

Hilary Armstrong MP - Speech

Families are the bedrock of our society. They can provide the greatest support in difficult times. They can build resilience and strength to overcome challenges. They can provide love, encouragement and inspiration that helps people succeed.

And the majority of families in this country are doing well. Incomes are rising, education standards are higher, there are greater opportunities and improved wellbeing. This government has supported families with more flexible working, extended maternity and paternity leave, free nursery places, greater access to childcare, child tax credits and significant rises in child benefit.

The Every Child Matters Agenda has provided a blueprint for radical reform of children's services that is now the envy of the world. But a minority of families - around 2% of the population - have simply not been able to take advantage of these opportunities.

Poverty and worklessness, lack of qualifications, poor health, insufficient housing and poor parenting can cast a shadow that spans whole lifetimes and indeed passes through generations. These problems can be multiple, entrenched, and mutually reinforcing.

And some family experiences can make things worse. They can limit aspiration, reinforce cycles of poverty, and provide poor models of behaviour that can have an impact on a child's development and wellbeing, with significant costs for public services and the wider community.

This cost to individuals, families and communities is what many of you as practitioners have to deal with every day. I want to talk about 4 principles I think are key for working with excluded families in and around the Criminal Justice System:

- 1 - Early intervention
- 2 - the importance of using proven interventions
- 3 - tackling mental health
- 4 - the importance of having a family focus

1. Early Intervention

It is crucial to tackle social exclusion through the principle of early identification and intervention.

I have always felt frustrated when services have failed to use their understanding to intervene effectively and prevent foreseeable problems down the line - resulting in a tragedy of wasted potential and wasted lives, and a reinforced cycle of deprivation. We must ensure people have access to help and support before problems escalate.

Those who end up in the Criminal Justice system often have a range of problems that could be dealt with earlier. They are 13 times as likely to have been in care as a child, and 13 times as likely to be unemployed.

They are 10 times as likely to have been a regular truant from school and 6 times as likely to have been a young father.

60% to 70% of prisoners were using drugs before imprisonment. And 52% of men and 71 % of women in prison have no qualifications.

So the social exclusion agenda is critical to reaching out to these most excluded families, to dealing with them at the earliest stage and in a personalised, comprehensive way before their problems escalate.

The government's Social Exclusion Taskforce tries to focus on these complex and inter-related problems, and to drive the agenda throughout government departments.

One example of intervening early and using the family as a support mechanism is the Family-Nurse Partnership that we bought in when I was Minister for Social Exclusion.

This worked with the most vulnerable young mums - often in their teens - during pregnancy and right up until the child was two years old. A nurse would visit fortnightly and work with the mum to look at everything from nutrition and play to finance and employment, and, crucially, family support and relationship issues.

And the government's Family Intervention Centres - are also trying to work with chronically anti social families to head off further difficulties before problems escalate and the criminal justice system is the outcome.

Programmes like this are essential if we are to break the cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Of course, by the time a parent is in the criminal justice system things have already gone terribly wrong. But this does not mean the principle of early intervention does not apply. We are all aware of the statistic that children whose father has a criminal record are twice as likely as others to end up in prison themselves.

We must break that cycle and that means working with similar programmes that deal with families individually, and on an intensive basis to deal with all their problems.

2. Proven Interventions

And so my second principle is about what we do once problems are identified. A great deal is known about what works for socially excluded people. But, currently, there is very little systematic evaluation, collection or dissemination of what works in the UK, especially in children's and social services which follow one standard.

This means that there can be variable and ineffective practice, and we are reliant on frequently overstretched front-line practitioners taking the initiative to identify and adopt best practice.

After all, a bad programme can be worse than no programme at all.

There are a number of institutes and organisations that evaluate and disseminate best practice through a number of mechanisms. The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) is perhaps the best known of such mechanisms.

Yet, there is no commonly agreed guideline as to what constitutes a good evaluation - and therefore a well evidenced programme in the field of child care, families and particularly those of offenders. This makes it difficult for commissioners of services in local government, PCTs and elsewhere to determine the effectiveness of programmes.

The government is in a process of establishing a code of practice and potentially a centre of excellence to develop a common approach to conducting and interpreting the evaluation of programmes. I think it is crucial that the work you do for families of offenders is included in this.

3. Mental Health

So I come to my third key area of importance in dealing with offenders and their families.

Over 70% of prisoners themselves suffer from at least two mental disorders, and nearly a third of prisoners' children experience significant mental health problems.

The government is taking steps to tackle mental health in the community, but there is much more that should be done.

Through our Social Exclusion Action Plan, the Government is providing funding of up to £7 million to launch up to six local programmes of multi-systemic therapy targeting young people at risk of being placed in care.

Multi-systemic therapy (MST) is a family and community-based treatment for young people with complex clinical, social and educational problems, including violence, anti-social behaviour, drug abuse and school expulsion. The primary goals of MST programmes are to decrease rates of anti-social behaviour and other clinical problems and improve family functioning.

It is crucial that we improve mental health treatment not only as a form of early intervention and prevention of crime, but also to prevent reoffending and help rehabilitation.

4. Family

And finally, my fourth key area - the family itself. Families are vital to the success of any of the work charities, agencies or governments do with the most excluded families.

Substantial change is needed in the way we work with these most at-risk families who need a targeted, specialised, whole-families approaches. It is also about making sure the different parts of the system around families work together.

Our transformation in children's services is having an impact on the opportunities of our most disadvantaged children. We want to build on this success by tackling the problems that the adults in the family face and which have such damaging consequences for the children.

The vast majority of families are a source of strength and protection. However, they can also face challenges. Parental and wider family problems such as poverty, parental worklessness, lack of qualifications, parental mental health, substance abuse, poor housing, and contact with the criminal justice system can cast a shadow that spans whole life'times and indeed passes down the generations. These family experiences can limit aspiration, reinforce cycles of poverty, and provide poor models of behaviour that can impact on a child's development and well-being, with significant costs for public services and the wider community. They damage the ability of children to build up resilience to problems or to benefit from the opportunities they are given.

At the moment adults' services don't sufficiently take account of the implications for the family when, say, an adult is taken into prison or has mental health problems.

The government should extend the benefits of the Every Child Matters approach, which has a common vision, clear accountability, joined-up working, information sharing and core processes and assessments. When I published my "Reaching Out: Think Family" document from the Cabinet Office in May, I said I wanted this approach broadened to the whole family so that adults' and children's services work together to tackle the root causes of children's disadvantage that often lay in the difficulties of their parents.

This is about early intervention - breaking the cycle that is passed down the generations, by tackling the drivers in the wider family environment that contribute to poor outcomes for the children and for child poverty. It is also about never giving up on families and looking for every opportunity to support them.

It's about joined-up working - getting agencies to talk together, sharing information and concerns about a family, making sure that where wider problems show up services work together effectively in the best interests of the family. Particularly agencies that may not have a history of working together like prisons and children's services to ensure the family gets the support it needs when a parent goes into prison.

It's about tailoring support, and making sure that the families are treated according to their individual needs, rather than expecting one-size-fits all universal services to find these families. It's about getting all agencies working with individuals to instead 'think family'.

But government can't do it all, and throughout my career I have seen the critical importance of good parenting. And fathers are as crucial a part of this as mothers.

It is an obvious, but profoundly important statement that fathers have a key role to play in caring, loving, guiding and protecting their children.

A quite startling statistic involving imprisoned fathers helps illustrate this. Research shows that if imprisoned fathers stay in touch with their families, reoffending drops by up to six times and their children are also less likely to commit crimes. The quality of involvement is also crucial.

We must help those fathers most at risk. It is still a regrettable fact that the higher level of a father's education, the greater is his likelihood of his involvement with children. We are committed to encouraging greater involvement for fathers in the most difficult of circumstances. There are some outstanding examples of innovative and forward thinking programmes already.

The Storybooks Dads programme, where prisoner fathers prepare CDs of bedtime stories for their children, has had astonishingly positive results for both fathers and children. At the very problematic end, recent changes

mean the courts now have more options to facilitate father-child contact at the start of proceedings and more options to enforce this where things go wrong.

So we all have a responsibility to try to work with families to ensure every child gets the best start in life.

I want to see a more coherent, effective, personal, problemsolving approach to excluded families to enable them to transform their life-chances and break the cycle for their children.

Government can't help families alone. We must work together with the most troubled parents to support, inspire and encourage their own children and to understand how this might help us break the cycle of the most persistent forms of social exclusion.