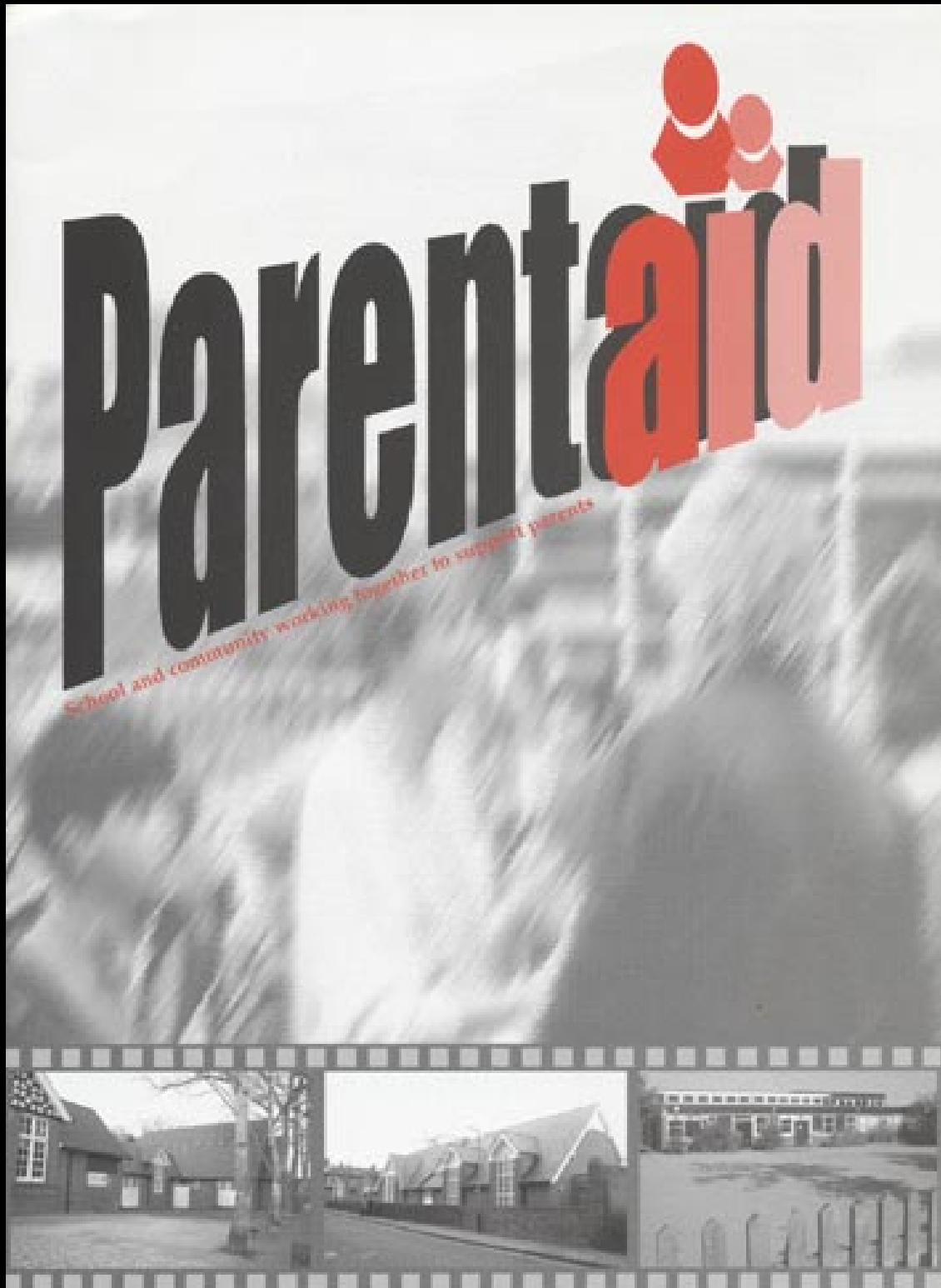


Parentaid

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Introduction

foreword

The report of the National Commission of Enquiry into the Prevention of Child abuse, *Childhood matters* (October 1996)¹ looked at factors which inhibit the 'safe and healthy development' of children into adulthood. These factors include poverty and homelessness, social harassment and insufficient support for children who are carers for their parents. A child's well-being is seen in the context of the society in which they live. The child's parent or carer is a cornerstone of their environment and the child's sense of security is built upon the well-being of that individual. If parents and carers are struggling physically and/or psychologically, then the child may well feel vulnerable and preoccupied. This, in turn, makes it difficult for the child to be fully engaged in learning and involved in school life generally.

Supporting parents

Childhood matters recommends that professional organisations and the wider community need to work together to take responsibility for the care and protection of children. This means:

- supporting those who care for children
- creating an infrastructure that reduces the stress which many children and parents experience, including problems with housing, health and education
- involving local people and community groups, and statutory and voluntary organisations, in developing local support strategies and service networks
- making information accessible so that people can make full use of the facilities and sources of support available in the community
- encouraging close collaboration between statutory and voluntary organisations so that they can form a network of support for those in need.



Preventative work

Childhood matters recommends a child-centred professional response with greater emphasis on prevention and family support, in preference to a service which is only available to families deemed to be at risk.

Childhood matters regards the welfare of children and the families who sustain them as the responsibility of individuals, the community and society. It is important to understand that the causes of childhood abuse include poverty, poor housing, unemployment, social exclusion and discrimination. These factors can place intolerable pressures on individuals, who may then abuse the children in their care.

The needs of parents

All parents experience stresses which may lead them to harm their children or which may overwhelm them to the extent that they neglect their children's needs. Many are reluctant to seek help from formal organisations and may be unwilling to approach statutory services for fear of being stigmatised. They may not know what help is available or how to gain access to it. Parents often seek advice from teaching staff about their children's behaviour.

A conversation about a child may well lead a parent to disclose other family problems. Schools are often the first point of contact for parents and may be the only point of contact for parents who are isolated.

The school's response to parents' needs

School staff, and particularly headteachers, have always been a source of support and advice for parents about issues relating to their children's education. Teachers acknowledge the link between the support parents receive and the emotional and educational well-being of the child. However, schools, particularly primary schools, report that they are seen by parents not only as a source of advice and support on issues relating to their children, but as a means of support for their own concerns and difficulties. Parents frequently turn to teachers they have come to know and with whom they feel comfortable. They may seek help and guidance on a wide range of issues including:

Setting up the Parentaid project

Step 1: Identifying pilot schools

CEDC set up pilot projects in two areas of the country, Dudley and Northamptonshire. CEDC already had links in these areas through previous work and believed that this would facilitate contacts with schools. They also offered sufficiently diverse areas in which to research the needs of parents and the possibilities of offering support to the schools. CEDC made contact with advisory staff in the two areas to inform them about the project and to enlist their help in identifying four primary schools in each area. The schools were to be different in character in order to give breadth to the project. (The schools identified are listed in *Appendix 1*.)

The Dudley primary schools ranged in size from 204 to 621 pupils on roll and catered for children aged between 3 and 11. Three of the schools had populations which were mostly white, with 12% to 14% of children from minority ethnic groups. In one school, 80% of the children were from minority ethnic groups. Two described themselves as located in areas of 'serious deprivation', with a high unemployment rate and a large number of lone parent families.

In Northamptonshire, the four schools ranged in size from 184 to 283 pupils on roll, catering for children aged from 3 to 11. Three of the schools had mostly white children and one was located in a self-contained estate (98% white). One school had several indices of deprivation: high unemployment, a high crime rate, 40% of children on the SEN register, 45% of children having free school meals, and 15% of children on the child protection register. In one school, 80% of the children were from minority ethnic groups.

Enlisting commitment and support from an LEA officer was vital to the success of the project, as they gave help and advice in choosing the pilot schools and continued to support the project as it developed.

A CEDC development worker was then assigned to the project. The first task was to make contact with each school, talk with the headteacher and staff about the project and learn about their previous experience of supporting parents who came to them with personal problems.

Some of the concerns expressed were:

- the danger of over-involvement in a family's difficulties
- the emotional pressure on staff
- the fear of encouraging dependency
- boundary issues in supporting one parent against another (for example, in a case of domestic violence)
- the concern that the 'social worker' role could obscure the teacher's role.

These concerns highlighted the difficulty some teachers experience in finding the right balance between supporting parents and becoming over-involved. Teachers felt that they needed to keep their prime role as educators in focus. Some staff felt they needed more training in working with parents and handling sensitive situations.



Parentaid

School and community working together to support parents

A child's well-being is determined by their parent's or carer's ability to cope and to obtain support. Schools are often the first point of contact for parents under stress. However, staff sometimes feel they do not have the time or the appropriate skills to help and advise parents about personal issues. They may also be unsure about what support agencies are available for parents within the community. Local organisations which offer support to parents are often keen to make contact with schools, but are uncertain about how best to do this. CEDC, having identified these issues, set up the Parentaid project in order to give schools information about local resources and to help schools and community organisations work together to support parents. This book outlines the development of the project, provides useful case studies and gives guidance on how to set up similar initiatives.



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