

## Engaging Parents to Reduce Youth Violence

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# Engaging parents to reduce youth violence: evidence from a youth justice board pathfinder programme

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## Abstract

The Youth Justice Board's 2019–2022 strategic plan set youth violence as a priority. As part of this, a 'pathfinder' approach was launched to assist local authorities and their partners to devise, develop, and disseminate whole systems approaches to serious youth violence (Youth Justice Board in Pathfinder—YJB, <https://yjresourcehub.uk/working-with-partners/item/651-pathfinder-yjb.html> Youth Justice Board Annual Report and Accounts 2020/21, 2020). In partnership with a regional Violence Reduction Unit, seven local Youth Offending Teams worked together with a programme that facilitated peer support networks for parents of children known to the youth justice system. The programme presented a challenge to a view in statutory youth justice of parents as part of the problem (Burney and Gelsthorpe in Howard J Crimin Justice 47(5):470–485, 2008). The aim of the programme was to engage parents of young people involved in the youth justice system, facilitating peer to peer support through a blend of online and face-to-face meetings. Taking a mixed-method approach, the research sought to investigate the impact of the programme on participants' well-being and perceived competence with parenting. A secondary aim was to explore experiences of the self-care and peer support activities offered by the programme. The quantitative findings showed statistically significant increases in parents' self-reported well-being and perceived competence with parenting during engagement with the programme. Effect sizes reached the minimum important difference for all of the quantitative measures, with a large effect for well-being. The qualitative findings highlighted that the self-care focus was important in engaging parents and helps distinguish the programme from statutory services. The findings are combined in the paper to produce a potential model of peer support for parents of children known to the youth justice system. Future research should investigate the impact on the children of parents who took part in this programme with a specific focus on youth violence.

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## Introduction

Encompassing a wide range of acts from minor assaults such as pushing and shoving through to wounding and homicide, violent crime is somewhat nebulous. That said, violent crime has been a cause for concern for policy makers for many years, typified by extensive media coverage on rising levels of knife crime and/or serious youth violence, which successfully garner public support while compelling the state to respond (Cohen 2011; Gunter 2017). One of the most significant areas for concern amongst politicians, policy makers and the media over the past decade has been that of knife crime. There is no specific legislation in England and Wales relating to knife crime, however, and data estimating its extent tends to refer to ‘knife enabled crime’. Most knife enabled crime falls under different pieces of legislation such as the Prevention of Crime Act (1953) which prohibits having an offensive weapon in a public space and threatening with an offensive weapon in public. Similarly, section 139 of The Criminal Justice Act of 1998 prohibits having a bladed or sharply pointed article in a public place—Section 139 further subsections prohibit the possession of bladed or sharply pointed objects in School or further education settings. Section 52 of the Offensive Weapons Act of 2019, meanwhile, outlaws threatening with an offensive weapon in a private place (McNeill and Wheller 2019) Knife crime is then shorthand for a range of specific offences.

Where broader patterns of violent crime are concerned, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) has shown a decline in levels of violent crime (ONS 2022). The CSEW similarly shows a 72 per cent decrease in violent offending from the year ending December 1995 to year ending March 2020. Recent trends are harder to determine due to the impact of national lockdowns reducing the opportunity for violent offending in public spaces and improvements in recording practices by statistics agencies. That said, some patterns can be identified such as the steady rise in police recorded violent crime to year end March 2022. In addition, CSEW data showed how offences involving knives or sharp instruments rose by 10% to the year end March 2022 but remained 11% lower than year ending March 2020 (ONS 2023).

In England and Wales, over the last fifteen years and in response to some high-profile deaths involving young people, knife crime has become particularly associated with serious youth violence (Williams and Squires, 2021). In England and Wales, offences committed by children are dealt with by the Youth Justice System (YJS). Sutton et al. (2022: 855) note how the Youth Justice System was established in England and Wales following the 1998 Crime and Disorder Act. The YJS has the ‘primary aim of preventing offending and reoffending amongst children and young people aged 10–17’. The 1998 Act also created Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) to work with children entering the YJS. YOTs are multi-agency teams comprised of representatives from statutory agencies (police, health, probation, local authorities), along with staff from other relevant services in Local Authority areas’.



The actual extent of serious youth violence—including knife crime—is difficult to establish for several reasons. Police data underestimate the extent of offending due to the ‘dark figure’ which refers to offences that are not reported or recorded (Coleman and Moynihan 1996). Lower impact offences involving sharp objects (such as being in possession of a weapon) are harder to detect and less likely to come to the attention of the police. Police data are also inevitably distorted by different strategies that focus on particular neighbourhoods and communities. The data show that there were 3500 proven offensive weapon offences committed by children in the year ending March 2021. This was a 21 per cent decrease on the previous year and a 14 per cent decrease from March 2011 (Youth Justice Board 2022a, b). For some thinkers the policy attention that has been brought to bear on the problem is disproportionate and resembles a fetish. It is, in short, a moral panic.

Concerns over violent crime have spurred responses from government and criminal justice agencies. The UK Government launched a Violence Reduction Strategy, central to which is the introduction of a public health approach to tackling violence (HM Government 2018, 2019). This approach adopts a holistic, multi-agency response that intends to identify and interrupt the social causes of serious violence (Local Government Association 2018). According to this model, programmes designed to reduce serious violence should adopt a clear theory of change, observe impact through pre- and post-measures, and then demonstrate desired outcomes have been achieved (Local Government Association 2018). Taking the lead from Scotland, this involved the establishment of Violence Reduction Units (VRUs) in police forces throughout England and Wales. The expectation was that the VRUs would seek to address ‘the root causes’ of serious violence through inter-agency working and public health focused interventions (Hopkins and Floyd 2022: 359). Other strategic initiatives launched at around the same time and forming the building blocks for a public health approach to violence reduction and prevention are the £200 m endowment over ten years into the Youth Endowment Fund—which provides grants to public, third sector and for-profit bodies working on targeted early intervention with young people, and has a ten-year mandate from the Home Office—and the establishment of a Serious Violence Taskforce to provide oversight and challenge to this spending (HM Government 2019).

The more youth focused response from the YJS can be seen in the updated strategy from the YJB, which introduced a ‘pathfinder’ approach to assist local authorities and their partners to devise, develop, and disseminate whole systems approaches to serious youth violence (YJB 2020). Whole systems responses are synonymous with public health approaches to violence prevention. The public health approach to violence reduction is depicted by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Krug et al. 2002) as having four key steps:

- Uncovering knowledge of violence through the systematic collection of data about all aspects of violence including its magnitude, scope, characteristics, and consequences.
- Investigating why violence occurs including deciphering its causes and risk factors and how these can be addressed.



- Exploring ways to prevent violence through the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of interventions.
- Implementing evidence-based interventions that are seen to be promising and widely disseminating information on the cost-effectiveness of programmes.

In this context, the YJB ‘pathfinder’ approaches should be public health, whole system, place-based approaches to tackling youth violence as it manifests in specific locales. This article presents the findings of research with one such pathfinder in the West Midlands of England. The regional VRU worked collaboratively with the seven Youth Offending Teams (YOTs) in that region and the YJB to develop, commission, and deliver a YJB pathfinder programme. The programme was designed to provide a bridge between parents and the YOT, supporting parents by helping them to understand the youth justice system. This article provides evidence from an evaluation of one of the pathfinder programmes delivered in the West Midlands of England. The programme looked at how parents can support other parents through the youth justice system by helping to demystify some of the complex arrangements that exist within it. Placing parents as part of the potential solution to youth violence reconfigures the role that parents have occupied in much current policy thinking.

In the next section we discuss the context of this pathfinder and its focus on the parents of young people known to the youth justice system, before presenting empirical data on the impact and experience of parents engaged with the programme. Relationships between parents and children in the youth justice system can be complex and can sit outside of expected societal ‘norms’ for a variety of reasons (Holt 2009; Bunting et al. 2015). It is beyond the scope of this article to consider how these relationships manifest, with this article assuming that parents are supportive of their children but poorly placed to navigate the formal youth justice apparatus due to the peripheral positioning of parents in policy terms, the longstanding, dominant discourse of ‘problem parents’ and the availability of limited accessible information.

## Context

### The policy context

This section outlines the nature of the programme, situating it within a broader policy context. There is a long history of addressing what we now refer to as antisocial behaviour and/or offending by children and young people by focusing on the family unit. State intervention with youthful misdemeanours has been long justified through the condemnation of poor parents. For some thinkers this dates back to the industrial revolution and the passing of the Factory Acts, which outlawed the use of child labour, but meant that a new version of childhood was created whereby many children were left unsupervised for longer as parents were required to labour to make up for the licit economic inactivity of their dependents (Muncie 2015; Hendrick 2003). These circumstances contributed to the development of policies that intervened in children’s lives as a consequence of impoverished, ‘incapable’ parenting when in fact, labour force restrictions had led some children to seek vital legitimate



and illicit income generation opportunities on the street. Indefinite removal of children to industrial schools (paid for by impoverished parents) in the Factory Act 1833 (National Archives 2023) evidences how the relationship between children's illicit deeds and notions of incompetent, impoverished parents are long entrenched, yet an outcome of structural factors, in the case of workplace regulation (Muncie 2015; Hendrick 2003).

Although it can be traced back to the industrial era, the hardening of attitudes towards parents in the criminal justice system, including youth justice, is consistent with what Pemberton (2016)—drawing on the work of Cavadino and Dignan (2006)—refers to as a neo-liberal penal such as that of the UK from the end of the twentieth century. For Pemberton (2016: 62) neo-liberal criminal justice regimes are 'heavily authoritarian in nature' where punishment is 'characterised by exclusionary methods'—such as reliance on the prison. Crime is the product of the actions of free, autonomous and rational actors'. In other words the determinants of crime are individual and not social. This thinking has an affinity with later attempts to address offending particularly by children and young people which equated it with various risk factors associated with the individual including, but not limited to their upbringing. From the 1980s onwards, then, policy made an increasing connection between youth criminality, family breakdown, and moral deficiencies. Nowhere was this more visible than in the new right thinking of Charles Murray and his notions of the underclass (Murray 1990).

Prior to their electoral success of 1997, the Labour party started to challenge their reputation for being 'soft on crime' by developing an increasingly tough stance towards crime and young people in particular (Newburn 2002). In the run up to the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, New Labour's flagship criminal justice policy, attitudes towards parents and young people became increasingly hardened. This trend has been associated with an increased general panic about offending in childhood, resulting from a rare high-profile, violent incident, and distorted press coverage that ensued (Sereny 1996). Burney and Gelsthorpe (2008) demonstrate how in the late 1990s into the 2000s, policy attention identified parents as being part of the problem, rather than the solution to youth offending, typified by the introduction of compulsory Parenting Orders in the 1998 Act.

Parenting interventions were strengthened in the Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 as Youth Offending Teams (YOTs)—multi-agency partnerships introduced to work with children and young people deemed to be at risk of committing offences—were able to apply for Parenting Orders, and parenting training could be mandated for predicted (rather than existing) child offending or antisocial behaviour, and when children had not reached the age of criminal responsibility (HM Government 2003). The Police and Justice Act 2006 extended intervention opportunities further as landlords and local authorities became able to apply for parenting orders. Parenting orders have been widely criticised for framing the solution to social deprivation as individual behavioural change when many subjects of such policies are living in extremely constrained circumstances with few choices (Holt 2009; Evans 2012). Despite this, non-adherence to compulsory parenting order requirements is treated harshly with breach potentially resulting in parents receiving a community sentence or £1000 fine, confirming this coercive rather than constructive policy approach,



which demands compliance rather than seeking engagement (Ministry of Justice 2019; MoJ/DCSF/ YJB 2007; Mayerhofer and Behrend 2014).

Alongside parenting orders were other interventions aimed at addressing the ‘risk factors’ associated with young people that might precipitate their offending. Drawing on developmental and life course theory (Farrington 2003; Ward 2019), risk factors are often framed as being internal to the lives of children who offend so link to their family, education, relationships, and so on. As a result, interventions were targeted at addressing these risk factors (Sutton et al. 2021). The problem with such a strategy is that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds were and are more likely to be seen as at risk (Bateman 2011). This kind of thinking was also prominent in social policy best characterised in the emergence of the Troubled Families Programme (Ball et al. 2016), whereby an initial 120,000 socially deprived families identified by the Social Exclusion Taskforce in 2007 and a further 120,000 in 2011 and then a further 400,000 in the third phase from 2014 were said to be in need of being ‘turned around’ (Crossley 2015; Bonell and McKee 2016). This was based on a range of criteria including where no family member was in paid work, where families lived in overcrowded conditions, where there were maternal mental health issues. As the programme evolved so too did inclusion criteria, including in 2011 where involvement became warranted when a child was involved in crime and antisocial behaviour, again reinforcing the dominant social policy discourse of incompetent poor parents as a cause of unruly childhood behaviours.

## The research context

The potential of the pathfinder programme explored in this research is in its reframing of the role of parents in youth justice and its promotion of pro-social familial behaviours, which draws on aspects of Child First approaches to Youth Justice. Furthermore, in its model of family-based desistance, it is also influenced by ideas of policy solutions being co-produced.

The programme theory is that that peer support networks focused on developing positive familial relationships to enhance parental skills and knowledge can contribute to reducing serious youth violence. The broad policy areas of concern are issues pertaining to the role of parents in youth justice and desistance. The programme attempts to move beyond the deficit model of parenting associated with parenting orders and troubled families. In doing so, it is premised on the theory that that parents are a resource (albeit one in need of support and reinforcement) rather than a problem. This, in turn, is not without its difficulties in that the structural barriers linked to the distribution of resources are left intact. It is, nonetheless, a step-change and draws on learning from Child First approaches to Youth Justice (see Case and Haines 2009). In particular, recent adoption of a Child First approach to youth justice delivery in England and Wales is underpinned by four tenets which promote pro-social identities, focus on strengths rather than deficits (see Tenet 2: Develop pro-social identity for positive child outcomes in Case and Browning 2021), and see children as part of the solution, not part of the problem (see Tenet 3: Collaboration with children, YJB 2021, Case and Browning 2021). Although Child First youth





justice is specifically focused on children, parallels can be drawn with shifting conceptualisations of, and responses to parents that focus on what they have to offer rather than where they fall short, and how collaborative working can make better use of lived expertise and insights.

The notion of self-care is central to the programme's parent offer. While the concept can vary across disciplines, it generally relates to 'the ability to care for oneself through awareness, self-control, and self-reliance in order to achieve, maintain, or promote optimal health and well-being' (Martinez et al. 2021). Research suggests that self-care is an important way of supporting parents through the stresses and emotional toll of having young people with emotional and/or behavioural problems, including those in the youth justice system (see, for example, Evangelou et al 2013; Kryszka et al. 2020). However, self-care is not just about strengthening the resilience of the parents, but about the indirect impact this can have on the efficacy of the parents in both supporting their young people and helping them deal more effectively with the complexity of processes, as well as the different professionals, they are required to engage with.

The novel approach within the programme discussed within this paper, and the historical view in statutory youth justice of parents as part of the problem, means it is particularly important to understand the impact of the programme. This matters as, despite evidence of parents facilitating young people's sentence engagement in different ways within their capabilities, such as by waking, reminding, and transporting, their role remains somewhat passive if not condemnatory in policy terms (Brooks-Wilson 2020). The focus of the programme on engaging and supporting parents formed the basis of the research. During the pathfinder—and in line with the ethos of the programme—it was important to understand the impact on, and experience of, parents. The research sought to explore the impact on parents', measuring well-being and perceived competence with parenting, with perceptions of competence thought to be a fundamental psychological need facilitating goal attainment, well-being, and healthy functioning (Williams and Deci 1996). Quantitative measures of well-being and perceived competence were combined with qualitative explorations of engagement, experiences, and impact.

## **Programme delivery**

First Class Foundation is an established regional charity that is described as focusing on supporting BAME young people aged 13–25 in the West Midlands of England, in the context of youth violence, mental health resilience and the development of purpose and opportunities, with an underpinning desire to tackle the under- and over-representation of BAME young people in different contexts (Charity Commission for England and Wales 2021). Through a competitive process to meet the West Midlands pathfinder brief, First Class Foundation was commissioned to deliver their Kitchen Table Talks programme, describing it as 'a culturally competent, psychologically informed, peer to peer outreach, engagement, and support programme to support and work closely with the parents of young people involved with the Youth





Justice System' (First Class Foundation 2020). The purpose of the programme was to create and facilitate parental peer support networks across the regional YOT delivery areas that could be accessed—and ultimately facilitated—by parents of children known to the youth justice system.

The aims of the programme were to engage parents outside the formal youth justice system and to act as an informal support structure, through a blend of physical meetings and virtual means of contact. The focus on building and maintaining positive relationships as an approach to addressing serious youth violence was consistent with activity that had previously been funded by the VRU (Caulfield et al. 2021). Furthermore, there had been a sense that pathfinder approaches in the region should accommodate people with lived experiences of the criminal and youth justice systems, with an added stipulation—based on national policy priorities—that projects attempting to tackle serious youth violence in the region had to be shaped by a whole system approach, while being responsive to the requirements of the locality.

In terms of delivery, seven local YOTs were involved in an initial pilot of regional provision roll out. The programme delivery team developed a referral system where an 'initial interest' form would be submitted digitally by the YOT, with the programme team using this information to initiate first contact with parents. This process was relatively loose, allowing local YOTs to integrate referrals within existing practice. Then, the programme team engaged in a relationship building phase of contact, which was led by parents in terms of communication mode and content. The Kitchen Table Talks approach utilises self-care and peer support, enabling the programme to be distinguished from statutory state interventions while sending signals to parents about the programme ethos. One way that this messaging was delivered to parents was through the location and structure of informal peer group meetings, which were held at a dessert shop, symbolising a treat, 'me' time while also replicating the sort of environment that people might engage with to relax with friends. Some parents readily engaged with these meetings, others required encouragement and some did not progress to these meetings, instead maintaining contact through remote communication methods (such as email, text messaging or phone calls) or home visits. During the Covid-19 lockdown period, this provision continued, with meetings taking place online.

## Methods

### Research design

The aims of the programme were to engage parents outside the formal youth justice system, facilitating peer-to-peer support structure through a blend of physical meetings and virtual means of contact. The programme approach—utilising self-care and peer support practices—enables the programme to be distinguished from statutory state interventions.

The research sought to investigate the impact of the programme on participants' well-being and perceived competence with parenting. A secondary aim focussed on



exploring the experience of the self-care and peer support activities offered by the programme.

The research took a mixed methods approach, using quantitative measures of the primary outcomes (well-being, perceived competence with parenting), extended through qualitative exploration of parents' experiences from a variety of perspectives.

A questionnaire using validated measures of well-being and perceived competence with parenting was completed by participants at the start of their engagement with the programme, and six and 12 weeks later. Qualitative data were collected with parents, YOT staff, and the programme delivery team throughout the programme.

## Data collection measures

### Pre- and post-programme scales

#### A. Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS: Tennant et al. 2007)

The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) is designed to monitor well-being in the general population and measures elements of positive affect, satisfying interpersonal relationships and positive functioning. The 14 items relate to functioning than to feeling, such as measurement of elements of positive affect, satisfying interpersonal relationships and positive functioning. WEMWBS has been used extensively, demonstrating good psychometric properties of validity and reliability across a variety of settings (Clarke et al. 2010; Taggart et al. 2015; Tennant et al. 2007) and has been successfully used in a number of studies by the authors of this current paper (Breslin et al., 2018; Caulfield et al., 2022; Caulfield and Sojka, 2023). Scores range from 14 to 70 with higher scores indicating greater positive mental well-being.

#### B. Perceived Competence Scale (PCS: Williams and Deci 1996)

Competence is proposed to be a fundamental psychological need and perceptions of competence facilitate goal attainment, well-being, and healthy functioning. Additionally, perceived competence is predictive of maintained behaviour change and effective performance in activities. Thus, any significant changes in participant scores on the Perceived Competence Scale (PCS) would indicate changes in the likelihood of behavioural changes and levels of effective performance. The PCS is a short, four-item questionnaire devised to be specific to the behaviour or activity being studied. Individuals rate each item on a seven-point Likert scale where 1 = not at all true, 4 = somewhat true and 7 = very true. In this research the PCS assesses participants' feelings of competence in parenting. This scale has demonstrated good psychometric properties of validity and reliability across a variety of settings (Williams and Gill 1995; Williams et al. 2004) and has successfully been used in



previous studies by the authors of this current paper (McGuire-Snieckus and Caulfield, 2018).

## Interview data

The original design for the research was to conduct focus groups with parents at the end of informal peer group meetings. This would be efficient for the research team and parents', allowing data collection with parents who were at the meeting without having to arrange another meeting time. However, face-to-face meetings were limited within the research period due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the light of this, and in order to ensure the parent voice was captured, parents were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were also conducted with programme delivery staff, and YOT staff at two time points.

Interview and focus group topic guides covered parents' experiences of engaging with the programme sessions, impact, how relationships between parents, YOTs, and the programme provider had changed over time, and the potential legacy of the programme. Interviews with YOT and programme delivery staff were conducted twice to explore any change over time in programme delivery and impact. Parents were interviewed or involved in focus groups once. Interviews were approximately 40–60 min with the evaluation team flexible to digital, telephone, or face-to-face delivery. Interviews and focus groups were (with participants' consent) audio-recorded and transcribed.

## Participants

Between October 2020 and February 2022, 198 parents were referred to the programme (181 female; 17 male); Forty-seven per cent White British, 25% Black Caribbean or Black African, 11% Pakistani, 6% Mixed, 5% White European, 2% Indian, 1% Bangladeshi, 1% Arab, 1% Chinese, 1% other. Initial quantitative scale data were received for 78 participants (WEMWBS) and 72 participants (PCS).

Parents represented 151 young people in contact with the YOTs (27 female, 122 male, 2 not recorded). These young people ranged from 10 to 19 years old (mean 15.17 years) with a similar average age in each YOT.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with: staff from all seven YOTs participating in the programme, three programme delivery staff, and four parents. Data were collected with a further seven parents through focus groups.

## Ethics and limitations to the data

Young people in the youth justice system disproportionately experience entrenched social disadvantage in areas like mental and physical health, education, income, housing, and the family, with criminal victimisation, exploitation, neglect, and abuse also commonplace (HM Government 1998; YJB 2005; Gray 2006). These problems



can also be experienced by multiple family members (Tew 2019), raising important ethical considerations for research contact. Furthermore, although youth offending teams can have supportive and constructive relationships with parents, longstanding, antagonistic positioning of youth justice and parents can produce research access barriers, positioning parents as 'hard to reach' in research (Brooks-Wilson and Snell 2012).

The research was granted ethical approval by the Faculty of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Wolverhampton, before proceeding with the research, with parent contact secured using the programme provider as organisational gatekeepers. It was hoped that this would build on the positive and supportive relationships that had been forged with parents on a voluntary (rather than statutory) basis. Then, research planning meetings with the organisational gatekeeper helped identify groups of parents that research contact would be most suitable. For example, parents who were new to the provision who had not established relationship with the provider were excluded from participation. So too were those parents who had very recently experienced the criminal conviction of their child, on the advice of the programme provider who felt that these parents would have too much to navigate in these very early days. Stratified sampling attempts for the qualitative elements were made in the context of provision engagement duration, but the high and complex needs of parents had to be prioritised in this research, reducing opportunities for participant contact. The research team then secured direct contact with parents face to face and digitally during the Covid-19 lockdown and social distancing periods, where access barriers were greater. During this period, the research team secured some direct contacts using remote methods (Zoom and telephone calls) and some focus groups were conducted and recorded by the provider staff using questions forwarded by the research team. The research team would like to have had greater contact with parents but struggled with access through the programme provider as gatekeeper. Informed consent was secured at all research contacts, with Plain English used to support clear communication (Plain English Campaign 2009). In some cases, parental involvement will likely have been precluded by poor access to information and communications technology (Digital Poverty Alliance 2023).

## Data analysis

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyse the quantitative scale data. Initial data were received for 78 participants (WEMWBS) and 72 participants (PCS) but data were only included in the analysis where Time 1 and Time 2 data were available (WEMWBS  $n=50$ ; PCS  $n=47$ ) representing participants who completed at least six weeks of engagement. Paired samples *T*-tests were used to identify whether there were any statistically significant differences between participant's scores on the scales at the start of their engagement with the programme, six and 12 weeks later. Absolute standardised effect sizes (ESs) were calculated using Cohen's *D*. An ES of 0.2 was considered the minimum important difference for all outcome measures, 0.5 to <0.8 moderate, and  $\geq 0.8$  large (Cohen 1988).



The qualitative data were analysed through a process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2022), examining ‘the perspectives of different research participants, highlighting similarities and differences, and generating unanticipated insights’ (Nowell et al. 2017: 3). Drawing on a model proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006: 87), our analysis went through six stages:

- Phase 1: becoming familiar with the data
- Phase 2: generating initial codes
- Phase 3: searching for themes
- Phase 4: reviewing themes
- Phase 5: refining and defining themes
- Phase 6: producing an interpretation of the data

Analysis began with two members of the research team reading through all interview and focus group transcripts. Next, the researchers undertook a coding process involving working line-by-line through the entire body of data, initially led by themes identified through the literature.

The codes were collated into a table, following which the researchers met to generate themes that captured the experiences and impact of the programme. The themes were then refined to ensure that they were not too broad, breaking them down to be more precise in their meaning. Where themes were too narrow in focus, they were amalgamated to be more reflective of the overall group data (DeSantis and Ugarriza 2000).

## Findings

The findings are presented below under two key headings: change over time and qualitative data.

### Change over time: pre- and post-programme engagement data

*Well-being.* A paired samples *t*-test showed that there was a significant difference between well-being scores at initial engagement and six weeks later,  $t(49) = -6.11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . The effect size, as measured by Cohen’s *D*, was  $d = 0.85$ , indicating a large effect. Data were collected after further six weeks (12 weeks since initial data collection) A paired samples *t*-test showed that there was a significant difference between well-being scores at initial engagement and 12 weeks later,  $t(32) = -10.71$ ,  $ES = p < 0.05$ . The effect size, as measured by Cohen’s *D*, was  $d = 1.38$ , indicating a very large effect.

*Perceived competence with parenting.* A paired samples *t*-test showed that there was a significant difference between PCS scores at initial engagement and six weeks later,  $t(46) = 4.31$   $p < 0.05$ . The effect size, as measured by Cohen’s *D*, was  $d = 0.47$ , indicating a medium effect. Data were collected after a further six weeks (12 weeks since initial data collection). A paired samples *t*-test showed that there



**Table 1** Pre- and post-programme results, 6 weeks

Measure	Sample <i>N</i> (No of responses available pre and post)	Pre-project mean	6 weeks post-project engagement mean	<i>T</i> -test results	Effect size
Well-being—WEM-WBS	<i>N</i> =50	36.16	45.80	$t \geq 6.11$ $p \leq 0.05$	0.85
Perceived competence with parenting	<i>N</i> =47	4.26	4.86	$t \geq 4.31$ $p \leq 0.05$	0.47

**Table 2** Pre- and post-programme results, 12 weeks

Measure	Sample <i>N</i> (No of responses available pre and post)	Pre-project mean	12 weeks post-project engagement mean	<i>T</i> -test results	Effect size
Well-being—WEM-WBS	<i>N</i> =33	36.16	55.77	$t \geq 10.71$ $p \leq 0.05$	1.38
Perceived competence with parenting	<i>N</i> =29	4.26	5.29	$t \geq 5.29$ $p \leq 0.05$	0.31

was a significant difference between well-being scores at initial engagement and 12 weeks later,  $t(41) = -5.29$   $p < 0.05$ . The effect size, as measured by Cohen's *D*, was  $d = 0.31$ , indicating a small effect (Tables 1, 2).

### Qualitative data

Thematic analysis of the interview data resulted in four themes: Facilitating Engagement: Self-Care; Peer Support and Parent Voice; and Future Potential for Strategic Engagement. Each theme is discussed in turn with illustrative quotes provided throughout the discussion.

In line with the ethos of the programme, it was important to understand the experience of parents. Qualitative data were gathered during participant's engagement with the programme in parallel with the quantitative findings.



## Facilitating engagement: self-care

The notion of self-care was central to the programme, aiming to support parents through stresses and the emotional toll of having a child in contact with the youth justice system. Self-care also appears to be an effective way of initiating parental engagement. Indeed, it became apparent that self-care was a key priority for the programme, providing treats for parents as a gentle way of encouraging programme engagement and distinguishing their provision from that of the statutory services. The programme staff described using messages of ‘care’ as a central part of their service, something which they continued throughout the Covid-19 lockdown and digital delivery period:

They will also get the popcorn and the mug. That’s the first thing they receive. And then monthly they get a little compliments slip, that says just for you, and they get pack of popcorn every month.... and then special occasions like mother day, father’s day, days that are significant for a parent, because I know some of them won’t feel like its mother’s day for them....they might be feeling that they are not appreciated

Being mindful of self-care, the programme described an ‘aspirational’ element of meeting in cake shops as important. Indeed, Evangelou et al. argue that being in informal, everyday spaces can be an advantage because ‘they already have that experience under their belt’ and so they are more likely to ‘feel that they can come in’ (Staff member 2008, in Evangelou et al. 2013: 132). The programme team said:

Wherever we go, it’s a beautiful location, and it’s easy to access, its aspirational, it’s got good food, good vibe, its comfortable.... And also, we really, really, want to make sure that parents feel safe. So even if we are in a public space, like a dessert shop, the area that we select is a closed off section.

Signalling successful distinction of this programme from statutory state interventions, this view was supported by Parent A, who said:

I think that was one of the things why I still keep going because it’s a treat for me. I spend on everyone else and my son...so it’s nice that once a month somebody is... treating me and taking care of me. I know it’s something small, like a dessert, but that means a lot.

Parent B stated:

It’s somebody taking care of me...buying me a drink and a dessert. It’s someone rewarding me... making me feel special.

Similarly, the YOTs confirm the importance of the emphasis on self-care. YOT staff 4 observed:





Even the environment – meeting in a dessert shop – totally relaxed, chilled... not being around authority... it is nice for them to have that separate space... that's why it's worked so well

Such findings emphasise the importance of engagement rather than compliance as a way of engaging and collaborating with parents (Mayerhofer and Behrend 2014). Extensive social deprivation in the lives of children in the justice system (YJB 2005; Gray 2006), and its permeation to other family members (Tew 2019), makes self-care an appropriate way of building relationships with parents, sending a symbolic message of support while distinguishing the programme from statutory services.

## Peer support

Peer support has emerged as an important initiative to offer support to parents and carers who have a young person with additional needs, emotional problems, or indeed, are involved in the youth justice system. As Carpenter et al. (2020: 5) write, 'parent-to-parent' support services 'based on a shared experience foundation can play an important role in providing emotional and informational support'. This is because, as Walker et al. (2015) found, parent-to-parent support, compared to other parent support strategies, is 'associated with improved self-efficacy in navigating' the youth justice system as, 'parents are viewed by parents as having more credibility than other social service staff' (p451).

Resonating with Tenet 2 of the Child First approach, which emphasises pro-social identities as an opportunity to achieve positive outcomes (YJB 2021; Case and Browning 2021), YOTs talked positively about the ethos of the programme, in terms of peer support. This was particularly in relation to the creation of a 'safe space' for parents where they could share their experiences and feelings without judgement. YOT 4 its staff described how:

Sometimes parents can feel that they haven't got an advocate...Somebody who just listens to them without any kind of judgement or repercussions...that for me is the biggest benefit....

For YOT 6, parents who engaged with the programme benefitted from the safe and supportive space, evident from their continued attendance:

Those parents feeling empowered and supported and feeling like they have got a safe space to...er...talk...that, you know, isn't their youth justice officer.... they are getting something out of it because they are continuing to have those phone calls or those face-to-face meetings or going to that dessert shop to have that discussion and feel good for it, which hopefully impact on the child because the parents feel supported.

A key element of the programme involved new opportunities for parents to help each other decipher aspects of the youth justice system that were difficult to understand



for the first time, elevating the peripheral positioning of parents. This resonates with the YJB participation strategy (YJB 2016) and Tenet 3 of the Child First approach (YJB 2021; Case and Browning 2021), where parents of children in the justice system had the opportunity to become part of the solution. Parent B described how Parent Ambassadors were a valuable source of peer-based support, reflective of the progress of that parent's journey: that they are able to support parents new to this community:

They're just so willing to share their truth. And that's the fundamental difference about the parent ambassadors and what happens once a parent has come through the service. So, for them, for me they have been instrumental. The parent ambassadors are why I'm even here. You know, there the ones that, I tell them this all the time, if it wasn't for them, I would not be here.

YOT 4 staff also noted that the potential benefits of peer support could be enormous:

For some parents the value could be absolutely enormous – it could be they are on the brink of suicide and this is the only safe space they had to talk about things and that took them off the edge. I think there is a lot there we are not giving weight to because it doesn't fit onto the boxes that are used to when it comes to project...(outcomes).

Further, programme staff had seen parents move from feeling supported to feeling empowered in their communications with youth justice services. As one of the programme team observed, the programme had led to a more positive engagement with their service:

You had parents... on their own volition and go and make an appointment with youth offending officers and have a sit down with them and say, "you know what I hated what was happening at the time, but I need to talk to you now". That was ground-breaking.

In stark contrast with previous deficit-focused strategies within youth justice and beyond (Hendrick 2003; Holt 2009; Evans 2012; Crossley 2015), and in line with current Child First approaches discussed elsewhere in this paper, this programme demonstrates how engaging with service using communities—experts by experience—can enhance service delivery. This shift from exclusionary, stigmatising treatment (for example, see Holt 2009; Evans 2012; Crossley 2015; Bonell and McKee 2016) resonates with the YJB participation strategy where is acknowledged how inclusion of a broader set of under-represented voices can support the robust delivery of youth justice in England and Wales (YJB 2016).



## Future potential for strategic engagement

Despite variable engagement of parents across the YOTs, the initiative was viewed as a ‘positive step in the right direction’, with YOT 6 stating that they would like to see a more routine role for the parent voice in the future, either through the development of the programme—or an independent parent forum in the future:

A parent forum in an ideal world looks great...(and) you’d want the parents to take full ownership because that would have more impact...you want those people (parents) to set things up because they are in the best position to share that knowledge. It places responsibility on them as well, doesn’t it? They won’t want to let down other parents or each other.

Such sentiments are reflective of the ideological change in youth justice delivery from a deficit-focused, punitive approach to a constructive, asset focused elevation of lived expertise (YJB 2016, 2021, 2022a, b; Case and Browning 2021) seen in Child First approaches. Indeed, as the coproduction literature reveals, valuing expertise by experience is not only empowering for the service using community, but enhances the design and delivery of services. YOT 4 echoed these sentiments—that having a working group with the parents to provide feedback on YOTs services would be a real benefit:

For me would be the best way forward... if they are able to feedback into the design of our service for what suits them as parents ... and they feel they’ve got some of the power.

For YOT 6 this development could come from making more of the programme’s Parent Ambassador role:

I love the ambassador work – I think that that’s what it should be...shaped by them. I like the fact they are choosing the topics, having guest speakers come in and choosing what they want to focus on. Their voice shaping how it runs and how it works...you want parents to feel that empowerment... “this is our space and our service”.

The data indicate that while parents have different barriers and motivations that impact on their capacity to engage with the programme, this has real potential to develop over time. Therefore, by harnessing these opportunities for further co-production (such as through the Parent Ambassador role) further value could be added to this provision.

Covid-19 had understandably impacted the programme delivery, with digital exclusion and literacy likely to have meant some parents were not able to access the programme during the lockdown period. However, contact was adapted and maintained through online provision and postal gifts, ensuring gestures of care could be maintained. Overall, there were high levels of perceived value, from both YOT professionals and parents, in the support and signposting being provided for a group who remain on the margins of youth justice in policy terms, but are often instrumental in terms of well-being, order completion and desistance.



## Discussion

The aims of the programme were to engage parents outside the formal youth justice system and to act as an informal support structure, through a blend of physical meetings and virtual means of contact. The programme approach—utilising self-care and peer support practices—enables the programme to be distinguished from statutory state interventions. The research sought to understand the impact on parents taking part in this novel peer support programme, quantitatively investigating well-being and perceived competence with parenting alongside qualitatively exploring parents' experience of the self-care and peer support activities offered by the programme. The quantitative findings showed a statistically significant increase in participants' well-being and perceived competence with parenting during engagement with the programme. Effect sizes reached the minimum important difference for all of the quantitative measures, with a large effect for the well-being measure. The qualitative findings highlighted that the self-care focus was important in engaging parents and helps distinguish the programme from statutory services. There is clear potential for YOTs to build on the benefits of peer-to-peer support and bring more of the parent voice into YOT work.

Using the well-being measure employed in this research (WEMWBS), at the start of the programme parents initially scored in line with the bottom 15% of the UK general population (Tennant et al. 2007). This indicates low levels of well-being. The findings demonstrate that during participation in the programme parents' well-being scores moved up into the mid-range (UK mid-range=43–60, Tennant et al. 2007), surpassing the mean UK score of 51 by 12 weeks (Tennant et al. 2007). Although not a clinical diagnostic tool, when benchmarked against measures of depression, a score of 41–44 is indicative of possible mild depression and a score of less than 41 is indicative of probable clinical depression (Bianco 2012).

The Perceived Competence Scale (PCS) measures feelings or perceptions of competence with questions written specific to the behaviour or domain being studied. This research did not, therefore, seek to make comparisons to the general population—because comparator data do not exist—and sought to focus only on changes over time in participants' feelings of competence in parenting. According to Self-Determination Theory, competence is one of three basic psychological needs needed for healthy functioning and well-being (Ryan and Deci 2000). The increases in feelings of competence with parenting during engagement with the programme therefore link to increased well-being and point to likely improved functioning. Perceived parenting competence relates to the 'ability to perform and quality of parenting behaviors' (Vance et al. 2017: 23), resulting in effective parenting, positive child–parent interactions, psychological adjustment, and positive child developmental outcomes (Vance et al. 2017). The links between parenting and youth crime are well established include the role of child–parent interactions in risk of delinquency (Farrington 2002; Haapasalo and Pokelo 1999; Patterson et al. 1992).

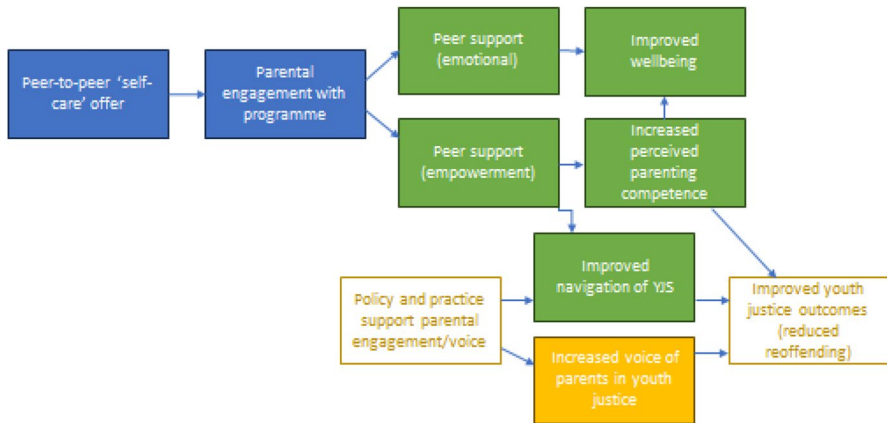
The qualitative data highlight the experiences of the parents and potential mechanisms through which increased well-being and improvements in perceived competence with parenting are achieved. The self-care focus of the programme is an



important and timely way of supporting parents to deal with the stresses and strains of having a child in the youth justice system. The use of treats and meeting in cake shops and cafes encapsulates that idea. The findings here align with ‘the importance of self-care and help-seeking among parents’ (Krysinska 2020: 1), with the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families (2023) advocating the need for self-care for parent carers of children experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties to avoid being overwhelmed by feelings of stress and to help parents to ‘find strength during difficult times’. The self-care elements of the programme also signal a clear distinction of this programme from statutory state interventions, which is important in engagement rather than compliance as a way of working effectively with marginalised parents (Mayerhofer and Behrend 2014). The programme reflects a desire to be a ‘more participative and decentralized’ form of service provision ‘that make(s) room for self-help and local initiative’ (Walzer 1988, in Pestoff 2019), and this was clear in the qualitative findings where peer support was central, offering safe spaces for parents to share experiences and opportunities for parents to help each other decipher aspects of the youth justice system. As noted earlier in this paper, indirect impact this can have on the efficacy of the parents in both supporting their young people and helping them deal more effectively with the complexity of processes, as well as the different professionals, they are required to engage with.

The qualitative findings also point to potential for a greater role for parents in influencing youth justice services, with a broader set of under-represented voices to support the robust delivery of youth justice in England and Wales (YJB 2016). This resonates with the YJB participation strategy (YJB 2016) and Tenet 3 of the Child First approach (YJB 2021; Case and Browning 2021), where parents of children in the justice system can have the opportunity to become part of the solution. In relation to complex social problems, such as youth offending, the United Nations advocate the need for, ‘meaningful participation in decision-making, planning and follow-up processes for all, as well as enhanced civil engagement, co-provision and co-production’ (United Nations 2017: 14). The programme, with its focus on the parent experience, reflects this move towards co-production. While there are different conceptualisations of coproduction in policy and research circles, which reflect varying levels of citizen control over policy design and/or service delivery processes (see Brandesen et al., 2018), advocates of coproduction recognise service user communities as ‘expertise by experience’ which can enhance the quality of welfare services, believing that this ‘greater citizen participation’ has ‘the potential to provide significant economic, political and social benefits’ (Pestoff, 2018: iv). However, it requires more than ‘a one-way transfer from a knowing subject to a supposedly ignorant one’ (Pohl et al. 2010: 271), with parents having the ‘space and opportunity’ to share their experiences and have them valued (Strokosch 2013: 376). This stands in contrast to the dominant narratives of failure, blame and shame that have come to dominate the youth justice system. Therefore, initiatives need to ‘transcend the cultural boundaries’ (Kellet 2009, p238) and nurture an environment which enables parents to have the confidence, language and opportunity to contribute to conversations and activities as equal partners. The qualitative findings suggest an appetite to further engage the parent voice in youth justice.





**Fig. 1** A potential model of peer support for parents of children known to the youth justice system

The data generated through this research, viewed in the context of existing literature, allow for the development of a potential model of peer support for parents of children known to the youth justice system (Fig. 1). This model maps how peer support and the impact of this could lead to improved youth justice outcomes, providing the appropriate policy and practice conditions are in place.

In summary, the programme demonstrates effectiveness in engaging parents and the findings show an impact on parents' well-being and feelings of competence with parenting. The programme shows success in engaging parents from diverse community backgrounds, offering the potential to break down barriers between parents and criminal justice agencies. The recent desire from YOTs to find new ways to engage parents demonstrates a marked and progressive change of approach in youth justice, from exclusionary and stigmatising to alignment with constructive, pro-social and asset-focused approaches in contemporary policy (Case and Browning 2020; YJB 2022a; b).

This research is not without limitations as—in line with pathfinder, public health, and Child First approaches (Local Government Association 2018; YJB 2020; Case and Browning 2021)—parent voices should be more present. Access barriers were enhanced through broader societal changes in face-to-face contact during the Covid-19 pandemic, but also through the need to access parents using an organisational gatekeeper, which ultimately presented a barrier to access. The status of parents in this programme as not well served by statutory services (what we might previously have termed 'hard to reach') meant that some research access barriers had been anticipated. However, more work is needed by the provider to overcome barriers in this area. This relates to wider challenges faced in current violence reduction strategies, such as VRUs where building effective links with communities remains a concern (Hopkins and Floyd 2022).

Although feedback on programme signalling and pitching was positive, effectiveness could have been further enhanced through better communication with the referring YOT teams, who ultimately hoped to use the programme as a vehicle to build



positive parental relationships, and deliver effective practice with young people. In particular, YOT teams described making adjustments to practice and liaising with the programme providers in different ways in order to connect parents, but that little information was shared back once engagement had commenced. This raised a tension, which the research team were able to discuss with the programme team and YOTs, around feedback loops but also confidentiality and maintaining a sense of programme independence from statutory services. At the time of writing the programme team and YOT were exploring this. For a range of practical reasons, data on well-being and competence with parenting were collected by the programme staff and very recent data on well-being and competence with parenting were unavailable, suggesting there is work to be done by the programme team on consistency of data collection processes. There are broader limitations concerning the use of self-assessment measures. While the self-assessment measures used have demonstrated good validity and reliability across a range of settings (Clarke et al. 2010; Taggart et al. 2015; Tennant et al. 2007; Williams and Gill 1995; Williams et al. 2004), self-report assessments are potentially limited due to social desirability (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994).

Parental knowledge, resourcing, and active involvement can be crucial for children's engagement and completion of youth justice sentences (Brooks-Wilson 2020), which links back to the original intent of the pathfinder programme to address serious youth violence. To assess whether engaging and supporting parents through this programme has an impact on youth offending, future research could consider objective changes in behaviour, as well as longitudinal research to track sustained changes and outcomes, particularly with respect to youth justice outcomes. While it was beyond the scope of this research to consider how parent/child relationships manifest—with this article assuming that parents are supportive of their children but poorly placed to navigate the formal youth justice apparatus—future research might also explore these relationships within the context of the programme. It is also important to view the programme and its potential effectiveness in the context of youth justice policy and practice (Brooks-Wilson, Booth, Monaghan, & Caulfield, in preparation).

## Conclusions

This research investigated how parents were impacted by one YJB pathfinder programme, that was delivered between 2020 and 2022. It was important to explore this novel programme, which aligns with contemporary Child First approaches to youth justice. The focus of the programme on engaging and supporting parents and facilitating peer to peer support through a blend of online and face-to-face meeting formed the basis of this stage of the research, which highlighted—qualitatively and quantitatively—the positive impact on parents and future potential of the programme.

The aims of the YJS pathfinder approach were to assist Local Authorities and their partners to devise, develop, and disseminate whole systems approaches to serious youth violence (Youth Justice Board, 2020). Within the context of the UK





Government's Violence Reduction Strategy, incorporating a public health approach to tackling violence (HM Government 2018, 2019), programmes designed to reduce serious violence should adopt a clear theory of change, observe impact through pre- and post-measures, and then demonstrate desired outcomes have been achieved (Local Government Association 2018). Future research will therefore need to investigate the impact on the children of parents who took part in this programme with specific focus on youth violence. Once sufficient time has elapsed for any impact to be visible in offence data (binary offending/reoffending, the frequency and type of offending/reoffending, and time to reoffence), data from the participating YOTs would allow exploration of this. Implementing a comparison group design would allow for testing of whether parental engagement with the programme has any impact on children (Caulfield et al. 2020). There is a need to consider the positioning of this pathfinder programme, and its novel approach in supporting and empowering parents, within the broader youth justice policy and landscape (see Brooks-Wilson et al., in preparation).

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