

# Delivering Incredible Years Programmes: A practice perspective

Anne Cresswell

Parenting Team Manager, Stockport NHS Foundation Trust

Parenting programmes have been around for many years, but the need for practitioners to deliver groups offering the best outcomes for families has been highlighted by the recent drive towards evidence based practice. The Incredible Years (IY) programme is cited by NICE guidelines (TA012, 2006 and CG72, 2008) as a gold standard intervention, but what is it like to deliver parenting groups in the real world? The need for fidelity to the programme, as well as support and supervision for staff, is key. The robust organisation of venues, crèches and materials also forms a vital part of successful delivery. The positive results which can be achieved when delivering these programmes make them a 'must do' for any practitioner working with the families of young children.

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It feels like all of twelve years since I sat transfixed at the Incredible Years 3 day training session. I knew the programme sounded like a great idea and that parents would find some solutions to their child's difficult behaviour in it. I didn't realise that I would become totally immersed in persuading numerous commissioners over the next decade that it really was the 'best thing since sliced bread' in relation to helping children and their families make positive changes. So, what are the benefits and barriers of delivering the programme?

#### **Barrier**

Parents are scared of groups and so are practitioners.

#### **Benefit**

Group work provides the best way to learn.

We have learnt the importance of discussing with the parents how the group will run well in advance of the programme starting.

This helps to allay any fears of being exposed or forced to join in with something frightening. Importantly, we assess how ready parents are to engage in the programme, because we want them to succeed. Parents experiencing crisis or upheaval in their lives are not in a position to benefit fully and need other support before they will be ready.

The group dynamics which emerge from this programme require a type of high challenge, high support model which helps parents to reflect on their behaviour and enables change to follow. We all know that sharing experiences with others who are having similar problems can be reassuring and supportive. What may surprise is the amount of effective challenge which parents are able to offer one another within the safe and empowering boundaries of the group. Only last week, one of

the members of my group refuted another parent's belief about smacking, citing principles they had learnt during the programme about modelling and emotional regulation. This had so much more power and meaning for the parent than it would have done if a professional had simply told him it was 'wrong'.

#### **Barrier**

You need to be a parenting expert to deliver the programme.

#### **Benefit**

Parents learn more from an empowerment model.

A key principle of this programme is modelling. This is one of the main ways that both children and adults learn. The importance of nurturing parents by offering appropriate venues, refreshments and crèche facilities cannot be underestimated. Just as important is the attitude of group leaders. A non-expert, supportive style is a cornerstone of the programme. Parents are not judged; they are encouraged to feel accepted for who they are. This is not the same as collusion. Parents are challenged with a Socratic questioning style:-

- 'What is the risk of you doing that?'
- 'What has your child learnt from your management of his behaviour?'

They are given the chance to think through solutions for themselves and start to consider how their behaviours impact on family functioning. Parents begin to model a similar style with their children, starting to understand how their child may be feeling. This is often the catalyst for an improved relationship and a decrease in undesirable behaviour usually follows.

**Barrier**

The programme is too complicated to deliver.

**Benefit**

The core components of the programme help parents change their behaviour.

The IY programme is manualised and includes a number of core elements. The topics covered form a progressive model which helps parents understand the key principles of helping their child manage his or her behaviour and fulfil his or her potential. The way the programme is delivered via discussion, reading, video clips, role play and home practice is an effective means to cater for a variety of learning styles and offers a number of opportunities to understand key messages.

The idea of role play often fills both facilitators and group members with dread! We have learnt that it is probably the most effective way of helping parents to try out a new skill at home. We have also learnt never to call it 'role play' or ask for volunteers! If a parent describes having difficulty with implementing a strategy, a casual 'Let's have a go at practising it now!', coupled with coaching support, often creates a positive learning experience which is more likely to be repeated at home. Home practice is essential for parents to have a go at new strategies and it is also a way of assessing progress. This work has to be valued by the group leaders, and positive feedback is offered by means of encouraging comments on the homework sheets as well as tangible rewards which motivate parents to comply. Surprisingly, parents often become extremely competitive, noticing that compliance equals praise and possibly a small prize! They also notice that those who do not complete homework are neither given attention, nor made to feel inadequate. This, in turn, helps them to appreciate how reinforcing praise and rewards are, and makes them more likely to use these approaches with their children. Back to modelling again!

**Barrier**

The programme is too long for our parents - it's better to adapt it and make it shorter.

**Benefit**

The full length programme, delivered with fidelity, is what gives positive outcomes for children and families (Scott et al., 2014).

When we discuss our parenting programmes with other professionals, they are often surprised that the basic course runs for 14 weeks. Their usual response is that parents cannot possibly manage to attend such a long course. This is not our experience! Practitioners may be daunted by such a time commitment, but parents, once engaged, usually complain that the course is too short. More importantly, the group's success depends on fidelity to the evidence-based programme. Simply put, if you don't follow the recipe, you won't get the result

you expect or want. The core elements must be delivered as prescribed in the programme each and every week. Parents often make excellent progress only to find that problems reappear or change during the course of the group. This is normal, but if the group ends after only a few weeks, you will not be there to manage the relapse and get things back on track. It is vital for parents to know that group leaders are available to support them outside the group sessions, with phone contact and home visits if necessary, to ensure they fully benefit from the programme. The medical analogy of right medicine, right patient, right dose and right duration really does hold true for this intervention.

**Barrier**

Surely a bit of group work about parenting doesn't need two facilitators and money spent on supervision!

**Benefit**

Co-facilitation and supervision creates a safe environment for parents and group leaders and delivers results.

The delivery of an evidence-based programme is a demanding process. Group leaders need to be fully versed in all the core elements as well as group process skills. Starting a new group is daunting even for those of us who have years of experience. We often marvel at the issues parents bring with them when they attend our groups, and without co-facilitation, these would never be addressed. The co-facilitator role is vital for identifying what is happening for parents during the group, whilst the other leader is concentrating on delivering the content of the programme. This group process is a powerful force and we have learnt over many years to 'trust the process' when times are tough.

Group leaders need containment and supervision to help them effectively manage the intellectual and emotional demands of such intensive work. We have been fortunate to have access to video supervision and consultation from Caroline White, Incredible Years Trainer. This has been invaluable in ensuring good practice and fidelity to the programme, as well as highly supportive in relation to our own personal development. Supervision is as vital as buying the manual and organising the venue and must not be omitted.

**Barrier**

This resource should only be offered to those who are really struggling to manage and may be on the edge of care proceedings.

**Benefit**

This programme can prevent families from needing highly expensive interventions later on.

At a time of great financial pressure, it is understandable if commissioners feel that prevention and early intervention are not a priority. However, given all the evidence about the importance of good

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enough parenting on brain development in children aged 0-2, it is clear that evidence-based programmes will make the biggest impact with mothers and fathers parenting very young children (Allen, 2011). Incredible Years programmes are available in Baby and Toddler versions as well as the more widely used basic and school age programmes for parents of children aged 2-12 years. Our own experience has shown us that using the programme for parents of very young children can have life changing results. We know that if we can help the parents of highly aggressive toddlers to manage their behaviour, we can change the trajectory of their lives in school and beyond (Tremblay et al., 2004). As one parent recently put it, 'I've changed, so he's changed and we're OK now'.

### CONCLUSION

The Incredible Years programme needs commitment, expertise, supervision, organisation and fidelity to make it work. It needs to be fully funded and properly managed in relation to referral systems, organising venues and crèches, providing materials and ensuring the necessary time for staff to deliver the programme effectively. It can feel scary, frustrating and complicated. It is also the only work I have ever done in over thirty years of working in the NHS where parents regularly say, 'This has changed our lives'.

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