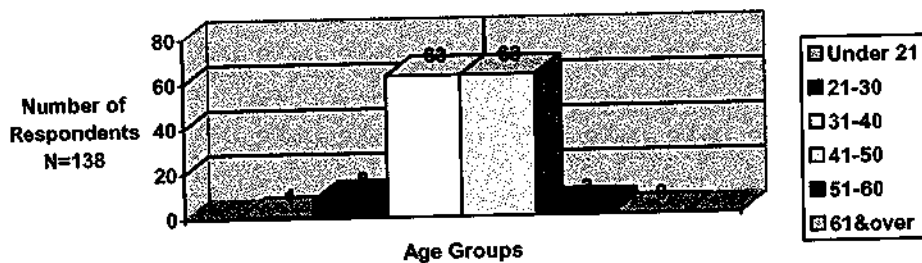
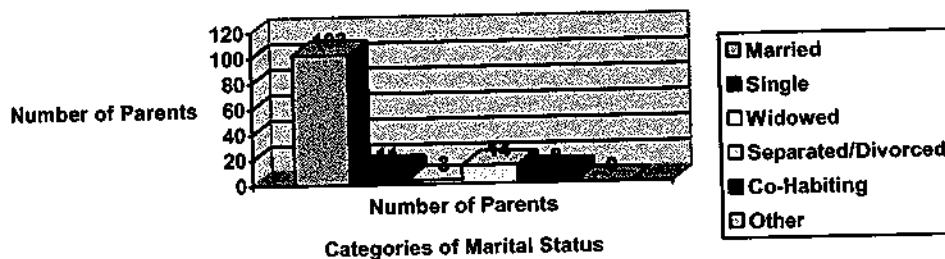


Table 2: Marital Status of the Sample Group



57% of the respondents stated they were currently employed. The hours worked per week ranged from 10-80 hours, with the respondents working on average 29 hours per week. There were a total of 338 young people recorded by the respondents as living at home with them at present. The average age of young people per household was 11 years of age and an average of two children per household.

The Findings

The findings indicated that there were four emergent themes: Family Factors; Support Systems; Barriers to accessing services; Future interventions.

Theme One: Family Factors

The pressures experienced by the parents and the impact of these on themselves and their families were examined. Within this theme three sub themes were identified: (1) their children's behaviour; (2) their role as parents; (3) societal influences.

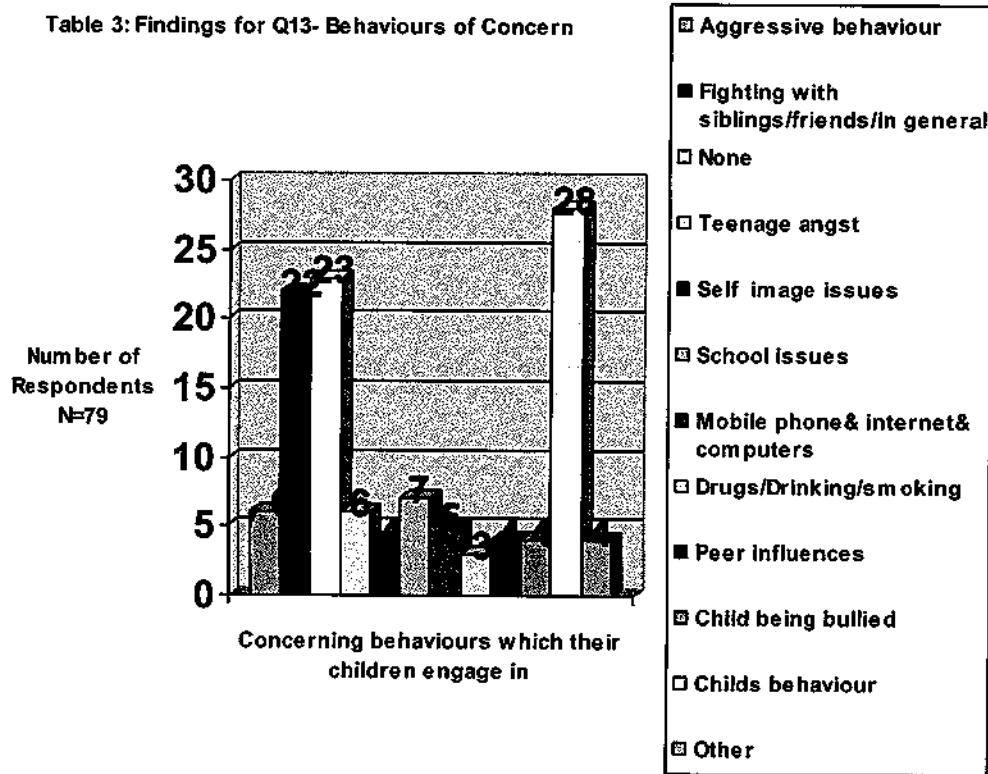
Sub Theme One: Their Children's Behaviour

One of the main aims of the study was to identify whether the sample of parents felt that they were under pressure from their children's behaviours. Out of the 138 respondents 72% felt that their role as a parent was 'sometimes' stressful, with a further 16% finding the role either stressful quite a lot or a great deal.

When asked whether they were stressed by their children's behaviours the findings indicated that 52% stated sometimes and 10% stated quite a lot or a great deal. 37% of the respondents stated they were not stressed by their children's behaviours.

35% of the respondents indicated that their children engaged in behaviours which concerned them. (**Refer to Table 3**). The behaviours of concern that were identified by the respondents fell within the spectrum of 'very mild' behaviours. The behaviours identified consisted of bad language; disobedience; testing boundaries; being attitudinal; and lying. 30% of the respondents stated that they had no concerns in relation to their children's behaviour. Only 8 respondents mentioned specific behavioural difficulties such as: anger/aggressive behaviours (N=3), smoking/drinking/drugs (N=3), hyperactivity (N=2).

Table 3: Findings for Q13- Behaviours of Concern



- **Key Finding 1: There are significant stresses associated with parenting 10-14 year olds even when specific behaviour difficulties are not present.**

The sample were asked as to whether their children's behaviour interfered with their everyday life, a high number of respondents indicated that their child's behaviour did not affect their every day lives (Refer to Table 4). 32% indicated that their children's behaviour 'sometimes' interfered with their home life and a further 25% stated that it 'sometimes' affected their child's peer relationships.

| | Not at all | Sometimes | Quite a lot | Great Deal | Did not answer |
|--------------------|------------|-----------|-------------|------------|----------------|
| Home Life | 82 | 43 | 5 | 4 | 4 |
| Peer Relationships | 88 | 32 | 9 | 2 | 7 |
| School Life | 98 | 27 | 8 | 3 | 2 |
| Community | 116 | 11 | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| Others | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | |

Table 4: Findings for Q14-the impact of their child's behaviour on their everyday life

These findings were supported by the feedback from the focus groups. Both parent groups stated that although they felt under pressure by their children's behaviours on occasions, they felt more pressure in regards to other societal factors such as concerns for their child's safety, monetary demands, and balancing home and work life etc. In general the parents felt that children were exposed to more influences today such as TV programs, media, and film/pop idols. 10% of the respondents indicated that monetary demands from their children as a current concern for them. Examples given were their children wanting brand/labelled goods and having to keep up with the trends of their peers for all the latest toys and gadgets. One parent stated:

Society is not the same today as when we were growing up. There are more demands and requests on us now from our children especially in relation to material things. They want the new trainers, albums etc... There is more pressure on us due to monetary value of everything these days. (Parent Group 2)

- **Key Finding 2: Parents indicated that there was a considerable impact on the home life, peer relationships and school life as a result of their children's behaviours**

Sub Theme Two: Their Role as Parents

Their role as a parent was identified as an important factor by a number of respondents and was represented in responses to several of the questions asked. The respondents were asked to list the main issues that concerned them as parents today (Refer to Table 5). A number of the responses were linked to their role as parents, such as concern for their child's health, welfare and safety (19% of total respondents), being a good parent e.g. raising them with respect for themselves and others and knowing right from wrong (10%).

| | |
|--|----|
| Drugs and Alcohol | 75 |
| Issues relating to the Health, Safety & Welfare of their child | 27 |
| Peer influences | 24 |
| Antisocial behaviours | 22 |
| Monetary Issues | 14 |
| Being a good parent | 20 |
| issues relating to their child's future | 13 |
| School Issues | 13 |
| Their child's behaviours | 13 |
| Access to computers & TV | 4 |
| Other | 17 |

Table 5: Findings for Q7- what are the main issues that concern you most as a parent today

- **Key Finding 3: The biggest concern for parents at present is drug and alcohol related issues.**

The sample of parents were asked to indicate whether they were aware of the children's whereabouts when they were not in their company, 77% stated 'a great deal', 13% stated 'quite a lot', 5% stated 'sometimes' and a further 5% stated 'not at all'. These findings indicated that in their roles as parents the welfare and safety of their children was paramount for the majority of the respondents. It should be noted that the 10% of parents who answered 'sometimes' or 'not at all' may be finding it very difficult to manage their children's welfare and safety.

The three focus groups discussed the issue of parental responsibility in respect to their children's behaviours. One of the professionals summed up the groups viewpoint by stating,

At times the focus is on the child or child's behaviour rather than the role the parents play in their child's behaviour..... The young people should not be blamed for their behaviour as their behaviour is a symptom of their parent's inability to cope with the pressures of family life. (Professional Group)

One parent who participated in the focus groups stated:

My job as a parent is hampered and put under more pressure by other parents not being as mindful as I am of their own children's whereabouts, safety and well being (Parent Group 1).

It was the collective view of the parent group and the professional's group that raising all parents' awareness of their responsibilities and their role in their children's lives would benefit not only the individual children but the wider community.

- **Key Finding 4: Managing their role as parent is a crucial factor in children's behaviours.**

Sub Theme Three: Societal Influences

The findings indicated that the respondents were not solely under pressure from their children's behaviours but also from factors outside of their family lives. The findings indicated a number of external influences such as, their local communities, and peer group pressures in relation to their children, school issues and TV and internet access. When asked to list the main issues for them as parents today (**See Table 5**), 53% stated drugs and alcohol related issues, such as how easily accessible they are; potential misuse by their children and the need for more education in relation to them. 16% stated concerns in relation to negative behaviours currently occurring in their local community, such as bullying, anti-social behaviours and violence. 15% stated concerns in relation to peer pressure. The main concern was in relation to their children getting into the wrong 'crowd' and being influenced towards negative behaviours. 10% stated school issues, such as the cost of education, academic pressures, bullying. These findings are also reflected in the respondents answers to Q11 in which they were asked as to whether they were concerned about the influences listed having a negative effect on their children (**Refer to Table 6**).

| | Not at All | Sometimes | Quite a lot | Great Deal | No answer |
|-------------------|------------|-----------|-------------|------------|-----------|
| Peers and Friends | 35 | 76 | 13 | 13 | 11 |
| School | 67 | 52 | 6 | 5 | 8 |
| TV | 22 | 75 | 28 | 7 | 6 |
| Internet Access | 37 | 49 | 26 | 21 | 5 |
| Other | 0 | 3 | 3 | 1 | |

Table 6: Findings for Q11-the concerns about the negative influences on their children's behaviours

- **Key Finding 5: The sample of parents indicated concerns in relation to the negative influences of TV and Internet access for their children.**

- **Key Finding 6: Parents are concerned about the negative influences of peer pressure on their children**

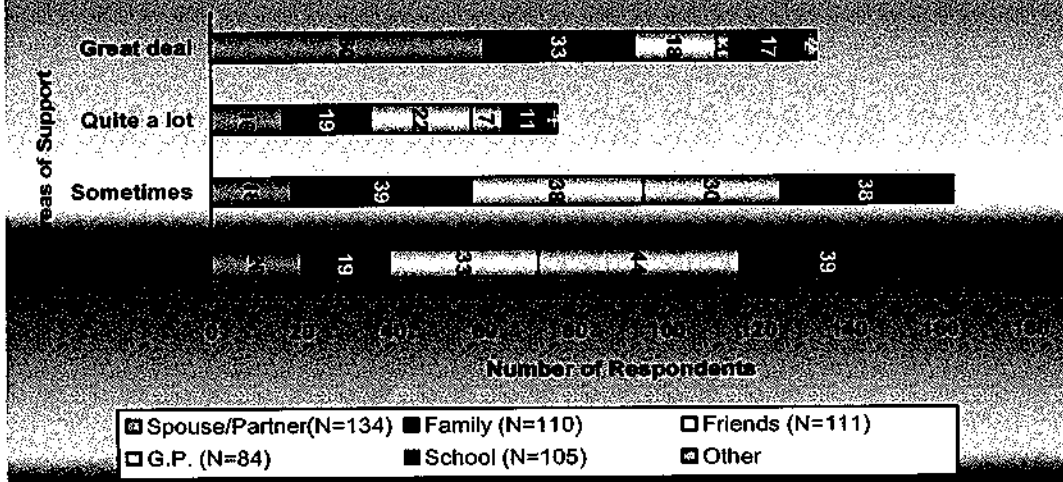
A further finding in relation to societal factors was language and cultural issues. This factor was stated in the three focus groups. This is an issue at present for the schools in particular. They are experiencing an increasing number of children of ethnic families attending their schools. The particular difficulties stated were in relation to the parents and children not speaking English as their main language and also unfamiliarity with their cultures and traditions. This factor was not apparent in the quantitative data but the researcher has to be aware that language difficulties may have been a contributing factor to the low response rate of the questionnaires.

Theme Two: Support Systems

Sub Theme One: Social Supports

The respondents indicated that they received either 'quite a lot/great deal' of their supports in dealing with their children's behaviour from their partner/spouse (61%), family (47%) and friends (36%). (Refer to Table 7). 27% indicated that their children's schools were a place that they receive support. Only 3 respondents identified other social supports. These were a drop in centre and their churches.

Table 7: Findings for Q15- Forms of Support for Parents in reaction to their children's behaviours



- **Key Finding 7:** *The forms of social supports used by parents consisted of spouses, family and friends. This finding highlights a potential gap in support systems for single parent families and families living away from their extended families or friends.*
- **Key Finding 8:** *The respondents did not view their G.P's as a form of support with their children's behaviours.*

Sub Theme Two: Lack of Awareness of Family Support Services

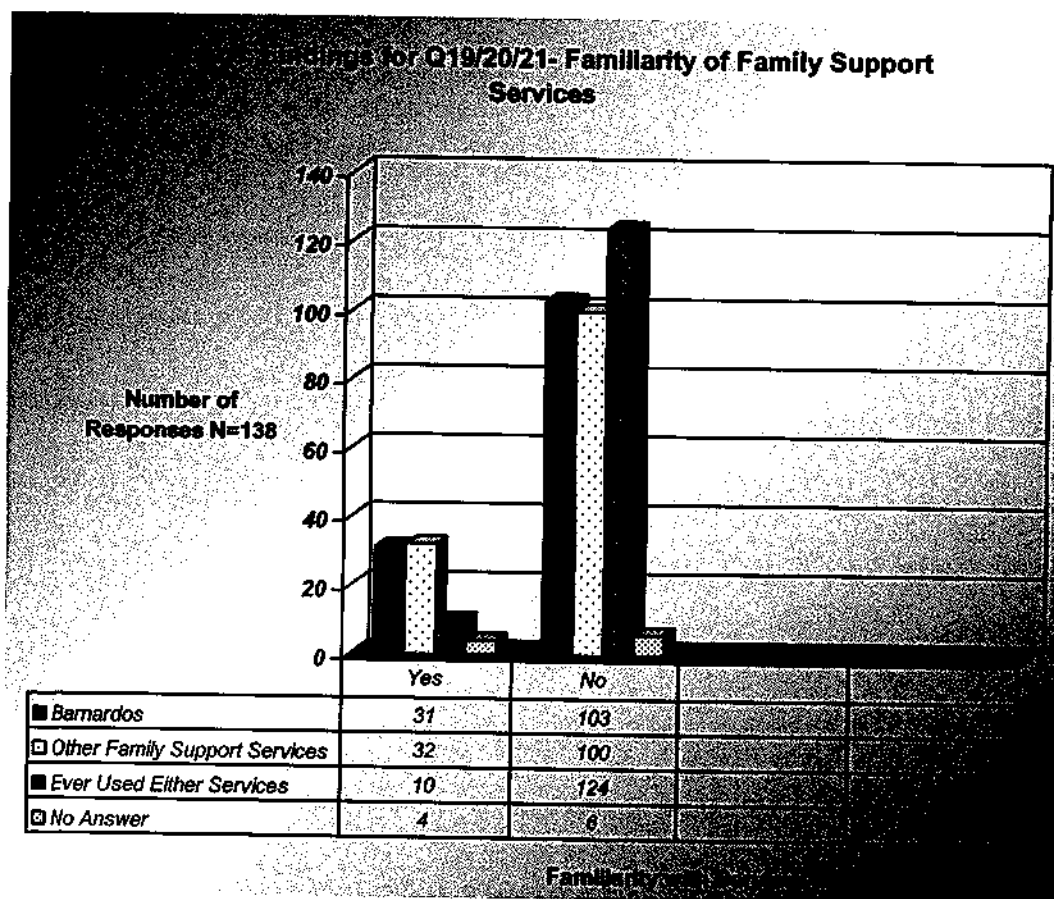
The respondents indicated that the majority of them were aware of how to access a number of services operating in their local communities.

| Name of Community Services | Yes | No | Not Sure | No answer |
|----------------------------|-----|----|----------|-----------|
| G.P. | 103 | 12 | 9 | 14 |
| Health Care Professionals | 64 | 31 | 22 | 17 |
| Education Welfare Officers | 58 | 34 | 28 | 18 |
| Juvenile Liaison Officer | 48 | 45 | 26 | 19 |
| Family Support Services | 60 | 39 | 23 | 16 |
| Social Services | 69 | 33 | 19 | 13 |

Table 8: Findings for Q18-awareness of accessing certain supports

- **Key Finding 9:** *The majority of respondents are able to access their G.P's but appear to be less familiar with how they would access other support services*

The findings indicate that they appeared to be less familiar with specific Family Support Services operating in their communities. The respondents who stated they were familiar with Barnardos believed that they offered services to families, specifically in relation to education, family and child support, specific family support services e.g. counselling. The most frequent services identified by the respondents in relation to other Family Support services were: Open Door; St. Catherine's; Youth services; and Women's Aid.



- **Key Finding 10:** *76% of respondents stated they are unfamiliar with the service offered by Barnardos*
- **Key Finding 11:** *76% of respondents stated they are unfamiliar with other Family Support Services.*

These findings were supported by the feedback from the three focus groups. Only 4 of the participants in the groups felt that they could comfortably state they were familiar with the services offered by Barnardos. The collective view was that the majority of parents would be "familiar with the name but not all that it had to offer". One parent stated,

I am aware of the organisation through ads on TV which focus on children who have been abused and neglected. By using this service am I not implying that my child has been neglected also? (Parent Group 2)

The professional focus group believed that the knowledge of the service would probably be based on locality to the service,

The local areas that the services operate in, I would expect that parents would be familiar with it... and that certain communities have certainly benefited from the service in their area, Askea estate for one....

(Respondent, Professional's Group).

The lack of awareness of services was viewed as a hindrance to parents accessing supports that they may require. The collective viewpoint of the three focus groups was that parents in the community are not aware of the services that are there for them and their families. Within the focus groups it was agreed that improvements could be made to highlight the services that currently exist. A number of suggestions involved: better promotion of the services through the local media e.g. local radio and local newspapers; a comprehensive directory of services to be either developed or updated and distributed to all homes; the development of a common website for all services making the services easily accessible to the general population. The professional group focused on the need for sharing information between other services. They felt that the school would play a pivotal role in this as they have the potential to access a large group of parents. A number of the participants proposed that workers from the community based services should approach the schools and provide information sharing meetings with both parents and teachers. It was felt that this would facilitate a more positive relationship between the parents and the services. This viewpoint was also expressed by one of the parents,

There should be better communication of what is on offer, not just notes sent home from school which can be missed or forgotten about. But actual direct contact with the services such as talks in the schools. (Parent Group 2)

Another parent in this group felt that attendance or involvement could be improved by the services offering personal invites to the parents to attend information sessions.

- **Key Finding 12: Parents appear to be unaware of the services available to them in their local communities.**

- **Key Finding 13: Schools are well placed to have a pivotal role in supporting parents in handling their children's behaviour and in promoting use of other support services available.**

Theme Three: Barriers to Accessing Services

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings indicated a number of factors which prevented parents from accessing existing services. These were identified as: (1) The perceived need for support; (2) Parents perception of the services; (3) Practical factors.

Sub Theme One: The perceived need for Support

The respondents were asked if they felt they needed more support to help them deal with their children's behaviour. Out of the 133 responses provided 63% stated they did not need more help, 20% stated they did, and 17% stated they were not sure whether they did. This perception of not needing further support was also reflected in the responses to the question 'what might prevent them from accessing existing services (See Table 10).

| Options | Tally of responses |
|--|--------------------|
| I don't know what is available | 61 |
| I don't need them | 76 |
| I would not know how to access them | 29 |
| I don't think they would make a difference | 8 |
| They are not in my local area | 11 |
| I would view it as interference | 5 |
| I would feel I have failed as a parent | 23 |
| I can't find the time due to work hours | 10 |

Table 10: Findings of Q23- What may prevent you from accessing services?

The highest response indicated by the parents was to the option of 'I don't need them'. The respondents were asked to list the supports they felt would be of benefit to them in their role as parents. The respondents (N=59) indicated that the supports they needed were in the specific areas of: education/information; services for themselves and their children; schools; peer group support for themselves; support from their families; and flexibility in relation to their work hours.

- **Key Finding 14: 63% of respondents perceived they did not need support in relation to their children's behaviours**

Sub Theme Two: Parents Perceptions of the services

This was the most frequently stated factor associated with preventing parents from accessing existing services. The collective view was that there was a 'stigma' attached to using certain support services and that these negative perceptions had to be challenged if the services are to become more accessible to everyone in the local communities. This perception of a 'stigma' was viewed as a significant barrier for a large number of parents. In relation to Barnardos a number of parents in the focus groups voiced the belief that this was a service only for under-privileged children or children from 'broken homes' and that they would fear being judged for using the service due to that belief. One parent stated,

I read in the local newspapers about parents who have been up in court and that they are ordered by a judge to attend Barnardos for parenting. This is not really a positive incentive for other parents. (Parent Group 2)

This fear of being judged was also expressed in the professionals group, as one representative stated,

...parents are afraid of being judged for being attached to a service. For example the drug service offered by Youth Services can be both educational and preventative based but a common misperception is that if you are accessing this service then people will just assume that either the child or the parent has an addiction. (Professional Group).

It was felt by both the parents and the professional groups that in order to make the Family Support Services more accessible, the use of these services needed to be 'de-stigmatised'. One proposal to achieve this was the idea of a neutral venue where parents could have access to the services, such as, a community building, similar to a health centre, that houses a number of multidisciplinary services - G.P., psychology and family support services.

A further factor identified was in relation to the negative viewpoint attached to seeking help. The professional group stated that they believed there were a number of parents who would view the need for support from external agencies as an indication that they have failed as a parent or that they are not coping rather than seeking help as a positive preventative measure. Other factors mentioned related to concerns over confidentiality within the services. This was more of a prevalent concern for the parent groups.

- ***Key Finding 15: Parents appear to perceive that there is a 'stigma' attached to using Family Support Services.***

Sub Theme Three: Practical factors

A number of practical factors were identified as preventing parents from accessing services. These were mainly: (1) geographical location of services- their location may not enable them to be accessible to everyone; (2) transport issues- are the services convenient to the town and are they accessible by bus for people who do not live in the nearby area? (3) time/work constraints- some parents already perceive themselves as feeling under pressure trying to balance their work and home life. It was suggested that some consideration would need to be given to this factor in particular by services targeting parents, for example, the length of some courses and what times they are scheduled to take place; the operating hours of services-do they function after normal working hours; (4) child minding issues- as the findings state there is a significant number of single parent families and parents who have work commitments in the sample group. It was stated by the three focus groups that again any service aiming to target parent groups would need to give due consideration to child minding issues on behalf of the parents, making them more accessible to the wider population.

Another practical factor that was not apparent from the questionnaires but was discussed in the Focus Groups was the increasing numbers of ethnic families living in the town and that there is a need for services to be able to bridge the language barriers so these families can access the services. One member of the parent group felt that services have so far not managed to take into account

language barriers or cultural differences in the process of information sharing. It was suggested that services need to target specific ethnic group by providing multi-lingual information in relation to the services in the area.

- **Key Findings 16: Organisations need to give due consideration to practical factors when developing their services.**
- **Key Finding 17: Multi-lingual information booklets necessary to address the ethnic diversities present in our communities.**

Theme Four: Future Interventions

The findings indicated that there were two distinct sub themes identified by the respondents in relation to what services they would view as being beneficial to them in their role as parents, both currently and for the future. (Refer to Table 11 & Table 12).

Table 11: Findings for Q22- What support services would you like to see operating in your local community

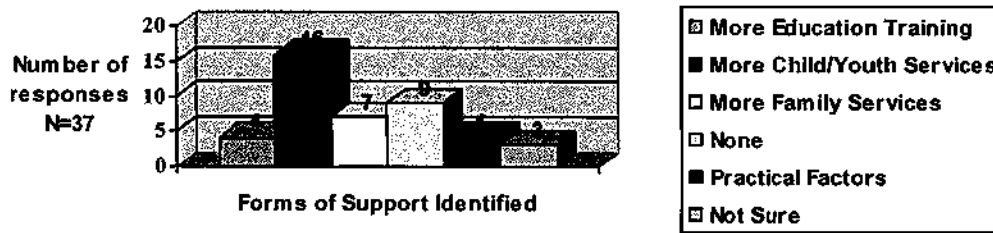
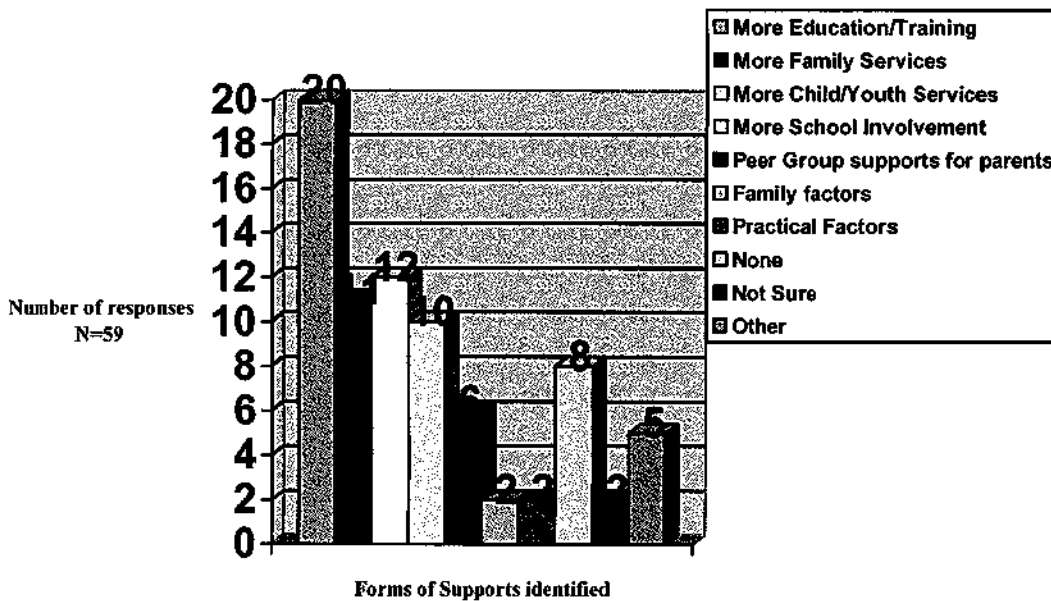


Table 12: Findings Q17- List of supports that would be beneficial to you in your role as a parent



Sub Theme One: Adult based services

As Tables 11 & 12 indicate, the respondents identified a number of supports which they viewed as important to them in their role as parents. Results from both the questionnaires and the focus groups show the need for more training/education for parents being consistently highlighted - specifically, courses related to the parenting of teenagers. It was felt that most courses available to parents focused on toddlers and babies and that a large gap existed in services available to parents of older children and teenagers. Early intervention, that is, courses on parenting of teenagers to be held for parents when their children are still attending primary school was called for.

Both the professional group and the parent groups expressed the view that the format of these courses would be more beneficial to parents if they were structured as peer support group sessions, which would enable parent-parent learning and support. A suggestion made within the professional Focus Group was to develop a 'Parent Buddy System' where parents would be linked to another parent for advice and support. The benefits to this system were that it had the potential to encourage parental involvement of either parents and that it may enhance parents and families to work together within their own local communities. One parent commented:

Being a parent of a child about to become a teenager is just like starting the parenting role all over again and some support around this would be good... Even the chance to meet parents who have 'survived' the teenage years with their own children and have a chat. (Parent Group 2).

Other areas highlighted in relation to education or training for parents was in the broader context of current issues and concerns for parents. This was indicated in the discussion on how to improve parents accessing specific services. It was felt that if services target courses and training in fields of interest for parents, such as, drug education or internet safety, more parents would avail of the courses and may be more open to further courses offered by that service in the future. Other practical courses mentioned were cooking, nutrition and budgeting skills.

- **Key Finding 18: Parenting courses/training specifically in relation to Teenagers was identified as a useful service for parents.**
- **Key Finding 19: Peer Support Groups was identified as an effective learning tool by parents**

Sub Theme Two: Child and Family based Services

The findings indicated that parents viewed the services within Carlow town for their children as reasonably good. However, they were able to identify the need for some changes and improvements to these facilities. The main areas identified for changes focused on activities being more affordable. It was generally felt that the financial cost of youth clubs and sports clubs created a barrier for some families to be able to utilise these services and that to help alleviate the pressures from families more clubs should be either free or at least at a minimal cost for parents to enrol their children. A number of the participants in the focus groups suggested that the local council could be instrumental in setting up such support

services for parents through providing the funding or part funding for the development of such services; supplying a 'free summer bus' that could collect children in the local areas and transport them to camps and clubs within the town; by providing more community workers to assist in increasing the number of resources available to the community. The findings also indicated that parents were interested in the development of activities and clubs for their children for specific periods of time, mainly after school and during school holidays. They viewed this as a form of support for them in their role as parents as it would help to alleviate the pressure they sometimes experienced when they are trying to balance their work and home lives:

It would be great if there was somewhere for children to go during their parents working hours which was safe. They would be doing activities with other children and we would be able to know that for that period of time they were being minded and were being kept safe. (Parent Group 1).

The findings also identified that the respondents were willing to use services that focused on the family unit and would provide an emphasis on quality time for the whole family. 39% of the sample identified the development of child and family services as a potential support to them in their current role as a parent, and 62% viewed the development of child and family services as a support they would like to see occurring in their own communities. Specific child and family services mentioned were: Family activity days; Family counselling; Family mediation services. By encouraging family activities it was felt the organisations would be promoting the role and responsibilities of parents in their children's lives and potentially developing stronger community links. A further point raised by the professional focus group was that organisations should offer services that include supports for extended family members such as grandparents etc... Within this discussion the point made that the onus is on services to act as the support service for families that are not near their own extended families:

The need exists for services to create the family support networks for families, especially families away from their own extended families due to moving from another area or country. We need to create the support for these families. (Professional Focus Group).

Key Finding 20: Services for families should be affordable.

Key Finding 21: Parents indicated a need for more services during working hours and summer holidays.

Key Finding 22: Family services could be instrumental in promoting parental responsibility.

Summary of Key Findings

This brief section brings together the key findings of the research identified in the preceding chapter. Some of the findings are merged, and the order is revised. The aim here is to summarise and present core areas on which future discussion can focus.

Parental concerns

- Key Finding 1:** *There are significant stresses associated with parenting 10-14 year olds even when specific behaviour difficulties are not present. Parents identified the impact of these stresses on relationships within and outside the home.*
- Key Finding 2:** *Of biggest concern to parents at present are drug and alcohol related issues.*
- Key Finding 3:** *Managing their role as parent is a crucial factor in children's behaviours. Schools are well placed to have a pivotal role in supporting parents in their role, in responding to their children's behaviour, and in promoting use of other support services available.*
- Key Finding 4:** *The sample of parents indicated concerns in relation to the negative influences of TV and Internet access for their children. These influences can be seen in the context of parent's concerns about peer pressure adversely affecting their children's behaviour.*

Accessing support

- Key Finding 5:** *The forms of social supports used by parents consisted of spouses, family and friends. This finding highlights a potential gap in support systems for single parent families and families living away from their extended families or friends.*
- Key Finding 6:** *While the majority of respondents are able to access their G.P's, they did not view their G.P's as a form of support with their children's behaviour.*
- Key finding 7:** *Parents appear to be unfamiliar with how they would access other support services to the extent that they are unaware of the range of support services available in the community.*
- Key Finding 8:** *76% of respondents stated they are unfamiliar with the service offered by Barnardos or other Family Support Services in the local community.*
- Key Finding 9:** *63% of respondents perceived they did not need support in relation to their children's behaviours.*

Addressing barriers to accessing support

- Key Finding 10:** *Parents appear to perceive that there is a 'stigma' attached to Family Support Services.*
- Key Findings 11:** *Organisations need to give due consideration to practical factors when developing their services.*
- Key Finding 12:** *Multi-lingual information booklets necessary to address the ethnic diversities present in our communities.*
- Key Finding 13:** *Parenting courses/training specifically in relation to Teenagers was identified as a useful service for parents.*
- Key Finding 14:** *Peer Support Groups was identified as an effective learning tool by parents.*
- Key Finding 15:** *Services for families should be affordable*
- Key Finding 16:** *Parents indicated a need for more services during working hours and summer holidays.*
- Key Finding 17:** *Family services could be instrumental in promoting parental responsibility.*

DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

Introduction

The primary aim of this study was to examine the perceived stress experienced by parents of 10-14 year olds and identify how best they could be supported. Here, the findings are discussed in relation to published literature reviewed on the topic and in relation to the key findings of the research. The Four main themes identified were: Family Factors, Support Systems, Barriers to Accessing services, Future Interventions. These themes are discussed and recommendations proposed based on the findings of the literature review and on the primary research findings.

Theme One: Family Factors

One of the primary aims of the study was to examine whether the sample of parents experienced that they were under pressure from their children's behaviours. The findings indicated that whilst there were significant stressors associated with the parenting of 10-14 year olds, this could not be primarily attributed to their children's presenting behaviours. The literature review identified that the spectrum of child behavioural problems varies from very mild to clinically problematic. 35% of the respondents indicated that their children engaged in behaviours that currently concern them. The behaviours identified were within the spectrum of 'very mild' behaviours, such as, using bad language; disobedience; testing boundaries, attitudes to their parents; and lying. Only 5% of the parents who participated in the study mentioned specific behavioural difficulties they were experiencing with their children. These included: Anger/aggressive behaviours; substance misuse; and hyperactivity. As early behavioural difficulties have been cited as a strong predictor of problems in later life the findings may indicate that preventative measures may be of benefit to both child and their families prior to these children reaching the next key stage of their life development-Adolescence.

The literature reviewed identified two key entry points in the development of behavioural problems: early childhood, and early adolescence - with potentially different risk factors associated with each. The risk factors identified were parent/child biological factors, family factors and processes, the community, and protective factors. Several of these risk factors were examined in this study. One common finding was in relation to the role of the parent. The literature review concluded that the parent-child relationship and the approach used by parents had a direct effect on the outcomes of children and their behaviours. Research by McKeown et al (2003) indicated that the most important factor to affect the well being of a child was that of unresolved issues between the child and its parents. These included conflicts relating to behaviours, family issues, and personal autonomy. 29% of the sample of parents indicated that they were concerned with their children engaging in fights with their siblings, friends and fighting in general and they also identified that this was having a negative impact on their family life. This finding may indicate that issues in relation to family conflict and the management of same could be an area where parents may require assistance. Conflicts with parents have been found to be strongly related with young people being more likely to engage in anti-social peer groups and substance misuse.

This connection would appear to indicate that interventions and supports for families which focus on improving and emphasising the importance of the role of the parent should counteract the child's likelihood to engage with disruptive peers, antisocial behaviours and substance misuse. Patterson et al (1982) highlights the fact that interventions and programs that focus on fostering positive parental roles, such as parental discipline and conflict management have resulted in improvements in child and adolescent behaviours.

A key finding within this study was that the parents felt that they were not solely under pressure from their children's behaviours but also from a number of external influences, such as, their local communities; peer group pressures in relation to their children; school issues; and TV and internet access. Similarly the research identified in the literature review highlighted the importance of these social factors on the child's well-being and resulting behaviours. It was viewed that these factors may act as an "important risk or protective features in the child's life" (Hayes & Kernan, 2001).

Kolvin et al (1990) found that the surrounding environment was almost as important in predicting delinquency as family deprivation. The community factors identified in Kolvin' research which were believed to influence children's behaviours included community disorganisation and neglect; availability of drugs; general disadvantage in the neighbourhood. Similar concerns were highlighted by the parents involved in this study. 53% of the parents stated that their main concerns as a parent today were drugs and alcohol related issues. 16% stated they had concerns in relation to negative behaviours that were currently occurring in their neighbourhoods, such as bullying, anti-social behaviours and violence.

Another key finding in relation to external factors was in relation to the issue of peer group influences. Sutton et al (2004) found that this factor was particularly prevalent to young people on the threshold of adolescence (10-14 year olds). It was a common view in a number of studies that peers have the potential to play a large role in shaping both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. One such UK survey showed that 90% of parents believed that young people's drug use was the direct result of young people feeling pressured to conform to their peer groups. It was felt that this age group would most likely benefit from drug and alcohol education including strategies for resisting negative peer pressure (Ibid., 2004). A number of approaches which have been proven as effective with this age group were highlighted, for example 'Bullying Prevention Project' and mentoring programmes such as 'The Big Brothers and Sisters Programme'. However, Oygward (1999) advised that placing too much emphasis on peer group influences may result in parents underestimating their own influences on their children. This fear was voiced in the professional focus group in this study where it was expressed that the young people should not be blamed for their behaviours as their behaviours are a symptom of their parent's inability to cope with the pressures within their family life. It would appear that interventions which highlight the role and the influence of parents and the risk factors associated with adolescent peer groups are essential.

A further key finding of this study and in the literature review was in relation to the pivotal role of schools in supporting parents in handling their children's behaviours. It was felt that the way children engage in or disengage from formal education is a crucial factor in their later experiences and behaviours. The literature highlighted that within the UK, parenting programmes are now increasingly attached to schools. In her evaluation of the Triple P Program, Sanders (2003) found that schools and

community networks act as the key to recruitment of parents. Studies seem to indicate that schools can help to facilitate greater engagement and uptake amongst parents in such courses. This factor indicates the potential development of programmes in Ireland with schools playing a crucial role in the recruitment of parents.

Theme Two: Support Systems

Grimshaw and McGuire (1998) found that the principal source of information and advice for parents are family and friends, followed by health professionals, teachers and social services. Similar findings in relation to sources of support were highlighted in this study with 61% stating their spouses/partners; 47% family; 36% friends; and 27% schools. The significance of this finding is in relation to the future provisions of supports for families. As the literature review highlighted the needs of families are dynamic and dependent on a number of variables, such as family circumstances; number of children; children's behaviour etc... The future design of support services need to be able to provide for the variety of presenting needs. In some cases the support services may have to play a fundamental role in creating support networks for families, in particular, single parent families and families living away from their own extended families and friends due to moving from another area or country.

A further key finding of this study was the lack of awareness of parents to the Family Support Services available to them in their local communities. The majority of the respondents were confident in their ability to access a G.P. but appeared to be less confident or unfamiliar in how to access other support services. For example 76% stated they were not familiar with Barnardos and 76% stated they were unfamiliar with any other Family Support Services in the area. The literature review highlighted that parents may be anxious for help but appear to be unaware of how to find it or access it for them or their families. Riordan (2001) found that this gap in information provision impacted upon parents' ability to use existing resources and services and prevented them in being able to build up Social Support Systems. This factor was pinpointed as a crucial consideration for all services in relation to the effective targeting of service users with regards to the recruitment and engagement of parents. The literature review identified assertive approaches developed in the US which included home-visits, meetings at the family's convenience, written contracts, and the fact that a number of services opted to offer incentives such as free transport, crèche facilities, meals, and prize draws to improve recruitment (Kosterman, 1998).

Reaching families that need support is a major problem for all Family Support Services. Numerous researchers have found that the families that most need help are very often those that are unlikely to seek it (Barton et al 2002). Therefore, services do not reach all families that need support as they are less likely to participate in such programmes (Prinz, 1994) and do not engage in school events (Ralph & Sanders, 2003), or indeed engage in research projects such as this one. This however should not rule out the implementation of interventions but rather focus the attention of service providers in developing innovative methods of reaching such marginalised families.

Theme Three: Barriers to Accessing Services

Vellerman et al (2000) identified a number of factors that can hinder parental involvement in projects offered by support services. These were: social difficulties such as extra financial and organisational difficulties of single parents, the location of events, lack of engagement with school or community, lack of self-confidence, fear of being stigmatised (for using the service), lack of perceived need, and lack of project resources. This study examined the barriers, if any, that may prevent parents from accessing Family Support Services in Carlow town. A number of similar findings as identified in Vellerman's study were found.

A key finding of this aspect of the study indicated that 63% of the parents perceived that they did not need any further support in relation to their children's behaviours. This perception was also expressed in the response rate to the question as to what might prevent them from accessing existing services. The highest response received in the categories offered was in relation to the option of 'I don't need them'.

The most frequently stated factor associated with preventing parents from accessing existing services in Carlow town was the negative perceptions parents attached to using the services. There was an apparent fear expressed of being 'stigmatised' or judged for using particular services and it was widely believed that this fear acted as a significant barrier to parents. It was felt by both the parents and the professional groups that in order to make the Family Support Services more accessible to a greater number of families, the use of these services needed to be 'de-stigmatised'. One proposal to achieve this was the idea of a neutral venue where parents could have access to the services, such as, a community building, similar to a health centre that houses a number of multidisciplinary services- G.P., psychology; and a variety of family support services.

The practical factors identified by the parents were: geographical location of services, transport issues, work constraints, child minding issues, and language difficulties. It was commonly acknowledged by this study and other research that organisations, when designing supports and programs for parents, need to give due consideration to the diversity of family groups and the subsequent mechanisms for recruitment and engagement must vary according to the issues identified. A particular challenge facing the existing services is addressing the gaps that exist in relation to the provision of services for ethnic families, and in particular language barriers or cultural differences in the process of information sharing and creating effective support networks.

Theme Four: Future Interventions

The key findings identified by the study in relation to future interventions were: (1) better promotion of the existing services; (2) more training and education programs for parents of pre-adolescent children; (3) the development of child and family services.

Both the findings for this study and previous research has highlighted that the first step required in the support of parents and their families is through the provision of advice and information that will help them cope with identified problems and be able to access the supports that they need. Put simply, parents need to be made aware of the services available to them and how they would go about accessing them. Research has indicated that the key contact points in terms of the provision of advice regarding Family Support Services include, local G.P's, pre-schools, primary and post primary schools. A number of suggestions were made in relation to promoting the services available to parents in Carlow. The main suggestion was for services to be promoted more through the local media sources, such as local radio and local newspapers. The use of local media in the promotion of programs was supported by Ralph & Sanders (2003), they believed that a co-ordinated and sustained promotion by specific organisations could be useful in helping to 'seed the ground' more effectively in terms of generating greater parental awareness and interest which could result in greater participation by parents in the programs. Another suggestion for the use of media sources was the development of a comprehensive web site for families which highlighted the local support services on one page. It was felt that the benefits of this would be to offer an easily accessible directory of services that could be accessed by the greater population of Carlow Town and the surrounding areas.

As already identified in the findings, schools have a pivotal part to play in supporting parents in discussing their role as parents. The findings indicated that to assist in the education of parents in relation to the availability of services and the benefits of them for their families, it was proposed that workers from the community based services should approach the schools and provide information sharing meetings with both parents and teachers. It was hoped that this would assist in the facilitation of a closer working relationship between the parents and the community based services.

The findings of this study indicated that parents viewed a need for more training and education especially in relation to handling their children's transition from childhood to adolescence. It was generally felt by the sample group that a large gap existed in the services available to parents of pre-adolescent and adolescent age groups and future services and programmes should target this specific area as a support for parents. The numerous benefits of parenting courses were discussed in the literature review and a list of sample programmes with the strongest evidence of improving the quality of parenting were summarised. The significant benefits to the development of effective parenting skills highlighted are: that it has been considered as the primary mechanism for change in child conduct disorder; and that such programs have been proven successful in assisting parents in reducing their child's level of aggression by 20-60%. The findings here indicated that parents were interested in programs catering for the 10-14 age groups and particularly programs which involved the element of peer support. *Teen Triple P Program* appeared to be a future intervention which could be offered to parents within Carlow. This program aims to specifically prepare parents for their child's transition to the

teenage years. The benefits of this course would appear to be that it can be used as an intervention to target parents of individual teenagers thought to be at risk or for an entire population as a preventative approach to risk reduction (Ralph&Sanders, 2003). This program also incorporates the peer group support which was identified in the findings for the study as the more preferred, less formal learning tool by parents. The benefits of peer support groups are that they include support, friendship, constructive feedback from other parents as well as opportunities for parents to discuss and learn through peer interactions (Ibid., 2003). Another program applicable to this age group highlighted in the literature review was *Strengthening Families Programme*. This is a universal, family based intervention programme which aims to enhance parent's general child management skills, parent-child affective relationships, and family communications. The program focuses on the seeking to delay the onset of adolescent alcohol and substance use by improving family practices. Based on the high level of concerns of the parent sample of this study in relation to alcohol and drug related issues, this programme may be a good starting block for an organisation to encourage parental involvement and participation in their services.

39% of the sample identified the development of child and family services as a potential support to them in their current role as a parent and 62% viewed the development of child and family services as a support they would like to see occurring in their own communities. Specific child and family services mentioned were: Family activity days; Family counselling; Family mediation services. By encouraging family activities it was felt the organisations would be promoting the role and responsibilities of parents in their children's lives. The research examined in the literature review identified that it is vital that the individual needs of the children are also being addressed within child and family services. Research further suggests that children may benefit indirectly from interventions that help to improve adult relations, children still have separate needs for support (Hawthorn et al.,2003). As the literature review indicates addressing the needs of the child and the family is a complex challenge to all community based services. To succeed in effectively supporting families, support services need to incorporate at least a two pronged response of support for parents and the children.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- The findings indicated that whilst there were significant stressors associated with the parenting of 10-14 year olds, this could not be primarily attributed to their children's presenting behaviours.
- The sample of parents indicated that they were concerned with their children engaging in fights with their siblings, friends etc... and that this was having a negative impact on their family life. This finding may indicate that issues in relation to family conflict and the management of same could be a possible area where parents may require assistance.
- Intervention and programs that focus on fostering positive parental roles, such as parental discipline and conflict management have resulted in improvements in child and adolescent behaviours.
- A number of studies have demonstrated that peers have the potential to play a large role in shaping both appropriate and inappropriate behaviour of pre-adolescent children. This age group would most likely benefit from drug and alcohol education including strategies for resisting negative peer pressure. A number of approaches which have been proven as effective with this age group were highlighted, for example 'Bullying Prevention Project' and mentoring programmes such as 'The Big Brothers and Sisters Programme'.
- Schools and community networks have an important role to play in reaching parents. Studies, including this one indicate that schools could have an important role in facilitating greater engagement and uptake amongst parents in such courses.
- Support services may have to play a fundamental role in creating support networks for families, in particular, single parent families and families living away from their own extended families and friends due to moving from another area or country.
- The majority of the respondents were confident in their ability to access a G.P. but appeared to be less confident or unfamiliar in how to access other support services. For example 76% stated they were not familiar with Barnardos and 76% stated they were unfamiliar with any other Family Support Services in the area.
- Reaching families that need support is a significant challenge for Family Support Services. Numerous researchers have found that the families that most need help are very often those that are unlikely to seek it. Riordan (2001) found that the gap in information provision impacted upon

parents' ability to use existing resources and services and prevented them in being able to build up Social Support Systems. This factor was pinpointed as a crucial consideration for all services in relation to the effective targeting of service users with regards to the recruitment and engagement of parents.

- A key finding of the study indicated that 63% of the parents perceived that they did not need any further support in relation to their children's behaviours.
- The most frequently stated factor associated with preventing parents from accessing existing services in Carlow town was the negative perceptions parents attached to using the services. There was a level of apprehension expressed in relation to being 'stigmatised' or judged for using particular services and it was widely believed that this acted as a significant barrier to parents in relation to accessing services.
- The practical factors identified by the parents that acted as barriers for them were; geographical location of services, transport issue, work constraints, child minding issues, and language difficulties. It was commonly acknowledged by participants in this study and in other research that organisations, when designing support programmes for parents, need to give due consideration to the diversity of family groups and the subsequent mechanisms for recruitment and engagement must vary according to the issues identified.
- A particular challenge facing the existing services currently is addressing the gap that exists in relation to the provision of services for ethnic families.
- Both the findings for this study and the research identified in the literature review highlighted that the first step required in the support of parents and their families is through the provision of advice and information.
- A dominant suggestion was for services to be promoted more through the local media sources, such as local radio and local newspapers. The use of local media in the promotion of programs was supported by Ralph & Sanders (2003) they believed that a co-ordinated and sustained promotion by specific organisations could be useful in helping to 'seed the ground' more effectively in terms of generating greater parental awareness and interest which could result in greater participation by parents in the programs.
- The findings indicated that in order to assist in the education of parents in relation to the availability of services and the benefits of them for their families, the relationships between community-based projects and schools needs to continue to be explored and promoted.

- The findings of this study indicated that parents viewed a need for more training and education especially in relation to handling their children's transition from childhood to adolescence. It was generally felt by the sample group that a large gap existed in the services available to parents of pre-adolescent and adolescent age groups and future services and programmes should target this specific area as a support for parents.
- Research supported evidence that programmes such as Teen Triple P Program and Strengthening Families Programme appeared to be two possible future interventions that could be offered as a support to parents of 10-14 year olds in Carlow.
- Addressing the needs of the child and the family is a complex challenge to all community based services. To succeed in effectively supporting families, support services based in the local community need to incorporate at least a two pronged response: support for parents as well as supports and services for children.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire for Barnardos Research Project

Please read each question carefully and follow the instructions as to how each question should be answered. All information provided will be treated in strict confidence.

You and Your Family (please tick the appropriate boxes)

1. Are you

Male

Female

2. What age are you

Under 21

41-50

21-30

51-60

31-40

61&over

3. Your current marital status

Married

Separated/Divorced

Single

Co-Habiting

Widowed

Other

If other please specify _____

4. Are you currently employed

Yes

No

If yes, on average how many hours a week do you work? _____ hrs

5. How many children live at home with you?

| Age of child | Sex | Your Relationship to child (parent/step-parent/relative etc) |
|--------------|-----|---|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

Your Role as a Parent (When answering these questions, please think of the behaviour(s) of your own 11 or 12 year old child/children)

6. Do you find the parenting role stressful? (Please tick the appropriate box)

- Not at all Sometimes Quite a lot Great deal

7. What do you think are the main issues that concern you the most as a parent today? (Please list)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

8. Are you stressed by your own child's/children's behaviour?

- Not at all Sometimes Quite a lot Great deal

9. When your child is not in your company or away from your home, do you know where they are? E.g. mixing with friends or playing in the local area.

- Not at all Sometimes Quite a lot Great deal

11. Are you concerned about any of the influences listed below having a negative effect on your child's/children's behaviour?

| | Not at all | Sometimes | Quite a lot | Great deal |
|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Peers and friends | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| School | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Tv | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Internet Access | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| (Please specify) _____ | | | | |

12. What behaviour(s) are you aware of that your child/children engage in? (please tick the appropriate boxes)

| Behaviours | Not at all | Sometimes | Quite alot | Great deal |
|--|------------|-----------|------------|------------|
| Staying out past the agreed time | | | | |
| Lying e.g. not being truthful about their whereabouts/friends/actions etc... | | | | |
| Not telling you where they are going/ where they have been when out | | | | |
| Mixing with older peer group | | | | |
| Fighting with siblings | | | | |
| Fighting with friends/peers | | | | |
| Not able to make or maintain friendships | | | | |
| Been the victim of bullying | | | | |
| Engaged in the bullying of others | | | | |
| Experienced problems in school with teachers | | | | |
| Frequent absences from school | | | | |
| Suspended from school | | | | |
| Excluded from school | | | | |
| Smoking | | | | |
| Drinking alcohol | | | | |
| Using drugs | | | | |
| Vandalism | | | | |
| Come to the attention of the Gardaí due to their behaviour | | | | |
| Other (Please specify) _____ _____ | | | | |

13. What behaviours do your child/children engage in that concern you the most at present? (Please list)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

14. Does your child's/children's behaviour interfere with their everyday life in the following areas?

| | Not at all | Sometimes | Quite a lot | Great deal |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Home life | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Peer relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| School life | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Community | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other (Please specify) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

Support Systems for you and your family

(Please tick the appropriate boxes)

15. Where do you receive support, in dealing with your child's / children's behaviour?

| | Not at all | Sometimes | Quite a lot | Great deal |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Spouse/Partner | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Family | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Friends | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| G.P | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| School | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other (Please specify) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

16. As a parent do you feel you need more support to help you deal with your child/children's behaviour?

| Yes | No | Not Sure |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

17. What help/support do you feel would be of benefit to you, in your role as a parent with your child/children's behaviour? (please list)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

18. Do you know how to access certain supports for you and your child/children?

| | Yes | No | Not Sure |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| G.P | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Health Care Professionals (Psychology/Psychiatry/PHN) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Education Welfare Officer | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Juvenile Liaison Officer | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Family Support Services | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Social Services | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other (Please specify _____) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

19. Are you familiar with the Family Support Service, Barnardos, in Carlow?

Yes No

If yes, please list the services you believe they offer in Carlow

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

20. Are you familiar with any other Family Support Services operating in your community?

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

21. Have you ever used any of these services to help you with your child's/children's behaviours?

Yes No

If yes, please specify _____

22. What support services would you like to see operating in your own community to help with your child's behaviours? *(please list)*

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

23. What may prevent you from accessing the current support services available in your community? *(You may tick more than one box)*

I don't know what is available

I don't need them

I would not know how to access them

I don't think they would make a difference

They are not in my local area

I would view it as interference

I would feel I have failed as a parent

I can't find the time due to work hours

Other

(Please specify) _____

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS QUESTIONNAIRE.

IF YOU WOULD BE WILLING TO TAKE PART IN A PARENT GROUP DISCUSSION ABOUT THE ABOVE ISSUES, PLEASE WRITE YOUR NAME AND A CONTACT NUMBER IN THE SPACE BELOW. WE WILL THEN CONTACT YOU WITH THE DATE AND DETAILS OF THE GROUP DISCUSSION.

| |
|------------------------|
| NAME: |
| CONTACT NUMBER: |
