



 An Anna Freud project

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

Child Outcomes Research Consortium at Anna Freud

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Contents

Executive summary.....	3
Introduction	7
Background/ national context.....	7
Parenting Apart Limited.....	9
Method	11
Findings	13
1. How is the programme being used and embedded in different areas?	13
Theme 1: Approaches to implementation of the programme	13
Theme 2: Referral routes.....	16
2. What have been facilitators to implementing Parenting Apart?	21
Theme 1: Provision of new knowledge and skills through training.....	21
Theme 2: Ongoing support for Parenting Apart practice - expert and peer	25
Theme 3: Strategic and operational management buy-in and support	30
Theme 4: Partnership work	33
Theme 5: Elements of the Parenting Apart intervention	34
3. What have been barriers or challenges to implementing Parenting Apart.....	39
Theme 1: Challenges securing parental engagement and consent	39
Theme 3: Staff capacity	42
Theme 4: Complexity of referred cases.....	44
Theme 5: Dual roles versus dedicated Parenting Apart practitioner roles.....	45
Theme 6: Administration and paperwork	47
Theme 7: Risks to sustainability.....	47
Theme 8: Scope and parameters of training	48
4. How is Parenting Apart shifting practice and cultures?	50
Theme 1: Raising awareness and understanding about the impact of parental conflict and ways to address it across the system.....	50
Theme 2: A child focus (focusing parents on the needs of their child).....	51
Theme 3: Staff confidence to work with conflict.....	53
Theme 4: Influencing practitioners' wider work with parents.....	54
Theme 5: Staff professional development	55
5. Indications of impact for parents and families.....	56
Conclusions and limitations	58
References	61

Executive summary

Background

Evidence indicates that frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict can have a negative impact on outcomes and life chances for children. In recognition of this the government developed the Reducing Parental Conflict Programme, and through this programme has supported a range of activity to develop the capacity of services in local areas to work with families to reduce parental conflict and improve child outcomes.

Parenting Apart Limited (PAP) aim to support families experiencing separation, divorce and parental conflict and to ensure children remain at the heart of every decision. Several local authorities in the UK have commissioned support and services from PAP as part of their Reducing Parental Conflict work.

The CORC project team at Anna Freud was commissioned by PAP to evaluate the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme ('the programme') in two local authority areas, Hillingdon and North Yorkshire. The evaluation aimed to address the over-arching questions listed in the 'Key findings' below.

Methods

The evaluation drew on two types of data: routinely collected feedback and attendance data collected by PAP; and analysis of qualitative data from interviews and focus groups carried out by the CORC team. Two local leads and twenty six Parenting Apart-trained practitioners in Hillingdon and North Yorkshire were engaged through the qualitative work, in addition to the PAP consultants providing training and support.

Key findings

How the Parenting Apart programme is being used and embedded

Both Hillingdon and North Yorkshire use Parenting Apart as part of an early help offer. Both areas are adopting an approach to rolling the programme out that allows learning to cascade from those who engage more directly with training and deliver interventions to a wider workforce who offer to support families.

In North Yorkshire, a local authority covering a large geographical territory including many rural areas, an emphasis in programme implementation has been to spread the approach across the territory by training Relationship Champions in each locality to both deliver Parenting Apart interventions and to support wider family support teams to be aware of and address parental conflict. In Hillingdon the evaluation identified a notable emphasis on partnership work, offering Parenting Apart training to a wide range of organisations and individuals in contact with families experiencing conflict, including for example voluntary and statutory

sector service provisions in social care, education, youth justice, youth work, and some parents.

Where awareness and understanding about reducing parental conflict and Parenting Apart were higher, this was found to support both the number and the appropriateness of referrals to Parenting Apart. Examples of how this was done ranged through formal multi-agency partnerships and cross-organisation working among professionals, to community events and parents evenings.

Factors that facilitated the implementation of Parenting Apart included:

- **Training from PAP** which was highly valued, and reported to improve staff awareness, understanding, skills and confidence to support parents in conflict. Elements that made the training particularly effective included the interactivity, role-play, modelling by trainers, and provision of a safe context for discussion and practise.
- **Ongoing expert and peer support** that practitioners found valuable in consolidating and realising the benefits of training when they returned to their work roles. Reflective Practice Groups, supervision and ad hoc advice from PAP were considered highlighted, as were supports that developed among colleagues locally, including both reflective spaces and Teams groups.
- **Securing the understanding and buy-in of managers.** At a strategic level this was key in prioritizing and sustaining the work, and at an operational level it was important to ensure that appropriate processes and support were in place for practitioner delivery.
- **Engaging partners** to improve awareness and understanding about reducing parental conflict, secure buy-in across the system, and increase appropriate referrals to Parenting Apart and RPC work
- **Features of the Parenting Apart intervention** itself that were found to be effective and compelling, including: involving both parents; clear boundaries and expectations and an explicit focus on outcomes for the child; a strengths-based approach; promoting parental responsibility; and some of the tools used by the intervention, in particular the use of a co-parenting agreements.

Barriers and challenges encountered in implementing Parenting Apart were similar to those that have been identified in the delivery of other RPC programmes, These included:

- **Getting consent and engagement** from both parents in contexts of conflict was often challenging. A number of factors were at play in getting the timing right for the intervention, including the duration and emotional intensity of conflict.
- **The capacity of staff** to deliver Parenting Apart interventions alongside the other commitments of their roles
- **Challenges for staff in managing a ‘dual role’** where some aspects of their work as Parenting Apart practitioners were felt to be distinct from ways of working they used in their core roles. For example some practitioners

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

experienced jarring that the tightly defined parameters and time-limits Parenting Apart did not allow them to engage directly with the child, and limited taking a more holistic, Think Family stance

- **The strain and pressures** for practitioners that can arise from the complexity of the work and some of the risks and issues that arose, including for example the conflict, domestic abuse, substance misuse.
- **Levels of paperwork and administration**, where requirements of measurement, monitoring, and co-parenting agreements, were felt by some to be burdensome to practitioners and barriers to engaging parents.
- **Barriers to sustainability** owing to staff turnover and the time-limited nature of funding.

Key areas of Parenting Apart impact in shifting practice and cultures included:

- **Increasing awareness and understanding** of the importance and impact of parental conflict, and of the role of the Parenting Apart programme in addressing it - among trained Parenting Apart practitioner's, their immediate colleagues, and among professionals in the partner organisations they work alongside
- **A focus on the needs of the child.** This was understood to be a key principle of Parenting Apart as an approach, and practitioners reported this as a crucial lever in securing parental co-operation and changes in parent behaviour
- **Improving practitioners' confidence in working with conflict**, based on skills and knowledge gained through PAP training and support
- **Use of the Parenting Apart approaches outside of formal Parenting Apart interventions.** Participants had offered advice and guidance drawn from Parenting Apart outside of a five session intervention, for example to individual parents, parents in conflict but not separated, or parents with communication issues. Local leads spoke of the value and desirability of integrating the skills, knowledge and approaches into wider family support in this way.

Conclusions

In the two areas involved in this study, efforts to implement and to maximise the impact of the programme have been supported by the quality of the training, support offer and intervention design offered by PAP, and by attention to partner engagement, manager buy-in and practitioner support in localities.

There are challenges in engaging parents in conflict at an appropriate point in time for this type of work, and the work can be demanding for staff in already-busy roles. However practitioners involved in this study also welcomed the development of their knowledge, skills and confidence in working with parents in conflict, and spoke of its positive impact for families they were working with.

Local leads affirmed their commitment to sustaining work to reduce parental conflict in their area, regardless of the continuity of current funding streams. The

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

evaluation identified a number of ways in which the approach is already seen to be embedding in ways of working and cultures at individual, organizational and system level. Opportunities to expand the scope of PAP training, and to embed the approach within developing Family Hub models, spoke to this energy to sustain the work into the future.

Introduction

The Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) team at Anna Freud was commissioned by Parenting Apart Limited (PAP) to carry out independent evaluative work to explore the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme (the programme) in two local authority areas (Hillingdon and North Yorkshire) in the period February 2024 to September 2024.

The programme delivered in these two areas includes training and support designed to provide professionals with the skills and knowledge to support parents or carers experiencing medium to high levels of inter-parental conflict to build healthier co-parenting relationships that support the well-being of their children.

The evaluation aimed to address three overarching questions:

- How is the Parenting Apart programme being used and embedded in different areas?
- What have been facilitators and barriers to implementing Parenting Apart in different areas?
- How is Parenting Apart shifting practice and cultures in different areas?

Background/ national context

Evidence indicates that, while some level of parental disagreement and conflict is a normal part of day-to-day life, frequent, intense, and poorly resolved parental conflict can have a negative impact on outcomes and life chances for children, affecting mental health, overall wellbeing and future employment.

Evidence reviews undertaken by Foundations (formerly the Early Intervention Foundation, EiF) (Acqua, 2017) on behalf of DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) detail the adverse effects of poor inter-parental relationships in child outcomes. These include impacts on levels of anti-social behaviour and anxiety, on social and interpersonal relationship problems and on academic and physical health outcomes. The reviews also highlighted that the quality of inter-parental relationships is affected by poverty and economic stress.

EiF's work drew out evidence that the likelihood of relationship and parenting difficulties is reduced where parents (in low-income families) are better equipped with effective coping strategies, communication and problem-solving skills, community and neighbourhood support, and access to maternal social support (Harold, 2016). However, the evidence for effective interventions to address inter-parental conflict for families in or at risk of poverty was found to be largely generated from interventions operating overseas, with evidence for programmes

effective in the UK being at an earlier stage and requiring further development (ibid).

The government established a parental conflict indicator which takes into account the quality of relationships among both parents who are together (based on levels of relationship distress) and parents who are separated (based on consistency of the child's contact with their non-resident parent). In 2020 this indicated that 12% of children were living with at least one parent reporting relationship distress; 52% of children in separated families saw their non-resident parent regularly (fortnightly). These figures were largely unchanged from 2015/16 (DWP, 2022). In government analysis parental conflict was seen to be significantly more likely in workless couple-parent families compared to those where both parents are working, with 21% of children in workless families, have parents in a distressed relationship (EiF, 2017).

In response, the government's 2017 strategy Improving Lives (DWP, DH, 2017) committed to a new programme to support evidence-based interventions to reduce parental conflict and improve child outcomes. The national Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) programme was informed by learning from the Local Family Offer, trialled over 2015-17 in 12 local authority areas to build learning and best practice about supporting parental relationships. The RPC programme aimed to develop the evidence base on what works to reduce parental conflict, and to help local areas to integrate and embed support to reduce parental conflict within local family support services.

DWP has supported a range of activity through the RPC programme, including: practitioner training to develop the confidence knowledge and skills of those working with families to reduce conflict and improve outcomes for children; workforce development grants to train staff in delivering specialist interventions and develop capacity across the system; funding for leadership support in top-tier local authorities, enabling the improvement of strategic capabilities to address parental conflict; a team of Regional Integration Leads to support local authorities in applying and sharing evidence and best practice; and 'what works' centre support (through EiF) to help local areas with evaluation, approaches and tools, and dissemination and learning about what works to reduce parental conflict and improve child outcomes.

This burgeoning understanding of the importance of reducing parental conflict in supporting child wellbeing, and national government policy and support for implementation and learning in this area, are the backdrop to the focus and investment on implementing PAP in Hillingdon and North Yorkshire. Evidence and learning about how local authorities can be effective in reducing parental conflict are gradually increasing and being shared as approaches develop (see for example (Foundations, 2024)). This study is one further contribution to learning in this field.

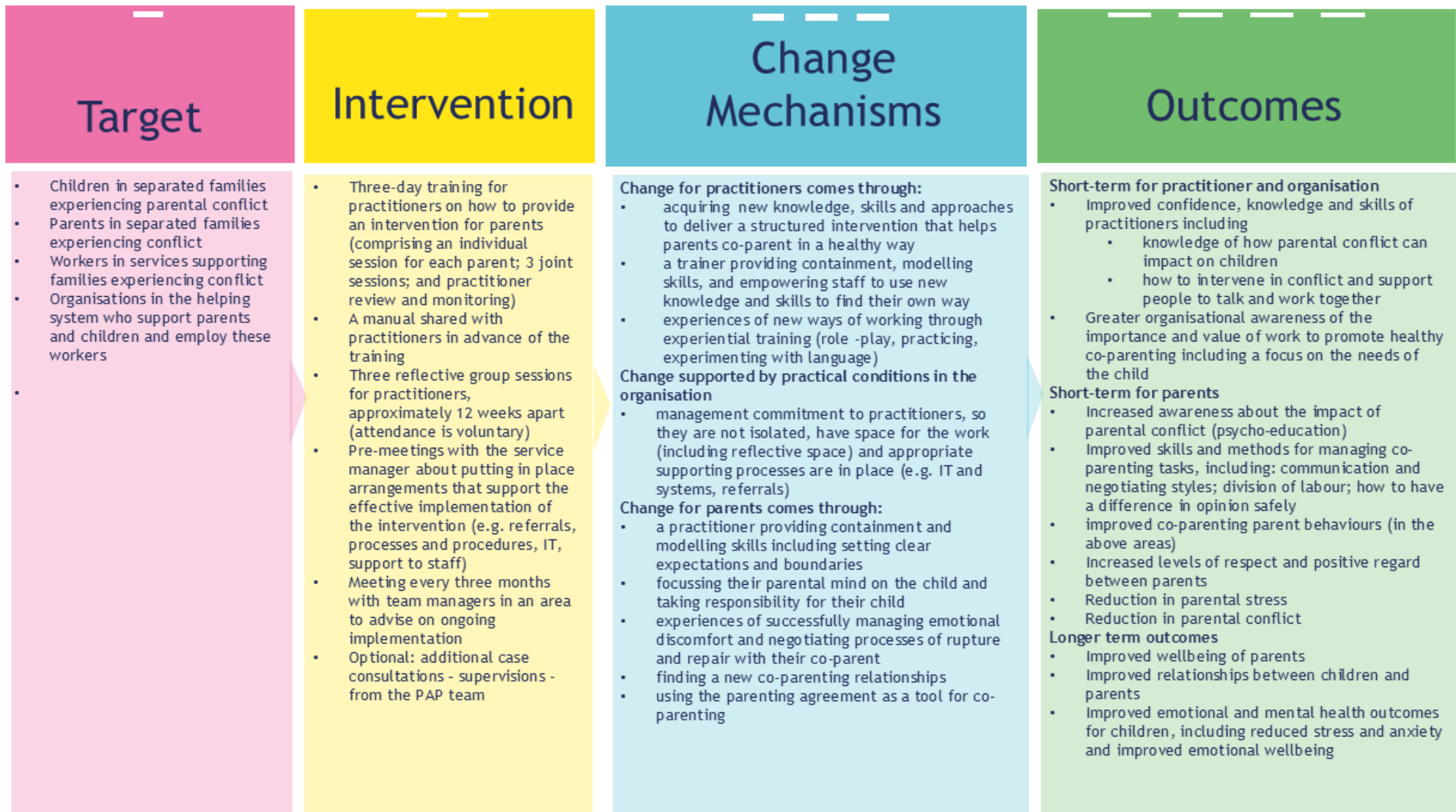
Parenting Apart Limited

Parenting Apart Limited (PAP) aims to support families experiencing separation, divorce, and parental conflict, and to ensure that children remain at the heart of every decision (Parenting Apart Programme website, accessed 2024). In supporting this aim, PAP offers a range of supports and services, including individual and joint sessions for parents, specialist assessments, resources, support to local authorities, and training for professionals (ibid).

This evaluation explores a package of support, ‘the programme’, offered by PAP and taken up in the two local authority areas Hillingdon and North Yorkshire. The training element to the programme is designed for professionals who are supporting parents or carers experiencing medium to high levels of inter-parental conflict. It focuses on systemic family therapy approaches and positive, strengths-based communication between parents, and draws on evidence from child development, neuroscience, attachment theory, and conflict and communication theories. Reflective group sessions over the ensuing three months are run by a PAP facilitator and support professionals to refresh and consolidate learning from the training, address issues and challenges they may experience applying the intervention with parents, and to support and learn from one another. Support is also provided to managers in the area to assist them with planning, implementing and embedding the approach.

The logic model below was developed in consultation with PAP consultants. It sets out the components of the programme in Hillingdon and North Yorkshire, the hypothesised mechanisms of change and the intended impacts. This highlights that while the direct work of the programme offered by PAP is between PAP consultants and professionals in local areas, the overarching aim is to make a difference to the behaviours and relationships of parents and carers and the outcomes of their children.

Logic model for the Parenting Apart programme in Hillingdon and North Yorkshire



Method

The evaluation drew on two types of data: routinely collected feedback and attendance data collected by PAP; and qualitative data from interviews and focus groups carried out by the CORC team.

Routinely collected feedback and attendance data

PAP provided anonymised quantitative data about the engagement of professionals in the training and reflective practice components of the intervention in each area.

PAP also provided the research team with collated responses to the feedback forms which are completed by attendees for PAP at the conclusion of their training sessions. Feedback was analysed from 101 forms (descriptive analysis), and the key themes identified informed the themes explored and developed through the qualitative data collection strand.

Qualitative data collection

Professionals in the two local authority areas (Hillingdon and North Yorkshire) were invited to take part in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Data was generated through:

- One-to-one online Interviews with the local lead in each of the two areas
- Focus groups with practitioners participating in the programme in each area (ninety minutes, online)
 - Three focus groups were held with practitioners in Hillingdon, engaging a total of 17 practitioners
 - Two focus groups were held with practitioners in North Yorkshire, engaging a total of 5 practitioners
- One to one journey mapping sessions with 4 practitioners; 3 from Hillingdon and 1 from North Yorkshire.
- A focus group was also carried with PAP consultants who support the programme in the two areas by delivering training, facilitating reflective group sessions.

Topic guides for qualitative data collection were based on the three overarching evaluation research questions and informed by the logic model developed in consultation with PAP consultants (see above). The research questions were:

- How is the Parenting Apart programme being used and embedded in different areas?
- What have been facilitators and barriers to implementing Parenting Apart in different areas?
- How is Parenting Apart shifting practice and cultures in different areas?

The interviews and focus groups were recorded on MS Teams. Interview transcripts were analysed using the framework method (Gale, 2013) and thematic analysis (Braun, 2006). Illustrative examples from practitioner journey mapping sessions have been presented as Practitioner Stories in the proceeding sections.

Findings

Our findings are organised around the three evaluation questions, and the key themes that were identified during analysis. We have synthesised information from the different data collection strands under these themes. The fifth section in the Findings relays some of the material the evaluation gathered that illustrates the type of impact Parenting Apart can have on the lives of parents and children.

1. How is the programme being used and embedded in different areas?

Whilst there are similarities in the approaches taken by the two local authorities in Hillingdon and North Yorkshire to implementing the programme in their areas, there are also some differences. This section highlights some differentiating features in how the programme is being rolled out, how referrals are made, and work with local partnerships, exploring some of the underlying factors and implications for each theme.

Theme 1: Approaches to implementation of the programme

Both Hillingdon and North Yorkshire use Parenting Apart as part of an early help offer, and both areas are adopting an approach to rolling the programme out that allows learning to cascade from those who engage more directly with training and deliver interventions to a wider workforce. Hillingdon has been implementing the programme for a longer period than in North Yorkshire and a larger number of professionals have been trained. At this stage of delivery in North Yorkshire, a local authority covering a large geographical territory with lots of rural areas, there has been a focus on spreading the training across localities, whereas in Hillingdon, a more urban and densely populated area, there has been more emphasis on including partners in the training offer.

North Yorkshire

In North Yorkshire the programme is part of the Reducing Parental Conflict (RPC) work of the Stronger Relationships team within Early Help.

North Yorkshire is a large area with lots of rural areas, and the local authority workforce includes a number of small teams in each rural area. Rather than create a discrete team trained to deliver the Parenting Apart intervention, North Yorkshire has taken a more distributed approach to rolling out the programme by training staff in locality teams. A 'Relationship Champion' role has been

developed, and staff in this role are trained in various aspects of parental conflict and relational work. It is Relationship Champions in North Yorkshire who deliver the Parenting Apart intervention. Their role also includes sharing their knowledge and skills in this area through consultations with other staff in their locality teams and across their service. The model is that Relationship Champions advocate the Parenting Apart approach and support other children and family workers and social workers with general awareness and understanding about parental conflict and in how to use Parenting Apart tools and approaches, including for example ways to communicate more effectively with parents in conflict.

“What we tried to do in North Yorkshire in embedding it is to do it in localities because it's so geographically huge, it made more sense for us to train those practitioners in the Parenting Apart programme so that they could embed it within their work within early help or within social care”.

Parenting Apart Lead

Following on from the initial focus on Early Help practitioners, at the time of data collection plans had been put in place in North Yorkshire to expand the Parenting Apart trained workforce, with social workers in Adoption teams and Safeguarding teams and Family Group Conference staff signed up to attend future Parenting Apart training, and therefore to become Relationship Champions.

Hillingdon

In Hillingdon, the programme sits in the Stronger Families Key Working Service, based in the Early Help and Prevention Service. As in North Yorkshire, it is used to provide early help and intervention, supporting parents that are in conflict to prevent family breakdown and reduce the burden of the Family Courts and associated statutory requirements.

The Parenting Apart training, along with other reducing parental conflict training, is at the time of writing a part of mandatory training for all new starters in the Stronger Families Key Working Service. Additional to this, the approach in Hillingdon is to also offer the training to all staff in contact with families experiencing conflict, including voluntary sector service providers, education staff, probation team staff, Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) staff, social workers and youth workers, as well as some parents themselves.

This is in keeping with interviewees' descriptions of how the RPC approach in Hillingdon is generally oriented toward partnership work. Several Hillingdon interviewees described this work to raise awareness of the programme with all professionals that have contact with parents in conflict, and to develop links and referral pathways with partner services. Staff reported attending meetings with midwifery, education providers (including school cluster group meetings) and voluntary sector services to achieve this. The PAP lead also reported attending the

Partnership Group Board meeting attached to the overarching Safeguarding Children's Board to forge strategic links with partner services.

“From the from the beginning, we thought the only way the agenda of the RPC is about how you promote RPC across the Borough, and we thought we can't just do it in Early Help. We need to actually just put it out there with our partnerships. Our Stronger Families is very much about partnership groups, and we've got a lot of community links.”

Parenting Apart lead, Hillingdon

Participation in Parenting Apart training

Hillingdon began to implement the programme at the beginning of 2022, where North Yorkshire started training staff a year later. As such, there are more staff trained in the programme in Hillingdon where 58 members of staff have taken part in the training in 6 cohorts since February 2022, compared to 37 staff members in 3 cohorts North Yorkshire.

The range and diversity of staff roles that have taken part in the training to-date is also broader in Hillingdon, as compared to North Yorkshire, reflecting the different roll-out approaches described above.

Table 1. Number of staff attending Parenting Apart training

Area:	Cohort:	Date:	No. of staff attending:
Hillingdon	1	Feb-22	7
	2	Oct-22	8
	3	Jun-23	15
	4	Nov-23	10
	5	Jun-24	5
	6	Jul-24	13
	Total:		
North Yorks	1	Feb-23	12
	2	Oct-23	13
	3	Jun-24	12
	Total:		

Table 2. List of roles of staff participating in Parenting Apart training.

Hillingdon	North Yorks
Assistant Headteacher & Designated Safeguarding Lead	Key Worker
ASYE Social Worker	Children and Families Worker
Axis Prevention Case Worker	Army Welfare Worker
Chief Executive	Children and Family Worker
Children's Centre Co-ordinator	Family Network Coordinator

Children's Centre Manager
Children's Social Care
Clinical Psychologist
Deputy Head Teacher
Director, Coach, Consultant and
Psychotherapist
ELSA & Mental Health Co-ordinator
Family Advice Worker
Family Development Worker
Family Support Worker
Head Teacher
Key Worker
Locality Lead Officer
Nursery Practitioner
Parent Champion
Pastoral Care & Parent Support Lead
Programme Co-ordinator
SEND Advisory Keyworking Service
SEND Key Worker
Senior Assistant SENCo
Senior Programme Co-ordinator
Social Worker
Stronger Families Key Worker
Team Manager
Therapist / Parenting Practitioner
Youth Offending Service
Youth Justice Social Worker

Theme 2: Referral routes

In North Yorkshire parents are referred to Reducing Parental Conflict support, which includes the Parenting Apart intervention, through the Early Help assessment process. Evaluation participants reported that in North Yorkshire referrals do not often centre on parental conflict, with referral reasons more likely to be, for example, a child's behaviour or performance at school, parent-child conflict, or a need for parenting support. However, parents are asked key questions about the quality of their relationship, taken from the Parental Conflict Tool Kit. Responses to these questions help to determine if parental conflict is an issue for the family. Where this is the case, the referral is forwarded to the relevant Relationship Champion in the family's local area, to offer either a Parenting Apart intervention or other appropriate professional support locally.

"I've got three families that I've offered it [the Parenting Apart intervention] to: all three of them have come in because of, you know, whoever's referred in either it's been the police, it's been a school, and I think the other one was a self-referral actually. They haven't directly named Parenting Apart for it to be PAP

referral, but it's kind of well actually that would fit really well, parental conflict is the reason for referral”.

Parenting Apart practitioner, North Yorkshire

It has not been possible to obtain data on the number of Parenting Apart referrals and interventions delivered in North Yorkshire for this report. There are challenges with the way that such data is recorded locally, as often practitioners decide if they wish to attempt Parenting Apart delivery with the family they are working with, and it's not always recorded clearly what interventions are being used with them. This issue is acknowledged by the local lead and is being worked on at the time of writing.

In Hillingdon, the Stronger Families Hub is the gateway for referrals to a Parenting Apart intervention. Evaluation participants reported that programme leads have worked to raise awareness about parental conflict and the Parenting Apart programme in the area including through school parent's evenings, coffee mornings and other community events. Word of mouth was reported by the PAP lead in Hillingdon as a significant contributor to referrals for the Parenting Apart intervention. The Stronger Families Key Working Service also facilitates a Parents Network Group which is seen as effective in sharing information about the programme to other parents. Some members of the Parents Network Group have undertaken the Parenting Apart training and therefore have a good knowledge of the programme and how it can support parents in conflict.

“We do a lot of lunch and learn. We did a lot of promotions. I do attend a lot of meetings and partnership meetings [to promote the PAP].”

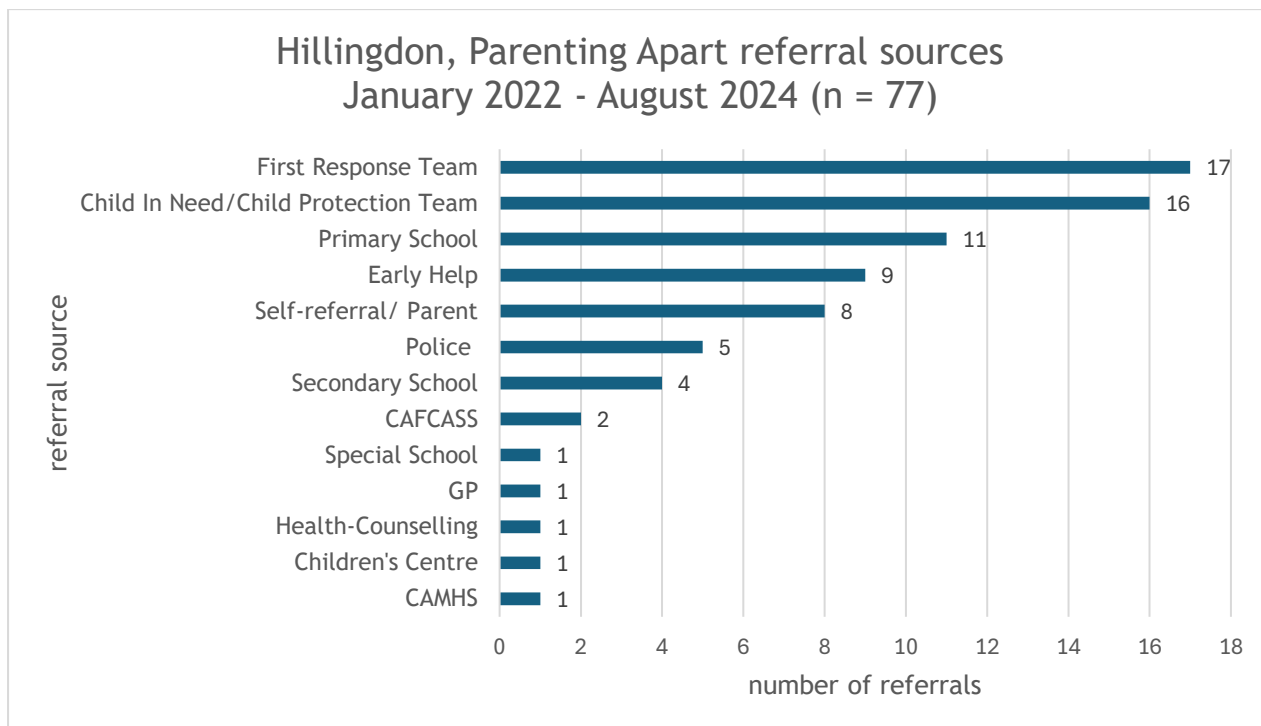
Parenting Apart practitioner, Hillingdon.

Programme leads in Hillingdon have also worked to raise awareness of parental conflict among services that have contact with families, direct referrals have come from a variety of sources. As indicated in the Chart below, these include schools, Children's Social Care, the Police service, and referrals from parents themselves. Participants reported that such self-referrals are often based upon recognition from parents that they need early support to prevent escalation into statutory proceedings.

Chart 1 below shows where the 77 referrals received for Parenting Apart in Hillingdon between January 2022 and August 2024 originate from. 43% of referrals came from the First Response Team¹ or the Child In Need/Child Protection Team; 21% from schools and 10% from parent self-referrals.

¹ A 24/7, community-based team to provide rapid assessment to people experiencing a crisis or mental distress.

Chart 1



Focus group attendees working in Hillingdon, described their work to promote the programme further so that more parents can access support:

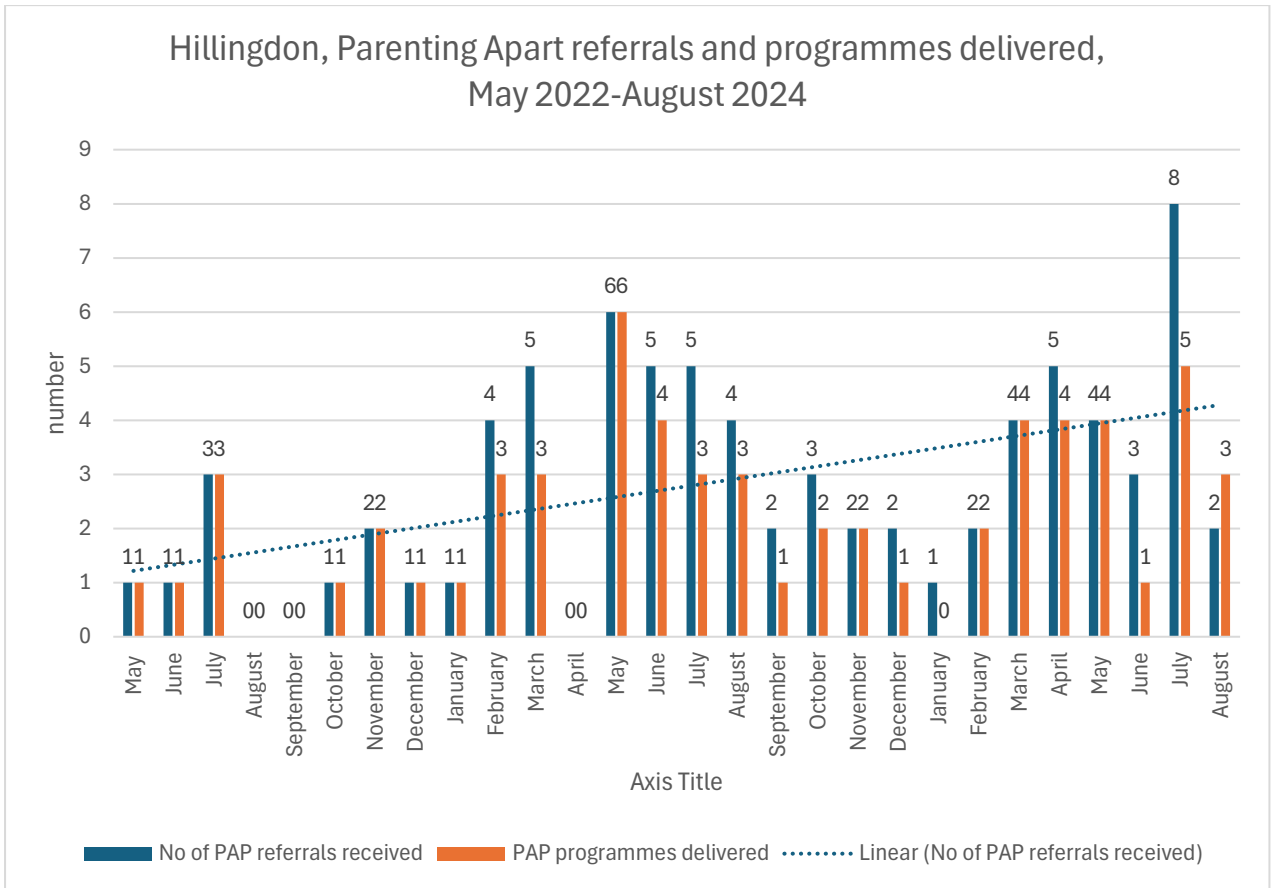
“I have worked alongside our colleagues from health to try and identify the families that they are seeing that we are not yet seeing, that would benefit from PAP so that they can have those conversations with families. And some of our colleagues in midwifery have similar conversations.”

Parenting Apart practitioner, Hillingdon.

A Family Hub model is developing in Hillingdon and at the time of data collection, evaluation participants reported that this is intended to be an important point of entry for Parenting Apart support in future. Drop-in support is to be offered to parents via the Family Hub to make RPC and Parenting Apart support more accessible and available as early as possible, rather than parents needing to take part in the whole PAP itself.

Data provided by the Stronger Families Key Working Service indicates that referrals have increased steadily between May 2022 and August 2024 (see chart 2).

Chart 2



The data sitting behind Chart 2 also indicates that 79% of referrals to the Parenting Apart intervention result in interventions delivered. Evaluation participants reported that this high conversion rate was supported by the practice of offering the referrer an individual discussion with the local Parenting Apart lead to assess the suitability of the referral. Alongside this it was reported that, as awareness of the programme has grown in Hillingdon, and as more staff become Parenting Apart trained, fewer such case discussions are taking place, demonstrating the effectiveness of such work.

Some of the reasons for referrals for not leading to an intervention being delivered include only one parent giving consent to engage in the programme, allegations of domestic abuse, contact arrangements as part of bail conditions and ongoing court case contact arrangements, or parents being determined to be best supported by other appropriate services.

A PAP practitioner's story.

A Stronger Family's key worker in Hillingdon told us about her experiences with receiving referrals from two different pathways for the Parenting Apart programme. The first came from the CAFCASS, and the relevant member of that team had spoken with both parents about their support needs and the suitability of the PAP prior to making the referral. As a result, both gave consent for the referral and subsequent support. We were told that this is not always the case and often referrals are made without parental consent which poses challenges.

The other referral discussed was a self-referral, from a mother who heard about the PAP whilst seeking help at her local Children's Centre. She was introduced to the programme by the Centre's staff, and she was supported to complete a thorough assessment form. Upon receiving this referral, the key worker called the mother and asked about their partner (father), and their awareness of the programme. The worker was told that the programme had been discussed with the father and he had consented to take part.

"So I said OK, obviously I'm going to have to explore that for myself. So I did contact Dad and he very much was on board and he was quite happy that mum did referring because he felt there were a point where they needed help with their parenting."

2. What have been facilitators to implementing Parenting Apart?

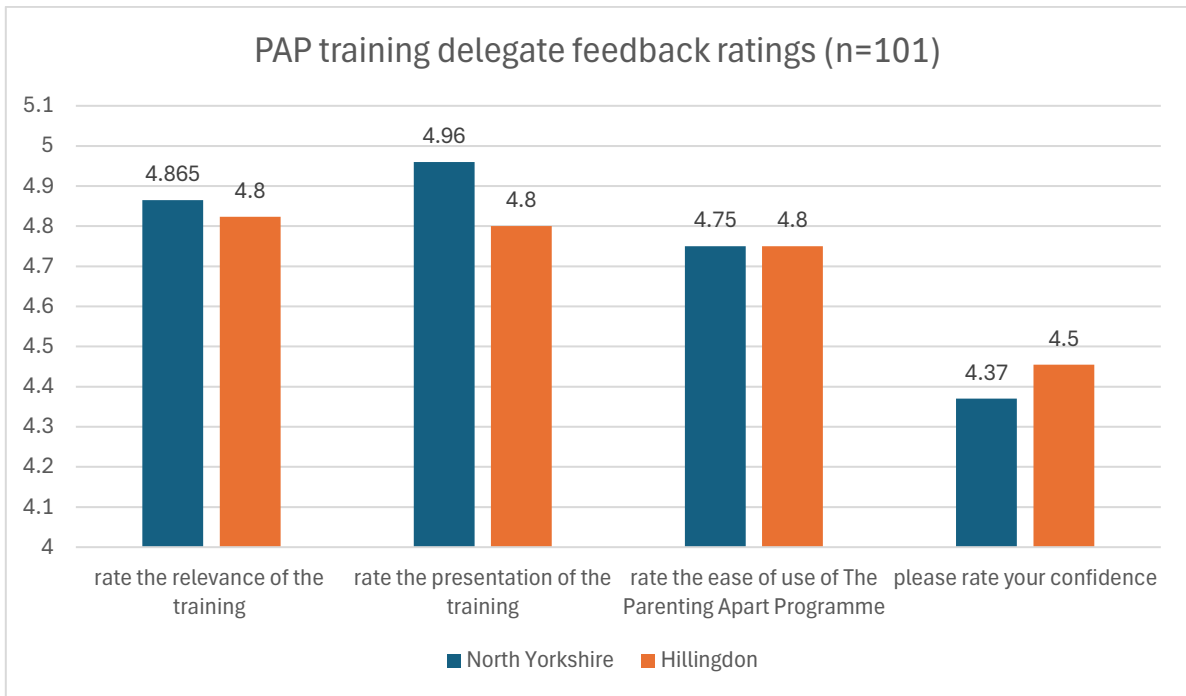
A range of facilitators were shared by staff, local programme leads and PAP consultants. They told us how the Parenting Apart training provided practitioners with the necessary knowledge and skills to work confidently with parents in conflict; about the crucial role of peer and PAP expert support; about the importance of managerial support for staff and strategic support for the programme; how partnership awareness and engagement with the programme facilitated its implementation; and we heard about the key elements of the programme that practitioners valued the most.

Theme 1: Provision of new knowledge and skills through training

The evaluation participants from Parenting Apart teams in North Yorkshire and Hillingdon spoke about the impact of the 3-day training provided by the Parenting Apart team in providing them with the knowledge, skills and confidence to support parents in conflict. Participants on the training are also asked to complete post-training feedback forms anonymously: Parenting Apart shared their dataset of feedback forms with the CORC Team and these have been analysed and incorporated in the analysis below. This section explores both the impact of the training, and aspects of the training that facilitated that impact.

The overall feedback from evaluation participants about the training was overwhelmingly positive. It was valued and praised by the participants that we spoke with as well as by those that left feedback on the training via post training feedback forms. 101 completed forms were reviewed, on which participants were asked rate on a scale of 0-5 (where 0 is the lowest and 5 the highest rating) their thoughts on the relevance of the training, the presentation of the training, the ease of use of the approach and their confidence to deliver it. Chart 3 below shows that average scores across all of these questions were close to the maximum score of 5.

Chart 3



Illustrative comments from two evaluation participants were:

“I think the training is absolutely amazing. It's a really good training to have. It's been long coming, to be honest. I just think it's something that I'm glad we have PAP and we are trained in that field to be able to work with parents in the way that we're not able to do.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

“[the staff] were so inspired by the way that [the consultants] delivered the training and they were desperate to suddenly get out and try and use what tools they could with these families.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

Participants indicated that the training had provided new learning, skills, and helpful strategies and practical tools for working in different situations. On feedback forms, several key areas of learning were described including:

- knowledge and understanding of children’s brain development, and of the impact of conflict and ways separation can affect the child
- mentalizing how the child would feel
- keeping sessions children centred
- how to control or manage conflict
- communication skills for working with families including in the use of language with parents within sessions and in managing conflict
- the importance of working with and bringing both parents together.

Evaluation participants outlined several of aspects of the training that helped to make it impactful, as outlined below:

- Many participants said, in focus groups and through training feedback forms, that the interactive nature of the training had been effective in supporting their learning. In addition to the use of breakout rooms and opportunities to ask questions and share experiences, they reported that taking part in role plays helped to build their confidence, practice skills, and consolidate their understanding of course content.

“We did a lot of role play. So I think that really was amazing. It really helped us to, you know, know the role and confident for when we actually have our first PAP“

Parenting Apart practitioner feedback via training feedback forms.

“They're [the PAP trainers] very engaging and I liked the way they put into that role play and it was it was very interactive, as interactive with the Teams training session can be. You really felt that actually I can make a change here, I can do something. You know, you came out quite empowered about what you'd learnt.”

A Parenting Apart practitioner as part of a focus group.

- Other evaluation participants highlighted that observing role plays recorded by the Parenting Apart team was also valuable in modelling the approaches and stimulating reflection about the process.

“Watching role play gives a realistic view of how PAP can work. Keeping the child centre, repositioning parents and forward focused work, how to get it right at the start of the work, introducing effective boundaries, interjecting when needed, keeping the focus.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

“The videos of the role plays between [PAP consultants] were really valuable so that we could see the process in action and it helped us with a good model of what it could look like when we eventually deliver it ourselves.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

- Practitioners attending focus groups said that the knowledge, skills and experience of PAP trainers also contributed to the impact of the training.

“The knowledge that [PAP trainers] were able to offer throughout the training was invaluable. The fact that they were all experienced and were able to offer their own differing styles to demonstrate how the model can be delivered is something that works for my learning style.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

- Having a safe space to practice techniques and to reflect on practice was also considered beneficial by evaluation participants, who valued the opportunities to practice what they were learning and reflect on their real-world experiences, in a non-judgemental arena.

“I really enjoyed the safe space to reflect and draw up on practice in myself and others.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

- The Parenting Apart manual was also valued by staff and leads on the training.
“[staff have] got the handbook that goes with the training, which is incredibly comprehensive and really easy to understand, which is I know the practitioners have found very, very useful.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

The programme leads spoke positively about the training and told us how word has spread among other staff that work with parents:

“If I put out another PAP training tomorrow, I would have, well, 15 people coming straight to me saying, ‘yeah, I’d love to do this, we’ve heard so much good stuff about it from other practitioners’....and I think it’s because we have so many cases, so many families, where conflict probably forms 80% of the work.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

The PAP consultants also shared reflections on aspects of the training they felt were most beneficial. Some overlapped with those mentioned by practitioners above, including the use of role play, the blending of theory with practical learning, conveying the importance of reducing parental conflict, and the emphasis on keeping the perspective and needs of the child at the forefront when supporting parents in conflict to build a healthier relationship and a more stable home environment. Other themes trainers specifically raised as important included

- Demonstrating and role modelling that mistakes are common and can be used to develop practice rather than reduce confidence
“[as a trainer] I like sharing your hiccups or your failures because otherwise in training, people just get this story of how brilliant you are, and then they go ‘I can’t do it that well’.”

PAP consultant

- Tailoring and adapting the focus and content of the training to best meet the needs of trainees;

“it depends on practitioner skills and knowledge as well. The group [training cohort] that we had before this one, they’re relationship champions, their

roles are slightly different. The context is slightly different. So what they want to experience through the training is slightly different. It was more about knowledge, skills and learning about their want to talk. They understood the theory a lot better, maybe because they were a bit more experienced.”

PAP consultant

- Separating out concerns about the local system: trainees naturally have questions and challenges about how the PAP fits with their local system and trainers have found it important to take these out of the three day training to focus on the Parenting Apart approach itself.

“When we first started doing the training, a lot of the practice just got stuck with the system; ‘how would I get the referral’ we spent a lot of time talking about the system that they're going to be operating in....so we said to the managers ‘that stuff we’ll offer you a separate session on ... we’ll do separate meetings with the practitioners if they've got any questions.”

PAP consultant

- Focussing on how professionals work flexibly to support positive co-parenting, and how to use the development of co-parenting agreements as a tool to address co-parenting issues.

“We don't have a slide of ‘this is how people should be co-parenting’ because inevitably, as soon as they pick up the first case, that won't be the work. That won't be how it works, and they'll fall apart. What we want to do is help them help parents work out their co-parenting.”

PAP consultant

Theme 2: Ongoing support for Parenting Apart practice - expert and peer

The evaluation highlighted the provision of ongoing support for practitioners, following the initial Parenting Apart training, was highly valued by practitioners. It was considered to help with consolidating and applying learning, with practitioner confidence, and with addressing and learning from challenging arising in case work.

Reflective Practice Groups (RPG)

The Parenting Apart programme offered to the two local authorities includes three Reflective Practice Groups (RPGs) over the 12-month period following the training. PAP consultants facilitate these and described the intention of this as being to enable practitioners to receive practical support and reconnection with Parenting Apart ideas while they are taking what they have learnt within the 3-day training programme back into their field of practice.

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

In total 17 RPGs were held in the two areas since January 2022, with a total of 80 staff members attending. 50 professionals from Hillingdon joined 11 groups; 30 professionals joined 6 groups in North Yorkshire.

In feedback forms the vast majority of staff who responded to the question ‘What has been the impact of the group for you?’ agreed or strongly agreed that the RPG helped them to become less stuck with families, gave them ideas about how to work with parents, helped them to develop their practice and to feel more confident about delivering the PAP, and had a positive impact on the quality of the PAP that they deliver. Small numbers rated neutrally to a minority of these, and this might reflect the fact that these staff had not yet had opportunity to deliver a Parenting Apart intervention.

The main discussion topics in RPGs are recorded by facilitators and these provide insights into the areas of practice that staff sought to reflect on. The main topics are:

- Developing confidence in managing challenging and complex families including managing aggressive behaviour, using an authoritative stance, managing boundaries and setting expectations of behaviour in sessions
- Using Parenting Apart in different contexts, for example navigating chaotic family lives; differing parental opinions about child behaviour management; differing developmental stages of children
- Working in the context of legal proceedings or the court arena
- Positioning parents as “mum” and “dad” to centre on family role focus as opposed to couple focus
- Impacts on parenting and intergenerational relationships of family and cultural values, including family roles, gender and religious beliefs and practices
- Working within context of Parenting Apart alongside safeguarding concerns and managing competing demands of workloads
- When timing is right for a family to begin a PAP intervention
- Managing competing demands and roles, and challenges being a lone PAP practitioner within a team
- Developing a referral process and finding the right cases for Parenting Apart interventions

In both focus groups and feedback forms staff fed back that attending the groups had provided helpful opportunities to: reflect on and share experiences of delivering a Parenting Apart intervention; observe others sharing their experiences; discuss concerns and hear feedback from the PAP facilitator; and develop confidence in delivery and overcome challenges.

“I find these [RPGs] are really beneficial, being able to go into a group with everyone that’s having cases to be able to speak to someone and get that advice from fellow practitioners as well. You know, if there’s something you’re stuck on,

you're freely able to communicate with each other, support each other through, so I feel that the [RPGs] that we have are so beneficial for us all."

Parenting Apart practitioner

"It is a brilliant space to share and generally talking about our practice and helps to re-ignite the enthusiasm and confidence for the PAP work"

RPG feedback via the feedback form.

The Parenting Apart leads in both areas also shared positive feedback about the role of RPGs in supporting Parenting Apart practice and how this approach is embedded in practitioner support locally:

"[RPGs are] really, really helpful. And saying that, we do a lot of that anyway within our work .. reflective supervision, reflective practice, and we have those meetings where we do peer supervision. But I think they do find it so much easier when they can bring a case or bring a family and discuss just that family."

PAP consultants also shared their perspectives on the benefits of including RPGs in the package of support for PAP practitioners, providing space for reflection and allowing practitioners to learn from one another and refresh learning from the training.

"I think the main thing that I find that offering the practitioners that space after the training really helps keep that training alive as well because we get them to reflect on well, let's have a think about what did we do in the training, what are the bits that you've forgot about? What are the things that you've learned there? What are the things that you're getting stuck with? And I think I think those are sort of real benefits."

Both staff and PAP consultants noted that when attendance is low at the RPGs this can limit their usefulness. PAP consultants have found that securing buy-in and engagement from managers can facilitate staff engagement.

"[Engagement with the RPGs] is improving now because the managers are on board, before managers were leaving it to staff. And now that managers are seeing the importance of doing those and we get managers to attend those meetings and so that they can begin to experience what their staff are saying and what they what they thinking what the barriers are. That has helped with the involvement of practitioners more I think."

In one area a participant described how the RPG model was being developed locally by Parenting Apart practitioners to support the wider workforce that is supporting parents in conflict:

"And so now [PAP practitioners are] replicating [reflective groups] themselves by setting up their own little surgeries in their localities....So that model that [the PAP consultant] practiced with them, replicating that in localities to be able to talk about and enable other practitioners to have a safe space to come and rant

and say, I don't know what to do with these two parents because they're just at each other's throats."

Parenting Apart practitioner

Peer support

In addition to formal reflective practice groups, Parenting Apart practitioners in our focus groups spoke about the importance of having colleagues available locally able to support them with the work. In many cases, this local network of support was their first port of call. This could take the form of regular meetings or more ad hoc shared discussions and informal advice and support.

"We've got Parenting Apart champions as our Relationship Champions and most of us have done the Parenting Apart kind of training. And so, we're meeting regularly. So, I think...you actually got a lot of support. We've got we can ask questions, and we've got our lead as well we can kind of go to. So yeah, it's helpful."

Parenting Apart practitioner

In North Yorkshire where the model is to train specific Parenting Apart practitioners in each locality, staff told us that it can be difficult to access local support:

"In my team I have a colleague in my team that who has trained in it [PAP] too. So, if I like, it's interesting to ask for advice. We've got each other in terms of help and advice, but if you were the only person in your team then that would be quite tricky."

Parenting Apart practitioner

One area had a Teams group of Parenting Apart trained staff which was providing a way to ensure all Parenting Apart practitioners could access this type of support from colleagues. An advantage of this medium was that support was responsive.

"So obviously we've got our practitioners Teams group ... it's really helpful having that group chat that we can just dip into. If there's just a question or what do I need to do about this form or whatever, it is that's been really helpful for us just to be able to do a quick 5 minutes. Can someone just pop on and tell me, you know what I need to do, I think that that's definitely something that everyone should be involved in."

Parenting Apart practitioner

One PAP practitioner suggested a buddying type of system would help with applying training in practice and help to address feelings of isolation or low confidence among recent trainees.

"you do your training, and then you go back to your team and get on with your day job ...if you watch someone in your team to do it, somebody who you could be

buddied up with within the Authority or somewhere that you could just have a conversation about how do you go about it? How do you start it? I feel scared. Well, you know, just that confidence and sort of like confidence boost for each other because it otherwise you feel a bit isolated.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

A Parenting Apart practitioner’s story#1.

A Children and Families worker in an Early Help service shared her experience of struggling with parents on a Parenting Apart intervention. As a result of their challenges, the intervention did not complete as successfully as hoped and this left the practitioner with feelings of doubt and apprehensions about the programme. The practitioner shared how taking part in an RPG helped overcome these feeling and to rebuild some lost confidence:

“I felt really deflated. I felt like, oh, God, how am I ever gonna get this like, to do this right? Maybe I’m doing it wrong. What do I need to do? And then I think I went to a reflection appointment with Kam and Christine, yes. And we discussed it and talked about it and then got some sort of feedback and that was helpful. Yeah. That kind of made me feel a bit empowered again to give it another go. And yeah, that was helpful.”

A Parenting Apart practitioner’s story#2.

A Stronger Families key worker told us how helpful it was to hear other practitioners’ experiences of a programme in RPGs and about how these sessions have a therapeutic benefit:

“There’s a quite therapeutic side to it as well, which actually, you even you think, wow, that that was powerful.

One of the questions that they asked you is, are you having any difficult PAP cases at the moment? Do you want to bring it to the table and discuss? And they do this really good thing where they kind of block out, so let’s say if you had an issue, I would switch off my camera. So, you can’t see my facial expressions or anything and you just talk and offload and then when you’re finished, that’s when we switch our cameras back on you switch yours off and then we give ideas of like, what’s the best approach, what we think you could have done better, what’s working well. And then we all come back together and it just it’s a really, really nice reflective session actually. Really necessary, I think as well, because dealing with parental conflict is actually, there’s some heavy stuff, it is quite heavy.”

Specialist supervision from PAP consultants

Staff (clinical) supervision facilitated by a Parenting Apart consultant was offered to and taken up by both Hillingdon and North Yorkshire to supplement the core programme. This has allowed staff delivering Parenting Apart interventions to access dedicated and specialist individual clinical support. Six members of staff in

Key Worker roles from Hillingdon and four Key Workers from North Yorkshire took part in a Parenting Apart supervision session during 2024.

Those practitioners participating in the evaluation who had taken up supervisions provided by the PAP consultant reflected positively on them and said they found helpful to them in offering support with challenging cases, refreshing their PAP training and developing their confidence.

“The supervisions are really helpful.... they've been great. it helps to boost you, but also when you're sitting with [the PAP consultant], it's like you're going over the training all over again. It just brings it all back. So that's why it's so important to have those supervisions because you can explore and be able to reflect and at the same time come to some kind of decisions and conclusions where you know the next steps you may want to take with the parents.”

PAP practitioner

“The clinical supervision is good because you can focus on what's happening with your cases. For example, if you're struggling with anything, [the PAP consultant] is always there to shine a light on what's working, what's not working well. But I think it's good as well that they ask you how you're doing, how you're doing as a PAP practitioner, what's working well for you? Where do you think you're kind of going wrong, going right?”

PAP practitioner

Responsiveness of the PAP consultants to ad hoc queries

In our focus groups, staff told us that the ongoing availability and responsiveness of the PAP team was helpful to them as practitioners, providing support and tackling difficult issues

“Sometimes you know, you do have to go back to [the PAP consultant], she is always there for us, not just there at the beginning, she's there to have the duration as well. And if there are any issues that you're not quite sure of, she's there as a reliable space that you can go back and ask any questions. So that really makes you feel supported throughout as well.”

Theme 3: Strategic and operational management buy-in and support

Strategic leadership

The Parenting Apart leads in both areas reported that support from senior leads was crucial to successful implementation of the Parenting Apart approach.

“It all comes from the top, doesn't it? Absolutely that.... I would say...[the biggest challenge is] the local authorities commitment to this type of work; if you've got

strategic managers onboard, and they think that this is something that should be done, you will find that it works really, really well.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

The PAP consultants recognised the efforts of the leads in each area in securing strategic commitment to the programme, and the importance of this to the success of this work.

“I do feel that if you've got your strategic team onboard, that is better because it filters across the service, and you get more of a buy-in from them, from everyone. I think that RPC [Reducing Parental Conflict, including PAP] leads have had to work really hard from what I hear, from any sort of region, to really get this work being abided across their local authority, and I think over the last three years we've seen a real change in that culture across the local authority.”

PAP consultant

Reflecting on previous experiences with local authorities (outside of this study), PAP consultants noted that where changes in senior leadership teams and RPC coordinator roles could result in organisations losing personnel who understood about the importance and value of the programme and consequently a reduction in of strategic commitment and support for the programme. In contrast, Parenting Apart leads in the two areas involved in the study reflected positively on senior management commitment to the programme locally. There was also an awareness that there was potential to work further to ensure more senior and strategic leads locally had a full understanding of the programme and were actively promoting it.

“It would be nice to have more people at the top to kinda know more about it [Parenting Apart]- I do think they aware of it, it's just, are they actually then promoting it out?”

Parenting Apart programme lead

In recognition of the importance of strategic commitment, the PAP consultants and facilitators reported how efforts are made to engage strategic leads within local authorities:

“All of the local authorities that we've been working with have actually offered a presentation ... that's been really, really helpful for them ... to really get them to think about why RPC is important ... Otherwise, we'll just be delivering training, you know, we'll train their delegates, we'll send them back and it won't go anywhere ... unless they at a senior level, buy into this reason and rationale of working.”

Operational management

In addition to support at the strategic level, PAP consultants and local leads spoke to the importance of supporting Parenting Apart leads and the managers

overseeing the delivery of Parenting Apart interventions and supporting practitioner teams.

As part of the programme of support offered to local areas, Parenting Apart leads are able to access support and advice from a PAP consultant about implementing and integrating the approach in their system. This support from the PAP consultant has included ongoing email and phone call support. PAP consultants described the role of this support in working through how the programme can be implemented in services and putting in place and processes to support this in a comprehensive way.

“With the managers, it’s very much around setting up the systems, thinking about how PAP can be introduced across their service in different ways, so even getting them to think about actually the back end of their service when they’re returning children to home, where there may be some conflict. So, looking at all sort of areas of their service and thinking how PAP can intervene in those situations.”

PAP consultant

The PAP consultants described that they tailor the frequency and intensity of support to the needs of the lead in each area. For example, while one area would be supported through a quarterly review, while in another area a PAP lead would be proactive in reaching out with specific case queries or advice along the way.

The leads in the local areas described the PAP Consultants as being responsive and supportive in a way that helped them to sustain the implementation of the approach on an ongoing basis.

“[The PAP consultant]’s always on the end of the phone or at the end of an e-mail, which is great if you just have something to ask about. She’s great with that. PAP are just very supportive....I just think they’re just a great organisation.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

“So, it’s the whole package really of support that you get from going on the training and then the support that you get off after that as well, which has really helped to keep it at the top of the agenda and a priority alongside some of the other tools that we can use as well.

Parenting Apart programme lead

In addition to supporting the Parenting Apart lead, supporting wider managers who oversee and support practitioners delivering Parenting Apart was considered key by evaluation respondents. PAP consultants stated that these managers were crucial to embedding Parenting Apart practice and to supporting practitioners with their delivery of the programme. Parenting Apart leads described the steps that had been helpful to secure engagement from those wider managers in implementing the approach effectively and supporting staff. This had included sessions with managers prior to running the course to build managers’ understanding of the approach and secure their buy-in.

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

“before the course [w]e always have a manager’s meeting with [PAP consultant] so that she can give an overview of the Parenting Apart programme and the course and what practitioners will learn and why it is so helpful - and what we’ve got as evidence ... the legal side and how much money it’s probably saving us as a local authority ... so managers are given their very own flavour of what the programme is doing and what we’re trying to achieve.”

Parenting Apart programme lead.

Further to this, one Parenting Apart lead reported that she had found it helpful to use additional funding to purchase training handbooks for local managers and to commission some supplementary manager support workshops from PAP. Other local leads re-enforced this by stating that it would facilitate implementation have a part of the Parenting Apart training dedicated to engaging managers, together with post-training sessions for managers, with a focus on how they can support practitioners in implementing the approach.

“I think it would be great if we could just have a manager’s session that they [PAP consultants] do, that tells you a little bit more about the programme, but how best to support the staff after the programme, after the training .. I’d like that to be built into the actual Parenting Apart training programme so that maybe one of the sessions is just directly for managers and ongoing support for practitioners.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

We weren’t able as part of this work, to capture the experiences of managers who had engaged with the PAP consultants and facilitators.

Theme 4: Partnership work

Many of the professionals participating in this study told us that a key facilitator to the successful implementation of Parenting Apart was awareness and understanding of the programme among partner services.

The role of partnership in referrals is discussed in the first section of this report. Parenting Apart practitioners said that having good understanding of the programme among partners would mean there would be fewer unsuitable referrals. An example was given of inappropriate referrals where there are significant elements of domestic abuse, and how a better understanding of the remit and role of the Parenting Apart intervention would address this.

Evaluation participants also reflected that having an understanding from wider partners in the system about the impact of parental conflict on child outcomes, and about interventions to address this locally, was crucial to securing full impact for the approach. Parenting Apart leads spoke about the need for this at a strategic level to secure buy-in to the RPC agenda.

“I would like to have more buy-in with partners, with external partners. I'll have to. I really would like to have buy-in more with people above me with the senior management side. You know, reducing parental conflict is across the board. It's not going to go away. And I think we need buy-in more to that.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

PAP consultants talked about the need to engage all services that engage parents in conflict with the Parenting Apart approach, to encourage them to be aware of the role of RPC work and to raise the priority given to it.

“Thinking about...what are the touch points.... of conflict in their service....How do they have conversations with their strategic managers to make it more of a serious thing within their agenda?”

PAP consultant

Parenting Apart leads described the efforts they had made to foster awareness of the programme across the system including with voluntary and community sector partners. This had been supported by working with existing partnership groups.

“We have a Stronger Families Partnership group where that's across partners, volunteer sectors, community sectors and partly internal partners that actually support us, and it's part of our terms of reference about reducing parental conflict.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

Further to this, local leads also described opportunities they had identified to further facilitate the roll-out and impact of the approach through partnership work. These included for example domestic abuse services and refugee and asylum sectors.

“It would be really nice if you know, we can have more other voluntary sectors that can buy-in with the Parenting Apart Programme. We have the refugee and asylum seekers at the moment as well, that maybe perhaps could support that, for example, because they probably have that culture and all that stuff that's going on. I'd love to have more partnership with the domestic abuse services.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

Theme 5: Elements of the Parenting Apart intervention

There were a number of elements to the Parenting Apart intervention itself which evaluation participants highlighted as being particularly impactful and as supporting successful application of Parenting Apart approaches to their work with parents and families. These included:

- **Involving both parents and working with both perspectives**

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

Practitioners valued that a key aspect of the Parenting Apart approach is working with both parents with both separated parents who are in conflict, listening to the voices of both parents and remaining neutral between them.

“it just reminds you to make sure you do get both sides of the story and then bring them together.....And I'm more conscious now of trying to get both parents voices and not being swayed by the one that I'm sort of first involved with.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

PAP consultants explained that this approach is more effective as a use of time and to maximise outcomes for children:

“The benefits of working with both parents; one, it's less time consuming for the practitioner, and secondly, they're able to get more outcome, better outcomes for the children.”

- **Taking a strength-based approach**

We heard how part of the Parenting Apart approach was to explore the strengths of the family and the co-parenting, rather than a sole focus on the conflict. This also meant being aware of the language used in the support for parents, avoiding words like conflict for example.

- **Promoting parental accountability and responsibility**

An important ingredient of the programme highlighted by programme practitioners was how it reinforces parental responsibility, the notion that the children have rights, and the parents have responsibility. This supports parents to be accountable for their behaviour and how it impacts their child(ren).

“I think there's a bit of accountability that this programme has that which is very unique, it keeps pulling back accountability to both parents and when you're going to compromise.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

- **Taking a long-term perspective with parents**

Practitioners valued the way the Parenting Apart approach supports parents to take a more long-term perspective on their situations, for example, how they want their child to be supported by both parents in the future. We heard that some families are referred to Early Help and then re-referred for more support a short time after the initial support comes to an end. Supporting parents to take a longer-term perspective means that they are more likely to consider their future lives rather than their immediate challenges.

“And I'm hoping it gives them the parents opportunity to be a bit more reflective about their long term rather than just dealing with the immediate

and how they want their future lives to work, and then perhaps they won't so reliant on going back into services every time, you know, with the next crisis.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

- **Putting in place clear boundaries and expectations for the work**

PAP practitioners told us that a key facilitator for the intervention was having clarity about its purpose and being able to share this with parents. This included being clear about what it aims to achieve, what it is, what it isn't and having clear boundaries for the Parenting Apart support.

Practitioners said that clear aims and boundaries, and the clear structure of the intervention around the five sessions, could address the potential for the work to be mis-directed, for example towards mediation or counselling, or to be co-opted by one parent or another.

“The PAP programme fits really well because lots of people try and mediate with families, and I think what the PAP programme does is gives you a really clear structure as to how to actually go about the sessions.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

“Parents sometimes try to use you to just pass the message to the other person. So obviously we are not that and we have to remind them like I'm not going to be biased. I'm neutral. I'm just here to support you two, and this is my role.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Practitioners spoke about occasions where it had been helpful that they felt empowered to state their boundaries. One example included in being clear with a parent that the intervention would not address financial issues between the parents. Another practitioner explained that parents can expect a practitioner to tell another parent what to do, and the value of boundaries with this. The practitioner quote below explained that at times having boundaries for the programme meant saying that it could not proceed:

“We can't fix everything .. we haven't got a magic wand, and there are times when you do have to say, well, you know, if you can't speak calmly to each other, then we do have to kind of pull back. So just being realistic with what is possible and what isn't possible.... they [the PAP facilitators] were very realistic with what is possible and the boundaries with which we have to work.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

A PAP practitioner's story.

A key worker shared their experience of challenges associated with having clear boundaries to their Parenting Apart support:

“My biggest barrier with this family, and it's the only case I've had, so I've got nothing else to compare it to, but the daughter is a teenage daughter. Parents have been separated for a long time, and they've had a key worker before it came to PAP, but really the parents want support for the child and it's almost like they're still getting that that very blurred line between what PAP is and what a key worker is and kind of a putting them two together and wanted a bit of both.”

- **Using specific intervention tools**

Timelines: a number of programme practitioners shared how they began a programme by asking parents to reflect back on when they first met the other parent and when things were good for them and their child(ren). They felt that this started the programme on a positive note and reinforced the child focus.

Co-Parenting forms: Some programme practitioners valued the parenting forms included in the manual. An example highlighted was the form that asks both parents to rate each other's parenting style

“I use that in my sessions when we bring them together jointly in session three. It brings out some of the things that the parents might be struggling with in terms of behaviour and so where both parents can now start talking about what one does and the other one does what works, what doesn't, well, it brings it all together to them, how allow them to have that discussion and then come to an agreement, how they will work together to, to start supporting their children together.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Co-parenting agreements: the power of co-parenting agreements in the Parenting Apart approach was reported by programme leads and practitioners. These are a live document intended to support parents to bring their joint decisions together in a single document. This would include, for example, decisions about how they will communicate and co-parent, noting agreements about specific arrangements, for example related to collecting their child or for the school holidays.

The PAP consultants and facilitators emphasised that the co-parenting agreement template offers some ideas about what a co-parenting relationship could look like but that it was the process to determining and agreeing what is on the document, and formalising the parent's commitment and responsibility to their child that had an impact (above the content itself). However practitioners also highlighted the value of this document in representing in concrete terms the outcomes and achievements of the parents' work together.

“At the end of the programme is the PAP working agreement and if they actually sign it off, that's fantastic because they actually say ‘I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that’.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

3. What have been barriers or challenges to implementing Parenting Apart

A number of challenges to the successful implementation of the programme were shared by the professionals that we spoke with. We note that many of these challenges have also been experienced by other RPC implementation interventions. For example, in the DWP-commissioned report into learning from the second phase of RPC Challenge Fund delivery, the barriers and challenges that were identified included practitioner and management capacity, challenges with engagement and case complexity, and difficulties engaging service users with outcome measures (Ecorys and Family Lives, 2021).

Theme 1: Challenges securing parental engagement and consent

The most frequently mentioned barrier to implementing the approach was the need to secure the consent of both parents to participating in the intervention. This barrier could be encountered where parent motivations were misaligned with those of the programme, or where parents disengaged before completing all five intervention sessions.

Parenting Apart practitioners communicated their frustrations about situations where they could see that a Parenting Apart intervention might help, but they were unable to secure both parents' consent.

“One thing I do find challenging, which is not something that we can change actually, it's just the fact that PAP is obviously a consent based service and quite a few cases that I've received of recent, I've read them and I thought, wow, these parents really, really do need support because it's impacting the child and I'll call them and they'll deny consent. And in my head, I'm thinking I can't force them to engage in the service. But I'm also thinking, gosh, how's it going to impact that child if they've now refused this service where they actually need help? And I just have to close the case.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Practitioners described a range of contexts in which this had arisen, including for example where one parent did not respond to phone calls, or where one parent believed the other parent was at fault and did not want to engage in an intervention themselves. Some practitioners suggested that the need for two parent consent needed to be better communicated in information promoting the intervention, and that consent should be secured prior to the referral being passed

to the Parenting Apart practitioner, by the original service in contact with the parents.

“that’s got to be explored on the outside of us, for whoever advertises it, and when they’re doing these referrals, it really needs to be stated and both parents have to be ready and willing to do this programme and know that they’re going to see each other potentially face-to-face or virtually because it’s by the fact that, you know, it’s a big challenge that we’re all coming across.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

In securing consent, practitioners told us that parents can have negative feelings about local authority services and care and attention needed to be given to engaging parents and gaining their consent to participate.

“Some families ... have a certain opinion of, you know, the Council and the agencies and so forth and so sometimes, especially if it’s mandatory, so they will come with a little bit of an attitude ... we have to really very calmly speak to them and let them see that actually we’re on their side and we’re advocating for them and we’re there to help them, not to judge them. So that’s all part of the referral process is that that initial phone call that we set the right tone.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

In certain situations, Parenting Apart practitioners reflected that where a parent’s motivation to engage was signal compliance (for example to social services or court) this could be at odds with the intervention aims engaging motivation to participate was sometimes compliance and influence the work.

We heard from PAP practitioners that in a number of cases a parent would disengage in the PAP after engaging for a period of time prior to the final session

“Getting the two parents together is hard enough...you’ll get one parent will engage, the other one won’t engage, and then when you do finally get them to engage by the time you get to the 4th or 5th session, they’ve had enough .. of sitting down discussing and also just being around each other.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

The Parenting Apart leads emphasised that persistence and effort was key to overcome the challenge of securing consent.

“Consent is always going to be difficult and that you know and especially if they’re not talking to each other. So, we do go back, we’re very persistent. Please do come back to us. Think about it. Don’t say no. Now think about it, reflect on it and then we go back.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Programme leads also shared that where one parent engages, practitioners can successfully use elements of the approach with that one parent:

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

“So even if we can't run the whole programme, we're managing to do individual aspects of it, which according to the practitioners, have gone down really, really well.”

Theme 2: Timing of the Parenting Apart intervention

Linked to the above challenge around engagement and consent from parents, staff also reflected upon the importance of timing and the need for Parenting Apart support to be made available to parents when they are receptive to it. We heard how this right time can be different for different parents.

During our focus groups with staff, they shared some of the reasons that the time might not be right for a family, including: during a difficult divorce; in contexts of domestic abuse; where there is entrenched and high levels of conflict between the parents; or where the emotional distress of separation is still very present and strong for one or both parents, and they were not emotionally ready to engage.

Some practitioners reflected that intervening early could be helpful to engage parents with a Parenting Apart approach, before for example they move into a legal process.

“So the awareness is so important and we're trying to do as much as we can as key workers to go out and do as much outreach to promote PAP. So parents know there is a way forward before going down the court arena. If you don't need to go down the court arena.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Other practitioners reflected that the right timing does not necessarily mean intervening early. Another practitioner shared their success working on an intervention with parents who were living apart and who had been through the court process, and suggested having the backdrop of court-mandated arrangements gave the parents a helpful take-off point for reaching compromise together.

“If they weren't able to [agree], you go by your court order....so, I said, well, let's work together and make an agreement then. It sort of pushed them in their mind, like, ‘OK, now we need to work together’. And that helps in working with them.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

A Parenting Apart practitioner's story.

PAP practitioners shared their experiences of how the timing of their programme cases made a significant impact on its success. In their first PAP case the parents were going through a difficult divorce process:

“One parent was bringing all of....their baggage from their divorce and putting it into this scenario. And I kept trying to bring it back round to the two children they shared. And she wasn't able to centre it around them. It was more, we'll talk about the things in the divorce, like the house, the engagement ring, all of these kind of things and they just were not able to see or park that in any way shape or form.”

The practitioner reflected on the timing of the PAP offer:

“Timing is key to everything. And although we think that they need to do it, it's not necessarily the right time. Those family have, you know, a different stage of the parents individually at different stages of their relationship. So it's all right for us to say that's what you need to do but actually if they're not in it at the right time, then it's just not going to work.”

The practitioners next PAP case was for parents who were referred into the programme; the parents were still in a relationship but had acknowledged that there were conflict difficulties that were impacting their child. The various elements of the PAP worked for the parents in this case:

“[What worked was] listening to them talking about what the relationship looked like from start to finish, kind of their worries and concerns their hopes and aspirations for what they'd like it to look like in the future. Understanding kind of what's important to them when it comes to their child or children and like their values. And sort of thinking about strengths and when it comes to the other parent too, with the other parent, that kind of thing.”

In this example, the timing was good for the parents, they were able to consider needs of their child and think of the future. As a result, they completed the programme with successful outcomes.

Theme 3: Staff capacity

PAP consultants highlighted that high demand for RPC work in the early stages of the programme had been alleviated to some degree by the increasing numbers of staff now being trained in Parenting Apart in local authority areas. However, Parenting Apart practitioners and leads nonetheless highlighted capacity limitations as a significant barrier to effective implementation of Parenting Apart interventions - in particular managing competing demands from caseloads and other responsibilities associated with their key or family worker roles.

“So, my thing [challenge] is more around just capacity. So, our teams at times and probably the key working service, you can be at full capacity and then a PAP case comes in.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

“So, I think at the time I was holding like 12 cases as a family support worker and then got my first PAP case and it's not that we're we don't try and do 100%. We try and do our best, but we're fit in everything else in. And I think sometimes as well there's flexibility on our part and like so, when I was doing a couple of like 6 and 7:00 PM meetings just to fill it in with my with my calendar, just that the whole it was not overwhelming, but it's a lot, isn't it?”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Practitioners reflected that they had experienced challenges in juggling deadlines and managing caseloads alongside accommodating annual leave and training requirements in the team. Parenting Apart practitioners also reflected that to deliver a full PAP with parents would often takes longer than anticipated:

“With delays and things like that, although it sounds like four or five sessions, that can still stretch over sort of like 8-9 weeks sometimes and it's just the capacity of the staff that concerns me at times for having those cases.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

For some staff this meant that more often than not they were using aspects of the PAP rather than the full programme:

“it's not just five one-hour sessions because you've got all the other families and cases. And there's work you need to do and if they [the parents] cancel one session it then knocks everything else back. And so, logistics wise, yeah, with the best will in the world it doesn't complete very often. So, you can do odd sessions here and there and kind of use the best bits that you can and bring them together.”

The Parenting Apart leads in both areas understood and shared concerns about staff capacity to deliver the Parenting Apart interventions. This was said to be compounded in North Yorkshire by the a model in which a number of small teams were spread across a large geography including many rural areas.

“They may have smaller teams in each rural area, so capacity can sometimes be an issue, especially if you've got a practitioner who's off sick or move to another team. So those kind of sort of dynamics can make a difference.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

In relation to management level capacity, a Parenting Apart lead shared their desire to introduce a dedicated Parenting Apart coordinator role in place, additional to an RPC lead, to support with management capacity.

“I would really like just to have maybe a PAP coordinator that actually just has a piece of work for the reducing parental conflict. Because I'm team manager for a service and then also leading this, it does get a little bit difficult where your priorities are sometimes. Capacity, availability and then obviously you know you have [a large] team that needs your help.”

Theme 4: Complexity of referred cases

Parenting Apart practitioners said that the strain and pressures of the work could be exacerbated where cases were more complex or difficulties more entrenched, and that this was a factor affecting programme implementation.

Several practitioners spoke about the pressure for practitioners of where conflict between parents were complicated by potential domestic abuse. This included situations where parents had different views and the practitioner had to determine where it was safe to bring parents together.

“Assessing that level of, is it just parental conflict or is it sliding into something more, you know, and how safe is it to do when you sort of you only have a limited picture on their worlds, don't you? And yeah, I think that's hard as a practitioner to make those calls.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Other complexity factors reported by PAP practitioners included challenges finding common ground between parents where one parent had been forced into an arranged marriage, and situations where there was suspected presence of substance misuse.

“I've got one that's substance abuse from the mum, but she's saying she's sorted. But other people saying she's not and you know, she so dad won't engage because he's saying she's not sort of owning her difficulties and she just thinks she's fixed and everything's fine. And the risk to the child then when things all go wrong. And she's wanting to do it because she just thinks everything's OK at the moment. So that's yeah, it's those kind of questions that make it hard.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

A Parenting Apart lead reflected that high levels of conflict between parents was a significant challenge, with cases referred where parents were engaging in court and may experience conflict that had been worsening over a number of years of separation. This was considered to have an impact on staff confidence to provide support, in particular among less experienced practitioners.

“that some of our practitioners are quite young. Very enthusiastic to begin with, but then get such a lot of aggression between separated parents, they lose their confidence quite quickly ... they're getting bombarded with phone calls from these parents on a regular daily basis. If it's not phone calls, it's quite aggressive emails.”

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

Parenting Apart programme lead

Another PAP lead reported that language can be a challenge, and that there were added complexities in supporting parents who aren't able to communicate in the English language.

Theme 5: Dual roles versus dedicated Parenting Apart practitioner roles

We heard from several members of staff who are PAP trained about the challenges associated with having to integrate delivery of the programme alongside their main role, such as Key Worker for Family Support Worker. Often staff used the terms 'dual-role' or 'wearing two-hats' to describe this situation.

This could raise challenges where practitioners perceived there to be differences across the approaches they were offering in the two roles. A key difference discussed was the fact that the Parenting Apart intervention does not involve working with the child and hearing the child's voice very early on.

“Parenting Apart is about doing the work with the parents and we don't do any direct work with the children. And so, when we have a Family Approach, it's that real difficulty - that then you don't get drawn into the other bits and pieces, and try to have clear boundaries.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

This difference in roles posed a difficulty for some practitioners who said *“how are we saying child centred in that way if actually we're only getting the views of the parents?”*

Another reported difference between staff's Parenting Apart role and their other core roles was the amount and duration of support than was on offer for parents. Practitioners felt that roles as Children and Families Workers or key workers allowed for more time exploring and taking a holistic approach, and that keeping a tight focus for the brief duration of a Parenting Apart intervention was a challenge.

“Whereas with key working, we know that we're working for a period of time with parents, home visits, visiting them. You talk with them in the home, then you close the case. PAP is just a five session. It's just five sessions. That's all we've got. So it's not a long, you know, stretch of 2-3 months. It's five sessions. And then you allow them to go and get on. And that's the difference between what we're doing, you know, from wearing one hat to the next hat.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Some practitioners felt that managing dual roles increased the challenges of managing their capacity challenges. Some staff shared suggestions having dedicated Parenting Apart roles in their teams would lessen these issues.

“In an ideal world, I don't know whether we'd be better off having a bank of practitioners that solely focus on the PAP work at the moment. Everyone's trying to do this dual role and if your workload is at maximum point and then you're trying to do PAP alongside [it is a challenge].”

Parenting Apart practitioner

However participating practitioners also recognised that having a dedicated Parenting Apart practitioner role would have its own challenges in terms of the emotional demands and resilience of the workforce.

“If you had that role all the time, is it? It's quite hard emotionally?”

Parenting Apart practitioner

“And if you did that, then that wouldn't help when somebody then leaves because your [PAP] expert then goes.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

A view from a Parenting Apart lead was that it would be more effective to support practitioners to better integrate the roles rather than consider them as dual roles. This was considered to be in-keeping with the fact that Parenting Apart approaches could usefully be applied with a single parent (for example where one parent did not consent to an intervention) or incorporated very early with an emerging parenting challenge (and not as a full Parenting Apart intervention).

“What we're trying to do now in our Early Help services is [say] actually it's not the PAP programme and then you have your own role ... Now we're trying to embed it as just a practice for all of the Early Help practitioners. So we're trying to have that conversation now that it [PAP] is part of the role, it is embedded as your part of your role because even though they're not part of the programme, you do support families with conflicts”

Parenting Apart programme lead

“We do support families with some breakdown and they [staff] are using the tools and resources that they have, that they have learned from the Parenting Apart programme so technically speaking, there's no difference between the two. It's just the mindset of practitioners so actually like seamlessly it's the same approach.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

Theme 6: Administration and paperwork

We heard from some of the practitioners in the focus groups that the amount of paperwork and administrative tasks involved in Parenting Apart has presented a challenge for them, in particular in combination with wider casework demands.

“I find it like it's a lot of writing; when you do the meeting updates and you have to share it, send it, literally you have to do what actually happened and writing all those things that's big because also we support the other families. Sometimes I felt it's a bit time consuming and I have to work extra for that. Sometimes I felt like it's a bit too much writing.

Practitioners described situations where this was compounded by parents not engaging with paperwork emailed to them in advance of the sessions (in spite of prompting), and completing face to face was time consuming.

“neither of the parents did any of the paperwork that I'd emailed them, you know, despite prompting them....so in the end, I had to do them both face to face, which for us is difficult trying to find space....and it was like a two-hour meeting with each parent separately so it just took forever, and I'm having the same issue now with the paperwork, the actual [parental] agreement now which has been sent to the parents, they're not sending back to me signed.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

A third member of staff in the group described how paperwork could feel more burdensome in families with several children, where forms needed to be scored for each child.

“If you've got a family with, say, five children, there is a lot of admin for the parent to do. So they've got their parent's school sheet plus each individual child has to be scored as well .. The parents need to fill that out at the start, and then they also need to fill it out at the end. So sometimes I think, you know, that they're happy to do PAP and then you present them all this paperwork and they're a bit like they haven't really got time to do it...”

Theme 7: Risks to sustainability

We asked participants in our focus groups and consultation interviews for their views on what would impact the sustainability of the PAP in the future. While the spreading of Parenting Apart skills (through the growing number trained in the approach) and growing awareness of the Parenting Apart were supporting sustainability, Parenting Apart practitioners and leads also shared concerns about staff turnover and time-limited funding negatively impacting the sustainability of the Parenting Apart approach.

A staff member in our focus group told us that the impact of staff turnover could be significant when there are small numbers of staff trained in a locality. This concern was shared by the PAP leads:

“And of course, as we know that practitioners leave, they take things with them, and we don't necessarily know that we're going to get funding to be able to replace those practitioners to deliver that programme.”

The PAP consultants also acknowledged that future funding and staff turnover were challenges to the sustainability of the programme:

“I think funding could be an issue if local authorities, I don't know, like for example, if staff turnover or staff leaving and then they haven't got funding to do more training with training more practitioners.”

Local leads in the evaluation said that they were committed to continuing the programme following the discontinuation of DWP funding. One Parenting Apart lead reflected that once staff had been trained, more moderate support would be sufficient to sustain that. Keeping the Parenting Apart approach on the strategic agenda was considered to be crucial for the sustainability of the programme when there are competing strategic priorities, and potential staff turnover.

“So, if we don't have any more funding this year, for example, we can still carry on and do the PAP work that we've done....It's embedded now in the work that we do, so we hope to continue that for sure, whether we still do the training because we don't have the funding for it, but at least we can still do the PA programme with parents.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

Parenting Apart practitioners also reported positivity about the future of the programme in their localities, and in particular the scope for this to continue through the Family Hub.

“We're developing into Family Hubs in Hillingdon at the moment, and parenting is one of our key themes that we will be looking to continue to support and develop, and I can see PAP just increasing throughout the years because we know it's needed.”

Theme 8: Scope and parameters of training

PAP consultants shared some of the challenges and limiting factor associated with the training model. These included:

- online training can be disrupted, for example by connection issues and various interruptions

- staff sometimes do not have prior understanding of the programme before staff take part and do not choose to participate rather than being sent on the training
- practitioners attend training with varying levels of skills and knowledge and therefore there is a challenge having to balance the content to meet all needs
- Staff are expected to often work in areas of high conflict and it takes more than a 3-day training programme to be supported to do that work
- staff are not always equally motivated to engage with the training
- participants who are bringing their own experiences into the training, for example personal experience of separation and conflict, can need support

Some opportunities PAP consultants had identified to further develop and improve the training overlapped with those identified by trainees, including refining the training manual and offering a supporting resource pack, and providing training in-person if it was appropriate and beneficial. Practitioners and PAP consultants identified that Parenting Apart implementation could be supported by opportunities to develop the training further to:

- adapt the training for different audiences, for example those working in different sectors
- develop and offer additional modules to provide more in-depth training for practitioners supporting parents in specific contexts, for example when working with interpreters, with dual cultures, and with parents of children with disabilities or neurodiversity.
- incorporate some training on completing and handling the paperwork associated with delivering the intervention.
- incorporating real world cases and feedback from families that have participated in a Parenting Apart intervention
- further information on parental conflict, including defining it, and clarifying how it differs from domestic abuse
- incorporating further interactive elements, such as virtual whiteboards and polls and more small group discussions
- continued access to training videos in the weeks following the training

PAP consultants also reflected on the difficulty that some staff have when undertaking the Parenting Apart training in getting onboard with the rationale of working with the parents but not their children. To address this, PAP consultants work to emphasise other ways that child outcomes are a central focus of approach.

“The strength of the model is that although we may not necessarily work with the child, we are there promoting a positive relationship, a healthier relationship, a stable home environment.”

4. How is Parenting Apart shifting practice and cultures?

In our discussions with Parenting Apart practitioners and the Parenting Apart leads in both areas, we heard about a number of aspects of practice and working culture that have been impacted by the programme.

Theme 1: Raising awareness and understanding about the impact of parental conflict and ways to address it across the system

The first section of these findings relayed the numbers that had been trained in Parenting Apart in each area, and direct impacts that staff reported this had had on their knowledge, confidence and skills. A local lead reflected that this was successfully permeating across teams supporting families in the area.

“Now we’ve got these 24 Relationship Champions, who’ve got all these skills and knowledge and passing that on at team meetings. It’s on agendas at team meetings, not just Parenting Apart, but reducing parental conflict or RPC, and Parenting Apart is obviously an intrinsic part of that.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

Learning from Parenting Apart was also considered to be influencing other professionals who worked with families. We heard how Parenting Apart strategies were shared with colleagues and how Parenting Apart practitioners supported non-Parenting Apart trained staff to offer alternative and supplementary ways of working with parents. A key element of this meant encouraging professionals to consider the relationship between parents and how this can impact their child(ren). We were told that this didn’t only mean colleagues across Early Help services but those in wider services such as social care, Family Assessment Support teams and Looked After Children’s Health teams. By doing so, the Parenting Apart approach can benefit parents that are both not applicable for the programme as well as those that are not ready to engage with it.

“We do get some staff that haven’t been trained and if they are having parental conflict in their key working, they will come and kind of pick our brains like ‘I’ve got this family, this is going on. What advice could you give?’ So yeah, PAP kind of seeps into everything in a roundabout way to be honest.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Practitioners reflected that spreading the skills and knowledge of the programme widely across professionals working with parents in conflict was key to securing the

best possible outcomes for children and to sustaining the approach, and understood this to be part of their role as Parenting Apart-trained.

“I need to share those skills with teams. Isn't it like just trying to upskill people as much as possible with the resources we've got?”

Parenting Apart practitioner

A PAP lead talked about the ‘ripple effect’ that the Parenting Apart training and practice has had on staff beyond those that have undertaken the Parenting Apart training in improving confidence of other staff to address relationship issues in families.

“This [the PAP] has definitely had a great effect and impact, and people feel because they know the Relationship Champions are based within their teams or their friends, their colleagues it doesn't matter if they go and they're feeling really silly about something or they're lacking in confidence. It's a safe space for them to walk over a family with and get advice.”

Work to engage partners with the programme is also referenced in the first section of these findings; in addition to working to raise other professionals' awareness of the programme, in Hillingdon staff referred to activity to raise the awareness of community groups, local play groups, coffee mornings and at events. Evaluation participants considered the impact of this work was beginning to be seen in the growing numbers and sources of referrals for parental conflict support, reflecting improved understanding of its impact, and of the programme, across the system.

Theme 2: A child focus (focusing parents on the needs of their child)

The most commonly reported aspect of practice that staff reported as being shifted by the programme concerned maintaining a clear focus upon the child when working with parents in conflict. We heard that the difference that this makes is that as parent's attention is on the child's needs rather than the inter-parent conflict, they are more able to put aside disagreements and communicate with each other better.

“I really love that everything about it [the programme] is all centred around the child, and we keep bringing parents back to their child or children in the middle of all of it. I just love that, it kind of gets missed, doesn't it, in all of this conflict with parents? But I love that that, that centre point of it all.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Staff told us that some parents are not able to recognise the impact that their conflict is having on their child(ren) and that the programme helps them to understand that impact:

“Parents may not think they're in conflict or having any public conflict, but a child might see it very differently. We write a danger statement or worry statement when we're at our assessment, what [the children are] worried about and often using their words. So I had [a child] and when we talked about what he would want to see different...he said 'I just don't want Mummy and Daddy to argue anymore' and 'mummy and daddy don't get on...they say nasty things about each other'. There's the voice, isn't it? That's the work. And then take it back to the parents and I go 'this is what your child is saying.'”

Parenting Apart practitioner

This child-centred approach was reported as a key element of the Parenting Apart training.

“From the PAP course I came to know how often parents forget about their children and how often they don't think about how they're feeling. And now having done the Parenting Apart training, it always comes in my mind. Now I have to remind them [parents] your child is involved in between you and don't just forget this. A big part of your life.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

The Parenting Apart leads told us that they had seen a shift in RPC practice in their localities:

“It's helped them [staff] to really understand the importance of focusing on the needs of the child and putting the child at the centre of everything that they do with the with separated parents, whereas previously they would try and prioritise things like doing it for the parents, you know, not doing it with the parents, they'd be trying to work out their finance situation [for example].”

“I think what it's done for the staff is really get them to understand the importance of both parents having parental responsibility and not being able to shy away from that.”

“So every single time we do the PAP, we actually keep telling them [staff], hone it back, go back to why you're here in the 1st place, it's about the children.”

Parenting Apart programme lead

We heard from the PAP consultants and facilitators that this child-centred approach was a crucial aspect to the PAP:

“The strength of the [PAP] model is that although we may not necessarily work with the child, we are there promoting a positive relationship, a healthier relationship, a stable home environment.”

Theme 3: Staff confidence to work with conflict

Another facet of practice that Parenting Apart practitioners reported experiencing a real development with was working more confidently with parents in conflict. We heard from staff members that before PAP they often did not have the confidence to discuss conflict with parents whereas the PAP gave them the skills and confidence to breach the subject.

“Definitely my confidence in tackling issues and not being afraid of the elephant in the room, definitely for me thinking no, I’m doing this for the child and the child’s development and not being afraid perhaps to bring in things like trauma and you know, the impact of that child of trauma on that is the really that’s what’s happening to your children and rather than skirting around sensitive issues, tackling them in a way that parents can engage with and actually understand that the purpose for things.”

Parenting Apart practitioner

Another practitioner shared their journey with PAP and how it shifted their practice with parents by giving them confidence to work with conflict. As part of their key worker role, they would support families referred to Early Help due to their child’s difficulties. Often it becomes apparent that there is parental conflict at home, and this is impacting the child, but the practitioner was unsure about how they might tackle this conflict. After taking part in the Parenting Apart training they had the skills and confidence to do so.

Other PAP practitioners also shared their apprehensions about working with conflict and how the Parenting Apart approach changed that:

“My main concern was to go into a room where parents were conflict with each other and having to sort of referee. But the model that they showed in the training, it was all child focused, child centred. You knew that that you had that massive tool that you could share with parents to resolve any conflict because you just keep bringing it back to the children to that child focus. So, I felt equipped after the training and my concerns were decreased.”

A PAP lead also noted the impact of the Parenting Apart approach on the ability of staff to manage parental conflict:

“For practitioners because, they’re actually they learn more about what is conflict. They learn more about the strategies that they can put in place. They talk about working agreements now with parents. They have more experience about dealing with difficult conversations, challenging conversations.”

Theme 4: Influencing practitioners' wider work with parents

In our discussions with Parenting Apart practitioners and with the Parenting Apart leads, we heard how the Parenting Apart approach, skills learnt from the Parenting Apart training, were widely used to support parents that they were in contact with. As demonstrated above, there are a number of barriers to the successful implementation of a Parenting Apart intervention. There are also many parents who are not separated or not referred to the programme but where conflict is present or likely. The ability to use the Parenting Apart skills and tools with these parents was valued by staff.

"I think using the strategies with within our normal role as a key worker definitely works. I've had quite a few cases where parents have just kind of got to the end of their tether with one another. They want to be in the relationship and I've just taken it back to remind them of why they got together, what they first liked about each other, you know, let's do some fun things like you used to do before and all of those strategies. And they do work and definitely get parents thinking about their relationship."

Parenting Apart practitioner

Often the Parenting Apart approach was used by staff with parents that are not separated but are experiencing conflict, to help prevent the relationship from breaking down. A Parenting Apart practitioner was not able to offer the PAP to parents due to court orders in place, but they were able to successful use aspects of the programme with the parents involved:

"I've got a case at the moment through key working, and they were originally put forward for the PAP programme, but because there's a non-molestation order in place they can't do that. So I've been sort of delivering the programme through the key working side, so it's, you know, it's the same approach, you know, same strategies."

Parenting Apart practitioner

This shift in practice was acknowledged by the Parenting Apart leads who told us how practitioners can support parents with Parenting Apart related advice and guidance when a full programme is not possible, for example using positive communication.

"If one parent decided not to do the PAP programme and if they [the other parent] are willing for the support we have, the Early Help practitioners that can support with strategies and tools. They can actually give them those tips and hints for the strategies and then maybe perhaps, once they you know they can, then they can talk to their partner more in a nice positive way. So even though they said no to PAP, we also have the Early Help that we can actually give them tools and strategies or we can also refer them to PAP."

Parenting Apart programme lead

Evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme

Data provided by Hillingdon Stronger Families Hub shows that between 2021-2024, 238 families were referred for early help support where parental conflict was indicated as a key difficulty. This data provides a picture of the number of families who may have benefited from some of the Parenting Apart support approaches.

Theme 5: Staff professional development

A Parenting Apart lead shared their experiences of how the added responsibility of engaging in the Parenting Apart training and implementing it into practice, as well as supporting colleagues with associated skills, provided meaningful professional development for members of staff:

“I’ve always been really keen to see that team of people that have got skills and knowledge that can step into management roles and yeah, this is a great way because we can’t, you know we can’t do, we haven’t got anything where they’ve become an under manager or you know what I mean. So this is a great bit of added responsibility for that person to be able to develop their role. So it’s personal development as well as helping others to develop skills and knowledge and confidence and expertise.”

A family development worker based in a children’s centre told us how beneficial it has been to engage parents early on, before conflict escalates, which means using aspects of the PAP rather than the full programme:

“Where I support families, some of them may have conflict within their relationships, so I’m able to use some of the work that I learned in the Parenting Apart training with those families, but not actually doing that full course. So I’m able to give them the knowledge from that without you know, before they get to that extent where they have broken up, then there’s more conflict. So it’s good that I’m able to sort of start planting that seed and how that you can support that before they get to the escalation of breaking up.”

5. Indications of impact for parents and families

The impact of the Parenting Approach was not a key focus of this enquiry, however feedback from participants, and feedback from parents collated by PAP, illustrates some of the positive impacts the Parenting Apart intervention can have for parents and families.

The practitioner quotes below indicate positive experience from several practitioners of the impact of the Parenting Apart approach in helping parents.

“And the first time I've ever seen that ever in my career that there's something that allows that process to happen; even if it means agreeing to disagree, I'm going to compromise. I'm going to not hold fast to this idea I had for the sake of my child or children. There's a certain willingness that comes from that because they're being held accountable without blame. You know that's been phenomenal to be part of it in terms of process, but it's also just phenomenal to witness parents go through. So, it's lovely when you kind of hear after the fact when you kind of do the follow up, they've been able to not only maintain they find other ways then to implement what they've learned to think about the future and the future of their child.”

“In my case, the impact was kind of very striking because I had a parent who was very stuck that nothing was going to change. And so, to see that transition, I guess was the biggest impact, you know, and to end with ‘I didn't think it was possible for us to be here and now we are having conversations.’”

“When you've got a family that you're working with on a one-to-one and you can see when they started off, they could barely look at each other. Now they're actually contacting each other outside of the Parenting Apart sessions. That's it. Whether or not they maintain it is another thing, but certainly do with the actual sessions. You know, they're actually, ‘oh, we did speak, and we did arrange contacts, etcetera, etcetera’. It is a very satisfying programme. I think for me that was one of the biggest impacts it has.”

“I have a family that it's, well, they would describe it as life changing and they can actually spend time as a family. Not just to pick up and drop offs, but if there's an occasion to go to and then that's now extended to the wider family of grandparents and that has been amazing for that child involved. So yeah, it's definitely been really positive.”

Where practitioners were involved in interventions that were not successful, their reflections and feedback are reflected in our analysis above.

Parents who have taken part in a Parenting Approach intervention can complete a standard feedback form to share their perspectives on the programme. The quotes below are taken from 31 feedback forms.

The quotes below reflect positive experiences parents have had engaging with the intervention.

- I was sceptical to start off with, but after the first week it was really good. I would recommend it to anyone who was struggling with their co-parent. It was a bit of a god send really, we needed to be sat in a room and told to behave ourselves like children. We wouldn't have been able to get there otherwise. We needed that third party. Helped us move forward from where we were
- I felt confident and happy and got advice from you to show me what to do next after finishing the course.
- I found it nerve racking to start with and refreshing once we were in and made progress fast
- very helpful. It helped correct toxic behaviour. Helped shift the focus to the children for both parents
- The chatting/understanding each other was great as it allowed us to understand each other better as well as the child's needs.
- I found setting boundaries helpful and talking about new partners and dividing the time for the children between both parents, it was held in a safe environment to talk about difficult subjects.
- Good that we had to acknowledge the positives in each other's parenting. It was good that the practitioner was able to challenge the way we talked to each other, we needed that. Creating the contract and learning about the children's routines was good and things that happen in each other's houses. It made me feel more happy about the time the children were spending with their dad as I got another perspective.
- It was all helpful as it enabled us to speak and talk and air our differences, and a line drawn under what had happened

There was also some less positive feedback from a smaller number of parents.

- The PAP was quite difficult with all the historical stuff that has happened. I was hopeful that this would be different to the other work that we had completed however it was quite similar to other meetings we have had.
- When I brought up about the financial aspect, there could have been some additional support as this still hasn't been sorted. Better signposting would be better.
- Picking out the good points about the other parent felt forced, with everything that has gone between us.
- A lot of time was taken up during the sessions discussing holidays. We were talking about the B points opposed to what we were there to discuss

Conclusions and limitations

Whilst there are similarities in the approach taken to the implementation of the PAP in both North Yorkshire and Hillingdon, there are some differences. Both areas use Parenting Apart as part of an early help offer and are working to extend the reach of Parenting Apart knowledge and skills from those who have received the three day training to a wider workforce of teams and organisations supporting or in contact with families. In North Yorkshire this is being supported through the Relationship Champion role, while in Hillingdon there is an emphasis on offering Parenting Apart training widely across a wide range of organisations and individuals in contact with families experiencing conflict. It is also noted that the programme has been developed over a longer time period in Hillingdon, so both areas are at different parts of their implementation journey.

All staff that we spoke with, including the local area Parenting Apart leads, spoke positively about the Parenting Apart training and support, including reflective groups and supervision sessions, and support and advice to managers. The training was reported to be of high quality with expert delivery and we heard how it gave participants the knowledge, skills and confidence to deliver the Parenting Apart intervention. A small number of minor improvements to the training were suggested by staff. A proportion of the staff participating in this study had engaged in the reflective groups and supervision sessions facilitated by a PAP consultant, and all of these members of staff talked about how helpful and supportive they were.

Several common facilitators and barriers to the implementation of the PAP were reported by professionals that we spoke with in both areas. Parental consent to engage with a Parenting Apart was most cited as the biggest barrier along with an associated barrier, offering an intervention at the right time for parents. Practitioners and leads in both areas reported that staff capacity to deliver the Parenting Apart intervention, the demands of this type of work on occasion, and the complexity of carrying dual professional roles, presented challenges to them in implementing the approach. Some staff shared that the required amount of administrative work was a barrier. The support and buy-in of management was also considered to be key.

Some clear themes emerged from our discussions with those involved in Parenting Apart about how the programme was shifting parenting practice and culture. Foremost among these were the way the programme was building awareness and understanding about reducing parental conflict, and embedding a focus on the child in work with parents to address this. This focus on the child was reported to have impacted practitioners wider work with parents (in non-Parenting Apart settings) and we heard how this approach was influencing a range of other professionals that work with parents. Parenting Apart practitioners and programme

leads shared how their experiences of the Parenting Apart training and delivery had improved their confidence to work and to deal with conflict between parents. Many practitioners said that prior to Parenting Apart training they would often note conflict being a present issue for parents that they supported but that they would avoid addressing it. The Parenting Apart training reportedly gave them a structure and the confidence instead to tackle the conflict.

In addition to these, Parenting Apart staff and leads shared some of the key ingredients of the PAP that they found most affected their practice and these included the co-parenting agreements, the use of timelines, and reinforcing parental responsibility.

A final theme that emerged from our discussions with PAP staff and leads concerned the future of the programme and its sustainability. Despite concerns over the end of funding and how staff turnover could challenge sustainability, the Parenting Apart staff and leads that shared their thoughts, were positive about their commitment and the future of the programme in their areas. The evaluation identified a number of ways in which the approach is already seen to be embedding in ways of working and cultures at individual, organizational and system level.

Several members of staff who had delivered the PAP shared positive examples of how the programme had benefited parents. Some feedback captured from parents also suggested that the programme was well received by those parents. Participant comments about opportunities to expand the scope of PAP training, to continue to build partnership around RPC approaches, and to embed Parenting Apart within developing Family Hub models, spoke to this energy to sustain the work into the future.

Limitations

We note the below limitations of this evaluation of the implementation of the Parenting Apart programme, which should be considered in conjunction with our findings.

- **Views of self-selecting staff:** practitioners in North Yorkshire and Hillingdon were asked to volunteer to take part in our focus groups. As they were self-selecting groups of staff, their views may not be representative of staff overall and may tend to be more positive.
- **Limitations in feedback from strategic leads and managers:** input from two managers leading Parenting Apart implementation are captured in this report, however the study does not reflect perspectives from senior (top tier) leadership in the two local authorities, or from a wider group of managers who oversee teams delivering the Parenting Apart intervention (due to the capacity and/ or responsiveness of relevant participants). If available this may have offered a wider perspective on the implementation of the programme and its future.

- **Excludes evidence or impact or experience from parents and children:** this evaluation did not seek to assess the outcomes of the programme on parents or children. It was also beyond the scope of this study to collect information about the experiences of parents in conflict engaging with Parenting Apart. As a result, findings do not seek to fully reflect programme outcomes for these ultimate beneficiaries.

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