

Working with families that trouble us, what works and what does not?

Honor Rhodes
Director of
Development, Family
and Parenting Institute



Why does love matter?....to everyone

- **Neurology**
- **Cost**
- **Early intervention**
- **Every Child Matters**
- **Neighbourhoods and communities**
- **Wasted potential of any child**
- **Child death enquiries**

Who are the families we talking about here?

- 'difficult to engage and enable change' families
- What do they do to us?
- Fear, confusion, splitting
- £££££ down the drain
- Whole systems work ineffectively and defensively
- Make workers go off sick and leave jobs

What do we find when we persuade (or make) families to open their door to us?

- **Rubbish and smells**
- **Dogs**
- **Violence especially domestic abuse**
- **Too many children**
- **Too few parents**
- **Teenage pregnancy**
- **No sense of possible change**
- **Criminality**
- **Petitioning neighbours**

What do families believe has happened to them? And why might this matter?

- **Bad luck, bad health**
- **Victimisation/persecution**
- **Lack of tolerance and/or compassion**
- **Useful help that was taken away (Health Visitors etc.) OR**
- **No help when it was needed OR**
- **No help that was acceptable when it was needed perhaps because of the 'place' rather than the offeree.**

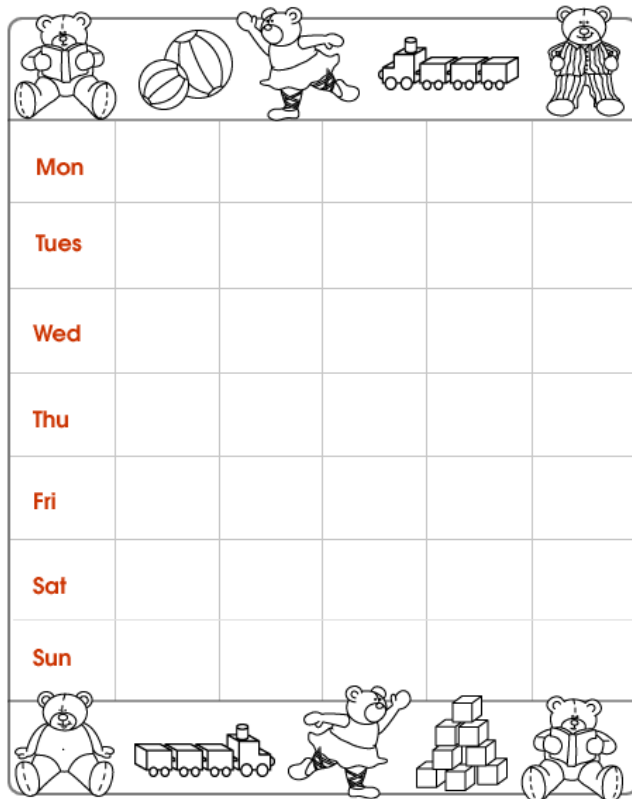
What do we know about the underlying problems? Research tells us...and why might this matter?

- Severe/enduring adult mental health problems
- Parents with learning difficulties
- Long standing physical illness
- Domestic violence
- Substance misuse
- Lack of regulation, time, resources and energy
- Lack of connection to the world around them
- Fractured family relationships
- Early poor parenting across at least two generations, often more

What works for families with this level of disorder, confusion and trouble? A general approach...

- Start in the home
- Solve a problem that the family want help with, this is '*the test*'.
- Take a very full social history, go back as many generations as you can
- Map other agencies involvement (or not), bring them in
- Set a contract – don't flinch
- Protect workers from scabies and violence
- Review, **reward** and sanction immediately
- Underline change and make it very hard to retreat

Rewards come in many forms and only need coherence and proper application



Know how to create a workable star chart

Tools we use to ask hard questions, have a lot of flip chart paper...

**Who are all of you and what family secrets do
you share/know/are frightened of?**

Open the door and see

1. What does the evidence tell us works with 'difficult' families? Because?

- Whole family and highly targeted interventions, often concurrent work with family, parent(s) and children
- Intervention as early as possible, with best sustained outcomes
- Whole system working
- Longer periods of intervention + booster sessions
- Services delivered by trained, skilled professionals
- Home based working for at least a part of the intervention

2. What does evidence tell us works with 'difficult' families? Because?

- Parenting programmes that have a strong theory base, clear model of change, specific outcomes focused and 'manualised'
- Interventions that have more than one 'mode' of service delivery
- Focus on behavioural and cognitive interventions working on belief and attitudinal change

Moran et al, What works in Parenting Support? A review of the international Evidence. DfES and Home Office 2004

Horses for courses...

Consequences

Time Out

Ignoring

Effective Limit Setting

Rewards

Praise

Play and Positive Attention

(Webster Stratton Model of Positive Parenting)

1. What does not work so well with very troubled families? Because?

Groupwork: No collective experience upon which to draw or place value, parents with learning difficulties feel lost and out of step with the group and then drop out, problems of a different order to other parents, shown NOT to work for young people too

Letters or any written communications : Hidden or manifest illiteracy, letter hoarding, other ways of communicating work better (photobooks, video, pictorial representations of shopping lists, rules, what should go where, rotas for basic cleaning)

2. What does not work so well with very troubled families? Because?

- **Short term interventions: complex multi generational problems take more than 6 sessions to solve, families are expert at defeating workers**
- **Sanction only interventions: much less effective than carrots**
- **Loss of energy/enthusiasm for change: family's purchase on desire to change is usually very weak, workers need enough energy to sustain the whole system and regular supervision**

The challenges that we all need help with

- **Housing workers and voluntary sector are often the first port of call and ‘acceptable’ in families eyes**
- **Poor engagement by other agencies and departments within the local authority is a real burden**
- **For some families schools are not acceptable sources of help and support**
- **CAMHS and health services are often involved but information sharing remains problematic**

A few more things....

- **Is the CP 'bar' higher for troubling families because they are frightening, time consuming and unrewarding to work with?**
- **Hard to get the rewards for change we need in a timely fashion to make the difference**
- **We need health planners, these families have complex inter-related health problems, diabetes, glaucoma, obesity, chronic smoking related illness**
- **Hard to get anyone interested in research, missing links with couple research too...**

And when I want to hire a skip
It takes a fortnight to be
allowed to have one outside the
property.... Don't get me
started on cones and rubbish
permits....we do come across
unusual waste

The support that others can offer, do you know how to access it and where it happens?

- **Parenting Programmes**
- **Whole family support**
- **Child and adolescent mental health services**
- **Youth services**
- **Health services (often poor users of general health provision)**
- **Schools related services**
- **Mental Health and Learning difficulties services**
- **What is your voluntary sector doing?**

The art of a good referral

- **Know the problem**
- **Agree the problem**
- **Understand what other agencies are required to do**
- **Frame the referral to meet those criteria**
- **Understand what they may offer**
- **Enable the parents to want this help**
- **Support them to use it**
- **Support them through and beyond the intervention**

So what can you do? And what can you know to equip you?

- **Understand the child welfare duty to collaborate placed upon you and others by the Children Act 2004**
- **Secure a place at the 'table'**
- **Know what parents can use locally – voluntarily and under compulsion**
- **Be able to articulate what good and poor parenting means**
- **Get training and support to equip you to engage effectively with troubled families**
- **Understand the powerful nature of resistance to change**
- **Consider what the family thinks of all this?**

Anything else to think about?

- **Differences**
- **Holding the child in mind**
- **Your feelings are important tools**
- **Look after yourself**
- **Plenty of rewards**

What next?

- Small groups....this means moving the chairs....
- Talk about a family that has perturbed you
- Consider how you felt, how you think the family felt?
- What you wanted to happen, did it?
- What are you proudest about?
- What would you do differently now?