
Building bridges? An evaluation of the costs and effectiveness of the Separated Parents Information Programme

Background

Currently 1 in 10 parents who separate or divorce seek the assistance of the courts in making decisions about contact arrangements for their children. Research in this area suggests that courts have limited impact on the key co-parenting factors that make contact arrangements sustainable and work best for children. Researchers conclude that resources should be redirected from the courts to more creative programmes that seek to improve parental relationships and help them settle contact arrangements independently.

The Parent Information Programmes (PIP) is the first available programme for parents involved in litigation about child contact and residence in England. The programme is a Contact Activity, introduced by the Children and Adoption Act 2006 as a tool for courts to facilitate contact.

PIP is a four hour group programme for parents referred by the court. Both parties, i.e. the applicant and respondent, are required to attend the programme, but former partners attend separate groups. The groups are designed to include both men and women. The aim of the programme is to encourage parents to focus on their children's needs and perspectives. The programme is delivered by trained providers from mediation, social workers and counselling or contact services backgrounds.

The study was conducted over a three month period in early 2011.

Aims and Methods

The evaluation was designed to identify the actual and future potential of the Parenting Information Programme as an effective and value for money intervention for parents with disputes over parenting arrangements, with a particular goal to inform the deliberations of the Family Justice Review. To achieve this overall aim the research team had four specific objectives. These were to:

1. Understand the court and non-court pathways undertaken by parents attending PIP, and how this compares to the experiences of comparable non-PIP cases.
2. Measure the impact on families of PIPs compared to other court-based pathways.
3. Measure the average cost of providing PIP and the cost-effectiveness of PIP in comparison with other court-based pathways.
4. Understand in more depth why PIP might work better in some circumstances than others, including what parents and professionals perceive to be helpful and unhelpful about PIP and what changes may be required.

The research design involved the following methods:

- A telephone survey of 349 PIP parents and a matched comparison sample of 292 non-PIP parents to provide data on pathways, impacts, costs and processes.
- Purposively-sampled qualitative telephone interviews with 12 parents reporting positive outcomes from PIP and 12 parents reporting negative outcomes from PIP.
- Four focus groups with parents, which took place shortly after the parents had completed the final session of PIP.
- Focus groups and individual interviews with 24 judges, 11 family lawyers, 28 CAFCASS staff and 26 PIP deliverers.
- A survey of the average unit costs of delivering a single PIP cycle based on a specially-designed tool.

Key Findings

- The results of the evaluation are mixed. Whilst participants' experience of attending a PIP tends to be very positive, this does not necessarily translate into mutually satisfactory contact arrangements regarding the child.
- 38% of PIP participants think participation improved their ability to discuss issues about their child and their ex-partner; 46% think they have a better understanding of ex-partner's perspective.
- 8% of parents who attended thought the PIP played a *big role* in reaching an agreement; and 16% said the PIP played *some role* in reaching an agreement.
- 8% of respondents who were previously having no contact with their child started to have some contact following participation on a PIP and 6% of parents who participated on a PIP said they were happy with the agreement in place.
- The evidence indicates that PIPs are most effective when they are undertaken early in cases, although there was evidence that PIPs can have a good impact on older cases too.
- Results show that PIPs are more effective in improving contact between children and parents where there was no arrangement in place before the parent participated in a PIP.

Conclusions

- The evaluation identified some of the real strengths of the PIP programme as well as its current weaknesses.
- It is clear that the programme resonates with many parents and that, despite initial reservations, most parents report finding the experience of attending a parenting programme entirely acceptable and generally supportive.
- Parents were positive about the purpose and focus of the programme, the group interaction and the way the programme was facilitated.
- The findings of the impact study offer a more sober estimate of the effectiveness of the programme when compared to the standard non-PIP case pathways.
- PIP participation had a positive impact on contact rates of about 8 percentage points, seemingly by converting 'no contact' into some, but not frequent, contact.
- PIP did not seem to have any impact on parental relationship quality, although there was a non-significant trend towards more positive outcomes in the PIP group.

- Attending PIP did not seem to reduce the extent of court involvement in cases, compared to non-PIP pathways.
- On three primary targets - contact, communication (or conflict) and court - it would appear that PIP is having a modest impact on the first but not the second or third. It is important to recognise that contact is not necessarily a positive outcome for children where there are continuing high levels of parental conflict concerns about safety. Indeed, the research team identified a potential sub-group of 'risk' cases for whom PIP may worsen outcomes for parents and children.
- The limited impact may be attributable to several factors: these are difficult cases; the PIP programme occurs very late in the day when habits of hostility and distrust have become deeply ingrained and very difficult to alter; the programme is very short; it has quite generic aims and no specific behavioural skills element; and there is no real follow through as cases transfer back into the court process.
- All of the limiting factors identified above could be remedied, with the exception of case difficulty. The most effective programmes take time and several iterations to develop.
- PIP already has a modest impact but its full potential has probably not yet been realised. The research team recommend changes to how the programme is implemented and delivered and refinement of the aims and content to maximise its effectiveness.

Recommendations

- PIPs should be made available at an earlier stage. This should be as voluntary self-referral and also linked with mediation as a mandatory step before proceedings in appropriate cases.
- More effective and systematic screening and assessment is required whether PIP is used during or before proceedings.
- More attention needs to be paid to ensuring that all parents have full, clear and accurate information about PIP before attending the programme.
- The programme aims and content should be reviewed. The aims should be clearer and more targeted. More skills development is needed. The programme should be more clearly focused on post-separation parenting challenges.
- A suite of programmes is required to address very different needs, including programmes for working with high/entrenched cases and cases, domestic violence programmes to set alongside the basic PIP programme.
- More effective mechanisms need to be set in place to follow up after PIP and to provide a bridge between parents and between PIP and the dispute resolution process.
- The PIP and associated material should be more widely available.
- Mechanisms are required for practice and professional development amongst PIP providers.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>
General queries about this research can be obtained by contacting DfE on 0370 000 2288
or by using the online form at <http://www.education.gov.uk/help/contactus>

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