

The case for 'time out' childcare

Parenting can be difficult in isolation. Parents need to draw on diverse networks of support to enable them to deal with the challenges of parenthood effectively, from friends, family, neighbours and many others. Support can come in the form of advice and shared experience, and it can also come in the form of childcare, giving the parent a break, particularly in times of stress. However some parents lack these informal networks. This article explores the idea of a new form of support for isolated parents; 'time out' childcare delivered by local volunteers.

'Time out'

Being a parent is enjoyable and rewarding, but it is also demanding and can be tough at times, particularly if parents are experiencing other types of stress at work or at home. Most parents can call on friends and relatives to allow them to have an occasional break at times of crisis. These periods when parents can have some 'time out' are important; they allow parents to sustain their ability to care for their children and strengthen the family as a whole.

At a minimum there is a need for flexible and free childcare provision for families during emergencies and severe upheavals, for example during a bereavement or repossession of the family home, where parents need time to sort out logistics, attend appointments, fill out paperwork and sort through their own emotions. On these occasions many parents would turn to friends and family for assistance. However the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents found that 27 per cent of parents who had not used childcare in the past year had no informal carers available, even for one-off occasions¹.

Even when problems are not so drastic, parents may need some time out. The survey found that 15 per cent of parents with school age children routinely used either formal or informal childcare for reasons relating to 'parental time' (examples given for how this can be spent include domestic activities, socialising, or looking after other children). This rises to 23 per cent for parents with pre-school children. Most parents who used childcare for reasons related to parental time relied on informal carers, though some used the formal system. Time out becomes far more difficult for parents who lack the money for formal childcare and the networks for informal childcare.

We know that additional stress can affect parenting. When parents are under stress their informal networks often come to their aid. If a parent is struggling, perhaps because they have recently lost their job or are having difficulties with their partner, they might decide to leave their child with their grandparents and take some time for themselves to think about and plan for their future. Isolated parents do not have this option. If parents are not able to take a break to deal with stressful situations early on, then matters could escalate to a point where they cause lasting problems in the family. In the worst cases, families may not be able to recover from a crisis on their own, resulting in a need for family support services later on. 'Time out' childcare could be part of a system of support for vulnerable and isolated parents, which would operate in addition to the formal childcare system.

¹ Smith, P et al (2012) Childcare and early years survey of parents 2010.
<http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/STR/d001073/index.shtml>.

The current system

Current childcare provision does not meet this need. Formal childcare focuses on the school readiness of the child and providing cover while parents work. Though formal childcare can help struggling families, its objectives are not to strengthen vulnerable families at times of need and crisis. This is a clear gap, which 'time out' childcare could help to fill.

The entitlement to fifteen hours free childcare is available for three to four year olds and two year olds from disadvantaged backgrounds. The entitlement for two year olds will be extended to around twenty per cent of the least advantaged from September 2013, allowing more families to access childcare. However this is only available at certain times of the day. Other services, such as extended schools' services, lack the flexibility to provide care whenever it is needed and only cater to a limited age range. Flexible, ad-hoc childcare is limited in its availability and can be very expensive where it exists.

Other provision is patchy. Social workers are able to arrange childcare and temporary foster placements in extraordinary circumstances, however this would only occur when there are already concerns about abuse and neglect, rather than as a preventative measure. There is little provision for families that are facing difficulties but do not have access to support from a social worker. The model of 'time out' childcare suggested here would plug a significant gap in the current system.

The proposed system

'Time out' childcare would be delivered by local volunteers. The volunteers can develop a longstanding relationship with the parent and child and earn their trust over time. Parents would be able to use the service to drop their children off in a safe space for an agreed length of time, anything from a few hours to a whole day. An important aspect of the service would be to help build parents' social networks, by informing them about playgroups, family activities and other peer support available. Because volunteers would be local, the child would be looked after by the same small group of volunteers. Should parents return to the service frequently, and problems appear more entrenched than temporary, volunteers would be able to signpost parents to appropriate formal support. If there are serious safeguarding concerns volunteers would be supported to make referrals to children's social care.

This type of 'time out' care would be aimed at vulnerable and isolated families who could not afford formal childcare provision and lack the networks to rely on informal care. 'Time out' childcare should not be used as a cheap option to replace formal childcare, as this would overburden volunteers and prevent them from offering flexibility and support to the families that really need it. Professionals would not be able to place children with the service, though they could signpost vulnerable families to the service if they meet the criteria. The service would not be widely advertised, instead volunteers would visit areas of particular need in their local area to build individual relationships with isolated families. While children would not be turned away from the service, targeted outreach should ensure that the vast majority of families that use the service are those that need it most.

A service such as this would fit well with the objectives of children's centres, and in some areas it might make sense for the service to be managed by the children's centre. However there are also opportunities for a service such as this to be delivered in private and in voluntary nurseries and crèches run by local community groups. This would allow more parents, who may not have much contact with their local children's centre, to have a more convenient option provided by people they recognise from the neighbourhood.

A trusted peer

If the model is to work then it will be crucial that the parent trusts the volunteer childcarer. Research shows that trust is a key barrier to parents choosing to use childcare². As well as trusting the ability of the carer to look after the child, parents would need to trust the carer enough to seek support, and in doing so disclose problems they may be experiencing at home. It is therefore important that the childcarer is seen as separate from the local authority and also that they are known to the parent.

For this reason it is important that the carer be a local volunteer. As the Homestart model shows, volunteer helpers are trusted and can often reach families that would otherwise not receive a service. Part of the role of the volunteer would be to visit isolated families to let them know about the service, answer any questions they may have and get to know the individual families and their situations. This will allow the volunteer to build a relationship of trust with vulnerable and isolated parents over time. Because the volunteer would not be approaching families in a professional capacity, some parents might be more welcoming towards the volunteer and more receptive of the offer of support.

Support for volunteers

This would be a demanding role and it would be crucial that volunteers receive the support they need to undertake it properly. The scheme provider would need to have a named contact should the volunteer need assistance, and one-to-one meetings with each volunteer every week to ensure that they were happy with the arrangements, and to talk through any concerns they might have about the children and parents they had helped. Not only would this give the volunteer an opportunity to share any problems they have experienced, but it would also provide an important time to reflect on any concerns that might need escalation. Volunteers would also need specific support and advice if they felt they needed to make a referral to social care. Volunteers could also contact the NSPCC Helpline for advice on any of these issues.

Impact on the development of the child

The quality of childcare, rather than who provides it, appears to be the most important factor that determines later cognitive, social and behavioural outcomes in children³. The scheme provider would need to ensure that volunteers under the proposed scheme were CRB checked and had a good

² Byrson, C. et al (2012) The role of informal childcare: A synthesis and critical review of the evidence <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/role-informal-childcare>

³ Rutter, J and Evans, B (2011) *Informal Childcare: Choice or Chance?* http://www.daycaretrust.org.uk/data/files/informal_childcare_march_2011_final.pdf

understanding of child development, but the focus of their role would not be on early education. 'Time out' childcare is not meant to be a long term solution, and would ideally lead to the use of formal childcare and early education provision, or to the child being looked after by a parent who is better able to meet their needs.

Used to mask problems

It is important that the scheme is not used to mask significant and entrenched problems. However it is likely that this model will allow struggling parents, who would otherwise have gone unnoticed, to receive help. Volunteers will be trained to recognise the signs of abuse and neglect, and to receive disclosures of abuse from children or parents. Volunteers would be supported to make referrals to children's social care in cases of suspected abuse. Other potential warning signs could include overuse of the service. Where problems are not severe enough to warrant support from social services, volunteers would be able to signpost parents to services that can support them, such as formal childcare services. Establishing a relationship with a volunteer carer in this way could allow parents to access the formal system. It also makes the child more visible in the community, so more people can recognise concerning behaviour or signs of neglect.

Conclusion

Though the idea of 'time out' is a key part of being an effective parent for many, isolated parents are often not able to have a break, even at times of acute stress. The provision of 'time out' childcare to meet this need would not only provide much needed help to struggling families, but would also help identify where there are significant needs in a family and allow these families to access formal support.

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About the NSPCC

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) is here to end cruelty to children in the UK by fighting for their rights, listening to them, helping them and making them safe.

We share our experience with governments and organisations working with children so together we improve the protection of children and we challenge those who will not learn and change.

We campaign for better laws and we educate and inform the public to improve understanding about child abuse.

Our services include the NSPCC Helpline, for adults worried about a child, and ChildLine, the UK's free, confidential helpline for children and young people.

ChildLine is a service provided by the NSPCC. Registered charity numbers 216401 and SC037717.