



# Helping parents helping children

New research suggests a strong start for the new local authority role of parent support adviser – with positive knock-on effects on outcomes for young people. **Geoff Lindsay** explains

Parents have important roles to play in the education of their children. These include activities specific to their own child, such as supporting homework or implementing learning programmes for children with special educational needs or disabilities. At a higher level some parents play an important role representing parents as a whole and contributing to governance of schools and policy development locally and nationally. These different roles require different knowledge and skills and consequently different types and levels of support.

Successive governments have expanded their demands on parents to engage with the education system. The present government has brought in a number of initiatives that draw on parents; it has also funded projects to support parents, including programmes to improve parenting skills

and so try to reduce or prevent behavioural difficulties in their children.<sup>1</sup> Another initiative is the focus of this article: parent support advisers (PSAs).

In 2006 the Government funded a two-year project in 20 local authorities (LAs) to recruit, train and deploy PSAs. We evaluated this pilot and reported our findings in several interim reports and in the final report published in summer 2009.

Over the years a number of LAs have developed a similar role to that of the PSA with different titles (such as 'family liaison officers' and 'family support workers') but this was the first national initiative funded by government to set up parent support professionals within education.

LAs recruited staff according to their own priorities and recruitment practices within the overall remit of the funding regime. Personal qualities rather than formal qualifications provided the main basis for appointment. Qualities identified by PSAs themselves, and confirmed by the LAs' lead officers, were: being 'patient', 'calm, even with angry parents', 'not confrontational', 'diplomatic', 'juggling' (relationship home and school), 'empathic', 'approachable', 'easy to talk to', 'putting myself in their position', 'good listener', 'open minded', 'valuing all people', 'caring about the community', 'honest – not frightened to say if I don't know the answer', 'confident', having 'basic counselling skills', 'really caring', 'reliability to do what I say I'll do', 'sense of humour', 'genuine'. Many felt their 'own life experiences' were helpful, such as having been lone parents on benefits. One PSA stated: "I am quite patient and I try not to judge people by the cover because the cover can be quite rough. I try to look at the person and what they could be with different circumstances."

## Qualifications

A minority of PSAs had qualifications up to degree level but others had no formal qualifications. Many had worked as teaching assistants or learning mentors, often in the same school as that to which they were appointed as PSAs. This was clearly a deliberate strategy in some LAs and enabled the recruitment of PSAs from local communities, which was seen as a bonus where these communities were not adequately represented among the education workforce. PSAs worked in both primary and secondary phases.

By August 2007:

- 717 PSAs were in place
- 1,167 schools received a service from a PSA
- 91 per cent of PSAs were female
- 91 per cent were white British
- 55 per cent came from an education background.

The proportion that had previously worked in the same school (in roles such as teaching assistant) varied greatly between LAs from 10 to 20 per cent up to about 90 per cent.

Since the pilot, the DCSF has provided funding for all LAs to support PSAs and by August 2009 there were 3,400 PSA or equivalent roles supporting about 13,000 schools across England. Of the 152 LAs, 116 were offering PSA or equivalent services, 16 were planning or recruiting and a further 20 were working towards sustaining provision.<sup>2</sup>

Initial training developed by the Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) comprised a relatively brief period of about six days at the beginning of the pilot. The PSAs were generally positive about the training – comments included 'excellent', 'high quality', 'very, very thorough', and 'fantastic, some the best training I've seen' – although they also highlighted the importance of their previous experience. The line managers we interviewed at that time were also generally positive.

The time limitation, however, was associated with a knowledge-based approach to cover a very large amount of material and a relative lack of focus on interpersonal skills. We also considered there was a lack of support to develop processes of helping, including a real understanding of parents and issues such as professional boundaries.

Over the pilot the TDA developed the Support Work in Schools (SWiS) qualification and then, drawing upon the experience of PSAs and LAs' PSA leads, undertook further development of qualifications within the qualification and credits framework.



## What do PSAs do?

To begin with, the pilot proposed three ways in which PSAs might carry out their work.

- Model 1: based in a single primary or secondary school, working solely with early intervention and preventative support for parents and pupils, including work on supporting parents at key transition points for their child
- Model 2: operating across a cluster of primary and secondary schools, focusing on offering parenting support courses and classes and one-to-one support for parents across the cluster
- Model 3: operating in one school (like model 1) but also with a role supporting pupils who had been or are likely to be excluded.



In addition, it was intended that some PSAs would be budget holders, able to make purchases of small equipment and services, for example.

The PSA role was to be developed within LAs to suit local needs, but was expected to include two main modes of working, namely single school working and cluster working. Fundamental to the role was an expectation that PSAs would provide support to parents in and around school settings.

However, we found over the pilot that PSAs supported by their line managers moved away from these models. In part this reflected the freedom many line managers (most commonly headteachers) gave their PSAs to develop their role. The first phase was characterised by a very wide range of activity by many PSAs. The important thing at this time was getting known – being available informally to parents, either by organising events such as coffee mornings or being around in the playground as parents brought or collected their children (in primary schools). Line managers recognised that this phase was necessary and that it bore fruit as increasingly parents started to develop trust and relationships with the PSA.

Practice varied not only by individual decisions, by PSAs or schools, but also according to whether the PSA was serving primary or secondary schools, and whether based in a school or serving a cluster. We examined whether there was a preferable model but we found benefits (and limitations) with each. The key issue was to identify

optimal practice within the framework of the role and its organisation.

In our research report we provide a large number of examples of the positive aspects of the PSA role and also explore how it was developed in different settings. This twin focus on processes of development and also on outcomes and impact was central to our work, as the other 132 LAs which were not in the pilot needed to know not only whether the PSAs had a positive impact but also how had this been achieved. The following presents a flavour of our findings.

## Parents' views

The 105 parents we interviewed were overwhelmingly positive. For example, 99 to 100 per cent reported that they felt listened to, understood and respected, with about 85 per cent giving this the highest rating. About 95 per cent also felt more confident to tackle problems. They also referred to practical interventions: "I felt really comfortable. I was upset talking about it, but it was for my son so I had to do it. [The PSA] started a homework club so my son could do his homework there instead of at home. He loves it."

In other examples, parents talked much more extensively about their own feelings: "I was in tears and it was as if something had been lifted, and I felt: I can deal with this... She'll break the problems down and tries to get to the bottom of them... She related to everything and sympathized. She made me feel he's not abnormal. She's my safety net. As soon as I have a problem I can go straight to her. I was so stressed and she puts you back in control."

PSAs also undertook practical support: "She helped me with the housing and the cockroaches and took me to sort it out."



It's interesting to note both emotional and practical support. Furthermore, although most of this sample of parents had been identified as being likely to have found the PSA's work positive or 'OK', we also included parents who PSAs thought would not think the work had gone so well. Almost all the parents identified changes for themselves. One said: "I was so depressed and crying every day and couldn't cope. She [the PSA] has given me back my confidence. I'm not on my own and there's help. I was

beating myself up and thought I'd let my son down. Now I feel stronger and more positive which is what my son needed all along. Knowing she's there, I don't need her so much. She doesn't solve the problem – she says I do."

In some cases parents reported improved relationships with their child(ren): "We get on a lot better. Me and my little boy were really not getting on very well at all at the beginning. We had a lot of issues and it has got 100 per cent better. It really has." Others said their child's attendance or confidence had improved, including help with transition from primary to secondary school: "She is more confident. She knows how to cope with friendships and is more mature. She copes better and is enjoying going to secondary school. The PSA took her up to the school to show her round and has made sure she is looked after at secondary school." (This was the parent of a child with asthma and learning difficulties).

### Line managers' views

About nine out of ten line managers agreed that PSAs had improved parents' engagement with the child's learning, relationships between parents and the school, and the situation for pupils who were 'at risk' because of their own



or parents' behaviour or attitudes. Where attendance was a concern, about 85 per cent of line managers reported that pupils' attendance had improved. About half of the line managers also reported that their PSA had exceeded their expectations of benefits for parents and also their value for money. There was also evidence that persistent absenteeism decreased at a faster rate in secondary schools that had a PSA.

We identified some areas where further development might be needed. Very few male PSAs were recruited and only 10 per cent of parents they supported were fathers. We also had concerns about supervision (by this we mean the process used to support the professional who is dealing with challenging work which is often emotionally draining, rather than line management). It was also apparent that PSAs sometimes found themselves dealing with parents who had substantial problems, beyond what is reasonable for a member of the workforce with very limited training.

I hope these issues and others we noted will be addressed as LAs develop their PSA workforce. Attempts to address the concern about supervision have been addressed by the Children's Workforce Development Council, which has now produced a supervision toolkit.<sup>3</sup>

Parenting is not easy for any of us: it is challenging and tiring as well as hugely rewarding and a joy when it goes well, and our children succeed in their own terms. But for many, parenting is difficult and a negative experience for a number of reasons. We have shown in a separate study that parenting programmes can have a positive impact on both parenting skills and parents' mental well-being. Our evaluation of the PSA pilot showed that PSAs can also have a positive impact supporting parents who are in challenging situations. For further information see our guide<sup>4</sup> or the full research report.<sup>5</sup>

Our evaluation provided support for the further development of PSAs, and LAs are now developing PSAs beyond the pilot 20 authorities. The next four years will be vital as PSAs integrate into a comprehensive system with other professionals to provide support to parents, which will then, hopefully, lead to better life chances for their children.

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### References

1. The Parenting Early Intervention Programme is currently being evaluated by CEDAR. This provides funding to all local authorities to run evidence-based parenting programmes and follows our evidence of the success of the Pathfinder: see [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/dcsf-rw054.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/dcsf-rw054.pdf)
2. Training and Development Agency (2009), *Parent Support Advisers: Practice and Impact – summer 2009*, TDA
3. [www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/providing-effective-supervision](http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/providing-effective-supervision)
4. *Parent Support Advisor Pilot Evaluation – A Guide*
5. Lindsay, G; Davis, H; Strand, S; Cullen, MA; Band, S; Cullen, S; Davis, L; Hasluck, C; Evans, R; Stewart-Brown, S, Parent support advisor pilot evaluation: see [www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RR151.pdf](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/DCSF-RR151.pdf)