

# Evaluation of the Parent Gym Programme

Final Report 1



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## Executive Summary

In 2012, Canterbury Christ Church University were commissioned by Parent Gym to conduct a three-month mixed-methods study to explore the perceptions of key stakeholders in relation to the processes and outcomes of the free parenting programme created by Parent Gym and delivered by trained volunteer coaches. The findings are presented in two reports. The quantitative study was designed to evaluate changes in parenting and child behaviour after parents had undertaken the intervention (see Report 2). The qualitative study was designed to explore parents' expectations, the related and unanticipated outcomes of the intervention in the short and medium term and the factors which help or hinder the impact of the intervention. These findings are presented, here in Report 1.

### Key Findings

The main motivation for attending Parent Gym for the majority of parents was to learn more about parenting in general. Some parents, more specifically, expressed a desire to learn new ways of adapting their parenting skills for individual children in the family.

Three quarters of parents interviewed whilst they were part way through the programme reported positive outcomes from attending Parent Gym in relation to learning new ideas, approaches and ways of behaving. Approximately a third mentioned an increase in their self-confidence and a general sense of feeling better about themselves. Over a quarter of parents noted that they had seen improvements in their children's behaviour as a consequence of increasing opportunities for communication and time for play with their children and through implementing new techniques they had learnt. The major unanticipated benefit for the majority of parents was the creation of a support network where parenting concerns and anxieties could be shared with other parents.

All parents who were interviewed two months or more after they had completed the programme reported that their relationships with their children had improved. Parents also reported using different parenting techniques and better methods of communication as a consequence of attending Parent Gym. Three quarters of these parents also considered that relationships within the family as a whole had improved.

The relationship, between Parent Gym and the school is a significant factor in the success of the programme. The Family Liaison Officers and teachers played a key role in recruiting and maintaining parents' motivation once enrolled. They also helped the coach to understand contextual issues in the school, so they were better able to adapt their approach with groups or individual parents.

The Parent Gym programme was highly regarded by parents, schools and coaches. Parents were also extremely positive about the volunteer coaches who delivered the parenting sessions and who appeared to move comfortably between the roles of 'fellow parent', 'confidante', 'personal adviser' and 'teacher'. The evidence suggests that they are an important component in the success of the programme.

## Introduction

Parent Gym is a philanthropic body, funded by The Mind Gym. It offers free parenting programmes with the aim to enhance parents' skills and confidence with a view to improve children's behaviour and well-being. Parent Gym launched its first programme in spring 2010, but since then there has been a rapid expansion across London with programmes currently running in 50 schools. Sessions are held in a range of settings, including schools, faith groups and community centres. The core programme is a nine-week course of two-hour workshops but more recently a five-week pilot course was launched. Parent Gym coaches are volunteers who deliver the sessions. They undergo a three-day Academy (train-the-trainer) based on the five Mind Gym disciplines – credibility, navigation, individual focus, affinity and spirit, and are then observed delivering one of the sessions in their first programme and given feedback against these disciplines, as well as on their adherence to the course design.

The Parent Gym courses run in areas of multiple deprivation. According to Parent Gym, the reasons for locating the programmes in such areas should not be seen as an assumption that parents living in the most deprived areas are any less effective parents than those living in more wealthy areas. Rather, the rationale for targeting the programmes in such areas is that of access; in that, parents in wealthier areas are more able to access parenting support and advice. Thus, Parent Gym is rooted in the tradition of parenting programmes underpinned by a principle of 'early intervention' aiming to break the cycle of deprivation.

The study was conducted over a 3 month period. The findings offer a snapshot of the Parent Gym courses running in three different sites in London. The overall aims of this study were to investigate the extent to which Parent Gym achieves its objectives in relation to developing parents' confidence and parenting skills and to examine the factors that lead to success. The study also sought to investigate parents' expectations of participating in the programme and participants' perceptions of the outcomes for parents and children in the short and medium term.

## Methodology

Researchers adopted a qualitative approach to this study. Methods included semi-structured observations of Parent Gym sessions and interviews with coaches, school staff and parents from current and past cohorts.

### Observations

CCCU received the contact details for case study schools selected by Parent Gym at the beginning of February 2012. Parent Gym organised access but researchers made contact with the schools and coaches to organise the observation visits. Four Parent Gym sessions were observed in three separate sites:

Site 1: This school is part of a federation of schools. It is a large primary school with 450 children. Half of the children are eligible for free school meals. More children are of minority ethnic heritage than most schools of this size. Language and literacy skills are lower than average and a substantial number of children are at the early stages of learning English. Thirty seven languages are spoken in the school.

Site 2: This school is a very large primary school with 724 children. The proportion of children taking free school meals is very high. Most children are from minority ethnic backgrounds, with the majority being Bangladeshi. Most children speak English as an additional language. Most children begin school with little or no English.

Site 3: The third location is a children's centre which shares its accommodation with an average-sized primary school of 212 children. Two thirds of the children are of White British heritage with the other children from a wide range of minority ethnic heritages. An above average proportion of children are eligible for free school meals. Overall the school is in one of the 30% most deprived areas in the country.

Two observations were carried out on the nine-week programme in two separate sites with different coaches: one a school and the other a children's community centre affiliated to a primary school. Both observations were of Session 3 in Week 3. The other two observations were carried out on the five-week pilot programme delivered in a primary school - Session 1 and 4 were observed.

### Interviews

Initially it had been the intention to interview parents participating in Parent Gym programmes in the three separate case study sites. Attendance, however, was less than anticipated with between 3 and 7 parents attending in each of the 3 sites, and not all of these parents agreed to participate in the study. Parent Gym, therefore, approached other coaches who were leading programmes elsewhere in London with larger group sizes, to seek parents' agreement to be interviewed. Contact details of parents who agreed to participate were forwarded to the CCCU research team via the Parent Gym Administration. The research team received the last batch of parents' contacts details at the end of March 2012.

All but one parent who agreed to take part in the study were female. One grandmother who had parental responsibility was included. The parents were diverse in terms of backgrounds and ethnicity, with the common ethnic groups represented.

Interviews with parents, coaches and school staff were conducted between February and March. Parents who were attending the parenting sessions at the same time as the research was conducted were interviewed on the telephone. Eight of the ten interviews with parents who had already completed the programme prior to start of the research study, were also conducted on the telephone; the other two interviews were conducted face-to-face.

The three coaches interviewed were women and all had benefited from parenting programmes themselves at an earlier stage. Coach A had been employed in a variety of roles, including a successful media career. Coach B had previous experience in coaching and counselling and running her own parenting programme company. Coach C had been employed as a manager in a large international organisation.

The following table details the numbers of interviews and observations.

Table 1

Method	Numbers
Parent Gym Sessions observed Primary school – site 1 (1 observation: 9 week programme) Primary School – site 2 (2 observations: 5 week programme) Children’s Centre affiliated to a primary school – site 3 (1 observation: 9 week programme)	4
Parents interviewed by telephone - current participants	26
Parents interviewed – past participants Telephone interviews (8) Face-to-face interviews (2)	10
Coaches interviewed	3
School staff interviewed – teachers and Family Liaison Officers	4

## Case Study Findings

### Reasons for Participation and Expectations

#### *To learn*

The large majority of parents had heard about the Parent Gym parenting programme through leaflets sent home in their children's school bags, posters in the school and personal recommendations from head-teachers, teachers, Family Liaison Officers or other parents who had already been through the programme. The majority of parents commented that their main motivation for enrolling was an interest in learning more about parenting in order to be well-prepared and give their children a good start. The following quote is typical of the parents' responses:

*...I was hoping to get some help and advice on bringing up three children.... Just any help or advice is always useful to learn. If somebody had some answers on normal family life...*

Several parents also mentioned that they were prompted by doubts about their own parenting and they wanted to learn from an 'expert'. And one parent mentioned that they were keen to refresh their skills as there was such a large age gap between their youngest and their older children.

#### *Specific Issues*

A number of parents interviewed were motivated to attend the Parent Gym programme because of specific issues or set-backs that their children were experiencing which affected their school life or performance. Some of these parents had been recommended to attend by the teacher or Family Liaison Officer. For others, a separation or divorce from a partner coupled with challenges in parenting had prompted the decision to take part in Parent Gym. As one mother explained:

*I'm currently separated...There's been some issues with my son - the children you know have been in a state of flux. And I had chats with the SENCO at my son's school because he had problems with maths.... So I don't know whether it's to do with the disruption,... There was a Family Services Officer who sort of introduced herself to my son within his classroom... so I just decided to put myself into this parenting exercise because, you know, I'm in the thick of it. Any tips I can get from anybody I'm happy to try and take on board, really.*

Here, the mother is explaining a change in her child's behaviour which she attributes to the change in her circumstances. This was similar to the experiences of another parent who felt her daughter's behaviour had become problematic since splitting with her children's father:



*She started behaving strangely, like you know, at school, like fighting all the time, doing stuff she shouldn't do, ... like I have been called several times to the school because of her behaviour.*

One parent explained that she had been referred to Parent Gym as she was feeling depressed and she couldn't handle her children. She said: '*I just thought like I needed someone on my side*'. A few other parents interviewed mentioned that they were attending Parent Gym with an expectation of finding much needed support and advice on how to adapt their parenting skills as their child had been identified as having special educational needs.

*Well, I am a single mum with two children; ..the eldest one,.. she is special needs and it is her I am doing the course for ...she is 14, but she has a mental age of a child half her age... Some of these theories, I'm not sure if they'll apply to her, but that's the reason I am going there.... I'll try anything.*

*I have struggled sometimes with my son, because obviously he is autistic and my daughter finds it kind of difficult being treated a different way....it's not that we treat her differently; it's just that what works for our son doesn't work for her.*

A number of parents noted that although the advice on the course may be aimed at children of different ages and developmental stages, they hoped that they might be able to adapt the advice to suit their specific needs. The range of parental expectations and needs raises questions about the potential for offering more tailor-made course for parents who are experiencing specific challenges.

### **Session Delivery**

Three of the observations recorded followed a very similar format. The first observation of the five-week pilot programme differed as parents spent 40 minutes of the 2 hour session completing the questionnaires for the Parent Gym evaluation.

The following vignette offers a composite case study of the three observed sessions.

Two members of the school staff were in the room ensuring that the coach had sufficient resources, for example teaching materials were photocopied. As parents filtered into the room school staff and the coach worked as a team greeting parents. The school staff helped parents to refreshments as the coaches prepared the room for the training. Handwritten flip-charts were pinned around the room displaying the aims, objectives, tasks and activities of the session.

As parents filtered into the circle of seats, school staff left the room. The coach started the session by asking questions, prompting parents to reflect on their parenting issues of the past

week and about their targets (which each parent had set for themselves). Parents took turns to share their successes and challenges during the week with comments such as *'I've been calmer'*; *'He's been an absolute demon'*. They also reported on what they had achieved and how they had changed their behaviour. The coach stressed *'Don't talk about what you did BUT the effect'* *'We should always talk about effect'*.

Initially, each parent answered the coach's questions or directed questions to the coach, but as the discussions continued parents contributed their own views, listening and supporting each other. Some parents attended the Parent Gym session with their friends. They formed natural allies in the discussion, however, when discussions waned the coach offered new questions and observations, prompting more silent members of the group to share their experiences.

The sessions were planned around a common interactive framework which included: short information presentations, group discussions, individual question and answers, reflections, out of seat physically active tasks, e.g. parents formed two teams in the centre of the room. Each member of the team ran, in turn, to a flip chart on the wall to write down a type of exercise. The two lists were compared and one team was congratulated on winning by creating the longest list. Parents appeared to be keen to engage in the 'fun' activities and the discussions. The coach encouraged parents to share their experiences of using techniques learnt in class, e.g. the use of 'reward' charts for positive reinforcement for good behaviour.

In each session there appeared to be a very warm relationship between parents and coaches with lots of laughter and humour between members of the group and the coach. The coach shared relevant stories from their own parenting experiences, offering empathetic comments such as *'In time it will get better'* and generally affirming parents' suggestions with comments such as: *'good idea, I think that's important'* or *'I'm going to use that (suggestion) with my kids'*. Parents also shared tips and coping strategies about how to manage potentially stressful situations such as 'bedtime' or 'encouraging children to eat dinner when they are tired after school'. Some parents also shared stories about life in other countries before arriving in England.

## **Perceptions of the Programme**

### ***Coaches' Perceptions***

All three volunteer coaches were very positive about the programme and spoke highly about the quality. The following comments are typical:

*Overall I think it's a wonderful programme and what makes it enjoyable as a coach is when people flourish...they're recognising the problem and they're actually very keen to do something about it and they're getting the skills...*

*Yes, I think it's a really good programme, I think there are elements of it that could be changed.... there are times when I think this is just labouring a point or this hasn't really been very well written, but overall I think it's a wonderful.*

In response to questions about the aims and objectives of the programme, one coach commented that the programme had a wider scope than parenting, in that it informs and empowers parents in a range of ways and helps to maximise their potential as parents and as citizens.

*I think that good parents are also ...good people in society... - it's not just about how they parent children, it's how they relate to everybody else in society....You can't just tell your child to do something; it's about how you behave as a human being, so you know in many ways it's about a rounded person and helping them ...*

Here, an emphasis is placed on 'relating' and the coach points to positive effects reaching beyond the family to the community and society as a whole. In the same vein, one coach highlighted the need to support parents' listening and communication skills and the potential of increasing this dimension in the programme overall:

*I would put more emphasis on...what I would call reflective listening, so understanding your child's feelings and more emphasis on descriptive praise. ...giving an accurate description of what it is that they have done right, no matter how small. It is touched on in the programme, but I think it could do with more emphasis.*

One of the Family Liaison Officers however, stressed that one of the benefits of the programme is that parents' listening skills appear to improve. She said:

*Listening skills generally is one of the things that I hear from people have improved. It's not that the children's listening skills have improved; it's that the parents are now listening to their children and they are responding in a different way.*

### **Schools**

Overall, schools welcomed the Parent Gym programme and were enthusiastic about the benefits it could bring to the school community. Staff from all three sites described how the schools were keen to support and promote the Parent Gym programme to parents. One key aspect which particularly appealed was that no financial cost was incurred by either the school or the parents. Staff from all schools commented on the good relationships between themselves and the Parent Gym organisation. Two Family Liaison Officers commented on the willingness of Parent Gym to tailor their programmes around the needs of parents in their

communities. They also highlighted that the coaches were professional and open to suggestions in order to meet the needs of specific parents.

Conversely, school staff were concerned that Parent Gym appeared insufficiently nimble in providing information and resources in good time prior to the start of a course which created challenges for the school. A Family Liaison Officer, for example, described how the dates for the parenting sessions had been arranged well in advance, but there was limited contact or information and the materials for recruitment only arrived a few days before the start of the first session.

Staff from two schools raised some queries concerning the standard evaluation questionnaires adopted by Parent Gym to evaluate the programme. One member of the school felt that the questionnaires were not relevant to their parents as they reflected a 'white', 'middle-class' style of parenting. A teacher commented that the questionnaires were aimed at parents with children aged over four, which did not reflect the ages of the children of the parents attending Parent Gym sessions. Some of the staff considered the questionnaires too long, the language too complex and mentioned that parents who were not fluent in English struggled to complete them. It was also noted that several parents were reluctant to complete the questionnaires because of fears about their responses being passed to social services as well as immigration. These issues were also raised by parents themselves.

Staff from two schools discussed issues related to recruitment. One member of staff considered that Parent Gym's aim to recruit twenty parents into one class was an unrealistic aspiration. She argued that the parent numbers were not disappointing as every parent that benefits from the programme will potentially enhance their children's lives and '*every child that can be reached makes a difference*'. When discussing the dropout rate, rather than reflecting the quality of the programme, the staff highlighted the complex issues that many of the parents in their communities faced. One of the Family Liaison Officers for example, identified two principle reasons for lack of attendance:

*Those that didn't complete were either working but really wanted to do the course and they were working shift work so were coming as and when they could. The other percentage of the group had either mental health or substance misuse issues, and every week there was some appointment, ... they are the parents that know what they need to do to make it seem like they're functioning, so they sign up, but their ability to commit and sustain is something very different....*

This comment highlights the challenges that schools face, firstly in recruiting parents to a programme such as Parent Gym, and secondly in supporting attendance once parents have enrolled.

In relation to the impact of the parenting programme on children's achievements, comments generally indicated that in such a short period of time, changes were difficult to identify. One

member of staff, however, mentioned that some changes in some children's behaviour and attitudes were discernible. She said:

*The effectiveness of it? ...those parents who are engaged in it who have previously not been engaged have taken a long time to see that the school are being consistent with them.... . I have had feedback from class teachers, from other agencies that work within our school that help children close gaps in their learning. Most of the learning isn't that they have come on leaps and bounds, but they are more engaged, they are more responsive....*

While this member of staff goes on to discuss how it was too early to see any improvements in terms of educational attainment, the school was hopeful that this change would be seen. Staff from two schools noted that they perceived that some parents who had participated in Parent Gym had become more confident as a result of attending the programme. This perception echoes comments made by some of the parents who reported that through an increase in self-confidence, they felt that they are more able to support their children with school work.

### **Benefits in the Short Term**

All participants still attending a Parent Gym programme at the time the study was conducted reported positive outcomes in the short term either for themselves, their children or for the family as a whole. Twenty parents highlighted the positive impact of learning new ideas, approaches and ways of behaving whilst nine reported an increased self-confidence and a general sense of feeling better about themselves. Six parents mentioned that they had noticed improvements in their children's behaviour as a result of techniques and lessons they had learnt, such as introducing reward charts or increasing communication and time for play with their children.

### ***Self-Confidence***

A number of parents described how they were feeling better about their role as parents since starting on the Parent Gym programme. Nine parents expressed improved feelings of self-confidence and reduced levels of stress and anxiety, as the following quotes illustrate.

*What I liked best was that you meet different parents and sometimes you think that you are the worst parent or you are not doing the right thing, but so many people out there are struggling with parenthood and for the fact that everybody felt free to discuss their problem and nobody was judged...*

*It's having confirmation that what you're doing or what you're planning to do is the right thing. As a first-time mum, I don't know what I am doing. I just half rely on my instincts and half rely on other people telling me what to do, so... that's kind of how it helps me out.*

Three parents described feeling 'low' or depressed before they had joined the programme. Although these comments were relatively rare, there are potential implications regarding appropriate continued support for parents once a programme has finished. One parent explained:

*First I used to ...really, really ..scream ... and I used to lay down on my pillow crying. I was going mad about it because of the children, but now, they are eating by themselves, I am not even in the room... everything has calmed down. I have really, really seen an improvement.*

### ***Learning New Approaches and Ideas***

Twenty parents interviewed described applying new approaches and ideas that they had learnt during the sessions into their everyday lives. One of the most popular techniques described was the use of a 'reward charts' to promote good behaviour. The following quote cites one specific example but is typical of how parents spoke about the reward charts.

*We started a reward chart, he likes that, and you know I have got a jar... every time he does something good, I let him pick up a marble and he puts it in the jar. At the end of the week, you know if he does quite a lot of obeying, doing good then I give him a little treat. I reward him with something, and he looks forward to that...*

Thirteen parents commented on how ideas given in parenting classes had improved their relationships with children. One mother, for example, described how the family had now started to sit at the table together for meals, and another reported that rather than busying herself with household chores she sits with her children during their meal times. Consequently she was listening and talking to them more. Another mother described changing the way she communicated with her children:

*I am communicating much better, instead of shouting and issuing orders and instructions and giving lectures and advice, I am actually listening to my son and ...explaining why we do things, and why we have rules rather than just imposing ...whether it's for safety reasons,....good manners, getting on with people. It's helping me adjust my attitude to how I deal with irritations that I experience. It's very beneficial.*

Through comparison and reflection, one coach perceived, that parents were more aware of parenting issues and they had developed a greater understanding of themselves as parents and in some cases their family as a whole. She said:

*...they get self-knowledge...and actually each individual parent will have one key thing .... So for one (parent), things didn't seem to be an issue and suddenly he got chatting – 'my son never talks to me' ....I can see growth in*

*everyone, even one or two ...of them were completely disengaged to start with... even if it's very hard to measure these things.*

### ***Changes in Children's Behaviour***

Six parents reported that they had noticed changes in their children's attitudes and/or behaviour which they attributed to the new techniques and approaches they had adopted since attending Parent Gym classes. The following quote illustrates the mutual benefits of one mother increasing positive reinforcement with her daughter.

*It's giving me ideas and strategies how to raise my kids... like how to punish your child ...how to talk to your child, or ... If your child does something good, you have to tell the child ...I didn't do that before, if my child did something, I just looked at her. Now ..if my daughter does something good, I say you have done well. She appreciates that, it makes her happy...*

Another parent spoke more generally saying 'My son is more happy now... One thing he is happy because we spend more time together, I can see he is more joyful'.

### ***Developing a Social Support Network and Community***

A major unanticipated benefit reported by eight parents interviewed was the expansion of a social support network. Eleven mothers highlighted the importance of sharing ideas and experiences with other parents. One mother described how the sessions were *like a little coffee morning.. we all listen to each other's stories*. Some of these mothers also commented on the benefits of meeting parents that they probably wouldn't meet in other circumstances. The social dimension appeared to be a source of support for parents. One mother expressed this in the following way:

*The fact we change...we open up, like, I can tell my story, other people can tell their stories so we change ideas and see what I am doing wrong, what they are doing wrong.*

Some mothers expressed a sense of belonging and being connected to their local school. One mother expressed this feeling with the following comment:

*It would be being more a part of the school community, ...you know walking down the road and seeing some of the mums there, I could be screaming that the children are driving me crazy..., and just seeing one of the other mums say yes, been there, done that, don't worry about it, and then I am okay, I am not just screaming inwardly to myself, I have said it, because I have met this person, she knows what I am going through, I know what she is going through, so it's the building of the relationship which is a huge benefit.*

In sharing their practices and stories with other parents, a corollary appears to be that some parents are reassured that they are 'not alone'; that they are not the only parents that are facing particular experiences or challenges. Responses such as these also indicate the value of being linked in with other parents in terms of the simple pleasure of sociability and a sense of connection through similar experiences.

*I like going to the sessions ...finding that actually your family is exactly the same as every other family in the world,...[well] in this area they all have the same problems. Everybody's shouting at quarter to nine in the morning saying 'put your shoes on', it's not just you and you know all the other daily pressures that people have.*

Six parents mentioned the benefit of the programme in terms of breaking out of social isolation as the following quote illustrates:

*It's like a little social meeting for me because I don't get the chance to go out much, because people are willing to look after my younger one, but not the older one because they know she's got problems, and where she won't talk they are scared in case she's got something wrong and she won't tell them. So I haven't got a chance ... I haven't got a social life, so it gets me out of the house as well, meeting people.*

### ***Cultural Community***

One member of the school staff mentioned that many women who are not English want to attend the programme as a way of meeting other parents and integrating into the culture of the new community:

*I hear from Muslim women when they are going to classes that the reason for them wanting to learn is to be in a group of people that are different from themselves, and often a lot of women are put off because they go into a group where everyone is just like them, where everyone is at the same point in their learning and they don't feel that there's anyone to role model for them, to push the aspirations of the group.. so we are very acutely aware of making sure that our parents don't feel targeted.*

Echoing this sentiment, one of the parents commented:

*...it's important for integration, because you come from different culture, different tradition... and you come, it's new life you have to follow and you have to learn. How you can follow without learning? .....I think parents from different countries they need it....it's important ... because you know, we are different tradition .. cause you know, when I was a child. ..when you go to school they hit you .. it's normal, but here you can't do it; you shouldn't... I*



*actually come from Afghanistan, it is totally different. The parents behave totally different with their kids, even their kids grown up....*

It is possible that the notion of learning and adopting new cultural reference points relate in part to negative patterns of social exclusion experienced in wider society however, there is a sense of agency in accounts such as these.

### **Benefits in the Medium Term**

Parents who had attended Parent Gym programmes in the past were asked about the sustainable benefits which they felt the programme was continuing to bring to their lives. All ten of the past participants interviewed reported using different parenting techniques and they perceived better methods of communication as a consequence of attending Parent Gym. All ten parents also felt that relationships between themselves and their children had improved, and some of these parents considered relationships within the family as a whole had also improved. Each parent described this improved communication in different ways.

#### ***Improved Relationships with Children and Family***

Seven parents described how the different ways of communicating that they had implemented since attending Parent Gym helped them to develop closer relationships with their children. One of these parents described how she was getting to know her children better. Typically, these parents described spending more time with their children, talking to them more, and listening to them. As this mother explains they have something to say:

*Most of the time we don't let our children to speak, but you have to listen to the children as well as when you are talking and they have something to say. You don't say you be quiet I'm talking here...*

In cases where parents might have been prompted to attend Parent Gym in order to seek advice on approaching the challenging behaviour of one child, parents were able to see improvements in their relationship with all their children and the family as a whole. Seven parents referred to noticing improved relationships within their family as the following quotes indicate:

*There is just a better relationship between myself and my children and my husband and my children and even me and my husband, so it shows on the different family relationships I suppose as well.*

*I'd say [the benefits] are for all of us...The benefits are for the family as a whole, for me, the children, the people I live with as I live in an extended family.*

One parent also indicated that the tips and advice she has picked up at Parent Gym could be applied in her relationship with other people. She said: *'I have even used some of the tips on my husband!'*

Two parents described how, since attending the programme they were shouting less at their children and, as a result of using the techniques they had picked up from Parent Gym, were feeling calmer and more able to find more productive ways of dealing with challenging behaviour and conflict. Two mothers explained that since completing the programme they were focusing less on giving out orders and had begun to communicate in different ways. For these two parents this meant talking to their children more about feelings and for one of these parents it meant being able to tell her children that they were loved, as this quote illustrates:

*... it's kind of given me a new way to communicate with my children as well rather than just placing rules and regulations within the house, it kind of helps you to communicate with your child and gives you tips on how to show your love in different ways. It's really lovely and I love the way they had a section each week that covered that...*

### ***Improvements in Education***

Two parents discussed how they had seen improvements in their children's educational attainment. One mother explained that she spends more time talking with her children and listening to them and she perceives that they are better engaged with their school work. She said that this is not only observed by herself but also a relative: *'...their uncle is coming every week, he is checking on their studies and stuff, so he is happy...so I am happy'*. The other parent highlighted a shift in the educational support given to her children:

*...the nicest thing about Parent Gym, at least for the kids, also for them I think, through this course we can improve our kids in reading, going to the library, which book they want, we take them, we study with them which we don't know before, we can work with them...*

It appears that as parents focus more attention on their children, their confidence in being able to support their children's learning increases.

### ***Maintaining Networks***

Three parents, who had finished the programme, commented on the need for continued support by the network of parents, beyond the duration of the Parent Gym sessions. One mother described how another parent had been 'appointed' as a group facilitator, responsible for maintaining contact with the parents from the class:

*She does text us sometimes, this year we have met about twice, there is a kind of follow up arrangement, we ... discuss the benefits and what challenges we are facing...*

One parent also mentioned that her group had discussed how to maintain the links and continue meeting with 'their' group in the future.

*...on the last session there was a lot to do with like continuation of the group, which I think is a really good community feel at the end of it. It kind of shouldn't stop there really...*

In a similar way another parent described how she had made 'friends' with the other parents from the classes and was able to phone them to seek reassurance. As a result of the classes they were able to stay in contact and provide support for one another.

### ***Increased Confidence***

Increased confidence can be discerned from the interviews with all the parents who had completed Parent Gym, however, three parents specifically discussed how they were feeling more confident about themselves and their abilities as parents. One mother explained her feelings of increased self-confidence about her parenting ability:

*It just gives you a really good feeling about being a parent really, it's just very reassuring and... makes you think more about how you are behaving, and also in parts when you realise that I was probably doing things not wrong, but I could be doing certain things better, that I didn't realise I could have done better, so that made me think a lot more about how I was parenting.*

Another of the three parents noted how attending Parent Gym has '*made me a better person...it made me a better parent*'. This sentiment was echoed by one of the coaches: she commented, '*it definitely impacts (on) their confidence ... (on) their ability to be consistent, to be positive, to listen and to understand their children more*'.

### **Factors that Support the Programme**

#### ***The Setting***

The support of the school and in one case the community centre appeared a key element in the success of the programme. Staff played an important role in recruiting parents and encouraging them to attend Parent Gym Classes. The following quote from a parent describes how the Family Liaison Officer is perceived as an important point of contact, acting as a 'go-between' for teachers and parents:

*She is the Parent Liaison Officer, so she is like a 'go-between', between the parents and the teachers and the children. If you don't feel like you can talk to a teacher you can talk to (name) and she will be your first point of contact if you need her to be...*

Additionally, coaches noted that Family Liaison Officers provide them with background details as one coach explained:

*They are seeing the parents, they know who they are, they know the background, they can encourage them to come along. They can give me bits of information about the parents that help me, so I think it's really quite crucial that it comes from within the school'*

### **The Coaches**

All coaches appeared to easily encompass the different dimensions of their role within the sessions observed. They appeared to comfortably move between the roles of 'fellow parent', 'confidante', 'personal adviser' and 'teacher'. One coach commented that it was *'the best job she has ever done.... and would be very excited to make it a career.'* In discussing the factors that help the programme one coach commented on the calibre of coaches recruited and the high level of competency and skill as this comment illustrates:

*....it takes quite a high level of skill and I am not trying to boost myself, but I have been [coaching] for a long time. I have got colleagues who haven't been doing it ..for a long time but are very skilled communicators and multi-taskers, and you have so much content that they provide, and you have to make instant judgements in the moment as to what you drop, what you put in, how you manage the group...*

She also considered the policy of recruiting volunteers as coaches to be a successful part of the programme, which in her view was sustainable.

*I think it's right... I think that they (Parent Gym) are very clever, I think they've tapped into a theme of middle class people who are looking to give back to society and they are quite happy to do it voluntarily. ....I'm in a position where I could do it for as long as I like.*

The three coaches had all undergone training designed and run by Parent Gym. All coaches considered the training to be useful although in differing degrees. One coach stated that *'the training is fantastic'*, whilst another described the training as *'pretty patchy'*. Similarly, perceptions about Parent Gym's provision of on-going support and development for coaches differed. One coach stated they did not feel the need for additional support, while another emphasised a need for *'regular chances to meet [other coaches]* and a focus on the underlying *'root emotional causes of misbehaviour'* alongside the focus on behaviour

management. Another comment indicated the need for on-going support in terms of ‘top tips’ of what to do and how to cope with the unexpected or with organisational aspects of the programme such as how to make contact with parents in the playground. One coach mentioned that the training programme had been very intense: she said, ‘they’re trying to cram a lot into a short space of time’. Another highlighted a need for improved monitoring to ensure consistency across all programmes:

*I know they don’t pass everyone on the academy, so they definitely have criteria and standards that you have to reach to pass .. but.. there is a potential for somebody to do it very differently and not necessarily achieve the results that they [Parent Gym] want to achieve.*

### **Parents Views of the Coaches**

The coaches appeared to have established themselves as part of the community of parents rather than separate from them. Parents talked about their coaches in very warm terms, due in part to their caring approach both during and between sessions.

*(The coach) was very good. Very warm and professional and friendly actually ..I had a concern because the family service person was the co-ordinator, ...and I knew she worked at my son’s school initially I thought ‘ooh I wonder if some of what I’m saying might filter through to her’ ...(the coach) assured me that things were confidential ...*

A number of parents commented that the coach ‘knew all our names’ and ‘she sent texts to check in to see how it’s going’. Additionally all three coaches appeared to appeal to their group on the basis of their shared identity and experiences as parents as the following quotes illustrate:

*I think the woman who was teaching us was brilliant; I mean, she’s got two kids herself.*

*Oh she’s very friendly. Sometimes she relates the situation to her experiences with her children. ...it’s not like someone who’s read a textbook and dictating how to bring up your children, she can empathise with you as well.*

*She was brilliant. ...she was one of us....it was a support system that she was sort of hosting but you never felt you were being preached at.*

Their ‘parent identity’ emerged not only as a chief connecting factor between the coach and parents but it also appeared to have a democratising effect between the parents themselves who were from very different backgrounds, ethnicities and income brackets.

### *Parent Gym Magazines*

One aspect of the programme that parents mentioned frequently was the weekly magazine. Each issue focuses on a different theme relating to everyday experiences and challenges that parents are likely to encounter. A number of parents commented that they had enjoyed using the magazines as part of the programme although a few parents commented that sections in the magazine such as the quiz became tedious when repeated at the start of each session. Two parents highlighted the benefits of using the magazines outside of the sessions. One parent described how she was able to use the magazines as a basis for conversation about parenting with her husband. The other parent described how she was reassured that the magazines were always to hand:

*...every session we are given the magazines, so it's like always next to me, where I can open and read it and it is always in my mind, you know? ... when you need this help or this advice, ...and I can remember what we did last time.*

All coaches were positive about the magazines as a resource for parents although one coach considered that elements of the magazine would benefit from some editing.

### **Factors that Hinder the Programme**

#### *Evaluation Design*

Parents had mixed responses to the standard evaluation questionnaires that were used by Parent Gym and administered in the first and last session of the programme in order to assess changes in their parenting behaviour. Some parents accepted that there is a need for an evaluation process and made no specific comments, however, others were more critical. A number of parents raised issues about the length of the questionnaire and the types of questions and some parents also appeared uncertain about the purposes of the questionnaires. These issues correspond with those raised by some of the school staff described earlier in the report. One of the coaches also commented on the length of time to complete the questionnaires. In one of the sessions observed the 'pre intervention' questionnaires took 40 minutes of the 2 hour session to complete. One parent also noted that she found the Likert Scales confusing as she had difficulty remembering the significance or relevance of the numbers '0 to 5' as she completed the questionnaire. Another parent described how she felt that some of the questions were not applicable to her circumstances, due to the ages of her children but that she didn't feel as though she could 'skip' the questions. Some parents expressed a feeling of uncertainty about the purpose of the questionnaire, in particular what would happen to the parents' responses and whether they would be kept confidential. The personal and sensitive nature of some of the questions was also an issue for some parents. In the following extract one parent explains her concerns about her information being passed on to social services:

*...especially when it comes to questions like about the hitting of your children or the punishment and discipline like that, because that is why I am there, is to get help with discipline, to find alternative ways, and I know they can't help you properly unless you are completely truthful, but then again you are scared, because you know as soon as you open up, you don't want social services on your case, or ... so it can be a bit scary that way.*

The question regarding the physical punishment of a child was also discussed by another parent, though for different reasons, as she had felt disturbed by a question on hitting a child, as she explains:

*Do you ever hit your child with a belt? That was one of the questions. And that was like oh no, no I don't....Some of them were quite upfront; some of them were really disturbing, yes definitely. I can't really remember all the questions because there was so many.*

The evidence suggests that further explanation and support is needed for some parents if they are expected to complete an evaluation using these questionnaires.

### ***Programme design and extension activities***

Some parents reported a sense of loss when the course was over and a desire to keep the newly formed network together in some way. The final session is designed to encourage parents to continue meeting in their own parent-led groups after the official end of the course. However, three of the ten parents stated they would value some kind of further support and follow-up after the programme had finished. One parent suggested on-going contact with the coach, another expressed a desire for further support of any kind and the third indicated a desire for an 'advanced' course. One parent from Zimbabwe had actually attended three parenting programmes over the year. She was very positive about Parent Gym, she explained that the programme suggests '*advice rather than educating rules and regulations and stipulations... this one has been much easier to follow*'. These comments highlight parents' need for information about extended support once the initial parenting programme is finished.

One parent mentioned that the programme would be improved if children could be involved. The quote below indicates that the parent considered incorporating a social gathering into the programme not only for children's information and enjoyment but also as a potential impact indicator of success:

*so maybe every month ...go outdoors maybe to have some game or funfair or something with their children, so the children will know this is the course their parents are taking, ...you can leave the children because then they will know how to get on with other kids and then we will know that the work we made, they are taking it into practice, I think it should be improved.*

Time and resources may potentially prevent some of these suggestions; however, they are an indication of parents' engagement and enthusiasm for the programme.

### ***A Children's Crèche***

One of the case study sites provided a crèche for small children and in another, small children could accompany their parents to the session. The Family Liaison Officer in another school commented on the importance of a crèche although they were unable to provide this facility for parents attending Parent Gym:

*The only downside ...is that we haven't been able to provide crèche ...We had a waiting list for this cycle, but that was based on the fact that we were hoping we would have crèche and we don't have crèche, so a lot of those parents that wanted to do it aren't doing it.*

One coach, however, commented on the disruption of having a crèche so near to the course in that some parents typically visit their children half way through the session due to some issues that may have arisen with their children in the crèche. There is a tension therefore, without a crèche some parents cannot attend parenting classes, but with a crèche parents may not be able to focus entirely on their own development and may disrupt the class or the coach, which potentially impacts on all parents and the session as a whole.

### ***Limitations of the Programme***

In relation to the limitations of the programme or areas of development, a small number of issues were raised in relation to the Parent Gym leaflet and the need for greater flexibility in the programme. Some comments related to the name 'Gym' which implies physical exercise and some parents said they hadn't realised from the marketing materials that the programme was 'a way of meeting other parents and sharing tips and ideas'.

The parent groups varied in terms of their needs, interests, and education and some parents portrayed a desire for a parenting programme that was designed more keenly to their specific contexts. For example, Parent Gym is aimed at parents with children aged between two and eleven however, two parents with young children who attended the sessions, expressed a desire for a programme tailored for those with very young children and babies. One of the coaches remarked on this:

*I've got the problem that quite a few of them have got 18 month old babies and they don't get a lot of what I'm saying and they're there kind of in anticipation of ... parenting later.*

Other comments associated with bespoke courses related to parenting programmes 'just for fathers' and one mother suggested that a specific course focused on parenting issues related to autism might be useful for small groups of parents.



An issue of the accessibility of the programme also emerged in relation to parents whose first language is not English. One parent commented that she had struggled at times, *'my English is not that good sometimes I just ask the words, what does it mean?'* Another parent stated, *'Some of the questions were in the ..book, they were very difficult for me, and I don't even bother to answer them now'*. This parent went on to suggest that the programme materials should include materials that are written in other languages: *'it might be a little bit more paper, a bit more ink, but if they do need it printed in a language that they understood, maybe that is something that could be done'*. Concurrently a coach commented on the language barrier during sessions for some parents, which suggests issues of entitlement as not all parents can access the whole programme.

*I mean the first group I did, there were a lot of Somali ladies, I think there were about 12. A few of them didn't understand as well and they had conversations between themselves where their friends were trying to keep them up, ..there would be a spokes-person and so it did slow things down. ..*

### **The 5 week Pilot Course**

There were mixed feelings regarding reducing the nine-week programme to a five-week programme. Two coaches appeared to be more in favour of the five-week course than the other coach. On a practical level these two coaches reported that the five-week course would potentially enable two courses to be run at the school per term, thus reaching more parents. In addition it was noted that a succinct course would be easier for parents to digest.

*I mean personally I think a five-week course is just where you are dealing with some of the key things...I prefer to deliver a five-week course and I would hope that they cover things in a far more succinct way ..*

However one coach expressed concern associated with attendance and suggested that if the nine-week programme was to be reduced, it might be better to reduce it to seven weeks rather than five. In relation to attendance, she said:

*...if they miss one or two, which they inevitably do, they are still getting seven ..but if they miss one or two of the five, then it is really limited...I think a lot of what is going on there is about feeling safe, gradually opening up, ..developing their bonds between the group and the support.., and it just doesn't happen in the same way as the five week programme.*

Parents also expressed mixed feelings about the length of the course, with three feeling that the five week course worked well while another parent clearly felt that more sessions or longer sessions would be beneficial. It is difficult, therefore, to draw conclusion about the reduction of the programme without further evidence.

## Conclusion

Overall, findings have shown that Parent Gym is highly regarded by parents, school staff and coaches. Schools were identified as important gatekeepers and keen to develop relationships with Parent Gym as a way of engaging with their local communities. Schools also play a key role in the recruitment of parents to courses. All parents described experiencing positive outcomes as a result of attending sessions. Parents discussed a range of motivations behind their decision to join Parent Gym, these included learning about parenting and seeking support for specific issues. One of the most noted benefits for parents was the development of a network of social support which, in some cases, helped them to combat feelings of isolation and depression. As a result of attending the sessions, many parents also described how they had started to feel more confident and better about their abilities as parents. A number of parents reported that they had successfully introduced a range of new approaches (such as reward charts) and felt that relationships with their children were improving. Parents also noted some areas for development for the programme such as a crèche and materials written in languages other than English. Parents perceive that Parent Gym sessions are well run by a team of committed coaches who are parents themselves. The observations revealed that the sessions were both interactive and inclusive. Schools were unable to identify improvements in children's achievement, however one member of the school staff in one school reported that some children appeared to be more engaged in class.

## Recommendations

1. The evidence suggests that more frequent communication with schools would be beneficial in terms of recruitment and maintaining attendance at the Parent Gym sessions. Additionally, attendance may improve if all marketing materials are forwarded to schools well in advance of the start of the programme to ensure that schools have time to contact 'hard-to-reach' parents.
2. It is recommended that further mechanisms are designed to maintain motivation and support parents' attendance during the programme for example support for a more organised mutually supportive 'buddy' system within the emerging networks.
3. The findings reveal a demand from some parents for tailor-made courses. It is recommended, therefore, that in the absence of bespoke courses at present, Parent Gym explore the potential of offering additional resources and information to enable coaches to support parents who have specific needs. A number of parents for example, would welcome materials written in languages other than English to enable them to fully access information in the magazines during the sessions and at home.
4. The findings from the interviews and observations suggest that either further support is offered to parents when evaluating the intervention or different instruments are used.

