Preventing violence: Evaluating outcomes of parenting programmes

A summary

Child maltreatment and parenting
Child maltreatment damages children’s physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. The consequences of it can persist into later life. Parenting programmes have been shown to be effective at preventing child maltreatment, as well as improving other areas of children’s lives.

Outcome evaluation of parenting programmes
Unfortunately, many parenting programmes have not been evaluated to determine whether or not they work. This can be a problem as a programme may be ineffective or harmful without programme staff even knowing, meaning that scarce resources are wasted. Also, a lack of outcome evaluation means that effective programmes that could be scaled up to benefit large numbers of parents and their children are not identified.

There are several reasons why programme developers and managers may avoid outcome evaluation:

• There is a misconception that you can draw conclusions about the effectiveness of a programme based on feedback from parents, comparisons with past programmes and gut feelings. Research tells us that relying on this type of information is not enough and can be misleading.

• Outcome evaluation is often considered to be too time-consuming and expensive. However, only outcome evaluation can tell you whether or not a programme works or whether it is harmful. Programmes that are not evaluated may lead to wasted resources, and prevent parents from receiving programmes that work. In order to do as much good as possible with available resources, programmes need to be evaluated early to determine their effectiveness.

• Programme staff often fear that if an outcome evaluation of their programme shows little benefit, it may have negative consequences for the programme’s future. However, although an outcome evaluation may reveal that some aspects of the programme are not working as planned, it provides an opportunity to improve the programme. Also, making the results of outcome evaluations – whether positive or negative – public can benefit parenting programmes by creating awareness of what does and does not work in this type of programming.

Pre-evaluation activities
All programmes are based on a set of assumptions and expectations about how the programme should be designed and delivered so that it achieves its aims. This is known as a programme theory. Before an outcome evaluation is carried out, it is necessary to assess the programme theory to determine whether or not it is plausible that the programme achieves its intended effects. If it is not plausible, a programme will not be effective at achieving its aims, regardless of how well it is delivered. Other activities that need to be carried out before conducting an outcome evaluation include determining whether:

• the programme is being delivered as intended;

• the programme allows for reliable information to be collected, managed and analysed; and

• there are the necessary resources to carry out an evaluation.

Outcome evaluation designs
The different types of outcome evaluation can be ordered according to the strength of the evidence they produce to estimate the causal relationship
between the programme and the outcomes (that is, whether the changes in parenting are caused by the parenting programme or are caused by other factors that have nothing to do with the programme). The different types of outcome evaluation, in order from strongest to weakest, are:

- randomised controlled trials (true experimental designs);
- quasi-experimental designs;
- single group designs; and
- non-experimental designs.

**Randomised controlled trials**

Randomised controlled trials allow the strongest conclusions to be drawn about the causal relationship. In randomised controlled trials, people in the target population are randomly placed in either the intervention group (parents who will take part in the programme) or the comparison group (parents who will not take part in the programme). This process is known as random allocation. If the number of people in the outcome evaluation is large enough, random allocation ensures that the intervention and comparison groups are equivalent on average. Having a comparison group that is the same as the intervention group, except of course that the comparison group does not take part in the programme, makes it possible to see whether it was the programme, or something else, that caused the difference in the end.

This type of outcome evaluation may not always be feasible. If another type of outcome evaluation is more appropriate, it is important to remember that it will be far less able to detect whether the programme caused the differences in behaviours and so whether the programme is effective or not.

**Quasi-experimental designs**

Quasi-experiments are similar to randomised controlled trials, except that they do not involve randomly placing people in either an intervention or comparison group. Instead, the comparison group and intervention group are made as equivalent as possible by either matching them on relevant characteristics or by using statistical techniques or ‘controls’ when analysing the information collected. An example of a quasi-experimental evaluation is the ‘pre- and post-test with comparison group’ method. The only trouble is that you cannot be sure that groups in quasi-experimental studies are the same – it’s not possible to match, or statistically control, every characteristic that might be relevant.

**Single group designs**

Single group designs do not have a comparison group, which makes them the least able to provide evidence of a causal relationship.

**Non-experimental designs**

If, for some reason, it is not possible to use an experimental method of evaluation, a programme may benefit from a non-experimental alternative such as theory-based evaluation or case studies. Although these methods of evaluation cannot determine whether or not a programme is effective at achieving its aims, they may provide useful information about the programme.

**Conclusion**

To prevent child maltreatment and other negative outcomes, parenting programmes need to be rigorously designed and evaluated. Outcome evaluations are critical to making sure this is the case, and indeed to making sure that parents get effective programmes that do no harm, make a positive difference, and use resources in the best way possible.