

Providing training and support for lone parents: evaluation of the SPAN Study Centre

Training remains a limited feature of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), which is geared primarily to those who require minimal or no preparation to find their way into work. The SPAN Study Centre (SSC) was set up as a pilot project to address the training and support needs of unemployed lone parents. Researchers from Bristol University evaluated the effectiveness of the SSC within the broad context of other local and UK services designed to meet the needs of unemployed and disadvantaged single parents.

- f** Nearly all lone parents were on benefit when registered with the Centre but 96 per cent had worked at some time in the past, on average for nine years.
- f** Parents were ambitious, wishing to "do something worthwhile" and "make a difference" as well as to make a decent living for themselves and their children.
- f** The majority aspired to professional or managerial level occupations, in particular nursing, social work, office work and information technology.
- f** A large majority mentioned health and well-being as the main goal for themselves and their children. They wanted "to do more than survive".
- f** Half wanted a good education for themselves and their children and more than two-fifths wanted a better house, better furniture and/or a car. Nearly a quarter hoped for a good relationship with a partner.
- f** In common with other studies, the most frequently mentioned barrier to education and training was childcare costs. This was as great a concern to those with children of primary school age as those with pre-school children.
- f** Over half the interviewees described current physical or mental health problems which interfered with their own or their children's activities. A fifth cited these problems as a major barrier to getting a paid job.
- f** Prejudice and negative stereotypes had demoralised them, increasing their self-doubts and diminishing their self-confidence.
- f** The high quality of the Centre courses and the careers advice was valued. So too was the Centre's crèche. Nearly half attributed increased self-confidence to their attendance at the Centre.

Background

The SPAN Study Centre (SSC) was established in early 1998 with two years of pilot funding from the European Social Fund Programme. 'Matched' funding was provided by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Nuffield Foundation, Bristol City Council, the Single Regeneration Budget, with 'in-kind' tutorial support from Bristol Community Education and the Workers Education Association (WEA). The Centre was developed by SPAN UK - the Single Parent Action Network.

The SSC aims to increase choice for lone parents on benefits by providing support and opportunities to explore their interests, talents and skills. The SSC encourages lone parents to choose what is right for them, whether to continue their training or education, gain work-related experience, find employment, or make a positive decision to delay study or work until their children are older.

The SSC is designed to meet the needs of lone parents from a range of backgrounds and offers participants one-to-one careers counselling and a selection of training courses and workshops, which can be tailored to meet individual needs. Free services, an on-site crèche, and family-friendly scheduling are central features, along with opportunities for involvement in SSC and SPAN-UK activities as a volunteer, ready access to peer support, and high staff commitment and availability.

Characteristics of SSC participants

The SSC attracted 151 participants. The SSC met its goal of serving a multi-racial group, living locally in disadvantaged circumstances, but from a range of social, educational and employment backgrounds. Teenagers and those who had their first child before they were 20 were less likely than other age groups to attend the SSC after they registered. However, other characteristics of disadvantage did not affect levels of attendance.

Most SSC interviewees were women. Compared with lone parents nationally, more had never been married/cohabited with their children's other parent. More had at least GCSE qualifications, with a significant number qualifying *after* they had become parents.

Parents' ambitions

While 96 per cent of interviewees were on benefits when they registered, 96 per cent had worked at some time in the past - for nine years on average, slightly more than the national average for lone

parents. However, 43 per cent overall had remained in one of the ten lowest paid occupations. Compared with lone parents in a population survey, SSC interviewees rated themselves as less ready for work, but much more positively in terms of work-related skills, such as assertiveness, self-presentation and confidence.

Interviewees were on the whole ambitious. Not only did the vast majority wish to improve their career prospects and eventually find worthwhile occupations, a significant minority were on their way to achieving their goals. The most frequent goal was to become a social worker, a nurse or a counsellor: to "do something worthwhile" and make a difference, as well as to make a decent living. The second most common career choice was office/IT work. Those in this group were more likely to have used another training provider in addition to or instead of the SSC. Many others had settled on career choices that offered family-friendly working.

"I'm starting college in September - first to do an access course in health and social work and that covers midwifery and psychology, too. I'll be able to get a better paid job then - even if it takes four years I'll have greater job satisfaction from doing something worthwhile."

Most were aspiring to professional or managerial level occupations, the remainder to skilled or clerical level. The level of career goal was generally in line with qualifications already achieved. Working in childcare came low on the list of choices because of low pay.

"I'd like a career where I can use the skills I've developed through looking after and living with a disabled child. I'd like to get formal qualifications so I can have financial security as well as a satisfying job."

While interviewees wished to "earn a decent living", a large majority mentioned health and well-being as the main goal for themselves and their children. Getting a good education for themselves and/or for their children was a goal for half, and more than two-fifths wanted a better house, better furniture and/or a car. Others mentioned wanting more money, "to do more than survive", to move to a healthier and/or safer place, a holiday or more freedom. Nearly a quarter hoped for a good relationship with a partner.

"Right now I'd like to feel better - to have better health so I can earn a better living. I'd really like a stress-free life. In 5 years from now, I'd like my kids to be going on with their education so they can get good jobs, and I'd like to have a good job myself".

Barriers to work, education and training

Childcare costs and the importance of looking after one's children were cited as major barriers to getting a paid job by virtually every lone parent with children under 11. Those with children between 5 and 10 were no less likely than those with children under 5 to rate the importance of looking after their own children as a major barrier to getting a job. The most frequently mentioned barrier to education and training was childcare costs.

More than a fifth of interviewees cited their own or their children's health problems as a major barrier to getting a paid job, but over half of the interviewees described current physical or mental health problems that interfered with their own or their children's activities. Interviewees aged 35 and older were more likely to cite health problems as a major barrier.

Support for parents

Most interviewees learned about the SSC from other agencies or from friends or family. Less than half said their main reason for registering was a particular course or workshop; frequent attenders were more likely to say they wished to improve themselves. The vast majority had used another training service or attended a college, as well as a range of social, health or community services in the past year or so.

Most interviewees had heard of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP), and most were generally negative or cautious about it. Only one in ten were positive. More than a quarter had seen a New Deal adviser, but very few felt they had received any real support.

Nearly two-thirds of interviewees reported that family and/or friends had given them support as single parents. Those who did not mention the support of family and/or friends were more likely to attend the SSC.

Seventeen per cent of interviewees had not made significant use of any services. Like those who used only the SSC, just half of non-users of services said they could count on the support of family or friends compared with over 90 per cent of those who made significant use of only a parallel service. Another distinguishing feature of non-users of services was low 'morale' scores.

Virtually all those who used the SSC praised it. Interviewees most frequently mentioned staff friendliness and support. Support was frequently described in terms of feeling understood, valued and encouraged. Others said they benefited from meeting other single parents.

"I felt like I didn't belong at first, but with the encouragement of the staff, the tutor and the other women, I soon felt a part of things, and my confidence has soared!"

While other services were more often said to have increased users' knowledge and skills, SSC attenders also frequently mentioned the high quality of courses or tutors and gaining knowledge and skills. Changes attributed to the SSC had to do with gaining new knowledge or skills, aspiring to higher goals or moving into further education or a job. More than a quarter praised the SSC crèche and valued the time they had to themselves, away from their children, to attend courses, be with others and take stock of their lives.

Prejudice and negative stereotypes wore them down and diminished their self-confidence. The SSC provided a sanctuary for many and a reassuring presence for many others.

"There's just so much negative stuff around about single mums being scroungers, it's hard not to let it get you down. SPAN helps build you back up: every single parent needs that."

Nearly a half of interviewees attributed increased self-confidence to SSC attendance, compared with slightly more than a fifth to the use of parallel services. Forty per cent said the SSC increased their awareness of self, others and the world compared with 12 per cent regarding parallel services. In contrast, parallel services were credited more with imparting new knowledge and skills.

"I need to get to grips with the whole idea of work and to get some sort of basic skills in an environment with others who understand what you've been through - and where you can learn about yourself and build your confidence. I'm doing that here [SSC]. Everyone is so nice and so supportive."

Conclusion

There are many reasons why lone parents are not ready to enter work, formal training or education.

These include feeling isolated, marginalised, unsupported or discouraged. The NDLP and most Further Education colleges are not in a position to meet these support needs, and the researchers conclude that the SSC and similar services can usefully complement the efforts of other services. In particular, the evaluation highlights the following general lessons:

- **Resources** need assessing fully. It takes time and effort to overcome lone parents' suspicions and eroded confidence and to meet their special needs. Short-term funding raises questions about whether a service can continue almost before it is established. Longer-term funding that allows for scheme development and integrates evaluation measures, but postpones formal evaluation, would help staff set and meet realistic goals instead of challenging them to succeed 'against the odds'.
- **Induction and mentoring** schemes might help reduce the number of those dropping out of courses due to initial lack of confidence.
- It is unlikely that services such as the SSC can meet the training requirements of all lone-parents. However, training designed to build confidence and basic skills can address the most common needs. **Networking** with other training providers would help participants access more specific courses elsewhere.

About the study

The study was undertaken by Karen John with Sarah Payne and Hilary Land from the School of Policy Studies, University of Bristol. The research involved face to face interviews with 111 of the 151 individuals who signed up for courses at the SPAN Study Centre between February 1998 and October 1999. The Single Parent Action Network (SPAN) is a grassroots, multi-racial network, working locally, nationally and in Europe to support one-parent families living in disadvantaged circumstances.

How to get further information

A 17-minute video, entitled 'We are Family', provides self-portraits of three lone parent families and was produced by SSC participants as part of the pilot project. It is available from the SPAN Study Centre, Millpond, Baptist Street, Easton, Bristol, BS5 OYW, telephone 0117 952 0626 (www.spanstudy.org.uk). A collaborative report, **RESPECT: Education and training projects involving women/single parents**, on international work carried out during the study with partners in Belgium, Greece and the Netherlands is also available from SPAN.

The full report of the study, **Training and support for lone parents: An evaluation of a targeted study programme** by Karen John, Sarah Payne and Hilary Land is published for the Foundation by YPS as part of the Work and Opportunity series (ISBN 1 902633 68 7, price £12.95).