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Reducing Parental Conflict Project Evaluation

**Overview of Early Findings**

**April 2019 – March 2020**

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Project Overview

Oasis Project provides a unique service model to women with drug/alcohol problems and to children who are affected by substance misuse in the family. With this project, Oasis brought its unique expertise in working with disadvantaged families affected by substance misuse to develop an understanding of what works to reduce parental conflict and improve outcomes for families where there are drug and alcohol misuse issues. In recognition of the fact that men are often overlooked by services working with families, we implemented and tested innovative ways of initially engaging fathers in support and preparing them for a longer-term intervention. We also delivered a series of reflective Community of Practice sessions for professionals working with families with an aim to improve their engagement with fathers. The work was delivered across the county of East Sussex.

Activities included:

* Delivery of the ‘Parents as Partners’ programme to couples. This is a 16-week family-based intervention for couples to strengthen their relationship. The programme was delivered to a group of 8 participants (4 dyads). Parents as Partners will be delivered alongside childcare
* Deliver of the Father’s Service; brief, flexible, individual practical and emotional support to fathers to strengthen relationships and communication
* Development of a ‘Father’s Network’; a series of structured ‘Community of Practice’ style groups for professionals from voluntary and statutory sector organisations to explore the challenges they face in their efforts to engage fathers.

The project has the following aims;

* Parents where one or both is in treatment for / recovery from substance misuse will experience a reduction in parental conflict
* Fathers will have a better understanding of their role as fathers in supporting their children and their positive development
* Children will have fewer adverse experiences having experienced parental conflict and more positive parental experiences with their father
* Through engaging with the Father’s Network, professional knowledge of the needs of parents with substance misuse problems will be improved
* Through Parents as Partners program delivery early indications will be established on

1. the programme’s efficacy with this population.
2. the needs of this population related to parenting interventions.

The project was open to families with at least one child under 18 years living in East Sussex (Hastings, Eastbourne and across the county) reporting inter-parental conflict / unresolved conflict which does not meet the threshold for Domestic Abuse where one or both parents has (self reported) experience of issues with drugs/alcohol including;

* those who are in structured substance misuse treatment
* those who are in recovery from drug or alcohol misuse following treatment
* those who are not and have not accessed structured substance misuse treatment but who have misused drugs or alcohol in the past

Parents could be;

* Co-habiting
* Separated - where mother or father lives alone with child (single parents)

## 1.2 This Report

This evaluation report outlines some of the key learning from Phase One of the project (April 2019 – March 2020) and includes an evaluation of **Parents as Partners** and the **Father’s Network** interventions. The University of Sussex has been commissioned to undertake an external evaluation of the project as a whole. The final evaluation report will be delivered in January 2021 and will consist of an in-depth evaluation of the project in its entirety, including the Father’s Service. The University of Sussex holds the raw data from Phase One of the interventions and will draw the analysis.

# 2. Methodology.

## 2.1 Approaches & Measures

### 2.1.1 Parents as Partners

The Parents as Partners service was delivered to four parenting couples (3=intact; 1=separated) during a 16-week period. Participants were administered a set of pre- and post-test measures at the beginning and end of the service. Measures addressed parental conflict (DWP Parental Conflict Questionnaire for Intact or Separated Couples), parental communication (Couple Communication Questionnaire, Cowan & Cowan, 1990), parent wellbeing (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation – Outcome Measure, CORE-OM, Evans, et al., 2000), and child wellbeing (Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, Goodman, 2005). A further instrument to measure conflict observed by children in the home, which was developed by the research team and administered to participants at the beginning, midway point, and end of service.

Of the four couples participating in the service, only three couples (n=6) completed both pre-and post-test measures. All participants were invited to participate in an in-depth interview at the end of the service, and three parent dyads (n=6) accepted the offer and were interviewed. These interviews were conducted while government regulations were in place due to the covid-19 pandemic and, therefore, were conducted by telephone, jointly with both parents present. Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Full data analysis will be completed at the conclusion of the extension period, providing both qualitative and quantitative data. However, early examination of the data provides some preliminary findings related to the experience and impact of the service. These findings will be subject to more thorough analytical methods and, therefore, should be treated as early and tentative.

### 2.1.2 Fathers Network

Participant attending the Fathers’ Network events were invited to complete a researcher developed instrument to capture their views on pre-event and post-event knowledge in five related areas and to provide their view on the extent to which these areas were addressed as part of the event. Data was available on four Father’s Network events (Hastings n=2; Eastbourne n=1; Newhaven n=1) collected on 24 participants (Hastings n=13; Eastbourne n=4; Newhaven n=7).

# 4. Findings

## 4.1 Parents as Partners

Early findings indicate that participants, while not identifying consistent improvement in the overall strength and stability of the relationship, did report less conflict and potentially greater self-awareness upon completion of the service than when started. Participant responses on conflict and parental communication measures at pre-test and post-test indicate either no change or improvement in how they or their partner solved day-to-day problems and on issues of disagreement with almost no participants reporting a deterioration across items. Qualitative interviews further identified positive change in the area of conflict and parental communication:

*[We] have learnt how to communicate with each other and take each other’s feelings into account and things like that…* (Father B)

*It’s helped a lot. At least we can talk to each other without arguing or not saying a word to each other… we can actually have a conversation again like we did when we first met and not sitting in silence.* (Mother B)

*As for the lack of conflict, I mean there is no conflict now as much as there was before we even started so that’s sort of drawn to a close, hence Social Services [closing our case] and everything else…Well we’re a lot more open now…whether that’s down to this project or not or whether it’s like made us realise that we need to really like get our arses in gear. So maybe in hindsight, it could have had that impact.* (Father A)

For one co-parenting couple, the service helped to identify and acknowledge some of the underlying issues that contributed to their high-conflict relationship and conclude their repeated efforts at reunification. Both parents perceived this as a positive outcome and highlighted that though the service did not result in an improved relationship and potentially surfaced some difficult issues, they both have a better understanding of their conflictual relationship and how to manage it in their co-parenting going forward.

*I think, before we started the programme, we were hoping to get into a relationship. Now we’ve finished the programme, I don’t think we’re going to get into a relationship…I don’t think the course had an effect on our outcome of our relationship. I just think it made us more visual and more open about what we can do and who we want to be with…Like, we don’t have to be together if we don’t want to be.* (Father C)

The researcher-developed instrument measuring observed conflict by children in the home also identified reductions in observed conflict. Half of participants reported instances in which children observed the following types of parental conflict: *negative comments by one parent about another*, (n=2) *witness to negative feels or emotions by one parent about another* (n=2), *verbal argument between both parents - face-to-face* (n=3) or *by phone* (n=1). No participants disclosed observed instances of physical arguments. Among participants reporting conflict at pre-test, all participants reported a decrease at post-test with no participants reporting observed conflict.

During interviews, some participants recognised actual positive impact the service has also had on the children in their care, while others were continuing to work toward achieving a positive impact for their children:

*[Our child] sees that we’re a lot calmer and there’s not much tension around… she just seems happier because we’re happy being around and we’re not so tense.*

*We’ve still got a long way to go and…all the time we are trying to resolve and get some solutions…until we get to that the kids are going to feel a little bit like neglected because our time is taken upon one another rather than as a family.*

The Child Strengths and Difficulties measure was used to evaluate child wellbeing at pre- and post-test. Results highlight differing views among parental dyads about child wellbeing at pre- and post-test with half of parents observing improvement in their child’s strengths and difficulties overall and across individual domains (*pro-social*, *hyperactivity*, *emotional problems*, *conduct problems*, *peer problems*). The other half of parents identified less or no improvement across individual domains, and two parents reporting lower overall SDQ scores at post-test.

In addition to the areas measured as part of the evaluation, interviews highlighted further benefits of service engagement. Participants consistently highlighted the positive experience of the group environment and having the opportunity to talk about their shared experiences and make friends.

*Most helpful was probably the fact that it sort of was nice to be able to share stuff that I wouldn’t normally share with other people… mainly due to confidence. And I feel like Oasis, it makes you have this confidence where you feel like you can talk to people because of what they’re going through, the similarities and stuff*. (Father C)

*Basically, we’re all friends now and carried it on and, yes, obviously we all know we’re having difficulties of different kinds so it’s, like, created a nice little support group between us all.* (Father B)

*I suppose when [we] had a good day or a good week, we would come in and then we’d say [to the group] that some good things have happened, and then we’d be looking really happy. You know, actually going to a group with people we could trust, I suppose.* (Mother C)

The CORE-OM was administered to parents to measure pre-/post-test change. One of the six parents completing pre- and post-test measures achieved reliable positive change from clinical levels to healthy range across domains (*wellbeing*, *problems/symptoms, functioning, risk*). Some parent scores indicated negative change, which was not supported by qualitative accounts provided by parents. It is possible that initial pre-test scores may have been influenced by social desirability bias, with parents feeling more able to provide an accurate account at post-test after a trusting relationship with facilitators had developed. Alternatively, it is possible that greater self-awareness (as suggested through other measures) may have also influenced differences in pre-post test scores.

## 4.3 Father’s Network

Overall findings indicate that most participants reported increased knowledge in the area of: *Engaging with men in their role as fathers* (0-4 point increase, 11-point Likert scale); *The role of fathers in their children’s lives* (0-4 point increase, 11-point Likert scale); and *The potential contribution of fathers to their children’s wellbeing* (0-6 point increase, 11-point Likert scale). Participant responses indicate these areas were comprehensively addressed in the sessions. The remaining categories (*The capabilities of parents with substance misuse histories* and *The unique needs of parents with substance misuse histories*) showed more variation across participants with about a third of participants not providing a response, which may indicate a general lack of understanding about the items or a lack of focus in the event. This will be further explored in qualitative interviews with facilitators.

# 5. Case Study

**Parents as Partners Case Study**

**Background**

Annie and Dan (names have been changed) were referred to Parents as Partners by Dan’s Fulfilling Lives worker. Fulfilling Lives provide support for clients with multiple complex needs.

Dan met Annie when she was volunteering at a local charity supporting people with life-threatening addiction, loneliness, bereavement, unemployment, homelessness and offending behaviours. Dan was accessing the charity in respect of having recently left prison, his problem drinking and his street homelessness. Annie has an eight-year-old daughter from a previous relationship and Annie and Dan have a 10 month old son. Annie lived with the children and Dan lived in temporary accommodation, though stayed over regularly.

The two children were previously on a Child Protection Plan due to concerns around Annie’s capacity to adequately prevent Dan from entering her home if intoxicated and, thus, preventing Dan’s behaviour negatively impacting upon the children. Just before the start of the Parents as Partners programme, Children’s Services noted an improvement and closed the case.

**Initial Assessment and Groupwork Interview**

From our first home visit with the couple, Dan and Annie were very clear as to what they wanted to gain from the programme. Annie wanted Dan to be able to understand how his drinking impacted upon their relationship and both wished to gain greater clarity and understanding of the status of their relationship itself. Annie had quite clearly stated that he would not be able to live with her and the children in her home until he had demonstrated abstinence.

Dan was keen on introducing himself as someone who had been imprisoned a number of times, had been exposed to significant violence whilst both in prison and, more recently, while in temporary accommodation and that he had also been a “bad person” in terms of how he misused alcohol. Conversely, Annie did not hold a clear narrative of herself, though wished us to know that she always felt she came second to Dan’s problematic use of alcohol and second in terms of professionals addressing *Dan’s needs* and not her own.

Their presenting respective attachment styles (Dan as *insecure-avoidant* and Annie as *insecure-anxious)*, inferred a not unusual, though somewhat problematic couple-fit. These presenting attachment styles were evident within the group sessions. Dan apologising for not really being very good at talking about his emotions and Annie tempering her use of language to soften the emotional resonance when talking to Dan and about Dan. In this way, Annie was able to articulate to the group that she was perfectly clear about the emotional depth and intimacy she wished for in her relationship with Dan, though held back on directly asking that he deliver this in front of the group. This spoke to the essence of Annie’s expectations of what the programme could deliver: should she risk investing in Dan as someone who may not be able to satisfy her emotional needs? Could she allow herself to share her vulnerability with someone who is themselves emotionally defensive, though vulnerable to addictive behaviours in relation to alcohol?

Following our initial assessment at Annie’s home, we invited them to a groupwork interview. This is a two-hour assessment meeting through which couples are able to gain an experiential taste of what the Parents as Partners group programme may be like. This meeting was held at Children’s Services. Annie had texted us just before the meeting that she was almost there, though she and Dan had had an argument and she wasn’t sure whether he would turn up. She arrived in tears and we sat down in the interview room as she spoke and cried with Dan on the phone. We could hear him shouting at her over the phone. Dan did attend the second groupwork interview meeting, though this episode did allow us to gain some insight into some of the challenges Annie was facing in her relationship with Dan as well as provide Annie with two witnesses to her needs and the emotional impact of these needs not being met (through Dan’s absence).

During the groupwork interview Dan, again, presented his narrative to us: someone who had taken a few wrong turns in their life, though now recognised this themselves and wished us to believe, invest and trust in his embarking upon a change process; from “bad person” to “good person”.

**Participation in the Programme**

The first session of the programme involves an exercise whereby parents are able to reflect on the main roles and responsibilities that make up their life and how much time and emotional energy is invested in these roles and responsibilities. They are then invited to consider how they would like to organise their time and commitment to these responsibilities in the future. Annie was particularly surprised that Dan stated he wished for more time for himself. Through further discussion, Dan was able to reassure Annie that he was very willing to play his part in care giving for their son and her daughter, though time to himself was important to him and he wanted to preserve this. This desire to maintain some independence from others was further understood though a subsequent session whereby individuals identified import people in their lives together with the emotional proximity they felt to these people. As most of Dan’s friends were associated with the ‘heavy drinker’ part of him, he positioned all his acquaintances quite far away from him, stating he didn’t really trust anyone apart from immediate family members. During a session which looked at how individuals managed stress, Dan appeared to be someone who generally withdrew and dealt with psychological imbalance internally, rather than engage with others to help process difficulties. Dan never drew a connection between stress he may be experiencing and his use of alcohol.

Dan’s drinking pattern closely followed his access to financial resources. When he received his allowances he would disengage from Annie and binge drink. When he had no money to pay for alcohol, he would then declare that he would never binge again, which was manageable for four weeks given that he had no money. This cycle would then be repeated when he next obtained his allowances. During a session following Dan bingeing over the weekend, Dan was able to talk about being in a bad mood and spoke without hiding behind his defensive narrative of being on his way to being a ‘good person’. He didn’t declare that this was the last time he would binge, though he did express being irritated with himself, feeling bleak about the future and he did acknowledge Annie’s sense of feeling let down by him. Though Dan steered away from addressing ideas around ‘recovery’, his weekend binge and accompanying mood allowed the group to learn a little more about how he felt his addictive behaviour impacted upon the family. My sense was that the group were more accepting of Dan and more able to connect with him in this moment than when he was presenting his usual narrative.

**Reflection**

My sense is that the Parents as Partners programme has been helpful to Dan and Annie. Though Dan has not abstained from drinking and Annie has not invited him to live with her and the children, they have gained greater clarity in terms of what they can both expect from each other within their relationship, which therefore leads to a more stable relationship. Annie’s capacity to share warmth, kindness and an emotional openness within the group and Dan’s somewhat defensive and emotionally withdrawn presentation within the group was enlarged and accentuated though the group process itself. The two gained a greater sense of themselves as co-parents and not necessarily as the couple they were hoping to be.