

**'Sdim Curo Plant!
Children are Unbeatable! Cymru**

'Help at Hand'

An evaluation report of a programme of activities promoting alternatives to smacking children

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Commissioned by Children are Unbeatable!

**Funded by New Ideas Fund, Social Justice and
Regeneration Division
Welsh Assembly Government**

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Acknowledgements

CAU! Cymru would like to thank Vikki Butler and Dr Sam Clutton of Barnardo's Cymru who undertook all the research and the report writing on behalf of the Alliance. We also give our thanks to all of the organisations who attended the Help at Hand steering group planning meetings for their hard work and for implementing co-operative partnership working. We thank the local health visitors, Startwell, Barnardo's Cymru Neath Port Talbot Parenting Matters Service, Save the Children, Briton Ferry West Communities First and NCH Llansawel Family Centre for their parts in the delivery of the events during the Help at Hand week. Particular gratitude is extended to NCH Llansawel Family Centre and Briton Ferry West Communities First for undertaking a large amount of the planning work, use of their premises throughout the activities week and dedicated involvement and support throughout the delivery of the Help at Hand activities week. Despite planning and delivery, this evaluation could not have been undertaken without the honesty and enthusiasm of the parents and young people we spoke to. To this end, we thank all of the parents and young people who willingly shared their opinions and experiences during the process of this research.

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the evaluative research was to provide evidence of:

- The most effective ways to change attitudes towards physical punishment of children
- The most effective ways to provide advice and practical support to parents to reject physical punishment and to adopt alternative, positive non-violent ways of managing their children's behaviour

The Welsh Assembly Government provided funding to cover the costs of the evaluation of a programme of events in Briton Ferry West. These events focused upon offering support to local parents with finding positive ways of managing their children's behaviour.

Evaluation Methods

The research used various methods including a short community questionnaire, unstructured interviews with parents, focus groups with parents attending parenting groups or courses, and semi-structured interviews with parents attending drop in sessions during the programme of events. We also gathered data from children and young people through a short questionnaire completed by secondary school pupils and a group interview facilitated through puppetry with primary school children. To assist with the evaluation of the process of delivering a programme of events we facilitated a focus group and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in the planning and delivery of the events.

Key Findings

- 1. Attitudes:** From the survey the majority of people in the local community do not think that smacking children is a very effective means of managing children's behaviour. While the majority (80%) thought that children should enjoy the same legal protection against being hit as adults just over half (51%) believed that parents 'have a right' to smack their children. The research suggests that 'hitting' and 'smacking' are viewed as separate actions by adults but not by children.
- 2. Getting information:** Many parents said they would not use a phone advice line because the person answering the call is unknown, it is hard to keep numbers to hand when you need them and it is expensive from mobile phones. There was consensus that booklets either give too much or too little information to be of practical use. Parents prefer face to face contact with someone they can build up a relationship with, but felt that access to support was sometimes dependent on which professional you engaged with and their skill level.
- 3. Support for specific groups (eg, BME parents, parents with disabilities):** There is a shortage of targeted services to specific social groups, with the exception of young parents. For positive family relationships to develop more services need to work specifically with fathers and generally act more sensitively to family breakdown.
- 4. Practical considerations:** Parental support services need to be very local or provide free transport, covering transport costs is often not of help as public transport in evenings and in rural areas is limited. Support needs to have accompanying free childcare or pay childcare costs.
- 5. Crisis support:** Parents sometimes need 'instant' access to support when there is an escalation in a child's behaviour or a crisis point in the family or at school.
- 6. Usefulness of courses:** Parents were unanimously positive about the impact of courses and were clear that attending them provided them with new skills and confidence in their parenting ability.

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Key Recommendations

- 1. Getting the 'No Smacking' message into the mainstream:** One of the main lessons learnt through the programme of events is that promoting alternatives to smacking needs to be an integral part of the every day practice of all professionals who come into contact with families.
- 2. Difficulties in finding support:** Access to information, advice and support is dependent on either being in contact with the 'right' individual practitioner or on situations reaching a crisis point. Parents identified a key role for schools in taking this agenda forward for families with children over 5 and Health Visitors were identified as a key source of advice and support in relation to the under fives. However, training in positive parenting needs to be given to many professionals to a higher standardised level.
- 3. Reducing stigma:** Parents feel they are bad parents when a professional suggests they need specialist support. Terms such as parenting course or parenting programme cause further stigmatisation. Stigma would be reduced if support were more freely available as a part of mainstream services and if terminology was changed.
- 4. The no smacking message cannot stand as an isolated issue:** Parents who were attending the parenting groups said that they do not smack their children, but struggle to know how to deal effectively with children's negative behaviour. Adults who do favour smacking, present in some of the community presentations, say that smacking never harmed them as a child. To tackle these different views the no smacking message needs to be attached to a larger message regarding the benefits of positive parenting and implemented through universal support and mainstream services.
- 5. Promoting alternatives to smacking:** This means providing parents with the tools they need to manage children's behaviour before things reach crisis point. Support needs to come earlier and be more accessible. Accessing support to develop parenting skills should be presented and practiced as an everyday part of being a parent.

1. Background to Children are Unbeatable!

Children are Unbeatable!/Sdim Curo Plant! (CAU/SCP) was established in September 2000 as part of a four nations alliance. The CAU Cymru Strategy Group comprises representatives of Children in Wales, Children's Commissioner's office, Barnardo's Cymru, Save the Children, NCH Cymru, NSPCC, the National Childminding Association, Cymdeithas Tai Hafan and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. CAU Cymru has signed support from over 60 Welsh agencies and organisations and over 350 individuals including AMs, MPs and MEPs. The main aims of the alliance are:

- To gain the same protection from assault for children that all other UK citizens have by removing the legal defence of 'reasonable punishment' which is used to justify and excuse the physical punishment of children
- To promote positive non-violent methods of managing children's behaviour

Children (up to 18 years) are the only UK citizens who can be legally hit (on grounds of 'reasonable punishment' under Section 58 of the Children Act 2004). Since October 2002 the Welsh Assembly Government has explicitly opposed the use of physical punishment ('smacking') by parents as an acceptable method of disciplining children. The Welsh Assembly Government is the only Government of the UK to have adopted this position but does not have the legislative power to change the law in this regard. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) Monitoring Committee has twice called on the UK government to act as a matter of urgency to change the law and undertake a programme of public education and advice and support for parents.

2. The Evaluative Research Project

In the second half of 2005 the CAU Cymru Strategy Group submitted a proposal to the WAG Social Justice and Regeneration Division, New Ideas Fund to undertake some evaluative research. The proposal aimed to provide evidence of:

- The most effective ways to change attitudes towards physical punishment of children
- The most effective ways to provide advice and practical support to parents to reject physical punishment and to adopt alternative, positive non-violent ways of managing their children's behaviour

This proposal was successful and funding was received to cover the costs of the research and dissemination. Organisations represented on the Strategy Group agreed to provide a programme of events over a time-limited period in one community in South Wales, the area of Llansawel in Briton Ferry West. A project management group was formed and local organisations came forward to offer contributions to the planning and programme of events.

The organisations directly responsible for the preparation and delivery of the programme of events work included: Children in Wales, NCH Cymru, Barnardo's Cymru, Save the Children, Briton Ferry West Communities First Team, Startwell, Neath Port Talbot LHB Health Visitors, the local domestic violence partnership and Tai Hafan. Barnardo's Cymru was commissioned to carry out the research. Separate pieces of research work were carried out in local schools by Save the Children and information about these has been included in this research report.

Briton Ferry West includes 1,236 households, is primarily a residential area and is ranked 53rd in the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2005. Briton Ferry West has therefore been designated a Communities First area. The area has a slightly higher proportion of people under 16 than the local authority (Neath Port Talbot) and England and Wales. Around one third of households contain dependent children and approximately 10% of households are lone parent households with dependent children.

2.1 Methodology

The purpose of the evaluative research was to assess the impact and effectiveness of different activities undertaken in preparation for the 'Help at hand' week, during the week and follow up from the week. A mixed methodology was employed which included:

- One short community survey questionnaire (see appendix 1). This was distributed through the 'Communities First' newsletter in March (before the events week) and was collected through community drop points and door-to-door collection
- Unstructured interviews with parents visiting the launch event
- Focus groups with parents attending three parenting groups/courses during the week of events
- Face-to-face semi-structured interviews with parents attending drop in sessions during the week of events
- A short questionnaire completed by secondary school pupils participating in the CAU pilot PSE lesson
- A group interview facilitated through puppetry with primary school children
- Focus group and face-to-face semi-structured interviews with professionals involved in planning and delivering the week of events
- Focus groups with parents attending the parenting taster course following the week of events

All of the qualitative data was compiled manually and analysed into common emerging themes.

3. Activities and Events

The focus of the pilot intervention was a week of events in May 2006, however preparatory and supporting work was undertaken in the period leading up to the week of events. The activities and events focused upon Britton Ferry West because it is a discrete ward area with many agencies working in partnership together and it lies within the county of Neath Port Talbot which has established parenting support provision.

3.1 Preparatory work: training session

In February 2006 a training session was delivered by CAU Strategy Group members. The session was aimed at local professionals who would be involved in planning and delivering the pilot intervention and parents who were already engaged with services. The training session was held in a local community centre and parents were provided with transport to attend. The training sessions introduced participants to an overview of the relevant legislation and policy and evidence from research. Evidence included information about the prevalence of 'smacking' and hitting children, what children have said about being hit or smacked and what has happened elsewhere in Europe where children enjoy the same legal protection as adults. Participants also examined case scenarios which helped them to explore their own perceptions and values in relation to the issues. In this way all those individuals involved in delivering the events and activities were clear about the aims and objectives of the CAU Alliance and the evidence upon which the campaign is based.

3.2 Preparatory work: publicity

Marketing students at UWIC produced some campaign materials for the CAU Strategy Group. One poster image that included a hand graphic was selected for use in Briton Ferry West (see appendix 2). The Briton Ferry West Communities First team produced 100 posters that were distributed to local venues including health centres, shops and schools. A programme of events was similarly displayed in key community locations.

3.3 Outreach work: community presentations

In the month preceding the week of events, members of the project management group and parents delivered presentations outlining the aims and objectives of CAU Cymru and gave information about the 'Help at hand' week of events. Presentations were made to the local primary school head teachers and a head teacher of a local secondary school, the community police officers, Communities First Partnership, Pensioners Forum and to a local mother and toddlers group. These presentations were not evaluated thoroughly but feedback was sought from facilitators regarding the discussions that took place with community members after the presentations. These findings are expanded upon in section six in relation to the success of the 'Help at Hand' week.

3.4 Outreach research: community survey

A community survey, aimed at discovering community attitudes towards smacking, was distributed to all households in Briton Ferry West with the March edition Communities First newsletter which included an article detailing the aims of the CAU Alliance and the upcoming local events. A second Community Survey was distributed with the June edition of the newsletter which included an article reporting on the week of events and the findings of the first survey. The purpose of the second survey was to compare results with the first survey to see whether the 'Help at hand' week had had an impact upon the local community's attitudes towards smacking. Since the week failed to engage with the local community the results of this second survey were not needed and so the second survey was not followed up or completed. This is explained in more detail in section four of this report.

3.5 The events week: 'Help is at hand' launch event

A launch event was held on the 15th May 2006 at NCH Cymru Family Centre, Community House, Llansawel. The on-site nursery was opened for the event and was staffed by nursery staff who provided play activities, face painting, balloons etc. for children. Refreshments were also provided. The event was launched at 4pm to accommodate the school day. The event was hosted by Jane Hutt, AM and Minister for Children. The Children's Commissioner's Office was represented, as was the local council, Neath Port Talbot, and the CAU Cymru steering group. A large number of local organisations as well as those involved in the CAU Strategy Group attended. The researchers were able to talk to parents attending the event launch in an informal way.

3.6 The events week: drop in sessions

Throughout the week beginning 15th May, drop in sessions were offered at the NCH Family Centre and Community House (a full programme of events is included as Appendix 4). On four mornings (10am - 12pm) drop in sessions for the parents of younger children were offered to provide opportunities for discussing positive parenting. These sessions were provided by NCH, Startwell and local Health Visitors. On four afternoons (1pm-3pm) during the week drop-in sessions were provided by NCH family centre staff for the parents of younger children. On three evenings of the week (5.30pm-7pm) drop-in sessions for the parents of teenagers offering 'tips and advice if they are driving you mad' were provided by Barnardo's Cymru 'Parenting Matters' service.

3.7 The events week: parenting groups

Three existing NCH parenting groups met at the Family Centre during the week of activities- a confident parenting group, a father's group and a 'managing behaviour' parenting group. The researchers asked parents for permission to sit in on the group sessions and this was granted. In each case course facilitators adapted the central message of positive parenting and alternatives to smacking into the most appropriate for the group, approaching the issues in an informal non-threatening and non-judgmental way. The ease of approaching these issues was assisted by the fact that the facilitators

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already had an established relationship with the groups. The researchers undertook focus groups immediately following the sessions, the outcomes of which are discussed later in this report.

- **The Fathers' Group**

This group had been meeting for some time, with a changing membership although some father's had attended for most of the life of the group. The fathers group discussed the issue of smacking through reflection on their own childhoods and discussion about what does and doesn't work in managing children's behaviour.

- **The 'Confident Parenting' Group**

These parents were involved in a 12 week course and the meeting during the 'Help at hand' week was the third session of the course. The group discussed a typology of different types of parenting from 'authoritarian' to 'uninvolved'. Through open discussion the group reflected on the way they had been parented; their current parenting style and the approach that they thought would be most effective.

- **The 'Managing Behaviour' Group**

These parents were involved in a 12 week course, although many of them had already completed the 'confident parenting' course. The group watched a short clip from a popular film which showed an exchange between a father and his son which ended in both losing their tempers. The group discussed the ways in which things could have been managed differently, identified trigger points in the exchange and examined the relationship between the father's response and the child's behaviour. In this way the association between parental response and child's behaviour was explored.

3.8 The events week: school sessions

During the week beginning 15th May, three local primary schools were approached by Save the Children. The schools were asked for permission to speak to pupils about their thoughts and views on smacking. Save the Children proposed using the character puppet 'Splodge' as used with children for their national research 'Listen up' (2003). One school decided that this was not an appropriate exercise to undertake with the children and another decided that teaching staff should speak to children about smacking rather than Save the Children. In the school that gave permission Save the Children were able to speak to 27 boys and girls from Year 3 (aged 7 and 8 years old).

A CAU pilot lesson was also delivered by Save the Children at a local comprehensive school to sixteen Year 7 pupils (11 and 12 years old). The session was split into three sections. The session explored pupils' opinions for and against smacking, Children's Rights and the CAU Campaign. Participants were asked to fill in a simple questionnaire at the end of the session (see appendix 4). The results of the questionnaire and an account of school sessions in both the primary and secondary school are provided later in the report.

3.9 Activities: parenting taster sessions

Following the week of events two separate four week parenting taster courses were provided by Barnardo's Cymru, Neath Port Talbot 'Parenting Matters' Service. The sessions were held in Briton Ferry West community centre. One taster course was for the parents of pre-teen children aged over 4 years and one taster course was for parents with teenage children. Parents found out about the courses in a number of different ways: some through schools/teachers or the education welfare officer, some via word of mouth, and one via the Youth Offending Team. The taster courses provide parents with a "flavour" of the more detailed 10 week parenting programme by exploring and reflecting upon positive parenting techniques. After the taster course, parents are then invited to attend the 10 week programme.

4. Findings from the Community Survey

The Community Survey, accompanied by an article about the CAU campaign and events, was distributed in the March edition of the Communities First to all of the 1236 households that comprise the Briton Ferry West area. The Briton Ferry West Communities First team and the NCH Llansawel Family centre staff team did a door-to-door collection of the community survey and various community locations had drop off boxes. A £50 prize draw was offered as an incentive to return of the survey.

The original proposal was that there would be two community surveys undertaken- one before the week of events and one after the week of events. The aim of this was to enable a comparison between attitudes before and after the 'Help at hand' week, to gauge the impact of the week. A second community survey was distributed in June's community first newsletter, but this was not followed up because analysis of the research data revealed that the week of events did not engage with the local community. This made the purpose of the second survey redundant. However, there is some useful information in the data from the first survey.

In total 170 or 14% of the first community survey questionnaires were returned. Of these 56% were completed by parents/carers; 31% were completed by grandparents; 8% were completed by people with no children and 5% were completed by people who work with or look after children. A summary of the results shows that:

- 75% of people thought that smacking children does not stop them being naughty
- 85% of people thought that you can stop children being naughty without smacking them
- 50% of people thought that it is not ok to smack a child if they are doing something dangerous and 50% did
- Nearly 80% of people thought that it should be against the law to hit children in the same way that it is against the law to hit adults
- 51% of people thought that parents have the right to smack their children
- Over half of people had already seen information or talked to someone about ways of getting children to behave well without smacking them and over 90% of people thought that holding events in the community to provide information and support was a good idea

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This data suggests that the majority of people in the local community do not think that smacking children is a very effective means of managing children's behaviour. However while the majority (80%) thought that children should enjoy the same legal protection against being hit as adults just over half (51%) believed that parents 'have a right' to smack their children. Part of this apparent contradiction may be the result of the different language used in the two questions. Many people do not agree with 'hitting' children but think it is ok to 'smack' children. The research suggests that 'hitting' and 'smacking' are viewed as separate actions. Some people wrote in comments such as 'I only agree to a light tap by a parent'. Part of the challenge in implementing a no smacking message is to convince the public that these actions both represent the use of unacceptable and ineffective physical force against a child.

Many people who responded to the question on whether they had already seen information about alternatives to smacking referred to television programmes. The majority of people (90%) felt that it was a good idea to offer events and support on the issue in the community. However, given the lack of engagement with the local community during the 'Help at hand' week, events and support for parents regarding alternative means to smacking need to be linked to on-going, established neighbourhood services and events.

5. Findings from schools: local children and young people talk about smacking

Children and young people talked about the hurtful nature of getting smacked. The findings are presented here, first from primary aged children then from young people in a local comprehensive school.

5.1 Primary aged children

Children at a local primary school were asked a series of questions about smacking using a puppet called 'Splodge'. The questions and responses were as follows:

Who knows what a smack is?

The most common response was that children get hit or slapped when they have been naughty, though several also mentioned fighting with their siblings as being a situation in which children get smacked. Several children simply responded "Ouch!"

Why do you think children get smacked?

Children told us that generally children get smacked when they are naughty, cheeky, disobedient etc. Some children mentioned breaking things and saying 'bad things' as being reasons for getting a smack.

Who usually smacks children?

The children agreed that it is adults who usually smack children. These might be mums or dads, but it could also be a sibling. One girl told us that bullies smack children.

What does it feel like to be smacked?

Some children told us that it stings, causes pain, or said "ouch!" They also talked about their feelings, with the majority of the children saying that smacking makes children feel sad. A few children told us that smacking makes them feel angry, commenting that it makes you feel "I want to hit something".

How do children act after being smacked?

Almost unanimously, children said they are good after being smacked.

How do adults act after they have given a smack?

One child said that adults act nasty after they have given a smack, but most said that adults are sad and quiet after smacking.

Adults smack children but why don't children smack adults?

One child told us that he does smack his mum, but there were different responses to this question:

- Children do not smack adults because adults are bigger than children
- Adults would smack the child back
- Children don't smack adults because "you just don't"
- Smacking an adult would result in punishment – being grounded or getting smacked back by the adult

Children smack each other but why don't adults smack each other?

The children generally disagreed with the idea that adults do not smack each other. Some said that parents sometimes smack each other, but others said that adults don't smack each other because it is wrong. One child said, "Adults do smack each other when they're angry and when things go wrong".

When you are big do you think you will smack children?

The immediate response to this question was a resounding 'no'. With time for reflection, there was a fairly even split between children who said they would smack and those who said they wouldn't. Some children decided that they might smack children, but only if they were very naughty. There were suggestions that if children were naughty they could be sent to bed instead of being smacked.

Do you know anyone who doesn't like smacking?

Some children said their dad's or mums didn't like smacking. Other people mentioned included Grannies, Splodge and the school's Headmaster.

How can we stop children being smacked?

The children discussed a wide range of alternatives to smacking, including grounding, sending to bed, locking a child in their bedroom, banning TV, DVDs, Playstations etc for anything from 2 hours to several days to a year, not being allowed out to play, or to play with friends, having to help mum, shouting at children instead of smacking, or not being allowed supper. One child suggested that a good way of stopping children getting smacked was for the child to run away.

5.2 Secondary school aged children

Sixteen young people attending a local secondary school participated in an hour long CAU Pilot Lesson. The lesson explored the opinions of the young people for and against smacking using a debating approach with one group arguing for the right for parents to smack and one arguing against. The young people already had clear arguments formulated in terms of the case against smacking of children however they struggled to come up with arguments for smacking. The young people were clear that the law is applied differently for adults and children and that this was unfair.

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The young people who participated in the lesson were asked to complete a short questionnaire (see Appendix 4).

Nine young people said that parents should not have the right to smack their children, commenting *'it's cruel and they hurt children'* and *'because we don't smack them'*.

Seven young people said that parents should have the right to smack their children 'sometimes' because *'they can't get away with everything'*; *'if they don't obey the rules they deserve a smack'* and *'if they've done something really, really naughty'*.

Thirteen young people did not think that smacking children stops them being naughty: *'it just teaches them violence is the answer'*. Three young people thought smacking children stopped them being naughty 'sometimes'.

All but one of the young people said that the lesson had not made them change their views on smacking, the majority were against smacking before the lesson.

Fifteen out of the sixteen young people had not heard about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child before the lesson.

Seven of the young people thought that smacking children stops them having their rights. Five young people said they didn't know and four said that smacking children did not stop them having their rights.

Fifteen out of the sixteen young people thought that adults should have help so that they can manage children's behaviour without smacking: *'Just to talk to them and listen to what your child has to say about you smacking and hitting them'*.

6. Evaluation of 'Help at Hand' week

The evidence suggests that providing intensive provision and campaigning in one community over a short time limited period is in itself not the most effective means of promoting positive alternatives to smacking children. Local organisations put a tremendous amount of work into publicising the events and activities of the week and engaging with local schools and community bodies. However the majority of parents who participated in the week of events were involved in on-going courses and many of these were from neighbouring communities within the Neath Port Talbot county. The parenting taster courses are provided on a county-wide basis and they would have been held in a different location if the CAU week of events had not run.

The information regarding what works in promoting positive parenting provided by the parents from the courses is detailed in the next section, whilst this section details the evaluation of the 'Help at Hand' week.

6.1 Evaluation of the Community Presentations

There were a variety of opinions that emerged from the community presentations. Since it was not a representative sample, no generalisations can be drawn from the discussions. However, not all audiences felt that delivering a 'no smacking' message was a morally right one. A minority of professionals from the police force and teachers group felt that smacking was not wrong. The Communities First Partnership and the mother and toddler group seemed to generally agree with the content of the presentations and seemed supportive to the planned week of events. The men's pensioners group was almost unanimously in favour of smacking. There were two views held among people who felt that smacking was a valid parenting tool. The most common view was that they were hit as children themselves and that it 'did them no harm'. The second view, expressed in the men's pensioners group, was based upon what was perceived as 'natural' behaviour with comments like 'If monkeys and chimps hit their kids it must be OK for us humans'.

6.2 Evaluation of the drop in sessions

The drop in sessions were very underused with only three parents attending all week. However, two of these parents had driven across the county area in order to get advice with managing their children's behaviour and in interviews said that they felt they were at the end of their tether and did not know where to go to get any advice. Comments in focus groups with parents suggested that although drop in sessions are a good idea they need to be provided on a long-term basis at the same time each week with the same staff being present. Parents suggested that any drop in session should be linked to general child development which includes the no smacking message alongside other childcare advice.

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6.3 Evaluation of the Launch

The launch was attended by 20 children and eight parents. In a few cases the event was the first time the parent had visited the family centre. The parents that the researchers spoke to voiced community safety concern and talked about their fears about letting their children outside. This suggests that their concerns were more immediate than the concerns of professionals regarding positive parenting. Parents at the launch felt that the week of activities was a good idea but thought that attendance might be low as people take a long time to get used to something new. The launch succeeded in reaching out to parents who had not had contact with the family centre before because there were activities provided, such as food, art, games and face painting. It was suggested that community events could take place with a focus upon issues that are pertinent to parents, for example welfare and benefits advice or community safety. Such events would enable the no smacking message to accompany general advice and holistic parenting support to be given to parents but with a light family fun approach.

6.4 Overview of the 'Help at hand' week of activities

The campaign and week of events failed to engage parents from the local community for the following two reasons:

- Some parents suggested that the publicity material was difficult to interpret. Generally parents said that poster adverts only work if they are eye catching and direct and that the adverts for 'help at hand' week were too small and possibly too 'clever' so some parents weren't sure exactly what the message was
- Parents need lots of information and a period of time over which to become familiar with a new service or new community provision before they are ready to engage. Parents need to have built up confidence and trust in professionals before tackling an issue such as the smacking of children. This is supported by the reaction of local schools that were hesitant about tackling the subject because of the possible reaction of parents

The 'Help at Hand' week of events and the associated activities before and after the week succeeded in the following ways:

- The campaign provided a profile for the issues locally and served to get people thinking and talking about the impact of smacking children and issues surrounding parenting more generally
- The issue of positive parenting was brought to the top of the agenda of many local organisations and networks

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- The week of events provided information about 'what works' for parents and carers in getting support to practice positive parenting and using alternatives to smacking. The week brought parents together to look at the issues in a number of different ways and this allowed the researchers to explore the issues in depth with parents and professionals. Parents provided a wealth of information in relation to the ways in which advice and support is best delivered and identified clear gaps in current provision. In this way the evaluation of the 'Help at hand' events has generated some clear messages about 'what works' for parents in promoting alternatives to smacking

7. What works in promoting positive parenting and alternatives to smacking children?

During the course of the 'Help at hand' week and associated activities the researchers spoke to 39 parents in a range of different circumstances:

- Some parents were accessing support for the first time in relation to a current problem
- Some parents were attending on-going courses and programmes. Some of these parents wanted support with particular problems, some had children at risk of going onto the Child Protection Register, some had children already on the Child Protection Register and some had children who were in the care of the local authority
- Some of the parents had had experience of different voluntary sector interventions
- Some of the parents had experience of statutory services, mainly education, social services or the health visiting service

In discussing parenting courses and wider support services a number of common themes emerged. These have been organised into the sections below.

7.1 Information and Advice

Parents talked about the difficulty of getting access to the right information and advice. Many parents said they would not use a phone advice line because the person answering the call is unknown, it is hard to keep numbers to hand when you need them and it is expensive from mobile phones. There were more mixed views with regards to booklets giving advice. Some parents felt they would use them but others said booklets get lost. The consensus was that booklets either give too much or too little information to be of practical use. Parents prefer face to face contact with someone they can build up a relationship with, but felt that access to support was sometimes dependent on which professional you engaged with and their skill level. Their experiences suggest that when support is given by professionals in different statutory organisations (particularly social services, education and CAMHS) it is often negative- tending to point out failings and problems rather than suggesting solutions and giving encouragement. Support from

these statutory services tended to be reactionary and parents reported that finding advice and help that was preventative was very hard.

Getting information about where to go for advice and support can be particularly difficult once children are over 5 years old or where a child has a learning disability or specific behavioural condition such as ADHD. Parents said that information about what to do and where to go needed to be more accessible. They suggested that:

- Schools and health centres are the best locations to display information leaflets, booklets and information about support and how to access it. It was felt that if professionals in these services received training they would also be ideally placed to give general information regarding child development and managing children's behaviour
- Professionals need more information about what support is available within different sectors so that they can give parents the right advice about where to go. Early information and support would enable parents to take action within their family settings before they got to a crisis point. There was general agreement that attending courses tends to be reactive rather than preventative
- Getting information and support in relation to children and young people who are over 5 years old or in relation to a child with special needs is particularly difficult.

'Someone like that (health visitor) for over 5's would be great. There's no information from doctors or anything. There's nowhere to go really'

'I didn't know what was normal for a 12 year old'

'It (WAG child development publication) doesn't say what to do if your child doesn't reach the development stages'

7.2 Targeted support

There is a shortage of targeted services to specific social groups, with the exception of young parents. The researchers spoke to no parents within the BME communities of Neath Port Talbot. In the Neath Port Talbot area action can be taken in line with the Race Equality Impact Assessment action plan, undertaken for their Health and Well Being strategy 2005- 2008. But nationally there needs to be direction for ensuring parenting support is available for all communities. The researchers also spoke to no parents with a disability, and would suggest that this is an area that requires some development.

More services need to be available to support fathers and mainstream services need to have better engagement with fathers. The researchers attended a father's group, but generally spoke to more mothers than fathers. This is not to suggest that men are not active in their children's lives but sometimes do not want to accompany their partner to a course, or require a different form of support to women. For positive family relationships to develop more services need to work with fathers and act more sensitively to family

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breakdown. Some young mothers explained that professionals criticised them for their ex-partners whilst some fathers said that they had limited contact with their children because they could not get appropriate housing to be able to have their children stay with them.

'A lot of services that are out there are geared more towards help for mothers'

7.3 Practical considerations: childcare and transport

Parents talked about the difficulties of paying transport costs to access family centres, parenting courses and health care. In more rural areas there is often not public transport available to get to classes or a group, particularly in an evening. The provision of free childcare was a crucial element of provision and many parents would not be able to attend courses or groups if childcare was not provided or childcare costs were not covered. In accessing provision to support their parenting skills parents need services that:

- Are very local or have free transport if they are not local
- Have free childcare available, or will pay childcare costs, while parents participate in courses and groups or speak to professionals

'You want to get help and be good parents....and you're making the effort but then it costs you'

'They throw all these courses at you free, what are you meant to do with the kids?'

7.4 Crisis Support

Parents sometimes need 'instant' access to help and support when there is an escalation in a child's behaviour or things reach a crisis point in the family or at school. For some parents Health Visitors play a crucial role in providing this level of support in relation to children under five years. However this depended on the individual Health Visitor and parents with older children felt that they often have no where to go. There was a feeling that social services followed up child protection and welfare concerns when they were reported by another professional but that they are not able to respond to parents seeking help during a crisis. One of the purposes of the taster courses is to give instant support so that parents are not having to wait to access a course. Parents attending taster courses welcomed this saying that what they learnt over the four week period gave them ideas to work with until they attended the longer course. When seeking support during a crisis parents would like:

- Access to a known professional who they trust and who knows their situation. Parents particularly welcome being able to phone a project worker for advice when they need to

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- Access to a professional who has the right information and understands the right approach to take with children and young people of different ages and who present with specific issues
- A regular and local place and time to get advice and support when things reach a crisis or it is a 'bad week' such as a regular drop-in service

'If you go to a drop-in session then they (the staff) need to know the situation (you don't want to) speak to a stranger every time you go'

'Fathers have got the same fears as mothers...it would have to be someone who I was comfortable with and I trusted'

'My Health visitor is awesome....can't fault her'

'I left twenty messages for her (professional) to get back to me.. to work with me to get me to NCH...nothing'.

7.5 Parenting courses and groups

In commenting on the parenting courses and the four week taster courses parents were unanimously positive about the impact of participating and had some clear ideas about why they liked the approach used within the groups. Parents were also clear that attending the courses was providing them with new skills and confidence in their parenting ability. The positive feedback about groups and courses related to both the content of the courses as well as the process that facilitators created to deliver the courses or groups. Parents told us that:

- They want to attend parenting courses so that they can gain confidence and find out about good parenting practice
- They enjoy an informal and relaxed approach
- Parents want to get access to the information and advice they need to make good decisions for their children but they do not want to be told what to do
- They need to be reassured that being directed for or seeking support does not mean that they are a 'bad parent'
- Parents enjoy meeting parents who are experiencing similar issues to them so that they don't feel as if they are the only person experiencing difficulties

'They don't tell you what you should do, they let you make your own decisions. They help you decide what you want for your kids. With the other one (another course) they tell you what you should do, what is right and what is wrong, but this one they help you decide what you want for your kids, rather than tell you what you should have done'

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'Even though they might be professionals they're (facilitators) still friendly'

'It's brought back my self confidence, my self esteem and stuff like that'

'I realised I want to come on this (course) because I want to have the confidence to be able to do it 24 hours a day... I want to have the confidence to be able to do it... and know that I can' (Parent waiting for her child to be placed back with family and currently having time limited contact).

'It just helps you and hopefully it'll pass the knowledge on to my boy because obviously he's going to start a family one day and if he can sit back and think, oh right you know this is the way my father was with me....I'd recommend it to everyone'

'I'm here to better myself as a parent'

7.6 Getting the message into the mainstream

One of the main lessons learnt through the 'Help at hand' week is that promoting alternatives to smacking needs to be an integral part of the every day practice of all professionals who come into contact with families. Following the 'Help at hand' week the organisations and individuals that had been responsible for planning and delivering the week met to discuss the week. A clear outcome of this discussion was that rather than locating the events in one venue and giving parents the opportunity to attend it would have been more effective to go and deliver sessions about alternatives to smacking to parents who were already meeting through playgroups, schools or social groups. This approach was supported by evidence from parents. Parents were very clear about the fact that it can be difficult to access the right information, advice and support. Further that access to information, advice and support is dependent on either being in contact with the 'right' individual practitioner or on situations reaching a crisis point. Parents identified a key role for schools in taking this agenda forward. Health Visitors were identified as a key source of advice and support in relation to the under fives. Parents suggested that:

- Schools are well placed to provide accessible literature and information about support
- Parenting courses need to be mainstreamed so that parents do not feel that they can only access them if things go wrong
- Parenting courses need to play a preventative rather than a responsive role
- Schools would be a good vehicle through which to deliver universal parenting courses so that there was an expectation that 'normal' parents attended
- Primary schools were a good location in which to offer informal drop in sessions to discuss potential problems early on

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- Health visiting type services need to be available to all parents as their children grow up and not just up until a child is five years of age
- Children may spend periods of the week with grandparents or non-resident parents. Where this happens the consistency of the behaviour management approach is broken down. Universal parenting courses would mean that children received a consistent message from everyone
- Teachers should attend parenting courses or they should be an element of teacher training. This would mean that children's behaviour was managed in a consistent way throughout the day
- Parents feel they are bad parents when a professional suggests they need specialist support. Terms such as parenting course or parenting programme can make parents feel further stigmatised. Stigma would be reduced if support were more freely available as a part of mainstream services and if terminology was changed. Examples given were 'living peacefully with teenagers' and 'avoiding tantrums in the under 8s'

'Why can't there be something like this (course) that should be normal for any parent to be able to go to?'

'If you could get it in the primary school once a month where it's up to the actual individual parent if they want to turn up, obviously they'll know if they're having problems at home and where there is somewhere for them to go'

'(practitioner phoned and told about) parenting classes..., what are you saying that I'm a bad parent, I didn't actually say it but I felt that , but I also felt well if that can help me then yes refer me'

8. Conclusion

This evaluative research was funded to explore the most effective ways to change attitudes towards physical punishment of children and the most effective ways to provide advice and practical support to parents to adopt positive non-violent ways of managing their children's behaviour.

There is not enough evidence from this particular initiative to meaningfully evaluate effective ways of changing attitudes across a specific community. However, this evaluation does suggest that the no smacking message cannot stand as an isolated issue. All the parents we spoke to and most of the respondents of the survey do not believe smacking works. Parents who were attending the parenting groups said that they do not smack their children, but struggle to know how to deal effectively with children's negative behaviour. Adults who do favour smacking, present in some of the community presentations, say that smacking never harmed them as a child. To tackle these different views the no smacking message needs to be attached to a larger message regarding the benefits of positive parenting and implemented through universal support and mainstream services to enable adults to practice positive parenting.

Numerous recent surveys and polls have claimed that a percentage of parents are 'for' or 'against' smacking children and it is possible that parents will give a different response according to how the question is asked. Whilst our survey may have created bias through stating that CAU! Cymru is against smacking, the phrasing of the questions highlights how adults distinguish between hitting, smacking and parents rights. A stand-alone campaigning message of 'no smacking' is likely to make pro or anti smacking opinions more entrenched. A change of attitude is more likely to occur if alternative to smacking are made available to parents, if children's rights are explained to parents and professionals who work with children and families are trained to support families in positive parenting. It was clearly stated by parents who are currently receiving family support services that learning about not smacking is a part of learning about child development.

To this end, the research findings focus upon what works for parents in delivering parenting support, identifying key strengths and weaknesses in current approaches. The key finding to emerge from the research is that promoting alternatives to smacking children means providing parents with the tools they need to manage children's behaviour effectively before things reach crisis point. Support needs to come earlier and be more easily accessible. Accessing support to develop parenting skills should be presented and practiced as an everyday part of becoming and being a parent.

The Welsh Assembly Parenting Action Plan, Community Focused Schools, Integrated Children's Centres and the opportunities for joined up services offered by 'Stronger Partnerships, Better Outcomes' provide fertile ground for such an approach. This agenda needs the support of cascaded training for all those who provide services to children, young people and their families. In this way the false moral division between 'hitting' and 'smacking' a child might be broken down so that children are protected from physical punishment in practice if not in statute.

Appendix 1

The Community Survey

CHILDREN ARE UNBEATABLE !



The Children Are Unbeatable Campaign Cymru/'Sdim Curo Plant is an alliance of organizations who want children to have the same legal protection against being hit as adults and to support parents to find alternative positive ways to discipline their children. In partnership with local organizations we will be holding events in your community in May 2006 to promote positive ways of disciplining children. Please will you spare a little of your time to fill in this survey so we can find out what you think about this. We will call to collect the survey or you can return it to a community drop point. There will be a £50 prize draw of completed and returned surveys. Please add your name and phone number if you want to be entered. We will only use your phone number to inform you that you have won and for no other purpose.

NAME:

TEL NO:

1. Do you think that smacking children stops them being naughty?
Yes [] No []
2. Do you think that you can stop children being naughty without smacking them?
Yes [] No []
3. Do you think that it is ok to smack a child if they are doing something dangerous?
Yes [] No []
4. Do you think that it should be against the law to hit children in the same way that it is against the law to hit adults?
Yes [] No []
5. Do you think that parents have the right to smack their children?
Yes [] No []

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6. Have you seen any material about or has anyone spoken to you about ways of getting children to behave well without smacking?

Yes [] No []

7. Do you think that it is a good idea to hold events in the community to let people know about ways of getting their children to behave well without smacking them?

Yes [] No []

Are you a (please tick all that apply to you):

Parent [] Grandparent [] Someone who looks after a child []

Someone with no children [] Someone who works with children []

Appendix 2

Publicity for 'Help at Hand' week



Appendix 3

Programme of Events



in association with
**Barnardo's Cymru, NCH Cymru and
Briton Ferry West Communities First**

“HELP AT HAND”

**A week of activities promoting
'alternatives to smacking children'
15th – 19th May 2006**

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS

Monday, 15th May 2006

1pm - 3pm	Drop-in for parents, carers and toddlers @ NCH family centre (with play activities and refreshments)
4pm	Launch of Activities by Jane Hutt, AM & Minister for Children and presentation by Sara Reid, Assistant Commissioner, Children's Commissioner of Wales Office (Community fun afternoon with bouncy castle, refreshments etc)

Tuesday, 16th May 2006

am	Drop-in run by Health Visitors PSE sessions in Cwrt Sart Comprehensive School (Year 7)
1.30pm - 3.30pm	Positive Parenting drop-in for parents of toddlers run by Sure Start (informal advice and refreshments)
5.30pm - 7pm	Drop-in promoting alternatives to smacking for parents of teenagers run by Barnardo's Cymru
5.30pm - 7pm	Drop-in promoting alternatives to smacking for parents of under 11's run by NCH Cymru

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Wednesday, 17th May 2006

am	Drop-in run by Health Visitors
10- 12	Confident parenting course closed session run by NCH cymru
1.15pm - 2.15pm	Younger children's views on smacking
1.30pm - 3.30pm	NCH Cymru Men's Group - fathering and managing children's behaviour
5.30pm - 7pm	Drop-in promoting alternatives to smacking for parents of teenagers run by Barnardo's Cymru
5.30pm - 7pm	Drop-in promoting alternatives to smacking for parents of under 11's run by NCH Cymru

Thursday, 18th May 2006

am	Drop-in run by Health Visitor
10- 12	Managing behaviour parenting course closed session run by NCH Cymru
1pm - 3pm	Drop-in, alternatives to smacking
1.30pm - 2.30pm	Younger children's views on smacking

Friday, 19th May 2006

pm	Reflection and focus group evaluation with all professionals who were involved in the activities
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June 2006

Four-week taster parenting course run by Barnardo's Cymru for parents with younger children

Four week taster course run by Barnardo's Cymru for parents of teenagers

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Appendix 4

Questionnaire completed by secondary school pupils

This form is to find out what you think about smacking after your lesson today. We will collect all the forms to make sure that young people's ideas are included in the Children are Unbeatable campaign. Thank you for filling it in!

About parents smacking children...

1. Do you think parents should have the right to smack their children?



2. Do you think smacking children stops them being naughty?



3. Have you changed your mind about parents being able to smack children because of your lesson today?
What has made you change your mind?



About Children's Rights...

1. Have you heard about the UNCRC before?



2. Do you think smacking stops children having their rights?



About helping parents to stop smacking children...

1. Do you think adults should have help so they can manage children's behaviour without smacking?



Thank You