

Complete Care Community Focus Group Study

Exploring the Impact of Childhood Behavioural Challenges in Halton



Introduction

A series of focus group discussions were carried out to gain an understanding of the impact of childhood behavioural challenges on key stakeholders. Focus group A consisted of parents and care givers of children who have behavioural challenges. Focus group B consisted of teachers and teaching support professionals. All focus group participants either lived or worked in the Halton area.



Aim

This focus group study was undertaken as part of the Complete Care Community (CCC) initiative which is an innovative national programme designed to support health systems to utilise Primary Care Networks in tackling health inequalities. CCC aims to enable a more systematic approach to addressing the underlying health inequalities that exist within communities and how they can be addressed. In Runcorn, the CCC project is being led by R Health, Runcorn's Primary Care Network.

The focus of this CCC project is improving outcomes for children living with behavioural challenges (including conduct disorders) and their families. Each individual project will filter into a national programme evaluation so that learning and best practice can be shared with the wider health system.



Key findings of this study

- ◆ The consequences of childhood behavioural challenges are far reaching affecting child development, educational attainment, life chances, family and work life, physical and mental wellbeing.
- Accessing support for children with behavioural challenges can be complex, time consuming and is quite often associated with long delays and waiting times.
- ▲ It is not always clear to families and care givers what support is available or how to access this. This can cause confusion and distress for families who want to be proactive in supporting their child's needs.



- ◆ There is a shared understanding among participants in this study that prevention and early intervention is critical, yet frustratingly it is not always possible to seek support until childhood behaviours have deteriorated significantly.
- The shame and indignity parents and care givers often feel as a result of their child's poor behaviour often creates additional barriers to accessing help and support.
- ▲ Growing levels of poverty and inequality in the community may increase the prevalence of childhood behavioural problems creating additional demand on already stretched services. Furthermore, study participants raised concerns about a possible rise in child exploitation owing to growing poverty and inequality levels, especially for children with behavioural challenges.



Recommendations



Improve access to practical, social, and emotional support for parents and care givers of children with behavioural challenges.



Promote awareness in schools and the community of the impact of childhood behavioural challenges on stakeholders including parents and care givers to create a supportive and understanding culture.



Explore opportunities to strengthen access to children's health and wellbeing provision in the school setting to complement existing pastoral provision.



Create opportunities for school staff and cross sector professionals to come together to explore ways to build capacity for early intervention and prevention support while working within current resource constraints. Create shared spaces for learning, relationship building and exploring the art of the possible.



Explore ways of improving access to community support workers as a first point of contact for parents and care givers looking for timely information and support in relation to their child's behavioural challenges.



Strengthen connections between education settings and the third sector to increase access to information and support for parents, care givers and children.

Method

In total there were 12 participants in the two focus groups that took place, three parents and care givers and nine teachers and teaching support professionals. Focus groups followed a semi structured format to allow participants to bring to light whatever they felt relevant to the topic of discussion. Group sessions were audio recorded with the full consent of all participants. Recordings were transcribed and a thematic analysis undertaken.



The focus group discussions centred on the following broad questions:

- ❓ What barriers do you face supporting children/your child who have/has behavioural challenges?
- ❓ What impact does this have on you and your students/family?
- ⚠️ What currently helps you manage these challenges?
- ❓ What would the best support conceivable for you and children/your child who have/has behavioural challenges look and feel like?
- ❓ What would help you the most right now to tackle the challenges you are facing?





Focus group findings

Participants spoke of the impact of childhood behavioural challenges:

“I had to come out of work... I took redundancy after 18 years...because my [child] was put on a part time timetable [at school] and then sent to the pupil referral unit which was different hours. It was having such an effect on work and managing the kids, I just couldn't do it”.

Parent / care giver

“The teaching assistants quite often become the person delivering the one-to-one support to those children with challenging behaviours. It's not really their job to do that...”

Teaching support professional

Participants shared their fears and anxieties for children who have behavioural challenges:

“I worry my child won't get an education at all... It's a dog-eat-dog world out there. Things are getting worse in the economy... It's a big worry as it's like what are you going to do with your life, you can't come look after your kids all the time when you get old... Who is going to see to them then?”

Parent / care giver

“Prison, antisocial behaviour, that they might be unemployed for long periods of time. Not having good life chances in general”.

Teaching support professional



Focus group participants spoke of their experiences trying to access support:

“Everyone just refers onto someone else, and you find that there is a circle of referrals, nothing that I see ever really changes for the family as a result of this... It’s hard to access support... or they are discharged, and we don’t always know why”.

Teaching support professional

“I’ve asked for help... my [support team] where brilliant, but then the support came to an end very quickly”.

Parent / care giver



Focus group participants spoke of not knowing what help is available or how to access this:

“Where do you start? Who do you ask first? Is it your school, doctor? Where’s the first?”.

Parent / care giver

“I just need one person to speak to initially, even if it’s just to rant to and who can then say, we’ve got this group, or that group... are you interested in any of this?”

Parent / care giver



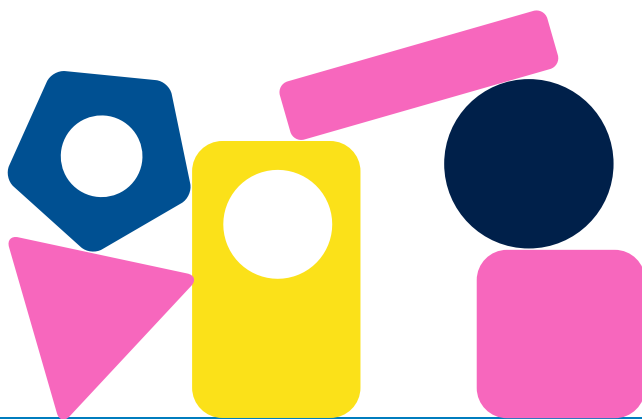
Focus group participants spoke of their frustrations trying to access early intervention and prevention support:

“You know a child may have difficulties, but we can’t get support until those difficulties have escalated. It feels like you’re sitting on a ticking time bomb because they’re fine for 6 months and then they blow up, but 6 months ago we could have told you that”.

Teacher

“Transition periods for children can be challenging, for example the transition from primary to secondary education. Often teachers are aware that these problems will come around for some children, but you cannot unlock the necessary support on teachers’ judgement alone and this feels a little as if the system isn’t trusting the professional judgement of teachers who may have supported that child for eight years and who may have 30+ years of experience”.

Teacher



Participants spoke of the shame and indignity they often feel owing to their child’s behavioural challenges:

“That’s a big reason why parents going through this don’t speak with others is because of the guilt and shame... When I pick up my children, I see the other parents stand together, and I stand alone with my hood up and umbrella trying to hide away”.

Parent / care giver

“We need to do more to make [specialist] provisions accessible and less stigmatising, so it doesn’t feel as if parents have done something wrong. Maybe if it was accessible in the school setting that would work better”.

Teaching support professional

Focus group participants spoke of the pressures that growing levels of poverty and inequality may bring about for children and families:

“Often parents don’t have the money and time to take children to these additional support sessions. I think more support situated in schools for children and parents would work really well. We need a hub in school or close by where agencies work together”.

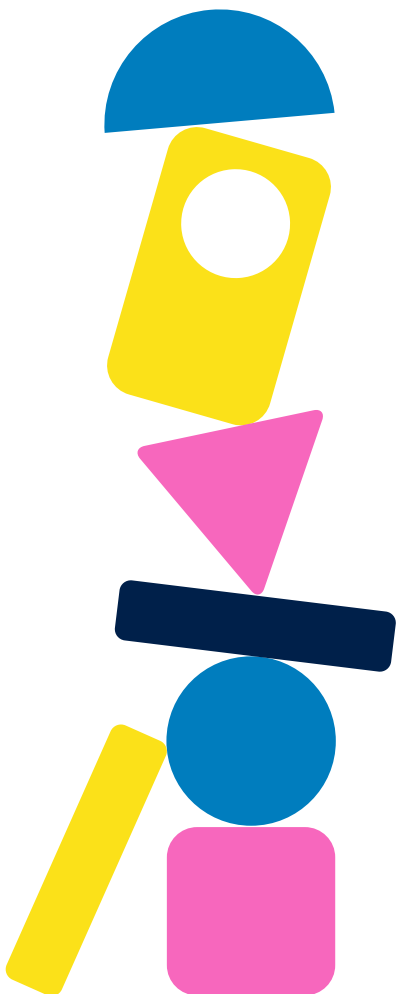
Teacher

“The kids often see it easier if they get involved in dealing drugs, and they’ll openly say that to you in the classroom. They need alternatives rather than going down this route”.

Teacher

“I don’t think the government understands the impact of the pandemic and how much it has affected child development. We are dealing with the fall out of this problem, the self-harm, anxiety, pupil absences. The number of reports for safeguarding concerns have increased by 3 or 4 times than before the pandemic, and we’re all just expected to carry on as if everything is as it was before the pandemic”.

Teaching support professional



Recommendations



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Explore ways of improving access to community support workers as a first point of contact for parents and care givers looking for timely information and support in relation to their child's behavioural challenges.



Strengthen connections between education settings and the third sector to increase access to information and support for parents, care givers and children.



Acknowledgements

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