



**Evaluation of the
*Strengthening Families,
Strengthening Communities*
Programme 2004/5**

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About the Race Equality Foundation

The Race Equality Foundation promotes race equality in social support (what families and friends do for each other) and social care (what 'workers' do for people who need support).

- We do this by exploring what is known about discrimination and disadvantage.
- We develop interventions that will overcome barriers and promote equality.
- We disseminate good practice through training, conferences and written material.

We are a registered charity and more information is available at www.raceequalityfoundation.org.uk.

About Research Plus+

Research Plus+ is a Norfolk based independent research and consultancy organisation. It specialises in undertaking research and evaluation on contemporary social issues and business research. It carries out projects for voluntary, statutory and commercial organisations both locally and nationally. It has experience of evaluating projects from a number of perspectives and of measuring performance against agreed standards.

Projects undertaken cover a wide range of topics including parenting programmes, housing, criminal justice, substance misuse, mental health, carers, health promotion, work related stress, sexual health, teenage pregnancy and disability. Most of the work has been used to inform the development of organisations policies and practices.

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1 : Introduction

This report summarises the findings of an evaluation of the *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* parenting courses held between January 2004 and March 2005. The full report is available from the Race Equality Foundation website at www.raceequalityfoundation.org.uk. The *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* programme is based on a culturally sensitive curriculum originally developed in the USA in the early 1990s. The programme demonstrated positive results in the USA with participants from a variety of ethnic / cultural backgrounds. The original programme was adapted for use in the UK by the Race Equality Foundation.

The programme is designed for parents / carers with children aged three to eighteen years. It consists of an introductory session followed by 12 three hour sessions held on consecutive weeks. Information is presented within a cultural framework covering five areas: cultural / spiritual, rites of passage, positive discipline, enhancing relationships / violence prevention and community involvement. The course is designed to enhance parent competence, parent / child interactions, child competence, parent relationships and community involvement. The course is based on developing the participants strengths using a facilitative approach.

Agencies are now responsible for the setting up and delivery of the courses. The role of the Race Equality Foundation is to support the deployment of the programme; provide facilitator training, expert support and supervision; ensure that the quality assurance system is implemented and facilitate the evaluation of the programme.

During 2006, the Race Equality Foundation obtained funding from the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) for the evaluation of the courses in 2004/5. Research Plus+ was commissioned to collate and analyse the forms completed by the course facilitators and participants, which provided the basis for the evaluation of the programme.

2 : The evaluation design

As part of the programme s built in evaluation process a Course Summary Report (CSR) was completed on each course by the course facilitator(s) and three forms were completed on or by the individual participants.

The facilitator completed the CSR at the end of the course. It provided a combination of quantitative and qualitative information on the course and the participants. Three forms were completed on individual participants — a registration form completed by the course facilitator, a pre course assessment questionnaire and a post course assessment questionnaire, both completed by the participant her/himself. The pre and post course assessment questionnaires were designed to measure whether there were any differences in the participants responses to a series of statements before and after attending the course. The questionnaires covered community activities, participant / child interactions, participant competence and child competence.

The evaluation design provided information to evaluate the programme in terms of process, outputs and immediate outcomes. The design did not cover medium or longer term outcomes and there was no control group to compare the results against.

3 : Information available for the evaluation and limitations of the data

Information was provided on 82 courses. There was a CSR for 76 of the courses and forms were provided on a total of 973 individual participants:

- Registration forms were provided for 831 participants.
- All three forms were provided for 400 of the participants.
- An additional 45 participants had both the pre and post course forms returned, but no registration forms.

Therefore, data from 445 forms could be analysed to assess changes in the participants' responses to the assessment questionnaires before and after the course.

A strength of this evaluation model is that the information required for the evaluation was built into the process of running the course. However, in practice there were a number of limitations:

- There were difficulties in ensuring that all the required forms were completed and returned to the Race Equality Foundation.
- Some of the forms that were returned were not fully completed.
- This evaluation model mainly focuses on those who successfully completed the course and provides only limited information on participants who dropped out of the course.
- As the data was incomplete, it was not possible to use the information from the registration forms and the pre course assessment questionnaires to compare the characteristics of those who dropped out with those who successfully completed the course.

Although the data was incomplete, information was provided on a large number of participants and courses and included a wealth of qualitative and quantitative data. This evaluation was therefore based on a much larger number of participants than has been possible with most UK based parenting courses to date. The results are therefore less likely to be due to chance.

4 : The parenting courses

The courses reached a wide range of ethnic groups. On almost three quarters of the courses the participants were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. The remainder had participants from a single ethnic background. Some courses were targeted at specific ethnic groups: mainly for Bangladeshis, but also for people of Chinese, Somali and Iranian backgrounds. Although not recorded as being aimed at specific ethnic groups, one course had all Angolan participants and another had mainly Yemeni participants. Two churches ran courses for their members, who were mainly of Afro-Caribbean origin or Mixed Heritage.

Just over half of the courses were targeted at other specific groups. In many cases this was specific age groups, geographical areas (including Sure Start areas) or specific schools. A few courses were targeted at people under court orders or for parents of offenders; people who had experienced domestic violence; refugees; single parents or teenage parents.

The courses were run by a wide range of agencies — voluntary, statutory and partnership organisations, and community groups. Two thirds of the courses were held in London. Other courses were held in Northern England, South West England and the Midlands. Most courses consisted of 13 or 14 sessions and were usually held on a weekday morning. The most common forms of recruitment to the courses were through flyers / brochures and announcements and by talking to parents / word of mouth.

5 : Course attendance

Attendance information, that was internally consistent, was provided for 48 of the 82 courses. Out of the 48 courses, just over three quarters (77%) of those who attended at least two sessions also completed / graduated from the course. A further 8% attended at least half the sessions but did not graduate. The drop out rate was 15%.

On nearly half of the courses some people had dropped out due to personal / family problems and on almost a third of the courses some people had dropped out due to a conflict in schedule. A number of actions were taken in order to encourage participants attendance. Those most frequently provided were refreshments, phone calls and childcare.

6 : Characteristics of the course participants

Three quarters of the course participants were of minority ethnic origin and, between them, the participants mentioned a total of 89 different ethnic backgrounds. In terms of broad ethnic groupings approaching a third (32%) of the participants were Black or Black British, 29% were White, 23% were Asian or Asian British, and the remaining 16% were of Chinese, Mixed Heritage, Middle Eastern or Other ethnic origin. The largest sub groups within the broad ethnic groupings were White British (25%), African (18%), Bangladeshi (15%) and Afro-Caribbean (11%).

A total of 53 languages were mentioned as a first language. Approaching half of the participants (46%) had a first language other than English. Approaching a fifth (19%) spoke an Asian language and 10% spoke an African language. Based on their individual descriptions, the main languages, after English, were: Bengali/Sylheti, Chinese, Somali, French, Twi, Urdu and Farsi. The French speakers were predominantly of African origin.

Whilst most of the participants were female, a small proportion was male (11%) and just over a third of the courses (39%) had at least one male participant. The main difference between the male and female participants was in their ethnic background. More males were of minority ethnic background, particularly African and Bangladeshi, and this was reflected in their first language.

Over a third of the participants were single parents (38%) and a few of the participants were grandparents (3%). Over 40% of the participants were aged between 30 and 39 years. For just over a tenth of the participants (11%) their education had ended by the end of primary school. Two thirds of the participants had a household income of under £10,000.

A small proportion of the participants (11%) said that they had attended a parent education course in the past. Many participants (87%) stated that they were attending the course to become a better parent, a third (34%) said that they were having problems with a child, 16% came with the intention of learning about drugs and violence and 3% were ordered by the court.

7 : The facilitators and participants experiences of the course

The facilitators provided detailed comments on how they presented the different components of the curriculum and the participants response. The facilitators comments on the curriculum indicated that:

- The cultural component, the positive discipline component and the relationship enhancement / violence prevention component were usually emphasised more than stated in the curriculum.
- The rites of passage and community involvement components were usually emphasised the same as stated in the curriculum.
- A few facilitators commented that they emphasised certain components of the curriculum less. This was most common for the community involvement component.
- A few facilitators commented that they had added to or modified specific components of the curriculum.
- On the relationship enhancement / violence prevention component it proved possible to emphasise some aspects of this component more than others and on 15 courses there was this mixture of emphasis.
- As part of the community involvement component a wide range of outside speakers were invited to speak to the participants to address a variety of issues. Some of the speakers / topics chosen were in response to concerns / requests expressed by the participants.

The facilitators identified a number of inter-personal challenges within the group that they had to deal with. They also identified a number of other issues that hindered people's participation in the course. Specific comments were made about working with different cultural, ethnic and language groups. The size of the group (too small or large) also influenced the effectiveness of the facilitation process. For many facilitators their experience of facilitating the course could be summed up as enjoyable, challenging, exhilarating and hard work. Their comments reinforced the benefit of having at least two facilitators for each course.

The participants rated the course content and the way that the course was conducted very highly. Nearly all the participants said that they would recommend the course to their family and friends.

8 : The impact of the course: the facilitators and participants views

The facilitators comments on the participants response to the course were predominantly positive. The participants reported that they had benefited from taking the course in a variety of ways. This included:

- They had learned new techniques to help with their children, especially positive discipline and alternatives to smacking.
- They particularly valued the concept of special time and the charts.
- They had improved their communication skills and had benefited from discussing issues with the other participants.
- The course had also had a positive effect on other areas of their life.
- They felt calmer / less angry and / or were more confident.

Approaching three quarters of the agencies offered some form of parent support group after the training was completed. Nearly all of the facilitators reported that the parents had plans to continue meeting after the course finished. This took a variety of forms and was at various stages of development. More than three quarters of the participants said that they planned to participate in a parent group after graduation.

Some of the facilitators identified specific parents for follow up and/or parents who were especially impacted by the course. This included some participants who were interested in training to become facilitators themselves.

9 : The impact of the course: findings from the paired sample pre and post course questionnaires

The paired sample, of 445 participants who completed both the pre and post course assessment questionnaires, was used to assess the impact of the course in terms of quantitative changes. In most respects the characteristics of the paired sample were very similar to the characteristics of the full sample. The most noteworthy differences were in respect of ethnic background and first language. This was mainly because there was a smaller proportion of participants of African origin in the paired sample.

The responses by the paired sample to the pre and post course assessment questionnaires were tested for statistical significance. The McNemar test was used for the Community Focus questions, as these had Yes / No responses. The Wilcoxon Matched Pairs Signed Rank Test was used for the remaining statements. The changes in the responses were tested for statistical significance at the 95% confidence level, i.e. to test if the significance value (p) was 0.05 or less. Overall, the changes in the responses to the pre and post questionnaires suggested that the course had had a positive impact on the participants.

The changes in the participants' responses to the statements in five areas were all statistically significant and the results suggested that the course led to:

- An increase in family activities and discussions.
- An increase in the use of positive discipline and communication strategies.
- A decrease in the use of negative discipline and communication strategies.
- An increase in both the participants' and the children's competence.

There were no statistically significant differences in the changes in the participants' responses to the questions on community focus. This suggested that the course did not have an immediate impact on the participants' level of community involvement.

10 : Conclusions

10.1 The ethnic and social mix of the participants

A review of what works in parenting support (Moran and others, 2004) highlighted that participation in parenting support by minority ethnic groups and fathers is generally low and there is a subsequent lack of evidence on what works with them. Similarly a report on the market for parental and family support services and a follow up review of capacity in the parenting support market (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006 and 2007) highlighted that a number of groups, most particularly fathers and minority ethnic groups, but also parents of disabled children and low income groups, were under-represented in the use of mainstream parenting support services.

The *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* Programme successfully reached people from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds with a wide variety of first languages. This included people who had recently arrived in the UK as well as people in more established communities.

The examination of the ethnic mix of the courses by the type of agency providing the course (voluntary, statutory or partnership organisation or community group) showed that each type of agency was able to access a range of ethnic groups. In some cases, where local ethnic minority organisations and community groups organised courses, this clearly assisted with reaching specific ethnic groups.

The courses also successfully reached people from a range of social groups and / or people who were facing a range of social issues. This included:

- People on low incomes
- Single parents
- Male participants
- People with varying levels of education
- People with experience of domestic violence
- People referred through the criminal justice system
- People referred by social services
- People dealing with a range of other social issues, including drugs and violence
- Teenage parents.

A few grandparents also attended the courses. A review of research on parenting programmes and minority ethnic families pointed out that minority ethnic grandparents were more keen to participate in parenting programmes than White grandparents (Barlow and others, 2004), so this was an important group of participants.

The above list includes people who are sometimes viewed as hard to reach. By working through local agencies and community groups, the *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* Programme has demonstrated that these groups can be reached and encouraged to participate in this type of course.

10.2 Course attendance

Some research has indicated that better attendance leads to more change, with 8 — 10 sessions usually needed to achieve substantial improvements (Scott and others, 2006). Nearly all of the courses ran for the full 12 weeks and some for a little longer. This provided time for the participants to reflect on their parenting skills and try out changes within a supportive environment.

The facilitators took a number of actions to support participants continued attendance on the courses and, out of those who attended at least two sessions, only 15% dropped out. This was a very satisfactory figure for this type of course. Other studies (Barlow and others, 2004) have indicated that the average drop out rate for parents in some parenting programmes is in the region of 30% and can be as high as 50%.

10.3 Benefits for the participants

Most of the participants attended the course to become a better parent. In their post course comments they identified a range of benefits they had gained from the course. These reflected the benefits of parenting programmes identified by other studies (Barlow and others, 2004). This included: enjoyment, new ideas, reduced stress, greater self control and an increased sense of empowerment. The participants also identified improvements in their relationships with other family members and other people. The pre and post course questionnaires provided quantitative evidence that the participants had benefited from the course and increased their competencies.

10.4 Benefits for the children

The participants comments also reflected some of the benefits of parenting programmes for children as identified by other studies (Barlow and others, 2004). This included: improved parent/child communications, spending more time together, increased empathy with children and use of positive rather than negative discipline. There was less evidence of allowing children more freedom. The pre and post course assessment questionnaires provided quantitative evidence that the children had benefited from the course and increased their competencies.

10.5 Use of positive discipline

Positive discipline has been recognised as a particularly important aspect of all parenting courses and the need to convey it in a culturally sensitive context has been emphasised (Barlow and others, 2004). The positive discipline component of the *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* Programme was the most valued aspect of the course and the pre and post course assessment questionnaires provided quantitative evidence that the ideas associated with positive discipline had had a practical impact.

10.6 Other parenting skills and community involvement

The participants also valued the other aspects of the curriculum and, as the course progressed, they appreciated how these contributed to their parenting skills.

As well as improving parenting skills, the content of the curriculum was designed to explore parenting styles in the cultural context of the parent/carer; to celebrate individuals' cultural background; to discuss and share different cultural parenting styles; to develop an understanding of and to provide the opportunity to build relationships between people of the same and different ethnic backgrounds; to break down isolation and to increase community involvement.

The comments clearly indicated that many of the participants learnt about their own and others' cultures and this contributed to the development of understanding and relationships between people from different ethnic groups. Nearly all of the groups planned to continue meeting in some form after the course had finished and some had already joined a parent support group.

A wide range of social issues were discussed through the curriculum in general and the community involvement component in particular. The different courses responded to the different needs of their participants and focussed on different social issues.

In some agencies experienced facilitators ran the courses alongside newly trained facilitators who had attended previous courses as participants. These parent facilitators added value by bringing their own experiences to the course. This also contributed to capacity building in the local community.

The pre and post course assessment questionnaires provided quantitative evidence that positive participant / child interactions had increased by the end of the course but the community focus questions did not provide quantitative evidence of increased community involvement.

10.7 Adherence to the recommended model

A minority of the courses did not follow the recommended model for the course as described in the programme manual. This occurred in a variety of ways: the target age group of the children, the size of the groups, the length of the course and the number of facilitators. Comments made by both the participants and the facilitators reinforced the importance of following the recommended format.

10.8 Overall conclusions

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative data indicate that, overall, the *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* Programme had a positive impact on the participants and the children and to some extent the wider family / community.

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The final words must go to some of the participants themselves:

'Very good mix of people from different cultures, found similar parenting experiences and concerns amongst us all.'

'The course is invaluable and I would encourage everyone, parent or not to go on this course. It is excellent and informative.'

'Apparently, I thought that coming to this class meant "I was a bad parent" but instead I've learned a lot and am so grateful.'



