

# RESEARCH FINDINGS No. 95

A Programme Development Unit Report

## USING MENTORS TO CHANGE PROBLEM BEHAVIOUR IN PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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*CHANCE is a community-based development project based in Islington, London, which offers early intervention for young children who are 'at risk' of long-term behaviour problems, school failure or exclusion, and criminality. At its core is the provision of trained mentors for vulnerable primary school children (aged 5 – 11). Subsidiary aims were to develop a peer group programme in participating schools and a parenting component.*

### KEY POINTS

- ▶ CHANCE is successfully recruiting, vetting, training, supporting and retaining mentors and matching them with vulnerable young children. About 40 mentors and children are involved each year.
- ▶ The project has built good relationships with schools and other agencies which regard the CHANCE team positively, i.e. professional, highly organised and committed.
- ▶ It has established effective referral criteria which focus on known risk factors and targets its referrals carefully and accurately.
- ▶ Strong, affectionate and trusting relationships have been built between mentor and child. Such relationships make possible solution-focussed measures designed to change problem behaviour by teaching life skills, promoting active learning, personal responsibility and self discipline, and encouraging independence.
- ▶ Initial indicators suggest these measures are improving children's behaviour – their mothers, teachers and mentors all report some positive changes.

### PROJECT OUTLINE

Following a setting-up period, the CHANCE project was established in 1996 with funding from the Home Office Programme Development Unit, the National Lottery Charities Board and the Cass Foundation. Programme Development Unit funding runs for three years and will end in July 1999.

The CHANCE project team consists of one full-time co-ordinator, two full-time support workers and a part-

time administrator. The project is steered by a Management Group comprising senior representatives from local education, police and health services, business, the voluntary sector and Programme Development Unit (PDU).

The project is highly innovative in that it provides solution-focussed mentoring for young children aged 5 – 11 years. The rationale of the project is

Evaluation findings at the two-year point are given here. The full lessons from the project will only be known once the developmental period is complete.

that action needs to be taken at the earliest stages of vulnerability, and before children can drift from troublesome behaviour into more serious problems, including offending. Children of this age are also probably more open to adult influence than adolescents. The hope is that intervention at this stage will be preventive and highly cost-effective. Mentoring involves one-to-one weekly meetings between mentor and child, generally lasting for two – four hours.

### MENTORS

CHANCE mentors are volunteers drawn from the community and are subject to a careful vetting process which meets Home Office guidelines. Their aim is to:

- provide a trusting relationship, role model and guide
- build up a child's confidence and promote a sense of responsibility, independence and active learning
- change problem behaviour and re-direct development through solution-based intervention and goal-setting over a pre-defined period.

CHANCE has developed a rigorous training programme for its mentors. In their words it is 'challenging but enabling'. The CHANCE team are seen by the mentors as being 'very professional; approachable; organised; knowledgeable; know what they are looking for; know what they are doing'.

Although about 60% of potential mentors drop out between first contact and the end of training, this is in line with trends in other mentoring schemes. The important point is that drop-outs occur primarily *before* mentoring begins. Once mentoring relationships have been established, breakdowns occur in less than 10% of cases and it has proved possible to introduce a new mentor in some of these instances.

A potential pitfall for all mentoring projects is that of failing to provide continuing support to mentors when training is complete. CHANCE has avoided this by establishing a structure of regular contacts and supervision – at first weekly, reducing to once a month as relationships become established.

### CHILDREN SELECTED FOR THE MENTORING SCHEME

Children who are to be mentored have to be carefully selected so that the project maximises its impact on reducing the likelihood of subsequent criminal behaviour. The project team tries to ensure that all known risk factors associated with offending behaviour are taken into consideration:

- anti-social behaviour
- family problems
- school failure/problems
- health problems
- poverty.

The children are identified by teachers in schools representing the most deprived areas of the borough of Islington. The professionalism of the CHANCE team and the very high regard in which they are held by mentors is shared by the school heads, class and special needs teachers. This professionalism has helped to avoid potential difficulties in breaking through school barriers and 'culture clashes'.

After some initial difficulties in identifying children appropriately, the project has found the 'Strength and Difficulties Questionnaire' (SDQ) developed by Goodman (1997) to be a useful tool in the selection process. The SDQ provides a behavioural problem score and sub-scores for conduct problems, relationship problems and hyperactivity, together with narrative data for these measures. CHANCE accepts referrals of children for mentoring who exceed the UK 80<sup>th</sup> centile for problem behaviour. In addition to the SDQ, however, selection criteria include family, demographic, educational and social indices. The underlying problems of referred children are serious and multiple (see Table 1).

**Table 1 Proportion of children who are assigned mentors by CHANCE with problems reported by teachers:**

Above UK 80 <sup>th</sup> centile for behaviour problems	100%
Hyperactive	91%
Conduct problems	82%
Social problems	62%
Peer problems	59%
Emotional problems	44%

#### Other characteristics of these children:

Age at referral	6 – 10 years
Proportion of boys	97%
Ethnicity:	
White	50%
Black	21%
Asian	10%
Mixed/other	19%
Proportion:	
Excluded from school	50%
Having free school meals	82%
With single mothers	50%

### MENTORING RELATIONSHIPS

All the mentors expressed affection for their child and satisfaction with their relationship with them. The children overwhelmingly said that their mentor liked them a lot, was fair and honest and listened to them – someone they could trust (see Table 2).

### PERCEIVED EFFECTS

More objective evidence of the project's effects on children's behaviour and performance at school is being collected and will be available in the final report. In the meantime there are encouraging perceptions of positive effects, admittedly based on very small numbers. Of 16 mothers interviewed, 13

**Table 2: The children's description of their mentors in their own words**

She's kind (this was mentioned often). Lovable. Takes me out. Helps me a lot.

Fun to do things with. Good for me, she gave me a pen.

She makes me feel good; she asks me what I want to do.

Every way she's a good friend to me; she's very, very good.

I talk to (mentor) a lot; she talks to me, answers questions.

She makes things better; shows me the way to find the answer. I've learned to control my feelings; not to get into a tantrum. She teaches me to count to ten.

said mentors were a good influence, 12 reported positive changes in their child's behaviour and 11 felt their own relationship with their child had improved. Typical comments about the children were that they were:

- more controlled
- more confident
- better mannered
- listened more
- more amenable, 'I don't have to scream and shout'
- more considerate, loving and helpful.

Another comment was that 'we've spent less time in the police station'.

All six of the children's teachers interviewed have commented on positive changes in:

- behaviour
- ability to communicate
- willingness to share and co-operate
- ability to talk about feelings.

Substantial improvement in academic work has occurred in the case of one boy whilst others show some improvement.

A possible unintended consequence of a child's involvement in CHANCE could have been that the children were stigmatised. There is no evidence of this with one exception, where a grandmother does not approve.

#### **SUBSIDIARY AIMS**

A successful pilot peer group programme was run in the second year of the project. Whilst this demonstrated viability and potential, it proved very resource intensive. Consequently, the Management Group reluctantly decided that this should not be pursued further for the time being, to avoid diluting other project areas. The planned parenting component took time to develop but a parent-

mentoring scheme is now on trial and full implementation is planned for later this year.

#### **CHALLENGES FOR THE FINAL YEAR**

CHANCE has developed particularly successful screening, training, monitoring and supervising systems for mentoring. The lasting impact of the project – vital to replication – requires that working practices be documented and this is under way. The mentoring component has established good practice in many areas. However, the project would also benefit from giving more consideration to developing policies and practice in other areas, especially:

- mentors' role boundaries (particularly in relation to children's mothers and special educational needs)
- giving priority to solution-focussed measures
- concluding mentoring relationships.

Further thought also needs to be given to recruitment practices. To date most mentors (88%) have been women. These have proved acceptable for most children and families, perhaps partly because of the children's ages. But it would still be desirable to try to attract more men and to broaden the ethnic and religious backgrounds of mentors.

The children CHANCE deals with have multiple problems, including health and social difficulties. It is vital that ways are found to pool information and resources between agencies, to provide a concerted approach and maximise the impact of interventions. These communication difficulties are not specific to CHANCE, which has established some very good working relationships, but require policy changes at local authority and government levels.

Whilst there are some remaining challenges, CHANCE is showing many strengths. The final report will be able to comment more fully on the project's effect on the behaviour of the children who have taken part.

**METHODOLOGICAL NOTE**

The Phase 1 evaluation was based on semi-structured interviews with the CHANCE project team and with three members of the Management Committee chosen because they were active and involved from the outset and represented key local agencies.

Others interviewed included: six school representatives selected randomly from those who had referred children to CHANCE and a random sample of mentors, children in the mentoring scheme and mothers (in each case, 20 selected for interview, 16 interviewed – others could not be contacted or refused to take part).

Where questions were open-ended, reliability was confirmed between three researchers who classified the answers.

**REFERENCE**

Goodman (1997) The strengths and difficulties questionnaire: a research note. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 38, 581 – 586.

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**PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT UNIT**

The Home Office Programme Development Unit's primary purpose is to inform the development of policy and practice by testing out innovative practical responses to problems related to crime and criminality. The Unit's work includes encouraging and funding the development of local projects, ensuring independent evaluation of all initiatives and disseminating the lessons learned.

Part of the Unit's remit is to encourage and disseminate good practice in project development and awareness of innovative initiatives. The Unit runs a series of training and development seminars for project staff and evaluators and also holds occasional seminars of broader interest for practitioners and policy makers.

PDU is currently funding a group of projects aimed at reducing criminality. Evaluation reports on the first phase of PDU projects funded from 1992 – 1995 should be published later this year.

If you would like to know more about the Unit's programme, please contact:

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