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Rights and responsibilities; parenting support in England.

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1. Introduction

The New Labour governments, 1997-2010, made early intervention in family, education, youth and criminal policy a key priority. In terms of parents and families, the government developed a series of policies designed to improve outcomes for school students, address anti-social behaviour, and improve children's well-being, aspirations, and life chances. As part of this strategy a variety of parenting support measures were put into place. This overall policy approach has been subject to much academic critical analysis, which has placed the New Labour agenda firmly in an older neo-liberal Conservative policy history. In terms of family and parenting policy, the critical assessment is that it represents the adoption of a deficit model of parenting, allied to the dismantling of welfare entitlement. In this analysis, working-class parents were increasingly the target of a coercive state intent on recasting 'hard to reach' parents in line with neo-liberal priorities. The continuing importance of the New Labour approach, and the associated critique, is highlighted by the fact that the post-May 2010 Coalition government has continued within the broad policy framework set by New Labour.

This paper seeks to review the development of parenting support policy under New Labour, along with critical perspectives of that policy. It will then utilise findings from the national evaluation of one key parenting support initiative – the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) – to examine the critical perspectives on this early intervention policy. In particular, the focus will be on findings relating to parents' perspectives of engaging in evidence-based parenting programmes offered as part of the PEIP. The paper will argue that, in the light of the data generated by the national evaluation of the PEIP, the critical perspectives on this aspect of early intervention policy need, at the least, to be revised.

2. Parents and parenting

2.1 New Labour policy

Family policy was a key component of the New Labour government's domestic agenda from the election of the first New Labour government in 1997 to its defeat in May 2010. A wide range of family-focused policy was put in place, from financial support for working parents, (for example, Working Families Tax Credit, 1999-2003), to new paraprofessional roles in schools designed to support and engage parents in their children's schooling (Lindsay et al, 2009, Cullen et al, 2011). Among these family and parent-focused policies were two major initiatives involving the provision, via English local authorities (LAs), of evidence-based parenting programmes. From September 2006 – March 2008, the Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) funded the Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder to the tune of £7.6 million to enable 18 LAs to implement one of three evidence-based parenting programmes for parents of children aged 8-13 years (Lindsay et al, 2008). The pathfinder was followed by the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP), 2008-2011, which provided central government funding to all 150 LAs in England to deliver selected, evidence-based parenting programmes (Lindsay et al, 2011). These were important initiatives that sat firmly within the New Labour government's early intervention strategy which aimed to counteract the emergence of a range of negative outcomes for children, families and communities by intervening with family 'support' to prevent, for example, anti-social behaviour, school exclusions, and the inter-generational transmission of disadvantage.

2.2 The critical perspective

Early intervention strategy, while championed by the New Labour governments as a key policy tool to improve outcomes and raise aspirations, has been the target of a critique by a number of academics who have subjected the approach to an analysis that sought to go beyond the declared aims of government policy. Critical analysis has portrayed New Labour's family and parenting strategy as being part of a broader policy shift away from tackling fundamental inequalities in social and economic life, towards locating responsibility for these issues at the level of the individual. From the beginning of New Labour's 13 years tenure, it was argued that the intention was to continue with the neo-liberal, Conservative agenda of reframing welfare provision, and the state's relationship with the individual. Despite the New Labour governments' rhetoric of a New Deal, and a Third Way, it was argued that, at base, it was a project to establish a moral order for the provision of welfare, and in the relationship between state and individual (Heron and Dwyer, 1999). That recasting would shift the burden of addressing socio-economic problems from the state, operating at a systemic level, to the individual responding to moral imperatives identified and enforced by the state. This approach continued to inform the New Labour governments'

policies in a range of areas – crime and justice, social welfare, housing, and education. As a result, it was possible for critics of New Labour to argue that it had managed to change the foundations of welfare policy from one that was characterised by the concept of welfare rights to a situation that was characterised by conditionality (Dwyer, 2004). The shift was from a position defined by need and entitlement to one where 'rights are conditional on the acceptance of attendant individual responsibilities' (Dwyer, 2004, 282). This trend, of course, was not confined to the UK, but could be seen as part of a policy shift in a variety of areas common to many mature economies, with similar changes being identified in, for example, Canada (Robson, 2010), and the USA (Mayer, 2008).

Gewirtz (2001), Vincent (2001), and Gillies (2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2010) questioned the class basis of the New Labour governments' discourses of 'support' and 'inclusion' in family education policy, arguing that such discourses represent the re-construction of the working class by the state. In the pursuit of its strategy, the government focused strongly on parents, who were as important for New Labour aims as they had been for the Conservative governments of Mrs Thatcher and John Major, 1979-1997. As Crozier remarked, early in New Labour's period of tenure, 'whether parents like it or not and whether teachers like it or not, parents are part of, even central to, the education strategy' (2000, ix). In this critical analysis, parenting programmes were a tool for locating personal and social issues arising from systemic causes at the level of the individual and the family, whereby participating parents were to be reconciled to social and economic disadvantage. The primary aim, it is argued, was not, therefore, to improve parent-child, or family relations – as parenting programmes claim – but, rather, the stress was on containing and refashioning 'hard to reach' parents and families. For example, Gewirtz argued that the government's overarching strategy was to undertake a programme of the re-socialization of the working class based upon the values of a fraction of the middle class, which she termed 'cloning the Blairs' (2001). This critique has, more recently, been applied to government sponsored parental involvement with their children's schooling, which Reay has argued is nothing less than part of a hegemonic project that has 'sedimented and augmented middle-class advantage in the educational field' (2008, 647). Within this strategy, parenting programmes for parents, specifically from the working class, who did not share particular middle-class values and aspirations, were one element of a two-pronged approach – the other element being the reform of schools to reflect similar ambitions and targets. The fundamental aim of this strategy was 'the eradication of class differences by reconstructing and transforming working-class parents into middle-class ones. Excellence for the many is to be achieved, at least in part, by making the many behave like the few' (Gewirtz, 2001, 366). This attempted refashioning of working-class parents and families was also linked to the continued

dismantling of welfare entitlements, which represented a dual policy aim: 'The inclusive rhetoric of New Labour's family support programme provides a smokescreen behind which the continued stripping of welfare protection together with the increase in punitive measures that fall disproportionately on those most in need, renders vulnerable those individuals who maybe "cannot" play by the rules,' (Broadhurst, 2009, 126).

It is clear, then, that at the academic level, if less so in terms of party politics and government policy, the exact nature of parental involvement with their children's schooling, and their contribution to the socialization of their children, is a strongly contested area of debate. The critical perspective stresses state compulsion, the linking of rights with responsibilities, the co-ordination of school and family policy to produce outcomes satisfactory to government aims, and a preference for an analysis that stresses a parent deficit model rather than an understanding of systemic disadvantage and inequality. The modern source of this strategy is seen to be the neo-liberal Conservative governments of Mrs Thatcher, with, in school, parenting and family policy, the ideological contributions of Keith Joseph's 'cycle of deprivation' hypothesis being to the fore (Broadhurst, 2009, 114). Further, the creation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrats Coalition government in the aftermath of New Labour's general election defeat in 2010, has seen a number of high-profile reviews and reports to government that represent a reaffirmation of the early intervention strategy pursued by New Labour.

2.3 Continuity under the Coalition

The coalition government's first Child Poverty Strategy, *A New Approach to Child Poverty: Tackling the Causes of Disadvantage and Transforming Families' Lives* (DWP, DFE, 2011), set out the government's approach to tackling poverty, indicating the direction of that policy, and its goals, up to 2020. The background to *A New Approach to Child Poverty* was the coalition government's Child Poverty Act 2010, which 'established income targets for 2020 and a duty to minimise socio-economic disadvantage' (DWP, DFE, 2011, 8). The Child Poverty Strategy has as one of its core elements the declared policy aim of addressing the contexts of poverty and early intervention, including parenting support. The Child Poverty Strategy is structured around an approach that stresses the benefits of work in terms of material, social and emotional well-being; supporting family life and children's life chances, and stressing the role of community and localism in the overall strategy. To attain the goal of supporting family life and children's life chances, there is particular reference to the role of early intervention.

The background to *A New Approach to Child Poverty* was a number of recent reviews and reports to government. Foremost among these were those by Field (2010), Allen (2011a), Tickell (2011), and C4EO (2010), while others, Munro (2011), Allen (2011b) have effectively reinforced key aspects of the Coalition government's Child Poverty Strategy. Field's review of poverty and life chances, *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* (2010), focused on poverty as an explanatory influence on the life chances of children, but also addressed other influences, and proposed the establishment of the 'Foundation Years' covering a child's life from conception to five years. In terms of the key drivers of outcomes in childhood and young adulthood, parents and parenting were seen by Field to be crucial (2010, 39). Field argued that the consistent factor throughout a child's development is the role of parents and families, and: 'There is now a significant consensus amongst academics and professionals that factors in the home environment – positive parenting, the home learning environment and parents' level of education – are the most important' (Field, 2010, 38). The Field Review's recommendations included a call for support for better parenting, and support for a good home learning environment (Field, 2010, 7), policies that can be seen to be a continuation of the New Labour approach.

The early intervention argument was also forcefully delivered by Allen in his two reports, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (2011a), and *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings* (2011b). Allen's first report argued for the centrality of early years life experiences to future outcomes, and outlined the negative impact, on individuals, society and the economy of failing to adopt a uniform national policy of Early Intervention. Allen called for a strong cross-party commitment to prioritising Early Intervention. The report recommended the widespread adoption of evidence-based Early Intervention parenting programmes, based on rigorous standards of evidence, and offered an initial list of programmes that have been shown to be cost-effective methods of intervention. The central thrust of the report was that Early Intervention should aim to 'provide a **social and emotional bedrock** for the current and future generations of babies, children and young people by helping them and their parents (or other main caregivers) before problem arise' (2011a, v). This understanding was built upon the literature on 'what works' with children, young people and families, and recognition that 'late intervention' was characterised by high costs and outcomes that were often limited in effectiveness. In a similar fashion, Tickell's report, *The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning* (2011), reviewed the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which was established in 2008. The report reiterated the Early Intervention message in relation to the importance of early influences in children, with home life being seen as the single most important influence, and the report

recommended a range of measures to strengthen the early years framework, and support parents, carers, and practitioners involved in early years provision.

The interesting thing about Coalition policy, and the range of review and reports to the Coalition government, is how they represent a partial continuation of the previous, New Labour, government's strategy. The political and policy consensus is that early intervention, or, as Allen stresses, 'Early Intervention', must be a central plank in social, education, and criminal policy. Within that, evidence-based parenting programme interventions are seen to have an important role in guaranteeing positive outcomes for children, families, schools, and communities. Yet, despite this party political consensus, the critical analysis of parenting under New Labour suggests that more empirical evidence needs to be examined before the validity of the argument can be tested. The aim here is to utilise data gathered from the national evaluation of the PEIP to address the question, through the lens of parent perceptions of undertaking evidence-based parenting programmes.

3. The PEIP and the national evaluation

3.1. The Pathfinder and the PEIP

The background to the PEIP (2008-2011) was in the New Labour government's intention to use parenting support as a way of reducing antisocial behaviour among young people, preventing crime and enhancing the quality of life of communities. The Respect Action Plan, a Home Office initiative, had a budget which included £52 million over two years to provide a number of parent support initiatives (Respect Task Force, 2006). The Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder (2006-08) was funded in 18 LAs for £7.6 million. Its focus was on parents of children aged 8-13 exhibiting or at risk of behavioural problems, with this age group being judged not to have the level of support available to younger and older children. On the basis of a review of the evidence by Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe (2004) three evidence-based programmes were selected: Triple P; Incredible Years (IY); and Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities (SFSC). Eighteen LAs were each allocated funding to implement one of the three programmes as determined by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The implementation of the Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder was evaluated by CEDAR, the University of Warwick (Lindsay et al, 2008), and as a result of the results of the evaluation, the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) commenced in 2008. The PEIP funded all 150 LAs in England to deliver evidence-based parenting programmes. Findings from the evaluation of the Pathfinder had shown that there were substantial improvements in parents' mental well-being, parenting styles (as measured by reductions in over-reactivity and laxness), and improvements in their children's behaviour as a result of the parents' attendance at the parenting programmes. The

PEIP parenting programmes were rolled out in two waves, the first, covering 23 LAs (in addition to the Pathfinder 18) from 2008, and the remainder from 2009.

The PEIP operated within a new policy framework, *Think Family*, which brought together several parenting support initiatives, including the PEIP. The policy gave LAs' greater freedom of decision making than under the Pathfinder. In addition, two new evidence-based parenting programmes – Strengthening Families Programme 10-14 (SFP10-14), and Families and Schools Together (FAST) – were added to the three Pathfinder programmes as permissible PEIP parenting programmes. The Pathfinder LAs were then known as the 'Wave 1' PEIP, the next group of 23 LAs were known as 'Wave 2' PEIP, and the remaining LAs formed 'Wave 3' PEIP.

3.2.   The national evaluation

The national evaluation of the PEIP was carried out by CEDAR, the University of Warwick; as was the evaluation of the Pathfinder. The national evaluation adopted a combined methods approach, using both quantitative and qualitative methods to address the research questions. All 23 Wave 2 LAs and a sample of 24 Wave 3 LAs were selected for the national evaluation. The Wave 3 LA selection took account of the need for a sample that reflected geographic spread, urban/rural, and levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. These were in addition to the data collected from the 18 Pathfinder LAs. In terms of the data relating to parents, overall, quantitative data was collected on 6143

The data underpinning this paper is drawn from quantitative and qualitative research undertaken with 18 LAs from Wave 1, 22 LAs from Wave 2, and 21 LAs from Wave 3[1]. Quantitative data was drawn from questionnaires containing four standardised instruments completed by 8350 parents at the start and end of their parenting group (Wave 1, n= 2207; Wave 2, n= 4,223; Wave 3, n= 1920). In addition, qualitative data was collected from 429 interviews with parents and professionals, of which 75 were interviews with parents who had taken a PEIP parenting course, in addition to 58 parent interviews from Wave 1 (the Pathfinder), for a total of 133 parent interviews. The interviews were semi-structured interviews, carried out face-to-face or by telephone at appropriate stages in the national evaluation (Lindsay et al, 2011).

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[1] The discrepancy between the numbers of LAs initially involved in the evaluation from Wave 2 and 3, being 23 and 24 respectively, and the numbers of LAs reported on by the evaluation – 22 and 21 – represent those LAs who were unable to furnish data prior to the end of the evaluation in April 2011.

3.2.1. Quantitative parent data

The quantitative data was collected using parent questionnaires administered by parenting group facilitators and completed by parents before they started their parenting programme (pre-course), and at the last session (post-course). The measures assessed by the questionnaires were:

- *Parent mental well-being*: the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), which examines how a parent feels, for example, 'I've been feeling useful', and 'I've been feeling good about myself'
- *Parental laxness*: this scale examines whether parents are too lax when dealing with their children; for example, whether a parent backs down and gives in if their child becomes upset after being told that they cannot do something
- *Parental over-reactivity*: this scale examines parents' over-reactions; for example, whether a parent raises their voice or shouts when their child misbehaves as opposed to speaking to their child calmly
- *Children's behaviour* was measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ): parents rated the behaviour of their 'target child', that is, the chid they had most concern about, on the SDQ. Three measures were reported: children's *conduct problems*; an aggregate measure (*total difficulties*) of conduct problems, hyperactivity, peer problems and emotional symptoms; and the *impact* of the children's behaviour problems

(Lindsay et al, 2011, 20).

These standardised measures are well established self-report measures and were also used in the CEDAR Pathfinder evaluation (Lindsay et al, 2008).

In addition to the pre and post-course questionnaires, parents provided demographic information about themselves and their target child. They also completed a questionnaire, 'How was your group?', at the end of their parenting programme in order to provide information on their group experience.

3.2.2. Parent interview data

Seventy-five interviews were carried out with parents from Wave 2 and Wave 3 PEIP LAs, in addition to the 58 parents that been interviewed during the Pathfinder, for a total of 133 parent interviews. All the interviews used a semi-structured interview schedule and were

carried out by experienced qualitative researchers who interviewed parents face-to-face on a one-to-one basis, or in small groups (depending on parent preference), or individually by telephone. Interviews were semi-structured, recorded, fully transcribed and analysed by thematic analysis. The interview transcriptions were coded individually against pre-determined themes (deductive analysis), and emergent themes revealed by analysis of transcripts (inductive analysis). The development of the coding system was a recursive (iterative) process.

4. Findings; parents and the PEIP parenting courses

4.1 Demographic

For the Wave 1 parents (n=2207) 86.7% of parents were women, 13.3% were men. One in eight PEIP Wave 1 parents (12.5%) did not indicate their ethnic group; of the others (n=1932) 76.1% were White British; the remaining 23.9% were spread across a range of ethnic groups. In the UK as a whole, in the 2001 Census, 92.1% of the population indicated 'White British' and 'white other'. However, there are very wide LA and area variations in the ethnic geography of the UK, with England having a higher BME proportion than the other constituent countries of the UK; and the variation in English regional figures spanning a spectrum of 29% of all London residents compared to 2% in the North East of England (ONS, 2001). LA figures vary to an even greater extent. The Pathfinder evaluation cohort was skewed in terms of its demographic sample towards areas with higher than UK average BME populations. In terms of educational levels, 46.9% left school at the minimum school leaving age of 16, or younger; 11.0% left school at 17 or 18 years; 24.0% attended Further Education college; 4.9% undertook an apprenticeship or trade based course; and 13.3% attended university. These findings compare with (in October 2009) 29% of the British population being educated to degree level; and 12.4% with no qualifications. The demographic findings from Waves 2 and 3 (a total of 6143 parents) were similar to those from Wave 1, but with an increasingly heterogeneous cohort. For example, 30.9% of Wave 2 and 3 were parents educated to higher education level, compared with 13.3% of the Wave 1 parents who had attended university. In addition:

- 85.4% of Wave 2 and 3 of parents were female, 14.6% male (n =6095; 48 missing cases).
- 83.3% of Wave 2 and 3 parents were White British ethnicity; the largest minority groups were at 8.2% (Asian). (n= 5995; 148 missing cases)
- 23.5% of Wave 2 and 3 parents (n= 5636; 507 missing cases) reported no educational qualifications, 40% had GCSEs (16+); 30.9% reported being educated to Higher Education levels, including 11.3% with a degree.

4.2 Parenting course outcomes – well-being measures

For Wave 1, the Pathfinder, prior to participation in parenting courses, parents overall had significantly lower levels of mental well-being than the general population. PEIP parents also had a substantially higher proportion of children with SDQ scores rated 'abnormal' than the national sample. The impact of undertaking a PEIP course showed a significant increase in parents' mental well-being, and in self-reported efficacy and parental satisfaction. In addition, there was a significant decrease in parenting laxness and parenting over-reactivity; and statistically significant improvement on all SDQ measures as indicated by reductions in the levels of problems. Differences in effectiveness between the three Pathfinder evidence-based programmes in terms of all child and parent outcomes were generally small or non-existent (Lindsay et al, 2008, 50-69). These findings refer to Wave 1, the Pathfinder. Findings from Waves 2 and 3 showed that outcomes for parents on four of the five parenting programmes, Triple P; Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities, Incredible Years, and Strengthening Families Programme 10-14 (insufficient data was gathered for FAST to be included in the analysis), were significantly improved after programme completion:

- Overall, 79% of parents showed improvements in their mental well-being
- The average level of parental mental well-being increased from that of the 25th percent of the population to the national average.

A considerable proportion of parents changed their parenting behaviour over the course of the programme:

- 74% of parents reported reductions in their parenting laxness
- 77% of parents reported reductions in their over-reactivity
- The percentage of parents who reported that their child had serious conduct problems reduced by a third, from 59% to 40%.

Parents were highly positive about their experiences of the parenting groups they attended:

- 98% reported that they found the group helpful
- 95% reported that the programme had helped them deal with their problems
- 95% reported that the programme had helped them deal with their children's behaviour

- 86% reported that they experienced fewer problems after completing the programme
- Over 98% reported that the group leader showed positive characteristics, including making them feel respected and working in partnership.

(Lindsay et al, 2011, 8).

Three evidence-based programmes were used in PEIP Wave 1 (Triple P, IY, and SFSC), to which were added SFP10-14 and FAST for Waves 2 and 3. Use of the programmes was uneven across the PEIP, with, for example, 47.5% of post-course questionnaires coming from parents who had taken part in Triple P programmes, compared to 21.4% from IY programmes in Wave 1. During Wave 1, comparisons between programmes indicated that the differences across all child and parent outcomes between programmes are generally small or non-existent. For Waves 2 and 3 there were differences in effects on outcomes between the individual programmes (with insufficient FAST data eliminating that programme from comparisons), but these were relatively small compared to the overall improvements reported by parents (Lindsay et al, 2011, 8).

4.3 Parenting course outcomes – the parent voice
Interviews were conducted with 133 parents from across the three waves of the PEIP. All the parents interviewed had completed a PEIP parenting course. The parents' accounts across all programmes were very positive overall and similar in content and emphasis. Parents reported changes in their approaches to parenting in line with principles and strategies learned on their programme. In consequence, they explained that their children had noticed changes in their parents' approach and responded with positive changes relating to self-esteem, behaviour and interest in school work. There were many examples of parent-child improvements in relationships, with less confrontations and friendlier co-operation. Parents from all programmes felt that the programmes should be made more widely available, especially for parents of young children.

4.3.1 Outcomes for parents
4.3.1.1 Personal development
The interview data showed that for the overwhelming majority of parents, undertaking one of the PEIP courses resulted in improved outcomes for them personally, and improved outcomes for them as parents. The parenting courses produced a range of beneficial outcomes for participants, including, building self-confidence, reducing social isolation, making friendships, and opening pathways for personal progression. An example of multiple beneficial outcomes was the case of a single, unemployed father of three boys who had

moved from their mother's home to live with their father. A combination of the new caring responsibilities, unemployment, financial difficulties, and inadequate housing had a serious impact on the father's mental health. A school nurse referred him to a PEIP FAST programme, which he attended with his two older sons. The father found it a difficult experience at first, but with the support of the FAST facilitators and other parents in the group, he was able to take a full part. He commented that the FAST group 'brought me out of my shell. It helped 100 per cent, and I am back to normal and can mix now'. For his two sons, the FAST group was also beneficial, and, at the suggestion of the FAST facilitators, they had joined a youth club, and an Outward Bound course, which had notably improved the mental well-being and social skills of one of the boys. In addition to these benefits, the family had also seen an improvement in their housing conditions (Lindsay et al, 2011, 59).

The improvements noted by the single father were mirrored in accounts by other parents. In addition, parents experienced their participation in the PEIP parenting courses as pathways for personal progression. Examples included parents becoming parent course co-facilitators, parents progressing to further learning opportunities, parents becoming more involved with their children's schools, and parents organising social events and support groups for other parents from the parenting courses. This process was greatly facilitated in one LA, where parents had been encouraged, from the start of the PEIP, to think about becoming co-facilitators. As a result, a group of these parent facilitators had gone on to form a consortium providing parenting programmes in the LA, and provided the main resource by which the LA was able to guarantee the provision of an evidence-based parenting programme in the authority.

4.3.1.2 Parenting
The interview data indicated that undertaking a parenting course was an educative process. Parents argued that the PEIP courses enabled them to acquire new knowledge and skills, which impacted positively on the culture of family life, interpersonal relations between adults and children, and between adults in the same household.

Parents identified a number of elements in the educative experience of completing a PEIP course. For the overwhelming majority of parents, the key transformative understanding was the acceptance of the knowledge that parent behaviour is of primary importance in parent-child relationships, and that parents need to change their own behaviour as a first step to the improvement of those relationships. For example:

'I was raising my voice willy nilly and I didn't realize, I wasn't present enough to see how that was masking him feel, how threatening that was, and some of the role plays and some of the things we did here made me see … I was shouting and screaming and everything, but now, just the fact that I don't raise my voice now has changed everything. I'm mummy and he's safe, and he feels safe, and he gives that off. It's completely different'. (Parent 1)

'Whereas before I used to lose my rag, totally, now I am more under control. Before it was grab her, smack her bum, but [now] I didn't stress up big time because it would have stressed her out more. She still got mad, but I thought, if I keep calm, she will keep calm. I've put that into practice a couple of times and it's worked'. (Parent 2)

The process of acting upon the new insights around the central part played by the adult's behaviour in parent-child relationships, and the rewards from that, helped parents gain new confidence in their parenting skills. In consequence, they were more capable of establishing or re-establishing appropriate parent and child roles, which, in turn, led to improved parent-child relationships, as identified, for example, by this parent:

'It's made me more confident in my parenting. It's made me more able to set boundaries with my daughter. It's made me more confident in challenging her when she's being disruptive. She knows when I mean business now. It's kind of ingrained in me now, and I can see, even when things are happening, and I'm not referring to the book, I can see myself thinking and afterwards I think, "I did that because of that course". It's changed the way I react to her reactive behaviour. It's just completely changed both of us, I think, in our outlook to each other as well. We're enjoying each other's company now. We're not just arguing constantly. It's changed our lives. It really has given me my daughter back'. (Parent 3)

The parents also provided accounts of the ways in which they had learned, through the PEIP courses, to devote specific time to their children, and, in that way they had learned how to build their relationships with their children:

'I now actually stop what I am doing and listen to them or say things like "let me just finish this washing up and I'm all yours". They ask you something while you're washing up … it's always, "just a minute". I think more about how *they are* feeling and not just what *I've* got to do. That has improved a lot in my relationship with my daughter'. (Parent 4)

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Improved parent-child relationships, child-centred time given by parents, boundaries for children, and appropriate parent and child roles all contributed to the improved quality of family life.

4.3.2 Children and young people

Parents reported a variety of benefits for their children resulting from their own, or their and their child/ren's participation in a PEIP parenting course. In addition to the benefits accruing to family life (discussed below), parents reported, in particular, increased confidence in their child/ren, and improved behaviour at home and/or in school. Parents reported that their child/ren were happier, calmer, had better relations with their families, and had improved experiences at school. In some cases, children's relationships with their parents and siblings had dramatic outcomes, with, for example, one LA which had delivered an adapted PEIP programme for parents of children in care, reporting a 24 per cent reduction in the numbers of looked after children (Lindsay et al, 2011, 63).

4.3.3 Family issues and improved family relationships

In their accounts of family life prior to undertaking a PEIP course, a common theme among parents was their realization that their family lives were affected by disharmony. For example, a father explained:

> 'It was just like a free-for-all, really, in my house. The kids were doing what they wanted, not listening when you tell them to do something.' (Parent 5)

Parents frequently described family life as involving a repeated pattern of interactions that they were unhappy with, such as their children not responding to reasonable requests, or frequent occurrences of shouting between parents and children. There was a sense that, for many parents, they felt that in their relations with their children they had reached an impasse and one that was having a negative effect on them as well as their children. One mother explained why she decided to go on a PEIP course by saying:

> 'To be honest the reason I went along was because I was at the end of my tether with my daughter.' (Parent 6)

Similarly:

> 'There were a couple of interesting bullet points [on the information leaflet] that caught my attention, but, again, I also felt that I was in a crisis where I needed help desperately'. (Parent 7)

Another commented:

> 'At the time I was contacted I was at the end of the road, I had looked at so many different places for help, and this fell on my doorstep and I just thought, "anything I can do to get help and information has got to be a good thing"; so I thought it would be an opportunity to go and learn, perhaps not where I had been going wrong, but how to put things right'. (Parent 8)

The parents wanted to address the problems that they recognised in their family lives, and wanted to improve their relationships with their children. They were concerned that other families were not like their own, and they were worried about attending PEIP courses where their 'dirty washing' might be on public display. Despite these reservations, parents accepted places on PEIP courses, and, even when referred, were willing to try the courses, in the hope that they might help in rebuilding relationships.

The evidence was that relationships were improved, with some parents noting that participation in a PEIP parenting course having prevented a total breakdown of parent-child relationships; an example being provided in the case of a mother-daughter relationship:

> 'Without that programme my daughter wouldn't be here, she'd be somewhere else. I'd got to that stage where I am thinking, "No, I can't do this anymore". You know, and I was willing to open that door and say, "Goodbye. Go to your dad's". But, no, it was definitely down to the programme. Because I mean to say when we had finished we were more … when she came back from school we would sit down and we would talk about the programme. And we'd talk about what we went through that day and things like that. And I found that my daughter *would* come and talk to me afterwards and she *still* comes and talks to me, which is nice because she would *never* talk before. She would bottle up or go and talk to her friends and what have you, but would never say anything to me. She does now.' (Parent 9)

Another example was provided by a mother of a boy with ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). Following her and his participation in a SFP10-14 course, she explained the changes in his behaviour towards her:

'He's gone from being a very naughty child – disobeying, stealing – he's not as bad. He gets his ups and downs, being ADHD, but he knows not to bow to peer pressure no more. He'll go off, have an argument with me, then he'll come back and apologise, and, oh, my God, I didn't think I'd ever get him doing that. And if it weren't for that group I don't think I would have got as far as I have with him now.' (Parent 10)

The most common improvements identified by parents who had attended PEIP courses were:

- parents' increased understanding of their children, linked to improved family dynamics
- children's increased understanding of their parents, linked to improved family dynamics
- changes in behaviour at home (and school), mirroring behaviour modelled in parenting courses.

4.3.4 Parents and schools

Although PEIP parenting courses were provided through a wide range of agencies – for example, LA multi-agency support teams, voluntary sector bodies, children's centres, and schools – some PEIP courses, particularly FAST, had a specific school link, while there was a wider, indirect, linkage with children and their behaviour and progress in schools. In addition, there was also the issue of parents' own relationship with their child's or children's school. Improved parent-school relationships were attributed to parents becoming more confident in dealing with schools as a result of undertaking a PEIP course. Parents noted that they were more active in monitoring their children's education, addressing issues with school staff at an early stage, supporting the school's social activities, and participating in school life. Overall, participation in PEIP courses, particularly if they involved a school connection, enabled parents to be more pro-active in dealings with school in matters concerning their child/ren, and in more general ways involving supporting the school.

4.3.5 Communities

Parents frequently experienced participation in PEIP parenting courses as a way of breaking down social isolation. A common experience was that parents would continue to meet following the end of their parenting course, either formally as part of the programme plan, or informally as friends. But greater parental involvement in their community also took other

forms, for example, volunteering with third sector organisations, and supporting or mentoring parents in other parenting groups. In addition, in some LAs with high concentrations of various BME communities, parents from different communities participating in the same PEIP parenting course helped build links between communities. Community building is a specific element of some of the PEIP programmes, particularly SFSC and FAST (Cullen, 2011b), but community benefits were also present with other PEIP programmes.

5. **The PEIP and the question of parenting support**

The national focus of the PEIP was on families and children at risk of anti-social behaviour. Within that overarching target group, LAs were, nonetheless, free to decide on local priorities and referral pathways. In consequence, there were a range of referral mechanisms, from universal offers to all parents to court order referrals for individual parents. The national focus on 'at risk' groups might suggest that, as critics of parent 'support' strategies argue, programmes like the PEIP are part of an attempt by the government to re-create the working class. There are problems with this approach in itself, with, for example, the inference that anti-social behaviour is a marker of class. The LAs operated under guidelines from the DCSF which stated:

> 'Parents targeted by the PEIP should include those that have been identified by children's and adult services due to their child's behaviour (early impulsiveness and aggression, substance misuse, anti-social behaviour including children & young people involved in knife-crime, violence, and/or gangs) and those with parental risk factors (substance misuse, parental offending, parental mental health difficulties etc.' (DCSF, 2009, 9).

If these target groups are taken, by inference, to represent the working class, or a particular, classed culture, as implied by, for example, Gewirtz (2001), Vincent (2001), and Gillies (2005a, 2005b, 2008, 2010), then characterisation of the working class is wholly negative; assuming that knife crime, substance misuse, and gang membership, for example, are accepted as being problematic for the individual and society. But even in the narrower context of the PEIP evaluation findings, there are additional difficulties with the critique that such initiatives represent a project the aim of which is the re-socialization of the working class by a fraction of the middle-class – the 'cloning the Blairs' project (Gewirtz, 2001).

Firstly, the class base of the PEIP parent cohort is not class specific. Instead, there was a growing heterogeneity over the PEIP roll-out, in, for example, the educational levels of parents involved in the PEIP, with 28% of parents from Waves 2 and 3 having been

educated to Higher Education level – which compares with an overall UK percentage of 29% (ONS, 2001) of the population having received Higher Education. There is a more class focused aspect of the PEIP cohorts in terms of housing (measured for Waves 2 and 3) with 30% of parents being owner occupiers, while 64.1% rented housing (for the UK population in general, in 2001, 68% were owner occupiers, 32% rented housing; ONS, 2001). Similarly, even given the problems associated with generating accurate returns regarding income, the PEIP cohort reflects higher proportions of lower income groups. Nonetheless, there is, again, heterogeneity across the cohort, with 18.6% of the parental income being above £351 per week, with 33.2% having an income of less than £150 per week, and a range between those two positions. Despite the national focus of the PEIP on 'at risk' families, it is the case that this did not, in terms of the PEIP cohort, translate into a straightforward class based intervention. The cohort exhibited a range of education, income, and housing backgrounds.

Secondly, in terms of the qualitative evidence generated by the parent interviews, there was no evidence that the parents regarded their participation as a classed experience. By contrast, parents explained that the experience of the parenting course was one that was characterised by non-judgemental respect. In addition, the delivery of PEIP courses was such that parents did not feel that they were in a formalised or hierarchical learning situation. In her critical review of inclusion strategies, Warin, 'problematize[d] the concept of "reach" arguing that many parents in these categories [BME parents and fathers deemed to be 'hard to reach'] do not believe that their own parental knowledge and experience is recognised, sought out or valued by educational professionals' (2009, 132). Warin posited instead an idea that she characterised as 'mutual reach' between parents and professionals. Mutual reach is characterised not by a one-way, top-down flow of values and information, but two-way communication between parent and professional. This idea of mutual reach provides a useful characterisation of the experiences of PEIP parenting course participants. As one father explained:

> 'It was the way it was delivered. It was not like a classroom setting, it was just like … your mates, a bit like a bunch of friends. Just like … down the pub with your mates or something. It was just … it was not, like, dictated to you like if you was at school, like, your teacher … this, this, this and this. It wasn't said, this is how you do it, this … it was suggested this is how you do it. It was never put forward, this is how you must do it. It was … these are only suggestions, you can take them on board if you like'. (Parent 11)

Further, the priority of the parents was to improve their relationships with their children. In some cases, there was an awareness that their children had been identified, by, for

example, schools, youth workers, or police, as presenting with anti-social behaviour, but these issues were still seen in the light of their own relationship with their child. Not as an issue of classed policy or class antagonism.

It was a common belief among parents who had undertaken a PEIP course that all families would benefit from such courses, regardless of background. Interestingly, one father who had been referred onto a PEIP course by his social worker, argued that:

'If you knock on ten doors round this place, and people say, "yes, I've got the perfect family" … what liars! There is no such thing on this planet as the perfect family that social services have made it out to be.' (Parent 12)

In this case, the father was using his life experience, and his experience of the PEIP course, as a way of subverting what he saw as his neighbours' and social workers' myths of 'perfect families'. Other parents were enthusiastic about the PEIP courses and the impact of their new parenting knowledge, and thought that the courses should be universally available. They were also aware that many parents were wary of participating, fearing that the courses were a means of control. An example is the commentary made by a mother who had attended a school organised PEIP course. The school had offered the course to all the parents of its pupils (the majority of whom came from a London borough with unusually low levels of social deprivation), and, following a successful participation in the course, the mother, and her friend, was keen to engage other parents for the next course:

'We've been trying very hard to promote [the course] but I think most parents at the school are too busy or on the other hand they are very suspicious of it, they see it as something else. Once you've done it and you realise you get so much from it but originally you were "oh this is going to be like the school interfering or it's for bad children", so I think the difficult thing is that maybe it's you struggle to get other parents to see the benefits from it.' (Parent 13)

Neither of these women met any criteria of social deprivation, both were married, home-owning, middle-class, women with husbands in professional occupations. Their belief that the PEIP courses should be made more widely available, so that more parents could access the support, was one that was typical of all parents interviewed, regardless of class background. Parents also argued that groups should be run at a range of times and locations to suit different work patterns. In addition, parents suggested that parents should have access to groups when their children were young and problems were less severe.

The overwhelming perception of the parents was that undertaking an evidence-based PEIP programme was valuable, useful, effective and produced a range of positive outcomes for themselves, their children, and their family life. The evidence also runs counter to Gillies' argument that, for the mother Gillies' was discussing, attendance at a parenting group had 'merely reassured her that she was already a good mother' (2010, 52). This in itself was a positive outcome, but Gillies' did not discuss the parenting group, or identify whether it was an evidence-based course, or one of the very many locally produced, or non-evidenced based parenting programmes. The importance of evidence-based programmes was emphasised by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in its *Compilation of Evidence-Based Family Skills Training Programmes* (2010). Local parenting support practice in the UK is often characterised by 'home-grown' or non-evidence based parenting programmes. Notwithstanding perceptions of success, or lack of success, on the part of those delivering or undertaking non-evidence based parenting programmes, the UNODC's review of programmes that had been subject to randomised controlled trials (RCTs) reinforced the message that evidence-based programmes provide the 'gold standard' necessary for successful parenting support:

> 'UNODC strongly recommends practitioners, clinicians and others working in the area of prevention to use evidence-based programmes rather than start developing their own from scratch. There are two main reasons for this: firstly, while efforts in the area of prevention to help and support others are undoubtedly founded on good intentions, research has shown that good intentions can sometimes cause unintended harm. Evidence-based programmes are based on a vast body of scientific research that has undergone peer review to ensure that the results are safe and beneficial to those targeted by such programmes. Secondly, that research not only shows that evidence-based programmes are effective and have a positive impact but also indicates how those results are achieved. Evidence-based programmes therefore offer the assurance that positive results will be obtained, that the programme will benefit those targeted and that close adherence to the programme structure and content will ensure that implementation will have no negative effects. This translates into huge savings in terms of the funds used to implement such programmes' (UNODC, 2010, 3/4).

The UNDOC report draws on an extensive body of work to recommend 24 parenting programmes, all of which are strongly evidenced. The efficacy of RCT tested parenting programmes has been supported in a large body of research and review literature. Key recent reviews of parenting programmes which have been evidenced using RCTs include

Barlow et al (2010), Barlow et al (2011), and Dretzke et al (2009), all of which attest to the efficacy of evidence-based programmes. This is a body of literature that has largely been ignored by critics of parenting support and early intervention policy in relation to parents, children and families.

6. Conclusions

This paper has reviewed the development of a range of policies under the New Labour governments, 1997-2010, with a specific focus on family 'support', the Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder (2006-2008), and the subsequent Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) (2008-2011). These initiatives were an integral part of the government's early intervention strategy (which, as argued here continues under the current Coalition government), which, in turn was located within the broader New Labour emphasis on 'rights and responsibilities'. The provision of evidence based parenting programmes under the PEIP was a good example of New Labour's stated intention to provide support for parents, but with the expectation that parents would exercise their responsibilities as parents and take up those opportunities. This approach has been the subject of a degree of critical analysis on the part of a range of academic commentators. As reviewed here, the critical perspective argues that the rhetoric of 'rights and responsibilities' was merely a smokescreen for the continued dismantling of welfare provision (a project which could be traced to the early 1980s), and the relocation of what are systemic socio-economic failings to the individual. In this context, parenting 'support' was nothing more than an attempt to target the so-called 'hard to reach', and transmit middle-class cultural values and norms in a top-down fashion that amounted to a project to refashion the working class. This approach was underpinned by a deficit model of parenting, and a shift away from the automatic provision of welfare entitlement.

The evidence presented here, taken from the national evaluation of the Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder and the Parenting Early Intervention Programme, draws upon extensive data of parents' experiences of taking part in evidence based parenting programmes. Data from 8350 parent-completed pre and post parenting course questionnaires (utilising well regarded standardised measures of well-being, parenting styles, and children's behaviour), along with interviews conducted with 133 parents, has been examined. This evidence presents a picture that is characterised by highly positive outcomes for parents, children, and families. In the light of these findings, it is the case that the arguments and conclusions of the critical perspective need to be revisited. The findings from the national evaluation of the PEIP (including the Pathfinder) show that for the overwhelming majority of those involved, the PEIP parenting courses were empowering,

supportive, and frequently led to progression for parents, while family life was, typically, enhanced. The experience of undertaking a PEIP parenting course, moreover, was not perceived in a classed or pejorative fashion, but, rather, was characterised by the idea of 'mutual reach' between parents and professionals. The argument is not that socio-economic issues, such as housing, income, and employment, are not important, but that the provision of the PEIP parenting courses was not experienced in a negative fashion, as part of government rhetoric, or a project to refashion a class. For the parents, and their families, the provision of evidence based parenting courses was seen to be beneficial and life-enhancing.

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