

Parenting NI
Families Together - Improving Children's Lives Project
Third Year Evaluation Report

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Preface

“There was a kind of carelessness among the mothers we knew, or it looked like carelessness to outsiders, but we knew it by another name. To the teachers at the school it probably looked as if they didn’t care enough even to turn up for Parents’ Evening, where, at desk after desk, the teachers sat, staring into space, waiting patiently for these mothers who never came. And I can see that our mothers must have seemed a little careless when, informed by a teacher of some misbehaviour in the playground, they would – instead of reprimanding the child – begin shouting at the teacher. But we understood our mothers a little better. We knew that they, in their own time, had feared school, just as we did now, feared the arbitrary rules and felt shamed by them, by the new uniforms they couldn’t afford, the baffling obsession with quiet, the incessant correcting of their original patois or cockney, the sense that they could never do anything right anyway. A deep anxiety about ‘being told off’ – for who they were, for what they had or hadn’t done, and now for the deeds of their children – this fear never really left our mothers, many of whom had become our mothers when they were not much more than children themselves. And so ‘Parents’ Evening’ was, in their minds, not so distant from ‘detention’. It remained a place where they might be shamed. The difference was now they were grown and could not be forced to attend.”

Zadie Smith ‘Swing Time’ 2017

1. The Families Together Project

a. Parenting NI

Parenting NI has been providing parenting services across Northern Ireland since 1979 in the belief that effective parenting is the cornerstone of strong families, and that parents should be supported to enable them to provide children with a positive upbringing. Parents are a primary influence on their children and that influence can either be negative or positive depending on the quality of the parenting (Campbell 1995).

PNI's is of a future where parenting is highly valued, and parents receive the support and resources they need to provide a happy and safe environment in which children and young people can thrive and achieve their potential. Their mission is to support parents and they aim to:-

- Contribute to the well-being and best interests of children and young people, by supporting parents in the parenting role.
- Influence policy and practice on parenting.

Their values are: -

- Parents should be highly valued, need to be supported, and have the right to be treated with respect.
- The safety and wellbeing of children is paramount. The rights and responsibilities of parents, children and young people should be protected and respected.
- All families should be valued equally, regardless of their structure or background.
- Services for parents should be universal, accessible and targeted to meet specific needs. Parents have the right to expect high quality services and to expect organisations with whom they are involved to be honest, open and accountable.

The key principles which underpin the work of Parenting NI are: prevention and early intervention; United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; outcomes focused; partnership working; evidence based and quality. The priorities for 2016-19 are: -

Children and Young People

- Improvement in children and young people's emotional resilience and well being
- Increased opportunities to fulfill their potential
- Reduction in their exposure to risk

Parents

- Increased knowledge, understanding and skills of parenting
- Increased self –esteem and confidence in their parenting
- Improvement in their relationships with their children
- Increased opportunities to have their voice heard

Society

- Reduction in demand for specialist services due to early intervention approach
- Contribution to six high level outcomes, including the rights of children
- Contribution to knowledge and skills of practitioners
- Increased understanding of the importance of consultation and participation of parents

Due to their prevalence, mental health, neglect, separation, fathers and child to parent violence are recurring themes across Parenting NI services.

Key strategic aims for 2016-19; -

- i. **Parents Helpline**, listening to and supporting parents.
- ii. **Parents Counselling** and Face to Face support for parents and families.
- iii. **Families Together**, helping support and improve family lives by encouraging more open and effective communication between parents and their children. Priority is to deliver a fully responsive service that is accessible to families in Antrim and Strabane through a range of mediums.
- iv. **Parenting Education** – empowering and encouraging parents through learning.
- v. **Training and Development** – parents’ consultation, training for practitioners and programmes for corporate organisations.
- vi. **Parental Participation**
- vii. **Dads Project**
- viii. **Finance and Governance**

b. Families Together Project Rationale

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s classic ‘social ecological model’ (1974) is widely accepted as accurate and effective by child development specialists. It indicates that effective approaches to child development centre on the interconnectedness of systems, including relationships involving the child, the parents / family and the school. The Families Together project was designed around these principles in order to holistically strengthen these relationships.

The project built upon the successful model Parenting NI developed as part of their OFM funded Aspire project, which provided parenting support at Holy Cross and Currie primary schools at a deprived North Belfast interface area. The Co-ordinator’s role, particularly in building relationships and establishing trust with parents, proved to be a key component of the original project, and the role of Co-ordinator was seen as central to the development of the new project.

Strabane and Antrim were selected as the two areas for the project because of the high level of disadvantage (Strabane is the most disadvantaged areas in the region). Primary schools within the most disadvantaged parts of Strabane and Antrim were invited to become partner schools. The schools wanted the project to be delivered in their schools, because their

children and parents had significant needs which could be effectively addressed by the interconnected services that the project will provide. In particular, staff at the schools identified families who lack confidence in their parenting ability, parents who lack self-esteem, with disengagement from school by both parents and children and family units which lack cohesiveness.

During January 2014 PNI consulted with parents and principals from schools throughout the project area to get a better understanding of the types of services/programmes they would like to see implemented in their area. In Antrim they consulted with Ballycraig PS, Parkhall PS, Sixmile Integrated PS. In Strabane they consulted with Strabane PS, Barrack Street PS, St Anne's PS, (which amalgamated to become St Catherine's) St Marys PS, and Sion Mills PS.

They received 309 completed questionnaires from parents of pupils aged 11 and under:-

- 81% respondents recognised a need for child and parent counselling services,
- 78% requested parenting programme services,
- 65% requested child and parent programme services
- 71% recognised a need for improved home school relationships.

In February 2015 PNI again consulted with the Head Teachers of the 6 partner schools who confirmed that they were still keen to participate in the project and that the needs originally identified remained pressing

c. Project outcomes

In Sept 2015 Parenting NI secured funding from the Big Lottery 'Reaching Out – Supporting Families' Programme to strengthen family cohesion and improve outcomes for children and young people by:

- Providing families with the skills, knowledge and understanding necessary to improve the lives of children
- Building stronger and more nurturing family relationships to improve children's lives
- Improving communication within families
- Fostering children's success at school and within their community
- Helping children make better long term life choices.
- Improve children's well-being and enhance family harmony through child and parent psycho educational group work and one to one child counselling.

Beneficiary targets are 3,462 children and 1,692 adults and 10 volunteers at each school over 5 years.

d. Partnership

The project involves a partnership between Parenting NI, New Life Counselling and 6 local primary schools 3 in Antrim and 3 in Strabane, all in areas of high disadvantage, which are:-

- Ballycraig Primary School
- Parkhall Primary School
- Six Mile Integrated Primary School
- Sion Mills Primary School

- St Mary's Primary School
- St Catherine's Primary School

e. Activities

The project delivers specially designed, connected programme elements, for example 'Time Together', 'Positive Parenting' and others. These activities encompass child / parent group work; one to one counselling for children involving art, music, play and drama; one to one counselling and group work for parents; and training and support for school staff.

f. Funding

Funding of £698,685 for 5 years was secured in Sept 2015 for: -

- Staffing costs of 2 Co-ordinators (a sum total of 30 hrs pw) and 2 Counsellors (6.5hrs pw each)
- Programme costs for 25 Time Together programmes to develop listening skills, promote behaviour and build routine within families; 1080 Time for Children counselling sessions to develop therapeutic relationship through art, music, play and drama; 1,824 Time for Parents sessions of Brief Solution' Focused Therapy; 12 Parenting Apart programmes to improve co-parenting skills for separated parents and 68 Positive Parenting programmes to empower parents and improve the health, happiness and emotional wellbeing of the whole family.
- Home School Relationship Programme - Training for school staff and parents on improving the home / school relationship to the benefit of children including: -
 - The development of Parent Councils at each of 6 schools
 - Family fun days
- Management, supervision, administration, overheads and evaluation.

2. Project Evaluation

Parenting NI put in place evaluation measures from the outset, with this mid project evaluation at the end of year 3 and a final evaluation at the end of Year 5., to capture the learning from the implementation of the project, assess to what extent the project delivers on outcomes, what elements of the programme gave the greatest benefit and how well the programme elements combined to increase impact.

The external evaluator was appointed in December 2015, the first month of the project. A comprehensive evaluation framework was developed and agreed by February 2016. The external evaluator's advice was sought regularly during the early stages of the development of the project. She produced data to inform Parenting NI's second year report to BLF.

Sources of information made available by Parenting NI for the evaluation include: -

- Annual and half year monitoring reports to the BLF, including data from the standardised measures and questionnaires used by Parenting NI to assess courses and support services, including quotes from parents.
- Annual social capital maps produced by Family Key Workers
- Project Coordinator's overview of year on year programme development and marketing.
- Contact details of parents willing to be interviewed as case studies for the project.

The external evaluator's work focused on adding to PNI's monitoring measures by assessing families' overall experience of the project and the difference this made to them. Evaluation measures focused on distance travelled by families in relation to: communication in the family; confidence and knowledge as a parent; stress level in the home; capacity to put in place boundaries with children; emotional wellbeing of parents and children; and connection to the community and the school. This information was gathered by interviews with parents at each of the annual Fun Days in Antrim and Strabane in 2016, 2017 and 2018; the findings are set out in Chapter 4. In addition, case studies were gathered from families by phone interviews and from Parenting NI case recording system – these are set out in Chapter 4.d.

In order to assess school engagement with the project, school's perceptions of the difference the project made to children and the project's impact on parents' relationship with the school, the external evaluator established a baseline through face to face interviews with Principals of the 6 partner schools in Year 1. This baseline was revisited in Year 2 and Year 3 in telephone interviews. Evidence from these interviews is set out in Chapter 5

This is an interim report which aims to evidence and draw conclusion about the: -

- year on year progression of the project in terms of engagement and impact
- qualitative impact of project activities on parents
- schools' perception of impact on children and engagement of parents.

A final report with further analysis and conclusions will be produced in 2019.

3. Project Leadership and Development

Project Leadership

Parenting NI established a strong leadership and management system from the initiation of the project, actively monitoring developments and methods of work.

This vigilance and critical thinking enabled them to identify at the bedding in stage, that the project model was not producing the engagement and the outcomes which it was designed to do. Senior Management took a proactive response and initiated a review of the staffing structure, seeking the advice of the external evaluator and consulting with the Big Lottery Fund. As a result, the staffing structure was revised from 2 project coordinators – one for Antrim and one for Strabane– to 1 Coordinator to work across the 2 areas, maintaining close relationships with schools and other stakeholders and 2 Family Key Workers – one for Antrim and one for Strabane. The Big Lottery Fund was supportive of Parenting NI's approach of undergoing short term pain for the organisation in order to achieve long term gain for families.

The new staffing structure increased the project's capacity to address family support, social work and mental health issues and enhanced the expertise and engagement opportunities available to families. As the project established itself in Antrim and Strabane, the high levels of need presented by children including additional needs, disability, mental health and care experience, bore out the rationale of the staff restructure.

By Year 2 there was clear evidence that the revised project structure with one person responsible for project coordination across the two sites and the introduction of one Family Key Worker on each site to focus on delivery of parenting workshops, had led to a more effective and efficient service.

Following the restructure in Year 1, the project continued to change and develop, rethinking its programme delivery to maximise parental engagement, developing new programmes to address children with the greatest needs and developing new ways of linking parents with schools. It increased the provision of smaller groups to enable active participation by families with high levels of need such as Children in Foster/Kinship Care, families receiving support from Social Services and children with additional needs.

In Year 3 the project responded to the high number of families with children with additional needs by reaching out to parents of children at Knockavoe School, to develop a programme on parenting children with challenging behaviours. Parents who attended the programme placed great value on the fact that the programme was developed with them and not for them, and therefore effectively addressed their individual needs.

The project continues to be effectively led and managed by Parenting NI along with its partners – New Life Counselling and the school principals.

Development of project activity

Initially service delivery was designed on the basis that parents would follow a set process. Following lower than expected engagement and feedback from parents and school staff,

service delivery evolved into a more flexible model which accommodated the needs of families and increased the accessibility of services.

The Project Coordinator tells the story of how ongoing service development maximised engagement and achieved project outcomes:

‘Workshops: The initial plan identified was that parents would access the Families Together Project by undertaking a 4-week Health and Happiness programme, which included the topics of Stress Management, Self-Esteem, Resilience and Assertiveness. After completing this programme family would then be able to access specific services or in some cases some families would be able to access specific services by being referred by the school or local agencies.

However, the initial uptake for the Health and Happiness programme was very low. Upon investigation with the schools, the key contacts all shared similar stories of difficulties in recruiting parents for courses or workshops, including examples of arranging for popular topics and popular speakers and only a handful of parents turning up. After consulting with parents, who initially registered but then only turned up for one or two sessions, it was evident that it was difficult for parents to commit to a 4-week programme, and some parents described how difficult it was for them to get organised to attend even one session. One parent asked ‘Why can’t you just run like Wee Workshops?’ and went on to explain that she would be more likely to attend if it was a one off workshop on a topic of interest.

We then offered a series of individual workshops: Handling Children’s Challenging Behaviours; Parenting in a Digital World; Helping Your Child Deal with Bullying and Making Friends; Positive Mental Health; Value of Play and Promoting Healthy Lifestyles. While the numbers attending improved, we still did not have the high numbers we were expecting.

We then tried a thematic approach – using national/international themes such as Budgeting; Internet Safety Awareness; Mother’s Day Craft workshop; Autism and Children’s Behaviours; Father’s Day Craft workshops. We were quite intrigued to find that the most popular workshops were the craft workshops – particularly where parents and children could attend together.

At this stage the Family Key Worker in Antrim had begun to develop the Meet and Greet concept where she offered parents tea/coffee in the school yard and on suggestion from the Head Teacher, this moved into the school and evolved into the Parenting Café. Once parents started attending on a regular basis, their topics of conversation led to informal workshops around issues that parents were most interested in, such as dealing with homework, healthy eating; budgeting and value for money. The sessions with children present provided ideal opportunities for parent/child interaction and arts & crafts became a popular medium for this group.

Workshops have evolved to be responsive to the needs of Parents. For example, earlier this year the Family Key Worker in Strabane met with a Support Group of Parents in Knockavoe School who wanted a programme that would help them as parents of children with additional needs. After listening to the parents and considering the programmes that could be delivered, she proposed ‘Sink or Swim’, a programme which supports positive mental health. It was well received by this group of 13 parents. Parenting NI also benefited because the programme was quality assessed by the Group to ensure it was fit for parents whose

children have additional needs. And in Antrim, the Family Key Worker met with a group of parents who attend a Parent and Toddler Group, listened to their views and co-designed an 8-week programme based around the idea of building a Family Scrapbook. This is an art based project which covers a wide range of topics including family relationships, parenting, dealing with stress and self-care.

As a result of this parent led development work, the Families Together Project is now providing both programmes (a series of workshops) and Wee Workshops, which meet the needs of a wide range of families, and are well attended.

Parenting Platforms. Initially the plan was to set up Parent Councils. However, it soon became clear that parents found it challenging to commit to attending parenting programmes, so we questioned how they could be expected to participate in Parent Councils. This task did not have to be initiated immediately so we were able to take time to listen to what parents and teachers were saying and to respond appropriately by taking small steps to establishing Parenting Platforms – a concept that is broad enough to cover any type of entity that parents in any school were interested in ongoing participation in.

The Parenting Café at Ballycraigy was the first Parenting Platform and is a good model of a space where parents now meet, facilitated by the Family Key Worker. These informal gatherings also provide an opportunity for the delivery of informal workshops based on topics of interest. The Parenting Café is open to respond to the needs of the group, including the welcoming cuppa, the arts and craft materials and a general plan for the following week which evolves at each session. On a few occasions parents have taken the lead at the workshops and on one occasion 2 of the children co-facilitated the workshop.

The Family Key Worker has now initiated a second joint Parenting Café with St. Joseph's and Greystone Primary School in Antrim and this has already taken into account parent's wishes to maintain the Café on a Tuesday rather than move it to the Library on a Thursday. Both schools are happy to accommodate this and any arrangement to share the base between the 2 schools. The project is also exploring the opportunity to set up a Walking Group at Parkhall with the support of the Council – this concept has been endorsed by the Principal and the Board of Governors.

In Strabane, the idea of a Walking Club got off the ground after an offer from Derry and Strabane Council at a Family Fun Day which was followed up by the Family Key Worker, who undertook a Walk Leader course and saw the benefits of a Walking and Talking Group. The Council were very enthusiastic in supporting the Group at Sion Mills and more recently supported the project to establish a Walking Group at St. Mary's. The two groups recently came together for the end of term trip which was a 7km walk on Inch Island in Donegal. Plans are at an early stage to establish a Walking Group in St. Catherine's before summer 2019.

Positive feedback about the Groups includes the reduction in isolation and a sense of fun and clearing of the head. The Groups have also provided the basis for workshops with parents staying on after the Walk to participate in a workshop on a topic that they are interested in. The Family Key Worker is going to run a 6 week 'Sink or Swim' programme using the Walking Group at St. Mary's as the base. The invite will go out to all parents across Strabane.

Parenting Apart. This programme alternates between Antrim and Strabane each term. We are now able to plan this in advance basing it in 2 community venues. We plan to invest more effort in recruitment because all the parents who complete it have given very positive feedback. Recent feedback includes the need to move away from Social Services and the Courts recommending this programme, as this creates a stigma. Parents suggest that the programme should be offered to people at a much earlier stage in their break-up – for the benefit of the children. One of the sessions of this programme is on the Economic Breakup and parents are encouraged to identify low or no cost activities that they can undertake with their children. Suggestions from participants have resulted in the production of posters listing free and low cost activities in each area. This could be developed further by each Group who do the Parenting Apart programme.

Time for Children is very popular and there is generally a waiting list in each school. The main source of referrals is now the school, although parents can still self-refer. Having the school as the main referral enables them to identify and prioritise children who they know may be struggling. Therapists are increasingly recommending families to avail of other Family Support services if appropriate.

Time Together: initially this was a self-refer programme, however this was very cumbersome and resource intensive to manage as many families expressed interest, but due to the nature of the programme, the participants had to be families with children in the same age range. To simplify this process, the selected school (rota system) is now asked to identify the class with the most needs and to help with the recruitment and encouragement of families to attend.

Time for Parents is now available for all parents in each location and is now being promoted more as a support service rather than counselling, in response to feedback from parents who were not keen to receive counselling but were ok to go along for a one off session of support, which could lead to further sessions if needed. This service is also delivered from a community location each summer.

Time for Me ('Bridging the Gap') has been developed to address the need of parents who want to discuss in more detail what the Project can offer; if their needs cannot be met in this way, the Family Key Worker then signposts them to local appropriate services. Each of the Family Key Workers now has a base in each school (except Sixmile Integrated) and this has helped to increase visibility of the Project.

Workshops for Teachers. Initially described as School Staff Home/School relationship programmes designed to complement Parent Home/School relationship programmes relating to Parent Councils, these are now focused on any requests from schools to run one off workshops for school staff on any topic of interest and to date this has included Handling Children's Challenging Behaviours, ACES (in conjunction with WHSCT) and information on support for families.

Family Fun Events have developed initially from a celebration and an opportunity for families to share feedback about their experience of the project to include a showcasing opportunity for local agencies which provide support and activities for families. This opportunity has been so highly valued by local agencies that some are already saying they will return next year. These events have the potential to sustain the benefits of the Project –

perhaps with a group of Parents helping to organise it over the next 2 years with a view to it continuing.'

Project activities

Year 1

	Children	Parents	Sessions	Programmes
Time for Children	23	23	184	
Time for Parents	46 children indirectly	23	114	
Health and Happiness	46 " " "	23	24	6
Time Together	16	16	24	4

Year 2

	Children	Parents	Sessions	Programmes
Time for Children	46	46	253	
Time for Parents	135	54	229	
Wee Workshops including Craft workshops for Parents and Children	223	136	30	
Time Together	33	33	36	6
Parenting Apart	27	11	12	2

Year 3 – first 6 months

	Children	Parents	Sessions	Programmes
Time for Children	31	31	156	
Time for Parents	46 indirectly	20	91	
Home visits to encourage engagement.	15 indirectly	7	24	
Positive Parenting Wee Workshops	173 indirectly	74	23	Equiv to 6 programmes.
Parenting Apart	20 indirectly	9	6	2
Sink or Swim	30 indirectly	13	6	1
Informal Workshop Sessions	15	22	37	Equiv to 9 programmes
Time Together	10	10	12	2
Walking Group, Sion Mills	16	8	Climbed Cuilcach mountain	
Parenting Café, Ballycraigy	15	10	3 parent led workshops/craft making workshop facilitated by 2 children.	
Parenting Café, St Mary's	5 indirectly	4		
Practitioners Workshops	78 participants from 4 schools			3

Wee workshops topics included E-safety, budgeting around food, mental health awareness, spring crafts and managing children's challenging behaviours. Informal workshop topics included boundaries, routines, relationships, grief, goal setting, wellbeing, motivation, parenting in challenging circumstances, adoption, self-esteem, family dynamics, accessing support and barriers to accessing support.

4. Family cohesion and relationships between parents and children.

This chapter sets out the evidence on progress towards achieving Outcomes 2 and 3: -

- Family cohesion will be improved and strengthened for children and families including those who are separated.
- Parents will gain greater parenting skills, knowledge and understanding leading to improved relationships and a better quality of life for children and families.

a. Evidence from project monitoring data

Family cohesion will be improved and strengthened for children and families					
		Target		Yr1	Yr2
Children report improved family relationships	Children attending Time Together	85%	No of people	90% 16	86% 33
Separated parents, carers report improved co-parenting skills	Parents and carers attending Parenting Apart programme	85%		87%	87%
Children and families report greater cohesion	Families attending Time Together More able to keep boundaries	85%	No of people	60% 16	86% 55%
Parents gain parenting skills, knowledge and understanding					
Parents less stressed Parenting Stress Scale	Parents who attended parenting programmes	85%	No of people	90% 23	89% 147
Increased emotional wellbeing CORE NET measure	Parents who attended Time for Parents.	85%	No of people	85% 23	86% 54
Parents report greater parenting skills and knowledge	Parents who attended Time for Parents.	85%	No of people	70% 23	88%

b. Evidence from interviews with parents at Fun Days

Each year the Families Together Project organise two Halloween Fun Days to celebrate Parents Week. These took place in October in Melvin Sports Centre, Strabane and initially in Farranshane House and then in Antrim Forum. A large number of parents and children attended: -

Year	No of parents	No of children	Total	No of stands
2016	80	130	210	
2017	139	282	421	32
2018	131	237	378	36

Families participated with increasing ease and energy in the days' activities, and engaged with confidence with staff from local agencies and services which were present. This was a clear indication of the project's success in engaging parents in the full range of activities and programmes during the year. There was a noticeable increase in the number of fathers who attended the Fun Days in 2018.

The external evaluator conducted short interviews with parents in attendance, mindful of the fact that they were supervising their children.

Number of interviews

In 2016 a total of 2 parents were interviewed – 1 in Strabane and 1 in Antrim.

In 2017 a total of 11 parents were interviewed - 3 in Strabane and 8 in Antrim.

In 2018 a total of 11 parents were interviewed – 5 in Strabane and 6 in Antrim.

School children attended	No of parents interviewed			Total
	2016	2017	2018	
Parkhall		2		2
Ballycraigy	1	3	5	9
Sixmile		2	1	3
Greystone		1		1
Sion Mills		1		1
St Mary's		1	2	3
St Catherine's	1	1	1	3
Knockavoe			2	2
				24

The purpose of the interviews was to measure distance travelled by families through their overall participation in the project. The interview asked about the programmes/ activities attended, the parent's and children's experience of the activity, what the family got out of it and the difference it made to them and then asked the parent to assess the difference it had made on a scale of 0-10 on: -

- Communication in the home
- Their capacity to put in place and maintain boundaries.
- Their confidence and competence as a parent.
- Stress level in the homes
- The emotional wellbeing of the children and the parents.

a. Experience of the project

Parents had attended a range of different activities, often more than one.

Programme undertaken		No of people			Total	
		2016	2017	2018		
Courses	Managing Children's Behaviour	1	5	1	7	
	Helping your child deal with bullying and making friends		5		5	
	Parenting in a digital world.		2		2	
	Assertiveness and self-esteem.		1		1	
	Parenting Apart		2		2	
	Emotional Health			1	1	
	Sink or Swim			2	2	
	Programmes	Time for Parents	1	4	1	6
		Time for Children		2	1	3
Time Together		1	3	2	6	
Time to Talk				1	1	
Parenting Platforms	Parents Café			5	5	
	Walking Group			3	3	
Total					44	

This is how they described the experience in their own words: -

Getting involved

- I was very nervous coming on the first day – but the Family Key Worker came straight over to me so I didn't have time to be nervous.
- I was afraid of being judged and of Social Services involvement; I blamed myself for being a bad parent. I got over those barriers and now I'm very open to future courses.
- It's been really positive for me. I'm new to the area. Usually I don't trust people and I hate groups because I feel judged. I go to them for the opportunity to interact with my children. I really look forward to the Families Together groups. I don't feel judged – they empower parents – the workers don't ask questions but they are there for you if you need support. I felt accepted and didn't want to run away, as I usually do.

- It was a really good experience; the services are brilliant – and free. I would highly recommend it. I share links on Facebook and tell friends about it – parents should be using the services a lot more.

The Family Key Worker

- The Family Key Worker really helped me to explain an issue to my child about his father. I know I can just lift the phone to her; she always has plenty of time for me.
- I really like the support – I've had lots of chat with the Family Key Worker.
- It was really good – I really enjoyed it. The Family Key Workers are brilliant.
- What I really liked it that it was tailor made for us. The Family Key Worker met us and asked us our individual needs. She took on board the importance of language issues about disability.

Workshops

- Behaviour Management was good; it was nice to know it's not just me and I'm not the only parent with a child like mine.
- The bullying course was very good: I'm going to do Behaviour Management next.
- I wasn't expecting much but I really enjoyed the programs and got a lot out of them.
- The Families Together Co-ordinator linked in with us two years ago and gave us an overview of the project. Two of us had worked with parents at the school on SCF's FAST programme and we have kept the activities going and now the Families Together Project is supporting the parents group at Knockavoe. I loved that they asked us what we wanted, and what our needs were – was it emotions or behaviour management e.g. safe emotional channelling. We talked about appropriate language around disability and the Family Key Worker was very open to that feedback and took notes of what we said.

Time for Parents

- Time for Parents was really good; it explained a lot.
- Really helpful. Time for Parents let me open up and realise that it was normal to feel the way I feel.
- Parenting Apart enabled me to take things back to their father, who listened to me for the first time and has been much more helpful with the children since.
- Quite a positive experience, except for the Time for Parents. I found the questionnaire (Core 10) too generalised. The counsellor wasn't on my wavelength. I felt she was making assumptions. I only went to 2 sessions.

Parenting Platform

- It was a wee break and some time out.
- Great! I love it! Without the coaches, I would never have walked.
- The walking group is brilliant – I love it.

b. What families got out of participating in the project – outcomes for children and parents

Difference to children

- It made me realise that the things that go on, that you might take for granted, can really upset children.
- From the Bullying course, I got good information and advice. The Behaviour Management opened me up to developing the child's independence.
- My child's confidence was really low and NLC's Time for Children showed her strategies to deal with issues with other children, without running and telling. I wanted to know if she was happy at home and I got reassurance from the counsellor about this.
- I got loads of ideas about managing the children's behaviour for example I have now put them in separate rooms – there is 5 years between them. And I don't bath them so much.
- I learnt a lot about internet safety – I hadn't a clue – and now know about setting parental controls. The bullying helped me to help my child who has autism – I felt easier and was able to deal with his feelings and work with him on his level.
- Tips on managing behaviour - to put our phones away and to respect the children's needs and wishes.
- I learnt different ways of handling situations. I learnt to let them do things for themselves instead of doing it for them because I thought it was quicker. I'm more flexible with them now.
- There is much less fighting between the children – they used to fight constantly. And now I take time for myself – I used to think I had to be busy all the time.
- My daughter loved Time for Children – she learnt how to deal with her emotions and was able to express herself a lot better, and I found it easier to help her with her emotions.

Difference to parents' confidence and competence

- It had benefits. I learnt different ways and tactics of addressing parenting apart issues in the context of the father taking issues on board.
- I was able to offload, reduce my stress and leave sessions with different things to try out.
- That I can stop putting myself down – it's not me!
- I enjoyed meeting new people and seeing that other people struggle too.
- Everyone could share safely in a safe environment about things like tiredness, exhaustion and coping. There was no judgement. Other families who don't have a disabled child don't get it.
- I heard about other parents' experiences and approaches.
- What I got out of it was that I'm not the only one with these feelings; everyone else feels the same way. I learnt that asking for help is the strong thing to do. I got tools and coping mechanisms.
- It made me feel better about myself. It was good to know that I'm not the only one struggling. I would recommend it.
- I enjoyed meeting other parents and having a cup of tea and a laugh.
- It built my confidence and I got tips on how to manage stress.
- It was very beneficial for me because I hit a rough patch with my mental health and I was able to talk about it, to tell people that I was struggling; I had more confidence to express my emotions.

- I've met so many good friends at the walking group. It clears your mind and gives you time to think about your life in general – you get some perspective.
- It made me think more about what I say and what I do – spending time together and making it a positive experience.
- I got more awareness for me and of the help that's available out there.
- It gave me the confidence to go back to work – I had become a carer with no identity of my own – I was just M's mum.

Families being together

- Parents Café enables my child and me to interact with other children and parents. It's the only group I'm in. I don't really go out. It's good to chat and for the kids to have fun.
- What I got out of it is coming together and doing things in groups – not being on my own.
- I value the opportunity to talk to other parents and to come to the school and do things with the kids. I'm always looking for things to do with the kids.
- I enjoy the interaction with my kids. Also the Families Together staff offered to speak to my professionals about how I was getting on.
- In Time Together, the one to one time with my daughter, helped us to highlight the positives about each other.
- Walking and meeting different people – having some 'me time' is very therapeutic – it clears your head. And now I walk with my child.
- It was good because my son and I were going through a rough spot and spending time together brought us together. We bonded again and he understood where the punishments had come from.
- It broke down the community barriers and stigma about having a disabled child; you feel like the eyes of the world are on you and you're under scrutiny. It helped me to learn to ask for help when you're not coping.

c. Parent's assessment of project impact on their family

Communication between child and parent.	
Before	After
6	9
7	7/8
5	8
0	5 – between the children.
4/5	9/10 between parent and children.
0	6/7
5	8
6	8
6	10
2	8
4/6	10
4	10
6	10
4	10

- I am more mindful now about how I speak to my children, for example I don't say things like 'don't be silly', when they are upset.
- I put things into practice. When she has a bad day, I am calm and talk to her where before I shouted at her. My tone is different and the children listen to me. Communication is calmer.
- We do more things together as a family now and there's more communication.
- My children were caught in the conflict between me and their father. Now I don't feel like I have to protect them by ignoring it or lying to them. I was able to encourage the children to speak to me about their issues with their father, without them feeling that they are taking sides, or torn between us; they are more open now.
- Communication is better. I learnt to use empathy, for example if they have a bad day at school, I'd now say – 'I would feel like that too, if that happened to me'. That has made a big difference.
- The children didn't talk to each other before– they were snarky and used bad language. It's different now.
- I learnt new techniques and so did the children for taking a step back, stop rushing, take a breather. Now the child will say – I need to go to my room now, or mum needs to go outside. I have a better voice now as a parent.
- I'm more open now – I listen. I try to spend some time alone with each of them every week.
- I learnt how to stay calm with my child, who has ADHD.
- I now do 'special time' with my child to calm him down.
- My daughter found it hard to communicate and got frustrated talking to me; now I remain calm and she's able to elaborate and explain how she feels.
- I have learnt to manage stress- to take 5 minutes- and to come down to the child's level.
- Communication between us is better because we're spending time together in school.

Capacity to put in place and keep boundaries.	
Before	After
6	8/9
5	8
3	8/9
5	8
6	8
0	4
0	6/8
4	10

- There were no boundaries before and now I have boundaries with my partner and with my child. I don't give in so much – 'no' means 'no'.
- I'm much better at putting boundaries in place. Before I would have said 'Bed-now!' and now I say bed in 10 minutes, which gives them time and results in less confrontation.
- I've put boundaries in place for staying out times – and repercussions if she doesn't come in when requested. And I'll say – 'It didn't work today but let's try again tomorrow'.
- It helped me with time keeping – I was too soft.

Level of stress in the home.	
Before	After
10	7.5
7	5
9	5
8	4
8-10	4-7
8/9	5/6
10	4
8	4
10	0
10	0

- The house was very tense before – now it never gets above a 7.
- There was a lot of stress before – I was too busy doing things, I did things just like my mother – the house had to be spotless. Now I'm more relaxed – I get my work done in the mornings and have more time for them when they come home from school.
- There is less frustration and communication is more and better I'm more open with close friends and family.
- I have 2 autistic children so I was always at home – the walking group gets me out.

Who you know and talk to more people in the community	
Before	After
6	8/9
2/3	8
3	7
6	8
4	8
0	10
2	10
6	10
4	10

- I come to more activities at school and fun days because there are more things to do now. After Sure Start, there was nothing for parents and children.
- I met other mums who can relate and understand.
- I found out that other people struggle too, that it's not only me who has 2 special needs children. I'm isolated so the courses are like a social life for me.
- It's easier to talk to other people now. I enjoy meeting new people. I don't have much family support.
- I am now getting more interaction with adults – people who had previously judged me are a lot more open to me.
- I knew of the other parents at the parenting café from growing up together – but not to talk to. Now I know them to talk to.
- We set up a Messenger Page for the walking group so that we can pull each other on if somebody doesn't turn up or is having a down day. I'm in the St Mary's group and now 4 or 5 of us go to Sion Mills on a Tuesday to walk with them.
- We are going to start a walking group in Knockavoe.

- I know a good few people now.
- We are all in the same boat and we help each other out; other parents took care of my baby to let me run the 5k. You get advice on what else is going on in the community. We've set up our own group online and we still meet on a Thursday even when the group isn't on.

Confidence as a parent.	
Before	After
6	9
7	8
6	8
2	8
3/4	9
3	9
3	6
6/7	8/9
6	8
8	10
6	8
2	10
8	10
6/8	10

- The children are easier to manage and I'm more relaxed. I'm better at expressing myself. I feel clearer.
- I had lots of self-doubt and was always beating myself up; I'm not second guessing myself now. I have more self-belief and confidence as a parent.
- I feel more confident and competent as a parent because of the one to one support I got and the tips on managing behaviour.

Emotional wellbeing			
Parent		Child	
Before	After	Before	After
2/3	7	2/3	7
6	10	6	10
3	8	1	6
8	9	7	9
2	6	2	6
4	8	4	8
6	8	4/5	10
4	8/10	4	8/10
2/4	10	8	10
0	10	10	10
8	10	8	10
6	10	6	10

- It changed my child's confidence. She is better able to protect herself and she can get out of situations that make her feel bad about herself.

- The programmes are brilliant for the family and for me.
- My daughter doesn't appear to be as anxious now – maybe she was feeding off my anxiety.
- The Family Key Workers helped me with my anxiety.
- I'm walking more than I would, I have somewhere to go and I'm looking forward to doing other things with the kids at school.

d. Case Studies

The following case studies were developed from telephone interviews and case records.

i. Ruth

Ruth is new to the area and has 3 young children. She values the opportunity provided by Scrapbooking Group because she really wants to meet other mums and the time and location were handy for her. She loves it because it is a low pressure environment – the kids are around, she can see them and they are safe but they don't need all her attention. And she loves doing crafty things like scrapbooking but it is impossible to do this at home. It engages her brain and her concentration, which is a welcome change from all her attention being given to the kids.

The group has made a big difference to her relationships with local people. Before people would say hello to her and then turn and chat with the people they already know, but the group has fast tracked her relationships and she feels people are now more accepting and friendly towards her. She has more conversations with other mums and they have greater depth. As a result, she's been invited to join a chat group and to local events and activities.

The group has had a big impact on her life. She is starting to get a circle of friends. This is important to her because she is new to the area and also because she has given up work and doesn't have the structure and the social contact which work often brings.

Her children look forward to the group and love playing with other children. Both she and her children see it as fun. It is better for her than parent and toddler group because it provides opportunities for her as an adult as well as a parent.

Engagement with the Family Key Worker is meaningful for her because she remembers Ruth's name and asks how she is; as a result, Ruth feels that she has a connection.

ii. Karen

Karen completed an expression of interest form for the Time for Parents service. She said she was concerned about her daughter who was very emotional. At the first appointment Karen said she had been suffering from anxiety for a number of years and this got worse after she had her second child. Her older child needed more and more reassurance at bedtime and sometimes had to be put back into her bed several times.

The counsellor reassured her that children can have disturbed sleep and gave her information about this developmental stage when increased imagination can lead to increased fears and worries. She reminded Karen that she had described her daughter as

well behaved and mature and asked her to consider whether her concerns about her child might be arising from her own anxiety.

The counsellor used empathy, brief solution focused techniques and emotional support and encouragement to enable Karen to: -

- recognise the positives in what she was doing to address her anxiety
- recognise her competence as a parent
- learn some simple CBT techniques such as postponing worries and examining distorted thinking patterns.

After 6 sessions Karen's CORE score showed reliable change in her wellbeing. She had secured help from her GP, worked hard to challenge her unhelpful thinking patterns such as catastrophising her daughter's behaviours and critical thoughts about herself as a parent. She started going to the gym. Her partner said he had seen a huge change in her.

iii. Linda

Linda attended Time Together with her child and they both loved the one on one time with each other - it was good for their relationship. Now she has joined the walking group and 'loves getting out and about in the roads'. The benefits for her are some 'me time', meeting other parents and getting a chat, and being able to socialise which getting some exercise – 'it's good for the head'. As a parent she values the opportunity of the regular walk to discuss questions that she might not have anybody else to ask, because 'often you think that you're the only one with problems'.

As a result, she thinks her children would say that mummy talks more now and shouts less. Her children are more confident now because they are used to attending activities and they meet new friends, and remember the children they met at previous activities.

For her, the main benefit of the Families Together Project is that it has 'made things more understandable – like behaviours and where they're coming from'. She has learnt that if the child is playing up that it's not their fault and to console them and find out what's going on with them and talk out their issues. She is taking a different approach now and resolving things in a different way.

The other main benefit is that she doesn't feel on her own as a parent so often. 'There's always somebody there at the school gates to talk to because the project creates wee communities within the school. There are ongoing chats amongst parents now and a feeling that there is always somebody to talk to'.

iv. Cora

Cora spoke to the Families Together Coordinator at an awareness raising event. She said her son was having panic attacks all of a sudden. He struggled when he was going to school and wanted to be near her, and he felt worried when he was in school. She had been physically assaulted by a neighbour 6 months before and wasn't sure if this had affected her son.

She opted for the Time for Parents service. When she spoke to the counsellor to arrange an appointment, Cora was distressed and felt that no one was helping her. She had taken her son to the GP a month before; he had referred her to CAMHS but she hadn't received an

appointment. She had spoken to her son's teacher, who suggested contacting Gateway which she did; Gateway initially said they couldn't offer any help but a week later said they would come to the house to do an assessment but she hadn't had any contact with them since. She had told her son's teacher that he had been tearful but felt the teacher was dismissive and pre-occupied. She was offered a counselling appointment within the week.

At the first counselling session Cora said that she found a toy in her son's room with a piece of string around its neck and told the counsellor that her son had said that he didn't know what he would do if someone didn't help him. The counsellor urged Cora to speak to her GP as soon as possible, which she did and the GP made an urgent referral to CAMHS.

At the second session Cora said that discussion with the CAMHS worker had revealed how affected her son had been by the assault on her by a male neighbour, and how he could be suffering from PTSD. By the third session CAMHS had confirmed that they would treat her son for PTSD and they had advised Cora to apply to the Housing Executive to move house immediately as living beside the neighbour who had assaulted her was impacting on her son's mental health. The counsellor enabled Cora to work through her feelings of anger with herself that she hadn't realized how much the assault on her had affected her son and her feelings about having to move house. Cora continued to receive support from the counsellor while she worked out how best to support her son and moved out of her house.

After 8 sessions Cora said that the counselling had made her feel that someone was actually listening to her, that it helped her to have confidence that her concerns were valid and important and she had learnt that being persistent paid off in terms of going back to the school and her GP about her concerns about her son and to trust more in her gut instinct.

v. Mary

Mary goes to the Parenting Platform in Strabane, and takes part in the walking group which meets after morning drop off at the school. She stays on for the parent's discussion sessions which take place afterwards, and sometimes at other times.

'My experience with the project has been brilliant. We've had some great mornings together talking about things like bullying and behaviours and how to get behind our child's behaviour and look for the reasons for it. We found out that a lot of us were having the same small problems. It's really valuable for me as an older parent because times have changed so much so I don't feel that I know what's going on.

The main benefits for me have been: -

- increasing my awareness of what's going on in family life and in schools now,
- listening to other parents chatting and realising that what they're talking about is an issue with my child too,
- learning that there's a reason for the child's behaviour and to look for the underlying cause; they don't always tell you what's happening in school and now I wouldn't brush issues aside – I'd look deeper to find out what's was going on with them.

It used to be that I wouldn't go near the school. Other parents at the school gates were all dolled up – I used to think they must get up very early to get ready – they didn't have a hair

out of place. Now I realise that other parents are just like me. You're not pressurised and you don't have to dress up.

You learn more when it's a social setting because you're relaxed. You can take your kids with you. I've got to know other parents on a personal level. You don't feel isolated and you find out what else is going on in the area. It's opened up a lot of avenues for me. The social aspect is so important. I've made a lot of friends.

To top it all, there's the walking. It's great for the mind and the body. About 10 of us walk every week at St Mary's and then another day some of us go to Sion Mills and join their walking group. And now I have a walking partner, whose child goes to the same school as mine, so every other day we have a walk after we've dropped the kids.

vi. Lauren

Lauren has recently left an abusive relationship; this badly affected her children and she went to the GP with concerns about their mental health. She was subsequently referred to Parenting Apart by Social Services. Initially, because the referral came from Social Services she thought that her parenting skills were being questioned and was fearful of further social work involvement. If the referral had been from her GP or Women's Aid, she would have had less doubt.

She wants to establish co-parenting with her husband so that there is consistency for her children but communication with her abusive partner is impossible and everything is now conducted through solicitors.

The course has opened her eyes about different approaches to parenting, and different perspectives from mothers and fathers. She is acutely aware of how torn children can feel. She would like to do the course again, further down the road of her separation and she would like to do a course on managing children's behaviours.

The benefits of the course for her have included: -

- Personal support and reassurance— people ask how you are.
- The ease, reassurance and normality of the general chat, which is enabling her to relax and feel less anxious about going to the course and now finds it empowering.
- Knowing that you've not an island and other people are going through this too.
- Learning that there is more than one side to a story.
- The legal information and literature is really useful.

She now wishes the course was longer and thinks the information and training available from Parenting NI is brilliant and loves how down to earth and friendly the tutor is.

e. Summary of findings

The project monitoring systems – from CORENET, Parenting Stress Scale and evaluation forms - evidence that the project exceeded its targets on reducing family stress levels, increasing emotional wellbeing, co-parenting skills and improving family relationships. It made substantial progress towards increasing parenting skills and knowledge.

The findings from the Fun Day interviews evidence parents' confidence and comfort with accessing support from the project. This was reinforced by their readiness to take part in interviews with the external evaluator. The interviews also identified the range of circumstances and needs of families getting support including those with very challenging circumstances and needs, including mental health, domestic violence, children with additional needs and contact with Social Services.

Not feeling judged is clearly a key factor in parents' level of comfort with the project and the Family Key Worker played a key role in establishing.

Parents interviewed about their participation in the Families Together Project reported a significant improvement in their communication with their child, their capacity to put in place and maintain boundaries, their confidence and competence as a parent, their contact with other parents in the area and in their child and their own emotional wellbeing; they reported a significant decrease in the level of stress in the family home. In particular: -

- Parents learnt more positive and considered ways of communicating with their children.
- Parents learnt strategies and tips to enable them to manage rather than react to their children's behaviour.
- Children learnt strategies and ideas to deal with other children.
- Parents value the opportunities provided by the project to do things along with their children.
- The awareness that other parents were also struggling was a significant source of comfort and confidence for parents.
- The group experiences provided by the project enabled parents to overcome their isolation, to learn to ask for help for the first time and to get some perspective on their experience of parenting.

Out of the 24 parents interviewed and answered this question at the fun days: -

- 14 reported improved communication with their children, 8 of them by 50% or more.
- 14 reported an increase in their confidence as a parent, 8 by over 30% and 3 by over 60%.
- 12 reported an increase in their emotional wellbeing, 9 by over 40% and 11 in that of their child – in 7 cases over 40%.
- 10 reported less stress in the home, in 2 cases from 10 – 0, and in 8 by at least 40%.
- 8 reported increased capacity to keep boundaries, 7 by over 30%. In 2 cases there had been no boundaries.
- 9 reported an increase in the number of local people they knew, in 7 cases by over 40%, 4 by over 60% and 1 by 100%.

5. Impact on children and connections between parents and schools – observations from schools

This chapter sets out the evidence on progress towards achieving: -

- Children will have improved confidence, self-esteem and cooperative behaviour - Outcome 1
- Reduction in social isolation by strengthening families' involvement in the local community including increased parents' connection with their children's schools – Outcome 4

a. Evidence from project monitoring data

Children will have improved confidence, self-esteem and cooperative behaviour					
		Target		Yr1	Yr2
Children report improved confidence and self esteem Likert scale	Children attending Time for Children	85%	No of people	85%	91%
Increased cooperative behaviours SDQ questionnaires	Children attending Time for Children	85%	No of children	93% 15	89%
Children and families report greater cohesion	Children attending Time for Children or Parent – Child group work programmes.	85%	No of people	93% 15	95%
Reduction in social isolation by strengthening families involvement in local community and increased parents' connection with schools					
Parents and teachers report more positive connections by parents with schools.		75%		65%	49%
Parents and children have increased community connections		75%		80%	46%
Parents report reduction in social isolation	Families who attended Family Fun Days	75%		80%	55%

b. Evidence from School Principals and Vice Principals

The external evaluator conducted face to face baseline interviews with School Principals in the third quarter of Year One. These were re-visited by telephone in Years 2 and 3. In this way year on year change was tracked. And opportunities were provided for the schools to reflect on progress and to feed issues and learning back to Parenting NI.

School	Contact	Area
Ballycraigy Primary School	Principal each year	Antrim
Parkhall Primary School	Principal 2016, no interview 2017, new Principal 2018	Antrim
Six Mile Integrated	SENCO in 2016, Numeracy Coordinator in 2017 & 2018	Antrim
St Mary's Primary School	Vice Principals each year.	Strabane
St Catherine's Primary School	Principal by phone each year.	Strabane
Sion Mills, Primary School	Principal and Vice Principal – each year.	Strabane

Case Study - year on year change in two schools – one in Antrim and one in Strabane

a. Engagement and communication with the project

- In Year One, the Antrim Principal reported that relationships with parents hadn't really formed due to staff changes in the project and she thought that building up trust would be a challenge.
- By Year Two, the Principal considered that the project had been very positive for the school because the right person was in the job. The new Family Key Worker's approach was working well in terms of relationship building, engagement with parents, new ideas and innovation, flexibility and thinking outside the box and a 'needs focused, relationship based' model of work. It also helped that she was a parent of a young child herself and she identified as a parent as well as a project worker. As a result, school staff members are more confident and enthusiastic in recommending project activities to parents because the quality and outcomes were now evident.
- In Year Three, despite the fact that the Family Key Worker had left the post to return to England and been replaced, the Principal reported that communication with the Project Coordinator had been great and the transition between the Family Key Workers had been really smooth with the Project Coordinator stepping in to ensure continuity.

In Year 1, the Strabane Vice Principal for Juniors observed that the project makes it easier to suggest programmes to parents in a positive way and counselling on site strengthens the relationship with parents and family/school links.

In year two she reported that: -

- The project is gaining momentum – the timetable is jam packed and more people are attending.
- The programme is a good mixture. Fun activities such as crafts enable parents to see Parenting NI in a different light and that they can also help them, if needed.

- Time for Children is very popular especially for children with self-esteem and anxiety issues. Time for Children staff members are flexible and organised with parents when organising what times suit to drop the children off.
- There is a high level of interest in Time Together – 38 EOI's so far.

And: -

- The VP Juniors and the VP Seniors meet the Project Coordinator at least once a term. There is quite a lot of contact. The Project Coordinator calls in with flyers and there's regular e mail communication, and she attended the parent interview evening with a stand. There has been less contact with the Family Key Worker but this will change when programmes are delivered on site after Halloween: she is based in one of the nurseries so she is seen in passing a lot.
- The project started work with seniors on the other school site and there has been more contact with the other VP.
- The school has started to share information about project activities on their website and Facebook pages.

In Year 3 the VP for Seniors observed that: -

- Targeting is better because Project staff now wait until the service is starting before they tell parents, rather than have them fill in EOI's and then wait months for the service.
- Communication is strong – we have really good contact with the Project Coordinator.
- The project's PR is great, they had a stand and spoke to parents at Parents Evening in October and did a presentation at P1 induction. They make good use of Facebook.
- The project is much more established within the school community, and became imbedded this year. It has gathered momentum – partly because Parenting NI people are lovely but also because of the open communication – they always ask us for our ideas – it's a good working partnership.
- The project is impacting on children, parents and the community, which in turn impacts on the school community. Parenting NI cover as many bases as possible, including issues like friendship difficulties and bullying. The VP was struck by the diversity of needs and parents being engaged – not just those who are always targeted because of high needs, but also fathers and people of different social backgrounds. This is de-stigmatising.
- Teachers see Parenting NI staff as valued colleagues – more so this year because they are more aware of their services.

b. Perceived impact on children

In Year Two the Antrim Principal identified outcomes for children: -

- Individual children are more open and engaged as a result of Time for Children.
- Parenting skills and issues have been highlighted and advice given in the Time Together programme.
- A marked difference in a P6 boy whose parent was encouraged into Time Together after the nurture project. He had been loud and aggressive and is now integrated into social and educational life at school.
- A marked difference in a P7 girl, who was disengaged with no friends and needed social support from staff in the playground environment. She is now participating socially and

melting into her peer group. Art therapy with the project is helping her deal with her new foster home and physical disengagement from her mother.

- Time Together could have been significant for a family in which children have entered the care system but the situation was too far gone.

In Year Three the principal commented on the overall impact of the support for children. She observed that: -

- Time for Children really makes a difference. In many cases issues are resolved.
- She gave an example of a mother who had gone to her in a crisis situation; the Principal said she who wouldn't have been aware there was an issue because it wasn't apparent in school. The project took on the boy at short notice and as a result of their input the home life has been transformed.
- The support for children in foster or kinship care has been great - and they will require ongoing support. Looked after children can appear to be ok in school even when there are issues at home. She gave the example of how effectively the project can get behind children; a kinship carer with a child at the school asked her social worker for support; the social worker spoke to the school, who referred her to the project, and help was provided.

In the second year interview the Strabane VP observed that a couple of years before the school had no support and now they have Action for Children and Parenting NI. 'It doesn't matter to us who we refer to as long as the child gets the help they need'.

By the second year staff could see children growing in self-confidence through Time for Me. Three children took part. The VP observed that the sustainability of the outcomes is notable.

- One child seemed ultra-confident but had to be in charge. She felt insecure. Her parents separated and then got back together. It was learnt behaviour. She couldn't keep friends and walked round the playground with the VP. She tried to use kindness to buy friends – she was an only child and her mum never said no to her. She told the VP that the counsellor had suggested putting on a cloak which would enable her to be the person who's not in charge. This produced a massive change and she's now playing with other children. The following year, she told the VP that she'd forgotten about her cloak as she was now fully integrated.
- Another little boy had moved from another place; his parents separated and his dad stayed in another country. He had to be in charge, to make his mark and he was difficult and domineering, wanting to feel important. After Time for Children, he calmed down, came back down into himself and is now happy and well adjusted. His mum was unable to cope last year and now she wants to do Time Together with him.
- The third child – a girl – was reluctant to come to school. Her mother is in assisted living while the child is living with her grandparents – her mother lets her stay up all night while her grandparents parent her in the way they know. The girl is playing the grandparents off against her mother. She loved the one to one support and loved to come into school on the day she got counselling; she started to make friends. The school used this as a lever to persuade her to come in on other days. She loved the artwork in Time for Children so they encouraged her to take part in art activities at school. Attendance improved.

In Year 3 the school was able to see the overall impact of the service for children. As the VP said: -

- Six weeks of Time for Children work seems to do the trick for children. We can see their new found confidence – ‘they are more chatty’. The quality time is a release for them and an opportunity to express themselves. Because it’s happening in school and the Vice Principal and the teacher is following up with the child, s/he know that we’re all working together for him/her and they’re not one their own. They are visibly happier and more contented because of their new found resilience.
- A child that has had this support, quality time and reassurance, (with no waiting time, as there was at the beginning), is able to manage things better because they have strategies for dealing with them.

c. Engagement with parents

In Year Two the Antrim Principal identified a number of developments: -

- The Family Key Worker is developing the weekly tea bar for parents in the school foyer into a parent cafe. The goal is to encourage parents to attend the weekly session with their children to provide an opportunity to show them how they could support homework, with the Family Key Worker, modelling effective behaviours to support their children.
- The parents meet in a local Community Centre – a less formal environment and working with this local group is proving very successful in engaging parents. The Family Key Worker and a local Family Worker are working together at the Monday morning parent and toddler group in the school, building relationships with parents and pre-school children.
- A bigger uptake of programmes and more parents are asking about them. Attendance at parenting programmes continues to require a lot of support from the Families Together Team but numbers are improving.
- Time for Children is going particularly well and Time Together is also proving an effective programme.

In Year Three the Principal reported that: -

- The crisis support for parents (Time to Talk) has been brilliant. It’s great to have a Parenting NI worker on site. Parents see the face and have built relationships with the Family Key Worker. She backs up advice that the school have given the parent, so the parents are getting the same advice from someone they trust. Parents are more open to talk to project staff because relationships are established.

In Year 2 the Strabane VP noted that project staff are learning themselves and are open to learning and improvement and finding out what works best. ‘We are all learning’. PNI’s openness to learning is evident from the Project Coordinator’s positive attitude to feedback and the early engagement of an independent evaluator.

- The VP has discussed the timing of sending out EOI forms with the Project Coordinator so that they are not sent out too far in advance - in order to sustain parents’ interest.
- The VP noted that all 38 of the EOI’s for Time Together went to the Parenting NI Family Key Worker although it included both the project worker and the VP as contacts. This surprised the VP but was not a problem. This indicated the added value of offering support to parents from an independent organisation, even when school staff already have strong relationships with parents.

In Year 3 the VP observed: -

- Time to Talk has been great – 3 parents have phoned the Family Key Worker in the last week. It's great to have this on site, which makes it accessible and non-stigmatising. Other types of support such as Action for Children can only be accessed through the family hub. One child had big rows about homework at home. The mum said that as a result of the support she received from the project, home life was less traumatic and this was a new release for the whole family.

d. Connecting Parents with the school and community

In terms of connecting parents with the school, the Antrim Principal saw the Parents' Café as a welcome development because: -

- It's great to get parents into school and interacting with each other in a safe and secure environment in which children can play around them. Parents and children love the crafty activities and doing things together.
- The school can observe how parents supervise their children; the Principal observed that behaviours need to be modelled e.g. how to spend time with each child and engage with small children in prams and buggies.

In Year 3 the Strabane VP spoke of the benefits of the Parenting Platform – 'parents have a release - a chat and a cup of tea and they learn what's going on in the local area'. Parents are participating in a 5k walk/run to raise school funds, supported by local businesses. The whole community is working together, with Parenting NI support and this is building community spirit.

e. Perceived benefits for school staff

In Year 3 the Parenting NI Dad's Project Worker delivered training in managing behaviour to classroom assistants in the Antrim school. The Principal reported that they had really enjoyed it and got a lot out of it, and thought that all the teachers should do it too. She had noticed that the classroom assistants were now using a different approach to children's behaviour - managing it rather than reacting to it. 'There is more ease and less tension in their attitude, their tone of voice is different, they are more nurturing. They are more understanding and insightful of the fact that there's a reason for the behaviour and more likely to explore what's behind it. This helps manage the situation effectively and is good for staff's health and wellbeing'.

In Year 3, the Strabane VP reported that school staff had attended a workshop with WHSCT on ACEs, which brought people together; 'there was a big turnout – 150 people – it was very informative and good that Parenting NI got involved'.

Project impact across four schools

a. Engagement and communication with the project

One school observed in the Year 2 interview, 'It took the first year to get going – initially it was difficult to get your head round the names of the programmes, and communication is hard until relationships are built. You have to get started before you can see where the project is going and how it works. We are much more positive now. There's more buzz

about the project now. We can see where it's going. The counselling and the workshops are going well. Parents have welcomed our suggestions that they attend programmes and there has been no negative feedback although there is lower uptake than we would like. Halloween and Christmas crafts for children and parents is a good development – hopefully it will be less threatening and encourage engagement.

'The Family Key Worker is in school once a week and we have good contact with the Project Coordinator. Communication is much better; relationships are more established. Project meetings are better – the Project Coordinator has the agenda and takes us through it. You can say anything to her.'

By Year 3, the same school reflected, 'the school understands the project much better and will now signpost the parents. The Principal reflected that she had learnt that parents were more likely to engage with the project if, rather than asking them to ring the Family Key Worker, she asked for their permission to give their number to the Family Key Worker - nobody refused.

She went on to say that 'the project is a fabulous resource – I hope it continues. It's great that it was more than 3 years because it takes 2 years to get your head around a new project. It's really worthwhile. And teachers accept Parenting NI as valued colleagues.'

Another school principal reflected on the progress made by the second year of the project. 'Parents and the community are more welcoming and open to Parenting NI than initially – notions about 'parenting police' dispelled. Parents were wary at the beginning but relationships and trust have been built and there is better engagement.' By the third year she reported that Parenting NI is now established in the school and is seen as non-threatening, like Sure Start'.

She went on to observe that by Year 2, 'The PNI project had been accepted as a team of professional colleagues and teachers are more open and familiar with working with others and acknowledging that they're a help'.

Parental engagement has been enabled by the project's presence at communal events and meetings and breakfast sessions. The Principal's key relationship is with the Project Coordinator who is the mainstay. She also liaised with the NLC who is brilliant and really understands the school environment.

She went on to reflect that her ward is the most disadvantaged in the North and so the hardest to permeate; there's a great deal of Social Services intervention. There is lots happening in schools and the community to try and address the issues and Parenting NI are part of that, which is positive. However maybe may be a mismatch between Parenting NI and the school recruiting for programmes.

External factors had a significant impact on the engagement of 2 of the 6 schools which were originally targeted. In one school the newly appointed principal observed that: - Prior to my appointment in April and when I was VP I didn't know much about the project. When I came into post I sought out the Project Coordinator, got to know her and the Family Key Worker. As a result, the Project Coordinator came to the first Governor's meeting and the project is now a regular item in the school newsletter and in the See Saw School App which aims to connect families to school. The Principal is much happier with where the

school is now with the project. The Project Coordinator and the PNI Dads Worker delivered an in service session about Parenting NI. Teaching staff view PNI as colleagues and experts who are there to help us and our families. In fact, the Principal has cleared his office out so that the Family Key Worker can use it for Time to Talk.

In another school an Acting Principal had been in place of 3 years when the project started. This had a significant impact on school leadership for example, membership of the Board of Governors has not changed because of the issue with the Principal and governors were in the school constantly to support staff because of the leadership situation. Staff reported that this had been very difficult for Governors because they hadn't been involved in the way they wanted to me. The leadership issue was passed to ESA and in Year 3 of the project, the acting Principal was formally recruited as the Principal. As a follow on, another 2 teachers had been made permanent and all school staff felt more comfortable now that the leadership issue has been resolved. This was the only school where project engagement was not led by either the Principal or the Vice Principal. Initially it was led by the SENCO and then by the Numeracy Coordinator. Engagement with the project was significantly lower than in the other schools and this was reflected the level of engagement with parents about what the project had to offer and the impact of project activities.

b. Perceived impact on children

In Year 2 one principal reported that the school is now seeing positive outcomes for children from the project. Time for Children is a valued service. The number of expressions of interest is a measure of the positive way in which the programmes are seen. The Principal saw the overall impact of this service as positive and effective. By Year 3 she observed that there was most uptake for Time For Children, and a waiting list. 'It is the most useful programme and will be greatly missed if it goes. The impact on children depends on how challenging their background is. There are always positive reports so it works and this is confirmed when there are no further issues after the work'.

Another school reported in Year 2 that 'the counselling has got going, a new counsellor has started and there are quite a few children receiving this support. The 6-week length of involvement is appropriate for the children who are attending now. Parents of children who received this support are making positive noises about it. When children have finished and need further support, the school goes to the Family Hub, eg Educational Psychology for undiagnosed autism and some parents have gone on to participate in the Wee workshops'. In Year 3 the same school reflected that 'For some children – those from a stable background - 6 weeks is enough and for others – where there is family breakdown, adoption or deeper issues - it is just time to open things up. When it is enough, children blossom and are more relaxed and less anxious. Managing this is a positive challenge for us – some children need re-referred but others are waiting on the service'.

School staff observed that children really enjoy the counselling and look forward to it. Teachers can see children's increased confidence through the counselling: 'they are more willing to speak out and more sociable and in one case, behaviour is improving.'

c. Engagement with parents

By year 3 one school principal observed that parents' engagement in the project had become 'normal'. 'Families Together staff came to the summer fair and all of their contact at

school has normalised Parenting NI so it is now seen as part of the fabric of what the school does’.

Principals had least knowledge about the uptake and impact of Time for Parents because parents access the support directly themselves. One Principal reflected that a neutral community venue might work better in her area as parents don’t want to come to school to access this kind of support. Another would like to know who is using the service.

Another reflected that Time to Talk is brilliant because of the Family Key Worker’s ongoing influence – her presence in school and her warm personality. ‘She follows up and really sticks with families, chiselling away, even when initially they won’t let her in the house. She worked with one mum over a sustained period on establishing and maintaining boundaries with her; as a result, the child now staying with her more often (rather than going to a grandparent) and is getting him to school on time’.

d. Connecting Parents with the School and community

From the outset, Parenting NI was struck by the high level of need of many of the families accessing the project. This highlighted both the demand for the project and its success in engaging to families in very challenging circumstances including poverty and family break up, domestic violence, isolation and addiction. However, it also called into question whether the development of formally structured Parent Councils would succeed in engaging parents. By Year 2 PNI had rethought this goal, and developed alternative parent/school initiatives in order to enhance parents’ links to schools and to each other. Two initiatives were piloted – a parenting café in Antrim offering parents a cup of tea at the school gates, and a walking club in Strabane in response to parents requests to meet each other outside of parenting workshops.

One school was delighted with the new community connection. ‘It’s like the school has become part of the community’. She spoke about the success of the project’s Walking Group initiative. ‘It started with 1 or 2 parents and now there are 8 or 10. It was lovely to see a busload of parents set off for a walk in Cuilcach Mountain in the summer. The walk leaders are active people and act as role models. You need experts with charisma and knowledge to build and maintain a group. Luckily we also have a room in the school where parents can have a cup of tea and a chat.

She was struck by the impact of the group on individual parents, for example one parent who was very nervous around her autistic child, had few friends and was quite negative, joined the walking group; she has now lost weight, has connected with others and is positive and happy and delighted about how her child is getting on.

This Principal has begun to create links between school programmes and the project – increasing the benefit of the Eco teacher’s Feet First project to encourage walking to school by offering parents tea/coffee in the car park.

A parent from Strabane commented on a walking group in another area – ‘I felt at ease and really enjoyed talking to someone; it was an incentive to do more exercise, like walking to appointments. And it was my first time in St Catherine’s Primary School!’

e. Perceived benefits for school staff

ACE training was useful (although one Principal didn't know that Sure Start had already offered it last year and she took the teachers out again). 'It was more theory - and teachers like practical ideas - but it was good to have the theory – social workers think we know nothing – so it's good to know the jargon'. Other schools are interested in ACE training as well as training in managing children's behaviour.

f. Summary of Findings

The schools encompass a range of capacities and experience– two had leadership changes during the 3 years of the project, some have considerably more experience of working in partnership with voluntary providers and local communities than others. And schools have different approaches to engaging parents, particularly those who are disadvantaged and disenfranchised. Project staff have worked effectively within these diverse contexts and half way through the life of the project, Families Together and Parenting NI are perceived by schools as an integral part of school life and by teachers as valued professional colleagues.

The provision of onsite support for parents is welcomed by schools as de-stigmatising and more accessible than other forms of support which require a referral process. As one of the more community savvy principals said, 'the project is now seen as non- threatening, like Sure Start'.

The Time for Children programme made a significant, observable difference to children's confidence, their ability to maintain relationships and to integrate into and benefit from school life.

Time for Parents and Time to Talk are highly valued. The provision of onsite support for parents is valued because it is accessible and the ongoing support for individual parents provided by the Family Key Worker is highly rated. Principals appreciate that the issues parents address with the Family Key Worker or the Counsellor don't always arise at school, and therefore teachers are unaware of them. Some parents received effective support to improve school attendance.

Parenting Platforms were welcomed and valued by schools for a range of reasons – from providing opportunities for parents and children to play together in a safe space to the opportunity for parents and the local community to work together with the school.

6. Engagement methods

Parenting NI's consistent commitment to its values - listening to the voice of the parent, learning lessons and putting learning into action is a consistent theme of the project. It is reflected in its work on engagement.

a. The development of effective engagement methods

The Project Co-ordinator tells the story of how engagement methods have developed over the first 3 years of the project: -

'At the beginning, we distributed Expression of Interest forms to families via approximately 2000 children across the 6 schools. While this generated a lot of interest, it was also very labour intensive to make contact with each family to assess needs and to allocate them to specific services. This became more cumbersome as some of these services were not immediately available and families were then being told they may have to wait two or three terms before a service would be available in their school. We received quite a lot of negative feedback from parents via the schools particularly in relation to not being able to get places on Time for Children. While some parents were desperate for this service as they had been waiting so long for their child to see CAMHs or Ed Psychology or an assessment for additional needs, many other parents also misinterpreted what was on offer and thought it was like an after school service or club for art, drama etc

In the early days, every time a programme was set up, flyers were generated and distributed to all schools as, at that time, we had anticipated that parents would be willing to travel between schools – this was not generally the reality. We began to realise that despite all the flyers, we were not getting the numbers we were expecting at the various workshops. Also we were getting feedback from some schools that they were beginning to feel swamped by all the paper we were generating.

Taking a step back, and taking advice from the schools themselves, we stopped sending out flyers. Instead schools posted up electronic flyers about programmes on their Facebook pages, and their websites and newsletters. Some schools were also able to send out text reminders and recently two of the schools started to include our messages on their Apps which are accessed by most of their parents.

We have been finding this paperless system to be a much more effective way of letting parents know what is available. Parents are now encouraged to contact us directly if they are interested in a specific programme or workshop. Parents can now also use the Parenting NI Freephone number to register onto programmes. With regard to the programmes provided by our partner organisation New Life Counselling, we are now working more closely with the schools to identify children who could benefit most from Time for Children. Key contacts in schools also now identify a particular class that would most benefit from engaging in a Time Together programme and our collective focus is then on recruitment of the families of children in this Year Group.

We have recently set up a Twitter account for Families Together which currently has over 125 followers. This has been a good way to generate interest and awareness about the project among our colleagues in the community and voluntary sector. Three of the 6 schools are on Twitter.

Besides the schools, we also forward e-flyers to the wider community through the Locality Planning Groups and Family Support Hubs as well as individual practitioners who have asked for updates for their clients.

The more contact that we have had with schools, and the more that staff understand what we are offering, the more likely that they will recommend our services to parents. Recently school staff have been suggesting to parents that they try Families Together and we also have evidence of parents recommending that other parents get in touch for support. This is probably the best ad we could hope for.'

School Principals confirmed that this listening approach by the project has resulted in significant improvement to communication and engagement: -

'It took the first year to get going – initially it was difficult to get your head round the names of the programmes, and communication is hard until relationships are built. You have to get started before you can see where the project is going and how it works. We are much more positive now. There's more buzz about the project now. We can see where it's going.

'The Family Key Worker is in school once a week and we have good contact with the Project Coordinator. Communication is much better; relationships are more established.

Project meetings are better – the Project Coordinator has the agenda and takes us through it. You can say anything to her.'

One Principal reflected on the challenges: -

'Our school is in the most disadvantaged ward in the North and so the hardest to permeate; there's a great deal of Social Services intervention. There is lots happening in schools and the community to try and address the issues and Parenting NI are part of that, which is positive. However maybe may be a mismatch between Parenting NI and the school recruiting for programmes'.

The addition in the third year of the project of school based opportunities for parents to get some support from the Family Key Worker has proved very successful as reflected by School Principals: -

- 'Time to Talk has been great – 3 parents have phoned the Family Key Worker in the last week. It's great to have this on site, which makes it accessible and non-stigmatising. Other types of support such as Action for Children can only be accessed through the family hub.
- 'The crisis support for parents (Time to Talk) has been brilliant. It's great to have a Parenting NI worker on site. Parents are more open to talk to project staff because relationships are established.
- 'She follows up and really sticks with families, chiselling away even when initially they won't let her in the house. She worked with one mum over a sustained period on establishing and maintaining boundaries with her; as a result, the she has at stronger relationship with the child and is getting him to school on time'.

b. Social Capital

The success of the project's focus on building open and positive relationships with parents and school staff is reflected in the Family Key Workers' annual mapping of their relationships with parents, schools and local agencies: -

- The number of parents known by name in Antrim quadrupled from Year 2 to Year 3, even with a new Family Key Worker in post. This included parents from 2 new schools and those attending Parenting Apart.
- There has been a significantly increase in project engagement with school staff in two existing schools and two new schools in Antrim and ongoing lack of engagement by one school.
- Relationships with other local providers including Sure Start, Parent and Toddler group providers, Home Start and CYPSP are now well established.
- Good partnership relationships are in place with New Life Counselling.
- The number of known parents known by name by the Strabane Family Key Worker has increased from 15 to 59.
- The number of school staff known by the Family Key Worker in Strabane has increased from 8 to 29 plus an additional 2 in a fourth school.
- There has been a significant increase in community links in Strabane which began with Strabane Community Project and Strabane Family Centre and now include Strabane Health Improvement including Men's Shed, PNI's Dad's Project, NICMA, the local Council, Melvin Sports Centre, a local dentist. Links have also developed with businesses which have community activities, including ASDA and O2, and local newspapers.

c. Findings

A face to face relationship based approach to engagement with parents and school staff has proved highly effective in securing uptake of project support. Lessons have been learnt about the limitations of paper based systems such as EOI's, which proved inefficient and produced significant time lags between marketing and provision of services.

There are different levels of engagement by school staff, including Senior Managers with the project at different times, which can reflect changes in school leadership and in one case ongoing lack of engagement at senior level.

Relationships have been built with additional schools in Antrim and Strabane, which have welcomed the support of the project.

The revised staffing structure has enabled the Project Coordinator Post to sustain strong partnership working with school leadership and the Family Key Workers to engage effectively with a significant number of parents in each school, as well as school staff members and local agencies. The skills, availability and engagement expertise of the Family Support Workers has enabled families with high levels of need to access the support of the project.

7. Conclusions and recommendations

7.1 Objectives are being achieved

There is strong evidence that the project is achieving its objectives. Feedback from schools on the impacts on children and from parents on the impact on families is consistent across the two project areas.

1. Children will have improved confidence, self-esteem and cooperative behaviour
2. Family cohesion will be improved and strengthened for children and families, including those who are separated.
3. Parenting will gain greater parenting skills and understanding leading to improved relationships and a better quality of life for children and families.
4. Reduction in social isolation by strengthening families' involvement in the local community, including increased parents' connection with their children's schools.

7.2 Value based approach

The project approach is consistent with key Parenting NI values ie services for parents should be universal, accessible and targeted to meet specific needs; and parents have the right to expect high quality services and to expect organisations with whom they are involved to be honest, open and accountable. The project fits well within Parenting NI's Strategic Priorities and contributes to the achievement of their overall strategic aims.

7.3 Application of the project model

The project was based on Urie Bronfenbrenner's 'social ecological model' which established that effective approaches to child development centre on the interconnectedness of systems including relationships involving the child, the parents / family and the school. The project was designed around these principles in order to holistically strengthen these relationships. There is growing evidence that the project model is achieving this result. Evidence from schools and parent's reveals gains for the child and the family from strengthening these relationships: -

- Because it's happening in school and the Vice Principal and the teacher is following up with the child, s/he know that we're all working together for him/her and they're not on their own. They are visibly happier and more contented because of their new found resilience.
- Parents see the face and have built relationships with the Family Key Worker. She backs up advice that the school have given the parent, so the parents are getting the same advice from someone they trust.

There is also evidence that the different knowledge and awareness of school's staff and project staff strengthens overall support to families. For example: -

- When given a choice parents accessed support directly for themselves from Parenting NI, rather than the school. One Principal realised this and changed her practice from suggesting parents contact the Family Key Worker, to asking their permission for the Family Key Worker to contact them; none refused.

- School staff's perceptions of parent's relationships with each other differed from that of parents, for example one parenting platform was perceived by the school to be attended by a group of friends; however, the parents interviewed from that group said that while they had grown up together, they hadn't actually known each other as adults, and through the parenting platform, they now knew each other personally.

7.4 Project Leadership

Parenting NI has provided strong ongoing effective leadership to the project. From the outset Parenting NI Senior Managers actively consulted with project partners including schools, listened carefully to the voice of parents and accessed independent advice from the external evaluator. This leadership approach was driven by a strong focus on the voice of parents and children and on outcomes. Participants were listened to, lessons were learnt early, options were carefully considered and changes were made to staffing and delivery, despite the cost in terms of Senior Management time and the risk of compromising credibility with the Big Lottery Fund.

In the experience of the evaluator this kind of leadership is rare; it is more common for organisations to devolve responsibility for success to project staff, to avoid rocking the boat with funders and to defer learning until late into the life of the project, or indeed wait until the end of project evaluation.

The courageous early review and restructure, and the ongoing review and adjustments to project delivery and marketing have provided highly successful in maximising project outcomes and particularly the engagement of disadvantaged families with challenging circumstances.

7.5 Engagement with parents

Experts in the area of family support have observed the number of research studies – in psychology, psychiatry, social work, criminology and family therapy which are steeped in a culture of parent blaming. Given the rampant parent-blaming in our culture exemplified in our mother blaming media, it is no surprise that parents often feel intense guilt. Guilt and shame are serious obstacles to parents forming working relationships with professionals. In this context it is no wonder that parenting interventions can be perceived as judgemental and the notion of parenting police still has some currency. This challenge is multiplied when delivering support to parents in areas of high disadvantage, who live with the additional stigma of poverty and worklessness. Parenting NI's long track record of building trust and changing perception informed the design of the Families Together Project. There is clear evidence that the project has succeeded in gaining the confidence and respect of school principals and staff members for its success in engaging parents and delivering an effective range of services which target their needs.

The project has learnt key lessons about engagement, moving from paper based to relationship based methods. This has proved effective in creating and sustaining relationships with parents, including those with high levels of needs and challenging circumstances.

This progress is reflected by one school principal, who had commented in the second year of the project. 'Parents and the community are more welcoming and open to Parenting NI than initially – notions about 'parenting police' dispelled. Parents were wary at the beginning but relationships and trust have been built and there is better engagement.' By the third year she reported that Parenting NI is now established in the school and is seen as non-threatening, like Sure Start'. And other who said, "the project is a fabulous resource – I hope it continues. It's great that it was more than 3 years because it takes 2 years to get your head around a new project. It's really worthwhile and teachers now accept Parenting NI as valued colleagues.'

Many of the parents interviewed observed that participation in the project had enabled them to stop blaming themselves, to realise that they were not the only parent who struggles and to ask for help and support from other parents and professionals. This, in itself, is a significant outcome.

7.6 Project delivery

All the project activities are effective in produces outcomes for children, parents and families. There has been considerable development of the original suite of activities in response to the needs of families. The package of supports and activities works well together and enable families to access different kinds of support and sustain their involvement with each other, the school and the project.

Individual activities are valued and effective: -

Time to Talk was introduced in year 3 to provide parents with onsite weekly support from the Family Key Worker. This development is highly valued by schools and by parents because it is onsite, accessible and ongoing.

Time for Children is highly valued by schools who reported that the 6-week duration of the programme addresses the needs of children, except for those with very challenging family backgrounds.

Time for Parents provides high quality support to families enabling them to understand and learn about parenting and gain tips and strategies for positive parenting; this service also provides critical support to families in very challenging circumstances and sees them through crises, working in tandem with other agencies.

Parenting Apart has significant outcomes for children in families whose parents are separating including those with very challenging circumstances. One parent reported that her partner took on board her suggestions about co-parenting for the first time; another reported that she had been enabled to find a way to talk to her child about this father and address his feeling of being torn. Another described it as empowering.

Time Together has been created valuable opportunities for parents to spend one to one time with one of their children and is a positive experience. The delivery model has proved challenging to apply in the school setting, with relatively low numbers of parents maintaining their engagement over the 6 weeks; some parents reported reluctance to focus on only one

of their children, others found the attendance requirement difficult and some schools find the loss of teaching time difficult, if a number of children from one class are taken out of class.

7.7 Parenting Platforms

Great strides have been made towards connecting parents with their local community and school 'The project is impacting on children, parents and the community, which in turn impacts on the school community'. 'I am struck by the diversity of needs and parents being engaged – not just those who are always targeted because of high needs, but also fathers and people of different social backgrounds. This is de-stigmatising'. 'The whole community is working together, with Parenting NI support and this is building community spirit'.

7.8 Recommendations

This interim report is part of a formative evaluation process which has worked alongside the project since it started. This approach to evaluation reflects Parenting NI's openness to listening to and acting on feedback. There is now a considerable body of evidence that the project is achieving its outcomes and improving the lives of families and children in areas of high disadvantage including those with high levels of need. The theme of the recommendations which follow is therefore 'keep on doing what you're doing'.

- Promote the success of the school based model to changing the outcomes for families in areas of high disadvantage.
- Capture the successful achievement of project outcomes by developing a short, simple distance travelled measurement tool for families' overall participation in project activities.
- Continue to review and revise service delivery in response to changing need, demand and feedback, including exploring how to make the Time Together delivery model work in the context of this project.
- Continue to review school leadership investment in the project in order to enable new schools who wish to invest to access the scarce resources of the project for their families.
- Develop Parenting Platforms in recognition that increasing parental engagement in schools is a longstanding challenge as evidenced by the primary role of existing PTA's as fund raising.

Families Together – Improving Children’s Lives: Evaluation Framework

<i>Outcome</i>	<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Measure</i>	<i>Activities</i>	<i>Fit with BLF programme</i>
<p>1 Children will have improved confidence, self-esteem and cooperative behaviour</p> <p>85%</p>	<p>Improved confidence and self-esteem.</p> <p>Increased co-operative behaviours.</p> <p>Children have improved confidence, self-esteem and levels of cooperative behaviour.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Already in place Project staff to put in place and collect Evaluator to collect</p> <p>Likert attitudinal scales</p> <p>SDQ – strengths and difficulties questionnaire. 85%</p> <p>Feedback from school staff.</p> <p>Review of EOI form</p>	<p>Time for Children counselling for children. 1,080 hrs 180 children.</p> <p>Time Together child and parent. 150 children and 150 parents.</p>	<p>Developing children’s skills to address issues they face and supporting them and their carers to surmount difficulties together will mean that more families will have greater skills, knowledge and understanding to overcome adversity; children and their families are coming together to learn these skills.</p>
<p>2 Family cohesion will be improved and strengthened for children and families including those who are separated.</p> <p>85%</p>	<p>Children report improved family relationships.</p> <p>Separated parents report improved co-parenting skills.</p> <p>Children and families report greater family cohesion.</p>	<p>Session evaluation forms.</p> <p>Review of EOI form.</p> <p>Pre and post intervention questionnaire.</p>	<p>Positive Parenting. 68 programmes 680 parents and 1496 children</p> <p>Parenting Apart. 12 programmes 120 parents and 264 children.</p> <p>Time Together</p> <p>Home School Relationship 12 programmes 324 parents, 712 children and 130 school staff.</p>	<p>More children and their families, including families experiencing separation, being supported to increase skills, knowledge and understanding to overcome adversity; and families will be supported to learn together effectively.</p>

<p>3 Parents will gain greater parenting skills, knowledge and understanding leading to improved relationships and a better quality of life for children and families.</p> <p>85%</p>	<p>Parents are less stressed in their parenting role.</p> <p>Parents and children have increased emotional wellbeing.</p> <p>Parents have greater parenting skills, knowledge and understanding and relationships and quality of life has improved for children and families.</p>	<p>Core 10 outcome measure.</p> <p>Parenting Stress Scale.</p> <p>Feedback from teachers and children.</p>	<p>Time for Parents counselling for parents. 1,824 sessions, 304 adults and 666 children.</p> <p>Positive Parenting</p> <p>Parenting Apart.</p>	<p>Children will have increased resilience and coping mechanism to overcome adverse circumstances due to the increase in their parents skill, knowledge and understanding of parenting.</p>
<p>4 Reduction in social isolation by strengthening families involvement in the local community including increased parents' connection with their children's schools.</p> <p>75%</p>	<p>Carers and teachers reporting better, more positive connection by parents with their children's schools.</p> <p>Carers and children report increased connections with their local communities.</p> <p>Carers and children report reduction in social isolation through more family involvement in the community including parent's connection with their children's schools.</p>	<p>324 carers and 130 staff – 75% of participants report better, more positive connections by parents through: -</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Semi structured baseline and follow up interviews with school staff and co-ordinators by external evaluator. Use of Arnstein's Ladder of Participation and tool to measure engagement methods. • Review of EOI's by co-ordinators. • Tracking referral patterns to demonstrate increase in self referrals. • Interviews with parents on fun days by external evaluator. • Co-ordinator's social capital maps. • Focus groups. 	<p>Home School Relationship.</p> <p>Participation on Parent Councils and steering committees. 6 Councils</p> <p>Families coming together for mutual support and sharing knowledge across programmes.</p> <p>Family fun days. 10</p>	<p>More children and families will be part of the community they live in and families and children come together and learn, by strengthening the relationship between home and school and increasing connections among parents in the wider community. School staff are able to effectively engage with parents to support them and children to come together and learn.</p>

