Informal community support for parents of
pre-school children

A comparative study investigating the subjective experience of parents
attending community-based toddler groups in different socio-economic
situations

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Abstract

Within the United Kingdom the importance of the appropriate parenting of children in their early years has received significant political support. However, it has been found that positive outcomes for young children, in terms of their present experience and future life chances, are often significantly weakened by the impact of poverty. A phenomenological scoping study was undertaken to explore the reasons why parents living in poverty access informal social support networks, in the form of community based toddler groups. The study found that engagement with these networks has value for parents in terms of their mental well-being and their peer education, both of which support their ability to parent a young child appropriately.

Keywords

Poverty, parenting, life-chances, informal social support
Introduction: parenting children in their early years

‘Parenting is an activity central not only to the functioning of families, but also whole communities,’ (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012: 138). Over recent years the importance of the appropriate parenting of children in their early years has been emphasised within the United Kingdom and thus providing appropriate support for parents of young children has been high on political agenda. Political rhetoric has often focused upon parenting and seeks to address the impact that this can have on young children’s opportunities. As the British Prime Minister, David Cameron stated, ‘What matters most to a child’s life chances is not the wealth of their upbringing but the warmth of their parenting,’ (Cameron in Sparrow, 2010). Yet this said, positive outcomes for children in their early years, in terms of their present experience and future life chances, are often significantly weakened by the impact of poverty (Field, 2010; Tickell, 2011).

This article documents a research study that was undertaken to support the work of the Birkenhead Foundation Years Project. The aim of this local project is to encourage a range of interventions aimed at engaging with and supporting parents living in areas of economic deprivation with the ultimate aim of enhancing the future life chances of their children.

UK child poverty

Poverty is a major feature of life for many living within the United Kingdom today (Bunyan & Diamond, 2014). The gap between those who live in poverty and those who do not continues to grow and thus the experience of life can vary significantly between these two groups (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Child poverty has been shown to significantly impact a
child’s current experience and future life chances (Field, 2010; Tickell, 2011). There are presently an estimated 3.5 million children living in poverty in the United Kingdom; 1.6 million of which are living in severe poverty (Whitham, 2012). These figures are set to rise to 3.9 million in the next year and by 2020 will have returned to levels not seen since the 1990s (Brewer, Browne & Joyce, 2011).

In March 1999 the then Labour government first announced their intention to halve child poverty by 2010-11 and eradicate it by 2020. Their intention to enshrine this pledge in law was confirmed by Gordon Brown at the Labour Party Conference in 2008. This approach was established in the Child Poverty Act 2010 and provided structure and objectives for the government’s strategy to tackle child poverty by focusing on household income (Field, 2010). The pledge to eradicate child poverty is an assurance that the coalition government has stood by (DWP & DFE, 2011; DWP & DFE, 2012). However it has been shown that the 2010 target was not met and only a significant amount of new money will now mean that the 2020 target is reached (Field, 2010). Regardless of a range of interventions undertaken by the various governments to ease child poverty, research shows that it still remains a significant ongoing feature in many children’s lives and has a notable impact upon the future life chances of many children (Ludwig et al., 2013; Odgers et al., 2012; Field, 2010; Tickell, 2011; Attree, 2004).

Concerning the causes of child poverty, Bradshaw and Holmes’ research (2010) shows that a child is significantly more likely to live within the conditions of poverty if they have a single parent, their mother is not of white ethnicity, the family do not live in owner-occupied accommodation, there are not two wage-earners in the family, the mother is not educated
to tertiary level or the mother is under 30 years of age at the time of the child’s birth (Bradshaw & Holmes in Hansen, Joshi and Dex, 2010). Some of these causes often combine to form communities characterised by poverty. The detrimental impact of neighbourhood poverty upon the families living within them has been the focus of much research interest (Ludwig et al., 2013; Odgers et al., 2012; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1994).

Children from low income families in the UK often grow up to be poor adults. However poverty is measured, whether family income, socio-economic status, or educational attainment, poverty blights the life chances of children ... [they] are more likely to have preschool conduct and behavioural problems; more likely to experience bullying and take part in risky behaviours as teenagers; less likely to do well at school; less likely to stay on at school after 16; and more likely to grow up to be poor themselves, (Field, 2010:28).

UK child poverty and children’s life chances

It is the impact of poverty upon young children’s life chances which forms the foundation of this study. Considerable outputs from research show that it is the early years of a child’s life that have the greatest significance for their future. The gap in holistic development between children living in poverty and children unaffected by poverty has been shown to emerge as early as 22 months of age (Whitham, 2012). This leads to significant differences in later life in terms of a child’s opportunity to thrive. ‘A child’s future choices, attainment, wellbeing, happiness, and resilience are profoundly affected by the quality of the guidance, love and care they receive during their early years,’ (Tickell, 2011: 2). The key influence upon this experience, during the early years, is the quality of relationship formed within the home. Parental relationships clearly influence the holistic development of the child and
thus evidence points to the role of the parent in terms of the determination of their child’s life chances (Siraj-Blatchford & Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

There is significant discussion concerning early intervention as the way forward for minimising the impact of a negative early years’ experience for a child (Tickell, 2011). Allen (2011) describes early intervention as the general approaches and specific policies designed to produce benefits for children in their early years. Allen elucidates the reality of the importance of early intervention as opposed to late intervention, which is shown to be both expensive and limited in terms of its effectiveness. The implications of Allen’s study are clear; if children aren’t supported in their early years to develop appropriately and healthily then society will suffer both economically and socially when the child reaches adulthood.

According to Allen,

> What parents do [in terms of their parenting] is more important than who they are. Especially in a child’s earliest years, the right kind of parenting is a bigger influence on their future than wealth, class, education or any other common social factor, (Allen, 2011: xiv).

Field’s Review “The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults” (2010) supports this finding and also provides evidence that children’s life chances are profoundly established, in terms of a child’s development, in the first five years of life. Factors including family background, parental education, parental parenting skills and child opportunities are shown to be crucial to ensuring a child reaches their potential in later life.

> The things that matter most are a healthy pregnancy; good maternal mental health; secure bonding with the child; love and responsiveness of parents along with clear
boundaries, as well as opportunities for a child’s cognitive, language and social and emotional development ... the most effective and cost-effective way to help and support young families is in the earliest years of a child’s life, (Field, 2010:5).

The emphasis of this Review seeks to direct government policy towards assisting parents to support their children in their foundation years. Primarily it focuses on the need to support parents to develop their parenting strategies and the need to assist them to evolve a constructive home environment. These findings are supported in the Millennium Cohort Study (Dex & Joshi, 2005; Hansen, Joshi & Dex, 2010) which also shows that indicators related to parenting have a profound impact upon factors such as children’s development in the family environment, children’s health, children’s resilience and children’s readiness for school; all of which have consequences for a child’s current and future life experience.

Central to this discussion, concerning the early years of a child and the implications this has on their future life chances, is the impact that living in poor environments can have upon the child’s experience and development. Klebanoc, Brooks-Gunn and Duncan (1994) find through their research the significant effect of neighbourhood poverty upon principle factors highlighted by Field (2010) and others, such as maternal mental health, and the ramifications of this for the child within the family context. Their work shows direct links between neighbourhood socio-economic conditions, the ensuing family conditions and the impact upon the parents in terms of their child-directed behaviours. Parents living within poor situations often deal with a significant level of daily stress which can become debilitating and affect their mental health, for example. This heightened level of psychological distress can lead to negative implications for the children within the family context, in terms of the maternal warmth and engagement shown. These research
outcomes suggest that if a family lives within a context of poverty it can, in some cases, have ramifications for parental behaviours which can in turn significantly affect child experience and development (Wilson, 1991). Negative parental behaviour can be found in all social groups, however the strain of living in poverty has been shown to add pressure to a family’s experience (Barnes & Freude-Lagevardi, 2002).

**Birkenhead Foundation Years Project**

The focus of the Birkenhead Foundations Years Project, established by the Foundation Years Trust to make operational the outcomes of Field’s Review (2010), was that purely focusing on financial poverty, in terms of solely increasing household income, was not the answer when it comes to affecting poor children’s future life chances. A whole range of factors linked to, but separate from, financial poverty determine the future experience of poor children before they even enter school. This challenges the exclusivity of the financial focus of the Child Poverty Act 2010, as focusing on financial poverty alone does not fully affect the home environment that a child is being raised within.

The Review (2010) identifies a range of factors, often amplified in situations of poverty, which influence the life chances of children. Factors include the home learning environment, parental warmth and sensitivity and parental mental health and well-being. These significant factors combine to form an atmosphere where a parent’s ability to appropriately nurture their child is either supported or significantly inhibited.

*Children need nurturing far longer than any other species and the quality of this nurturing has a major impact on how well children develop and then fulfil their*
potential ... it is the aspirations and actions of parents which are critical to how well their children prosper, (Field, 2010:11).

The Birkenhead Foundation Years Project has focused its work on a range of interventions for parents living in areas of economic deprivation, which specifically focus upon the development of the home learning environment, parental warmth and sensitivity and parental mental health and well-being. A range of research outcomes support this focus and point to the importance of external support as a significant resource for parents living in poverty (Tickell, 2011; Field, 2010; Attree, 2004; Kirk, 2003).

External support usually falls into two categories: formal support interventions and informal support networks. Formal support interventions, for example programmes designed to increase parents’ knowledge, skills and self-belief, have been shown to be effective in some UK-based situations to prevent child maltreatment and improve child life chances (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012; Edwards et al, 2007). These formal structures are often education-focused where parents are supported pedagogically to gain the appropriate knowledge and skills to effectively parent their child (Edwards & Gillies, 2004). Thus within the UK there are a range of statutory and third-sector agencies who work together to provide these formal mechanisms for support.

Some studies, for instance Barlow and Stewart-Brown’s meta-review (2001), reveal that some parents gain benefit from the formal support structures on offer within the UK. However, emerging research points to a lack of actual engagement with these formal
interventions (Heinrichs et al, 2005), particularly for those living in poverty (Forehand & Kotchik, 2002; Peters et al, 2005).

‘The prominence of barriers to attendance and engagement are heightened when parents face a multiplicity of issues such as low income, family discord, disorganised and chaotic lifestyles and / or ill health ... mothers in these circumstances have been found to distrust offers of help and become disinclined to accept the suggestion that a parenting programme might be of assistance,’ (Whittaker & Cowley, 2012: 142).

Thus, for the premise of this investigation, formal support structures were eliminated from the research project. Instead, the investigation sought to explore other support mechanisms with which parents who potentially avoid formal support services may engage. Research clearly points to the support gained from informal social relationships, largely provided by family and friends, as the key source of actual support for parenting (Edwards & Gillies, 2004). Thus the focus of the study sought to explore parents’ subjective perception of informal social support within a context of poverty.

**Informal social support interventions**

Informal support is classified as the support that evolves from an individual’s network of family and friends (Ghate & Hazel, 2002). ‘Friendships, in particular, are seen as being valued in a new way, providing egalitarian social and emotional support and a sense of collectivity,’ (Edwards & Gillies, 2004: 631). Informal social support can be understood in terms of its structural aspects (for example the size of the individual’s social network), functional aspects (for example the level of emotional support provided) and enacted aspects (for example the provision of advice concerning a difficult decision) (Hogan, 2002). This has been summarised, by Cohen (2004) into three main forms of informal social
relationship, including the categories of “emotionally supportive relationships,” “informationally supportive relationships” and “instrumentally supportive relationships.” As Cohen describes them, emotionally supportive relationships involve the communication of care through verbal and non-verbal means and the reduction of parental stress by allowing parents to voice their concerns and frustrations thus restoring self-esteem. Secondly, informationally supportive relationships involve the provision of advice and guidance and the minimisation of parental concern by providing parents with a sense of control as feelings of confusion and helplessness are reduced. Finally, instrumentally supportive relationships involve the provision of specific material aid, such as money or transport, and the reduction of parental worry by reducing feelings concerning the loss of control, (Cohen, 2004).

Moran and Ghate’s work (2005) supports this informal support focus in terms of effective intervention and even go as far as to promote the value of formal support interventions adopting an informal support style if they are to be effective. Their work reveals that a crucial factor for the effectiveness of formal interventions is the professional practitioner’s ability to build good, positive relationships with parents which mirror many of the characteristics linked with informal social relationships.

Attree’s research (2004) finds that it is socially isolated women (usually low-income, lone mothers) who are least likely to engage with formal support structures due to their perceptions of negative associations. Wilson’s study (1991) highlights the concept of “social isolation” which may occur in single parent households living in poverty. It finds that within this isolated social context that socialisation practices do not always support positive family
experience, with implications for parents’ psychological coping and parenting behaviour. Low-income parents sometimes remain wary of accessing health professionals and social welfare agencies as experience of these formal support structures are found to be unhelpful by the parents themselves (McKendrick et al, 2003). Ironically, it is thus the parents who would potentially gain most from formal interventions who are least likely to access professional help and support agencies (Attree, 2004). Thus informal social support structures are understood to be a valuable resource for adequately engaging with these parents. ‘Material and emotional support from family and friends can help to mediate the stresses of caring for children in hardship,’ (Attree, 2004:335).

In response to this lack of engagement with formal support structures significant research outcomes therefore point to the value of informal support and the impact it can have upon a range of factors, including parental mental health and child physical health (Bloom, 1990; Broadhead et al, 1983). Ghate and Hazel (2002) research the extent and quality of informal social support networks experienced by parents living in poverty. Their research finds that a significantly low number of parents feel that there is no one in their personal network that they can refer to for emotional or practical help. The great majority of parents have at least three people (friends and / or family members) in their support network and these relationships are usually characterised by physical proximity, warmth and interconnectedness. These research findings challenge the common understanding that poor environments are socially fragmented and highlight the importance of informal social relationships for parents of children in their early years living within this context. Attree (2004) explores the subjective experience of low-income parents in terms of their informal support networks and the impact of these support structures on their ability to care for
their children within the context of poverty. This research identifies a range of positive
characteristics of informal support, including material and emotional help, which parents
living in poverty emphasise.

Cochran’s research (1990) builds upon this understanding and clearly reveals the value of
informal support networks for parents in terms of the role these relationships play as a
shield to some of the effects of poverty upon the child. Cochran focuses upon the indirect
and direct influences that parental informal support networks can have upon the child. This
research reveals that the indirect influences of these informal relationships affect the
characteristics of the parents themselves thus challenging their childrearing attitudes and
behaviours. This involves a form of informal peer education where parents develop their
parenting ability through their engagement with the members of their social support
network. This development of parenting ability results in an indirect, positive effect upon
the child. Cochran’s research (1990) also reveals the direct influences of informal
relationships, which involves face-to-face contact between the members of the parents’
support network and the child themselves. This contact derives a positive change in the
child as a result of the connection. These indirect and direct influences are shown to negat
some of the effects of poverty upon the child.

Attree’s research (2004) shows that in the main these valuable informal support structures
are usually female-centred. Women provide and receive support, in relation to their
parenting, with and for each other. The research shows that it is mothers and female
friends who are significant figures within the informal support networks. Female
relationships are clearly highlighted as the location of emotional support, parenting
education and personal need satisfaction (Attree, 2004). This is supported by Ghate and Hazel, ‘In poor environments, then, it is women who are largely supporting parenting at the informal level,’ (2002:113). Cochran’s research (1990) also supports this notion that after direct family relationships, it is female friendships that provide the greatest level of support for parents.

Cutrona and Troutman (1986) show that a valuable intervention for the appropriate support of women with a new-born is social support. Their work, which focuses on maternal postpartum depression, shows that mothers of particularly irritable babies are still able to establish secure attachments with their children if they experience a high level of informal support. The researchers attribute this to the supportive environment that is created in situations where high levels of social support exist as parents are encouraged to develop a positive understanding of self. These high levels of self-esteem, which are safeguarded within this social context, are linked to clear coping behaviours. In terms of explanation, Cutrona and Troutman draw from Bandura’s (1977) concept of self-efficacy. Thus by providing an informal social support context, where parents raise their self-efficacy levels, parents will be less affected by the factors associated with living in poverty thus having a direct impact upon their parenting behaviours. Therefore social support, within this context, is understood to be a protective factor for the parents, and ultimately for the children, involved. ‘Women who had other people on whom they could rely for a variety of social provisions had more confidence in their ability to perform well as mothers, and this confidence, in turn, was an effective deterrent to depression,’ (Cutrona & Troutman, 1986: 1515).
The subjective nature of informal social support

Interestingly, it is the subjective perception of parents concerning the level and quality of the informal social support that they receive which has relevance for their ability to enhance their parenting (House et al, 1988; Lakey & Lutz, 1996). This understanding is supported by Ghate and Hazel’s research (2002) which shows that it is the perceived affiliative quality of informal support relationships that is critical to the effectiveness of the support network. Supportive relationships, which appropriately combine physical proximity and emotional connectedness, often provide a clearly constructed support framework. Thus the sense of being supported is found to be just as important as any actual practical advantage acquired. ‘How parents feel (that is whether they perceive themselves as supported) may be just as, or more, important than any objective assessment of how that support manifests itself,’ (Ghate & Hazel, 2002:127).

Informal support networks, however, may not always have a positive impact. There is an emerging body of research that suggests that sometimes informal support systems can result in a parent encountering a negative experience. This “negative support” clearly does not meet the needs of the parent and often the support received is deemed damaging, critical or antagonistic (Hogan, 2002; Ruehlman & Karoly, 1991). Ghate and Hazel (2002) explore this concept of perceived or actual negative support, which acknowledges the potential disadvantages of informal social support, particularly in contexts of poverty. Their work highlights the possible negative effects, in terms of interference, the intrusion of privacy and feelings of indebtedness, when high levels of support are engaged. Their research reveals the need of the parent to reciprocate an equal level of support within the relational context to ensure feelings of obligation or indebtedness do not ensue. Dakof and
Taylor’s research (1990) shows that negative support from peers, in particular, leads to a variety of difficulties, such as rejection, withdrawal and communication issues. ‘Thus, the kind of support, who provides the support, and the contextual issues all play a role in determining whether support is perceived as beneficial,’ (Hogan, 2002: 428). Lepore’s work (1992) finds that in these incidences if the perceived levels of positive support can be raised, potentially by developing other positive social relationships, then the negative effects of other relationships are lessened. Thus his work shows that including additional friendship relationships within any intervention often negates some of the negative support received from other members of an individual’s social support network.

**Research methodology**

To support the work of The Birkenhead Foundation Years Project a phenomenological scoping study was undertaken to situate, analyse and synthesise the experiences of parents living in poverty in terms of their participation in informal social support networks and the impact that these networks can have on their experience of parenting children in their early years. Specifically the study sought to investigate the subjective experience of parents accessing community-based toddler groups as a form of support.

The aim of this initial study was to ascertain the reasons for parents’ involvement in these informal support interventions, over more formal interventions, specifically in relation to parental mental well-being, parental warmth and nurturing, and parental informal learning concerning effective parenting. The aim ultimately was to begin to understand the impact of this support intervention on the home environment for children in their early years. Interestingly all of the toddler groups researched were run by Church groups as the vast
majority of the local non-statutory toddler group provision within the locality investigated was offered by faith groups. The location of the toddler groups attended varied and included areas of economic deprivation and economic affluence so that conclusions concerning the support for those parenting within the context of poverty, in comparison to those parenting in a context of affluence, could be drawn. The toddler groups run in the areas of economic deprivation were all linked with The Birkenhead Foundation Years Project and thus the outcomes of the study were of significance to their work.

The use of a qualitative research method, namely phenomenology, was agreed as, unlike other methods, the aim of this method is to understand an experience through the perceptions’ of the individuals involved. Any preconceived ideas or explanations are “bracketed” or side-lined so that the subjective experience of the participant dominates (Groenewald, 2004). The key feature that this method values is that of lived experience and subjective viewpoint (Titchen & Hobson in Somekh & Lewin, 2011). For this study the use of phenomenology was employed as it ‘focuses on the inter-subjective constitution of the social world and everyday social life,’ (Walsh in Seale, 2012: 246). Thus it understands the world as experienced and subjective; an individual’s experience is primary (Titchen & Hobson in Somekh & Lewin, 2011). As stated previously it is the parent’s subjective opinion of their informal social support networks that is of most importance if parents are to feel genuinely supported. Therefore employing a research method which sought to understand what it is like for parents to experience a particular phenomenon, namely their experience of informal support, was crucial. This research method was therefore employed as it places peoples’ lived understanding at the focus of the study to ensure the subjective view of the
participants themselves was gained in an attempt to expose the specific and subjective nature of the parents’ experience.

For this to take place, data was collected from a series of interviews that took place at five toddler groups in Wirral over the course of a two-month period. The parents were asked to share their reasons for accessing the toddler group that they attended and their views concerning any benefits that they derived from the experience for themselves and for their child. Fifty-four short interviews were undertaken which took account of the limited time that parents could give to answering questions whilst seeking to care for their child at the same time. Two of the toddler groups were run in West Wirral (an area of very low levels of child poverty) and three of the toddler groups were run in East Wirral (an area of high levels of child poverty) thus there was diversity gained from engaging with parents with differing socio-economic backgrounds. The parents from all groups were asked the same set of questions. The great majority of those interviewed were mothers, although there were a small number of fathers, grandparents and child-minders questioned too. The age range of those questioned varied and there was a range of family situations represented including single parents, step families and extended families.

A team of two researchers visited the toddler groups whilst the group was taking place and invited parents present at the group to briefly answer the questions posed whilst their child played within view. Participants were encouraged to share their reasons for being present at the group; what they felt they received from the group; what they felt their child received from the group; and who they had outside of the group to support them with raising their child. Written notes were taken during the interviews which took between 5 and 10
minutes. The decision was made not to record these interviews as it was understood that this might put parents off participating. The written research notes were instead fully transcribed. Additionally, the researcher took field notes during the visit to note the layout of the room/s, the engagement of the parents with each other and the general social rapport experienced within the facility. Through this means the researcher was able to construct a detailed understanding concerning the reasons why parents were accessing these toddler groups and any difference between the reasons cited from the parents from differing socio-economic backgrounds.

The use of basic Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was undertaken to interpret the findings. This is where the analyst seeks to explore particular personal stories, accepting that they are the product of individual acts of interpretation ... IPA seeks to know how the world appears to the individual and to convey unique meaning by placing the informant as the expert or the “knower,” (Griffin & May in Seale, 2012: 448).

Thus the researcher sought to “truly listen” to the parent’s experiences of everyday life which could reveal important insights regarding the phenomena under investigation (Miller & Sambell, 2003). The researcher recognised that although they themselves could not be directly involved in the parents’ lives they could gain insight by closely attending to what the participants told them. Through the analysis process the researcher aimed to identify the reasons parents gave for engaging with the toddler group and sought to identify how parents understood the informal support the group provided. This involved the co-researchers meeting toanalyse the data sets and the use of coding principles to identify the reasons as to why parents were engaging with the groups.
Research results and discussion

Through the exploration of parents’ experiences within the various localities the research identified that parents accessed toddler groups for two main reasons. The second reason, which was identified by parents to a lesser extent, was their desire to support their child’s development. Typical comments included ‘Lola is learning to share with others [at the toddler group], she is learning from other children not just from me,’ and ‘My child is gaining confidence, her speech and language is developing.’ However, the primary reason, which was clearly identified by parents in a prolific and significant way, was that they were accessing community-based toddler groups for parental informal social support. Thus when asked why they attended the toddler groups, the research participants, who were mothers in the main, clearly stated that they were attending for personal, social reasons. Typical comments which were repeated consistently included, ‘It [the group] gives me time to talk to my friends,’ ‘I know my child is safe whilst I socialise,’ and ‘I can meet people.’ This finding supports the work of Edwards and Gillies (2004) whose work shows that informal social networks are a fundamental source of authentic support for parents.

The social interaction identified through the research was sometimes recognised as a surface level engagement. However, many of the parents went on to elucidate how the level of interaction often involved an important level of depth. This was evidenced in comments such as ‘The group provides me with peer support,’ ‘I’m able to talk through difficult situations with my friends,’ ‘I like speaking to other people who are going through the same thing as me,’ and ‘I can talk to other parents about the challenges I face.’ Interestingly the results showed that all parents, irrespective of their socio-economic
situation, were accessing the groups primarily for this reason. It seems that all parents valued the opportunity to engage socially with other parents within a setting where their children could play. A significant number of participants, again from both socio-economic settings, were parenting alone or just with their partner. They had little or no extended family living locally and thus many of the research participants relied on friendships for social support. This was evidenced in statements such as ‘I have a partner but no extended family so the group is a massive part of my support network’ and ‘I have just my husband, no family and limited friends, so the group is crucial.’ This finding corroborates Edward and Gillies research (2004) that shows that friendships are often fundamental to the positive experience of those parenting young children. Ghate and Hazel’s work (2002), which reveals that most parents have a positive informal support network of at least three people, is also supported through the study.

The research findings showed that very few of the participants from the economically deprived areas were attending statutory provision, for example Children’s Centres, although these facilitates were available in the vicinity. Again this finding supports a range of previous research findings that show that parents, particularly those parenting in areas of economic deprivation, are less likely to access formal support interventions (Heinrichs et al, 2005; Forehand & Kotchik, 2002; Peter et al, 2005). This finding supports the work of Whittaker and Cowley (2012) and Attree (2004) who show that often the lives of families living in poverty can be complicated and that parents in these situations may feel less inclined to engage with formal patterns of support. Thus the research found that these highly popular, community-run toddler groups were providing opportunities that parents of
children in their early years required; this was the opportunity to build informal social relationships.

The research showed these informal social relationships were important to parents in two respects. Firstly, the informal support networks maintained parental mental well-being. Parents consistently and emphatically spoke of the importance of the groups for ensuring that they ‘got out of the house’ and were provided with some ‘adult company.’ Typical comments included ‘It gives me an excuse to get out of the house or I’d go stir-crazy,’ ‘I attend the toddler group for some sanity,’ ‘It’s a stress relief knowing you can escape,’ and ‘To fill my day. To give purpose to my day.’ This research finding supports the work of Cutrona and Troutman (1986) who show the value of informal support for mothers suffering from maternal postpartum depression. The research showed that although this correlation between attendance at a toddler group and the support of parental mental well-being was clearly evident in both research groups, parents living in the lower socio-economic locations referred to this attribute more often. Thus it was clear from the research that many of the parents living in areas of economic deprivation accessed the toddler groups to support their personal mental well-being, whether that be a diagnosed mental illness or general mental health, through the support that the groups provided. Therefore parents’ mental well-being is supported through the informal peer relationships developed within the context of a community toddler group; this has direct relevance for the outcomes of Field’s Review (2010) and has implications for the work of the Foundation Years Trust and the Birkenhead Foundation Years Project.
Secondly, the research showed that the social support networks provided the parents with informal peer parenting education. Parents regularly and explicitly told of the value of the relationships that they formed in the groups in terms of ‘chatting to like-minded mums’ and ‘sharing experiences about parenting.’ This was evidenced in statements like ‘I like to see how the other mums deal with their children,’ ‘I receive peer education concerning feeding, sleep patterns,’ ‘I attend the group because I value the parenting support I receive,’ and ‘I like speaking to other mums who have just been through it - we can share experiences.’ This research finding supports the work of Cochran (1990) who shows the value of the social support relationship, in terms of its influence upon a parent’s child-rearing attitudes and behaviours, and the ensuing indirect impact that this can have upon the child in their early years. Again the results showed that although this association between attendance at a toddler group and the provision of informal peer parenting education was distinct for both research groups, parents living in the lower socio-economic locations again made reference to this feature more consistently. It was apparent from the research that many of the parents living in areas of economic deprivation accessed the toddler groups to engage in informal peer parenting education through the support that the groups provided. Therefore parents’ ability to nurture their child and their potential to develop the home environment are enhanced through the informal peer parenting education experienced within the context of a community toddler group. This has direct relevance for the outcomes of Field’s Review (2010) and has implications for the work of the Birkenhead Foundation Years Project.

Conclusion
The main finding of this study was that the majority of parents, from both research groups, accessing toddler groups were doing so for the informal social support that they provided. This has major significance for The Birkenhead Foundation Years Project which is seeking to develop and establish a model that seeks to address some of the major factors that inhibit a child reaching their full potential later in life. This includes the home learning environment, parental warmth and sensitivity and parental mental health. It can be said all of these factors are directly and indirectly addressed within the informal relationships developed within the context of these community run toddler groups.

The purpose of this research was to undertake a brief scoping study. Part of this research was to identify individuals from the toddler groups who would be interested in partaking in a year-long ethnographic study to further understand the experience of those parenting children in their early years, whilst living in poor circumstances, in terms of the support that these individuals may or may not receive. The year-long study will attempt to further support the work of The Birkenhead Foundation Years Project, as well as inform wider academic understanding and practitioner application, and will seek to understand on an individual basis, in regards to Field’s Review (2010), the impact of informal social support upon factors such as the parents’ ongoing mental well-being, their capacity to nurture their children and their ongoing ability to develop the home environment through informal peer parenting education.

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