Nurture groups and parent-child relationships

Exploring parents' and children's perceptions of nurture groups and the ways in which they impact upon parent-child relationships

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ABSTRACT

There is currently very little research investigating the impact of nurture groups on children in their home context, particularly with regard to changes in the parent-child relationship. Where a positive impact upon this relationship has been previously found (e.g. Binnie & Allen, 2008, Cooper & Whitebread, 2007), the underlying processes have received little attention. The aim of this research was to explore both parents' and pupils' perceptions of the impact of nurture groups on the parent-child relationship.

This purely qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to gain the views of parents (n=12), and three focus groups to harness the perceptions of the pupils in primary school new-variant nurture groups (n= 11). The data was analysed using an adaptation of Strauss and Corbin's Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

The key findings included the parents' perception that their children had lower anxiety and increased confidence as a result of the nurture group intervention. They also perceived there to be a change in their interactions at home, with the children being more communicative, more affectionate, and having fewer emotional outbursts. The children's views were largely consistent with those of their parents.

The interviews also unveiled that some parents knew very little about the nurture groups, their aims, and the expected outcomes. The implications of this for children, nurture group practitioners and educational psychologists are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Nurture groups are small classes that aim to provide a safe, secure environment for children to develop their social, emotional and behavioural skills (Boxall 2002). The classic nurture groups described by Boxall (2002) would involve 10-12 pupils usually in primary school settings, as well as two members of staff; a teacher and a teaching assistant. The children would spend the majority of their time in this setting within the school, and receive highly structured and supported learning experiences. Children generally spend around two terms in this provision, as an early intervention to remove the barriers that social, emotional or behavioural difficulties may place upon their academic progress. New-variant nurture groups follow the same principles as the classic model, but differ in terms of the structure or organisation. For example, they may run on a part-time basis in which the children spend anywhere from half a day, to four days per week in the nurture group.

The impact of early parent-child relationships

According to Boxall (2000) some children are unable to organise themselves and behave in a way that is appropriate to meet expectations when they first start school. She explained that the reason for this often lies in their early experiences, such as having a mother who was unable to respond sensitively to their needs, or the interaction between the parent and child being impaired or disrupted in some way (e.g. childcare arrangements). She added that some parents may not have the experience or capacity to deal with their child's challenging behaviour; becoming stressed and unpredictable. According to Bowlby's (1969) Attachment Theory, this can result in children feeling confused, lacking a sense of stability, having minimal trust in adults, and low self-confidence. When these children begin school, this lack of trust in adults can mean they have difficulty accepting the teacher, and struggle to adapt to the routines of the classroom. These social and emotional skills are essential in being able to learn within the classroom, and therefore for some children who have not had the opportunity to develop these skills in their early lives for whatever reason, nurture groups seek to provide an environment within which these early experiences can be recreated, and skills nurtured.

Nurture groups and parent-child relationships
Research has found that not only do nurture groups have a positive impact upon children's social, emotional and academic skills, but they can also have a positive effect on parent-child relationships. For example, March & Healy (2007) found that the words that parents chose to describe their children were significantly more positive following the intervention, with many specifically commenting on

how the communication and relationship between them and their child had improved. Cooper, Arnold & Boyd (2001) also reported 'clear evidence' (p.164) of an improvement in relations, with parents feeling less anxiety and more optimism with regard to their child's development. In addition, Cooper & Whitebread (2007) found that some parents reported dramatic improvements in their relationships with their children, with many attributing this change to the improvement of their child's behaviour at school. This study accessed a large number of parents from a variety of nurture groups, suggesting that these findings may be generalised more widely.

Despite being a relatively frequently reported benefit of the nurture group intervention, only one piece of research has attempted to explore the process underlying the change in the parent-child relationship. Taylor & Gulliford (2011) conducted semi-structured interviews with parents, and nurture group staff in two neighbouring counties in the Midlands. They found that the most consistently occurring observation from parents following the Nurture Group was an improvement in communication and interaction at home. The parents commented that they felt less stressed, and felt happier seeing their child happy. Taylor & Gulliford used a transactional model to explain the change in the relationship between the child and their parent. They suggested that some parents may feel rejected when their child seems uncommunicative, and therefore when the child comes home and begins to talk about the nurture group with their parent, the parent feels less rejected and reacts more positively towards the child. In turn, the parent will give more praise to the child, altering their parenting style, resulting in the child feeling more responsive and secure. This is an interesting explanation for the change, however Taylor and Gulliford (2011) only explored the parent-child relationship from the parents' perspective, and as such may not give a valid representation.

The voice of the child

It is particularly interesting how few research studies have investigated the children's perceptions of nurture groups, given the general increase in research seeking the child's perspective over recent years (Reid et al 2010). This research will seek to understand the process underlying any changes in the parent-child relationship following the nurture group intervention. However, as well as understanding the perspective of parents, the child's voice will also be sought, as this is an area that is as yet unexplored.

Method
Data for this qualitative study were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus groups to explore the following research questions:
1. How do nurture groups impact on the parent-child relationships?
2. How do parents explain any changes in their relationship with their child?
3. How do children explain any changes in their relationship with their parents?

Interviews
The participants recruited for the semi-structured interviews were 12 parents (accessed through 10 interviews) of children (sex- m = 7, f = 3) aged between four and seven (mean = 5.9 years) in nurture groups in primary schools in a large county in the South-East of England.

The selection criteria for the parents were as follows;
- All had children who were currently in the nurture group or left the nurture group within the last term.
- Children had to be in a classic or new-variant nurture group.
- Children must be aged between four and 11 years old.
- Children must be in a nurture group within a mainstream primary school.
- Children must not have been diagnosed with a developmental or medical condition that may affect their social and emotional development (e.g. autistic spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).
- The children had to have been in the nurture group for at least two terms to measure the impact.
- Children must not have been taking part in any other intervention for social and emotional skills whilst in the nurture group.
- Parents must not have been taking part in a parenting programme during the time in which their child was in the nurture group.

The interviews took place in quiet, private rooms, either within school or at home if that was felt to be more convenient for the families involved. The interviews consisted of a set of pre-determined open questions and these varied according to the findings of previous interviews. The interview schedule was developed through consideration of several factors; the target audience, the research questions, and pre-existing research.

Focus groups
Focus groups were also conducted with children in three of the nurture groups. The focus groups each involved four children and were held in three of the schools from which the parents were selected.

One of the focus groups involved children who were all in Year 2, another involved children in Year 4, and a third involved children from Year 1 (average age 7.4 years). Overall, the views of 12 children were collected (11 of which were analysed), with their ages ranging between six and nine years (six boys, five girls). The children were all receiving the intervention at the time of the focus group, having been in the nurture group for at least two terms (average duration of intervention was 3.4 terms); or had finished the intervention within the last term (with the exception of one child whose data was not included in the analysis). In two of the focus groups, one of the children was the son/daughter of the parents involved in the semi-structured interviews, allowing for a direct triangulation of views. To measure the impact of the nurture group the children involved were not receiving other forms of therapeutic intervention. The children were given an explanation of the purpose of the group

at the outset and asked for informed consent. The children were asked to answer and discuss open questions that were explained in a straightforward manner, and each focus group took place within the nurture room, in the school setting.

Data analysis

The interviews and focus groups were recorded on a dictaphone and transcribed. A grounded theory approach was used during the data collection and analysis. Grounded theory is a qualitative approach originally developed by Glaser & Strauss (1968), and is concerned with the development of new theory that is grounded in the data, rather than the verification of existing theory (Strauss & Corbin 1998). The Strauss & Corbin (1998) model provided a structured framework for the collection, and coding of the data, from which theory was developed.

Findings

Parent perceptions

How do nurture groups impact on the parent-child relationships?

Parenting style. Some parents were able to identify clearly how their relationships with their children had changed while the children were in the nurture group. Several commented that they now shout at their children less.

" *I don't shout at him as much, that's about it. Not moaning at him as often.* "
(Interview 8)

Some felt that this was because the children had developed more understanding of their parents' demands; others reported that as the children's behaviour at school improved, it meant they could be more positive with them in the home context, while one other said that it was something that she herself had identified as something she needed to control.

" *I do shout at him less, yes, definitely, because I have to learn to control that as well.* "
(Interview 3)

Attachment style. Another parent commented that his relationship with his child had changed because the child had become more affectionate.

" *I came home from work the other day and he came out of the room to give me a hug and told me that he loved me, which doesn't happen a lot, but he does that. I suppose that didn't happen last year.* "
(Interview 10)

The majority of parents highlighted a reduction in anxiety, particularly towards unfamiliar adults. There was also a reduction in separation anxiety, with some of the children being able to stay the night away from their parents for the first time.

" *I can just go and I don't have to worry about him screaming and fighting….so that has got better* "
(Interview 7)

Reduction in outbursts. The parents observed that the children were more able to share their attention following the intervention. The children were also described as being more understanding, and as having fewer emotional outbursts, arguably making parent-child interactions easier.

" *Yeah actually, things don't go flying any more. He used to, when he was in a strop the chair would go flying or something…but he doesn't do that any more so thinking about it, it must have done something good!* "
(Interview 8)

Increased communication. Many of the children had also become more communicative, speaking more freely about school and the nurture group to their parents.

" *He's more confident with children and he's socialising with children of his own age, and he's coming home and talking about friends and things.* "
(Interview 6)

How do parents explain any changes in the relationship with their child?

Increased attention in the nurture group. It was clear from the data that parents saw two main attributes of nurture groups as being responsible for the changes that they saw in their children. These were the small group size, and the relationships that the children had with the nurture group staff.

" *…he does work better in small groups because he does listen more rather, because he is easily distracted in a class of 28, he's just lost.* "
(Interview 7)

" *…it's quite good as well because I confer with [nurture leader] and X will tell her stuff that she won't mention to me so…* "
(Interview 4)

The parents felt that these factors allowed the children to be given more attention, which often benefited them academically. It was also expressed that the exclusivity of the nurture groups made the children feel special, boosting their confidence and giving them a sense of belonging.

" *I think now she's confident because she knows there is a few more children that are like her, she's not the only one.* "
(Interview 2)

" *I think he just loves the whole thing, I think he feels special.* "
(Interview 10)

However, the increased attention was also seen as a drawback, as it frequently meant that the children were more demanding of their parents and expected more time and attention from them; something that they were often unable to provide.

" *I feel like because she is getting the one-to-one at school, the teachers giving her all ears, she expects that at home and I can't do that at home all the time. And then she feels a bit pushed back. Which I feel is the negative side of this.* "
(Interview 2)

There seemed to be a sense of guilt and resentment that accompanied this, as many of the parents went on to describe the other demands placed upon their time such as work, or younger siblings requiring care. This is a finding that has not been raised by previous research and therefore warrants further exploration.

Biological maturation. There was a reluctance at times to attribute changes in the children to the nurture group, with parents often finding it difficult to discriminate between changes that occurred due to the child's age and stage of development, and changes that were as a result of the nurture group.

" …*where she's growing up, she's different as well, so I don't know exactly what has made her different.* "
(Interview 1)

At times this seemed to be due to a lack of understanding about the function, aims and expected outcomes of the nurture groups; with parents focusing on problem behaviour, rather than social and emotional development.

Despite this, all of the parents noticed differences in their children. The majority of the parents cited their children as being more confident and more independent, as also found by March & Healy (2007).

" *I think she has got more independent as well since she's been here…I'm sure the group has helped.* "
(Interview 4)

Pupil perceptions

How do nurture groups impact on the parent-child relationships?

Better behaviour. Most of the children admitted that they were better behaved at home following the intervention, meaning that they got into trouble less with their parents. They felt that this was mainly due to being taught to listen in the nurture group, and also because they were now more helpful at home.

" *Because the nurture group says that you should listen more, because I'm not being told off now because I listen to my mum.* "
(Focus Group 2)

" *I help and my little brother tries to do the hoover and when my mum comes in and says 'let me do it' then I do it and I tidy up.* "
(Focus Group 1)

Increased communication. The children also felt that they were more communicative, and that they were more likely to talk to their parents about school. One child elaborated on this, explaining that being in the nurture group gave her something to talk about that her parents might show an interest in.

" *I really like the feeling when I go home because when I say something like new every time, like, or like when I said I have toast and stuff, I feel like because like, I feel like my parents haven't done that when they were little like these kind of stuff, so they could be interested in it.* "
(Focus Group 2)

This supports the transactional model described by Taylor & Gulliford (2011), but adds a twist, suggesting that as the pupils become more communicative, the parents reciprocate because it is of interest to them, rather than being because they feel less rejected, as originally suggested by Taylor & Gulliford (2011). Some of the other children commented that they were more communicative because they now had positive feedback to share with their parents, suggesting an improvement in self-image following the intervention.

" *I talk to my parents and tell them that I've been good at school.* "
(Focus Group 1)

How do children explain any changes in the relationship with their parents?

The children felt that there were three key factors which had contributed to the effectiveness of the nurture group. One was that it was fun that made them enjoy school more and increased their overall feelings of happiness when at school; the second was the relationship they had with each other and the staff (as found by Cooper, Arnold & Boyd, 2001); and the final one was the fact that it was a small group.

Small group size. This seemed important to them as it allowed them to gain the confidence to speak and the ability to listen to others. They particularly liked that they were given attention in the small group and were listened to.
" *I like coming to the nurture group because it's a smaller group and the people are my friends and I like learning new skills, but sometimes in class I get shy when I speak.* "
(Focus Group 2)

" …*it really helps me being in a small group because I can easier answer questions, but when I'm in a whole class, I mean a big class, it's hard for me to get the teacher's attention because there's 30 of us.* "
(Focus Group 2)

This allowed them to learn valuable speaking and listening skills which they felt impacted on their relationships with their parents, as they were able to listen more carefully to avoid getting into trouble, and were more confident in speaking about school, particularly as they had enjoyed it so much. The small group size is not a factor that has been specifically raised in past research, however factors such as it being a 'safe', 'calm' environment have (Cooper, Arnold & Boyd 2001). This highlights the possibility that these are the attributes of the small group that allow the children to develop their speaking and listening skills, and to feel more confident.

Maturity. The children seemed to show signs that they had changed in the way that they perceived themselves as a result of accessing the nurture group; viewing themselves as more outgoing, brave and mature. The children described themselves before as being nervous and easily upset, but felt that they had now become more grown up.

" *I was quite nervous and well not really used to things like this, like having to learn in a small group, and also, well I got told I was a bit mature now, but I felt like I can be grown up now, and can be ready for things.* "
(Focus Group 2)

Discussion

Similarities between the parent and child perspectives

Overall there are some striking similarities between the pupil perceptions and the parent perceptions. Both the parents and children highlighted the small group size and nurture group staff as being of key importance in the progress that was made. They both mentioned the impact of the relationships built with the staff, and also that the increased attention was a benefit. Parents were aware of this aspect of the nurture group intervention and felt it was very beneficial to their children in terms of their social, emotional and academic development. Both parents and the children identified that the children were more communicative and willing to talk about school following the intervention. This finding was previously explained by Taylor & Gulliford (2011) using a transactional model (Christenson 2004). This is the idea that a change in the behaviour of the child can act as a catalyst for further positive interactions between the child and adult. Taylor and Gulliford (2011) used the model to explain how an increase in communication can lead to a parent feeling less rejected, meaning that they then react more positively towards the child.

In the current research, this model would provide a useful way to explain the changes in the interactions between the parent and child. For instance, the children became more communicative, perhaps as one child suggested, because they had something to discuss that they felt would interest the adult. The parents then felt more positive towards the child as they were able to engage in mutually interesting conversation. This may have led to the children feeling less rejected, therefore behaving better through being given attention in a more constructive way; meaning that the adult shouted less and responded to the child more positively. Finally, this may have led to increased affection from the child due to the improvement in the relationship, and a desire for more time together.

Differences between the parent and child perspectives

It is interesting that the 'fun' aspect that was so important to the children did not emerge from the parent data. One parent actually expressed concern at the fact that they just 'played' in the nurture group. This aspect is clearly of less value to the parent group, and perhaps indicates a lack of understanding of the role of a nurture group in providing early learning opportunities through meeting the child at their developmental level.

The parents identified that the children were more understanding following the intervention. While the children did not use this term, they explained that they were now more helpful at home and listened better, which may be interpreted by their parents as them being more understanding. The pupils also considered themselves to be more mature, which is consistent with the aim of nurture to provide missed opportunities to support emotional, social and academic wellbeing. This was mentioned by several of the focus groups, but not once by the parents. With some of the parents preferring to attribute progress to biological development, rather than the nurture group, perhaps this maturity underpins all of the progress made, and may be more to do with experience of the nurture group rather than biological development, as believed by the parents.

The current findings have clear links to attachment theory, the rationale upon which nurture groups are based (Bennathan & Boxall 2000). Both parents and the pupils acknowledged the importance of the close relationship built with nurture group staff. According to attachment theory, this nurturing, predictable relationship provides a safe base to explore surroundings, supporting children's social and cognitive development. This may explain why the children felt more 'mature', as they had been provided with the missed nurturing opportunities that they needed in order to develop those skills. The parents commented that the children had lower anxiety, particularly in relation to unfamiliar adults, and also lower separation anxiety.

Both of these concepts (stranger anxiety and separation anxiety) are characteristic of an insecurely attached child (Ainsworth 1978), suggesting that the nurture group may have helped the children to become more securely attached to their primary caregiver or caregivers. This may be the process by which the children became more independent and more affectionate towards their parents.

Limitations

There were some methodological issues that may have impacted on the validity of the findings. First, it was decided that in order to allow the children to feel safe and comfortable, the nurture group practitioners would be invited to remain in the room during the focus group with the children. This may have impacted on the answers that the children gave, particularly as they were asked about their views of the nurture group staff. Therefore, their views were portrayed more positively than they may otherwise have been if the staff had not been present. However, the data from the parents did support that the children perceived the nurture group staff very positively, and not allowing the nurture group staff to be present may have made the children less comfortable and less willing to talk. For this reason, it could also have been criticised as being unethical.

A further criticism is of the sampling technique used. Parents were accessed through schools, and those who volunteered were chosen to be interviewed. It was felt that this sampling technique was necessary as the group have been difficult to access in previous research (Garner & Thomas 2011). However, this may have meant that those parents who agreed to take part in the research were those that had experienced a good outcome from the nurture group intervention. Also, it is likely that the nurture group staff would only have asked those parents they knew would portray the nurture group in a positive way. Therefore, there is a chance that the findings of the research may have a positive bias. For this reason, in future research a random sampling technique would allow for a more representative sample to be drawn in which the nurture group staff are not responsible for the selection of participants.

Focus groups were chosen as a methodology that would be suitable for primary school children, so they would not feel uncomfortable and intimidated in speaking alone to a stranger. This methodology allowed the children to express their views openly, but with the youngest group (aged five to six years) in particular, there was little interaction between the children, and they looked to the researcher constantly to facilitate. Researcher input was also necessary frequently to involve pupils who were less involved than

others, and the methodology posed a particular challenge to those children who experienced language and communication difficulties. In the future, focus groups would still be an appropriate methodology to engage the pupils in a relaxed manner around the table in the nurture room, but more explicit instructions may need to be given to encourage them to discuss each question among themselves, as it is likely to be a new experience for them.

Alternatively, for the younger pupils a group interview may be more appropriate as it would provide the more adult-led format with which they are familiar, as well as scaffolding their speech and language needs.

Implications

As a qualitative piece of research, with a small sample size, the aim of this study was not to make generalisations to nurture groups on a wider scale. However, there were some findings that if supported by larger scale research, may have implications for nurture group staff, parents of children in nurture groups, and also educational psychologists.

Implications for staff and parents. One of the key implications of this research for nurture group staff is with regard to their communications with parents. Overall, parents knew very little about nurture groups, their aims, the activities the children do, or the expected outcomes. This meant that the nurture groups were sometimes perceived with suspicion and negativity as parents felt excluded. Very few of the parents knew what the nurture groups set out to achieve and therefore were sometimes unwilling to attribute the changes that they had noticed to the nurture group. Although this may not be generalizable to other nurture groups, it supports similar concerns raised by Kourmoulaki (2013), and highlights the importance of communication with parents. Ideally, nurture group practitioners should involve parents throughout the intervention, through inviting them to visit and meet other parents. This is of particular importance at the beginning of the intervention so that parents have a full understanding of why their child has been recommended to participate in the nurture group.

In some cases, it may be that the parents of children in nurture groups are also vulnerable, and would benefit from a nurturing intervention themselves. The Estyn report (2013) exploring the impact of poverty on children in Wales, highlighted a case study in which a school had set up a 'family nurture room', where the family also attended the nurture group several times per week. Running the intervention in this way would inform and involve parents, while educating them in the principles of nurture, and supporting the parent-child relationship.

Implications for educational psychologists (EPs) EPs have a role in educating nurture practitioners in the importance of involving parents and communicating with them openly. Where parents are being excluded, or there is unethical practice (e.g. calling nurture groups 'social skills groups' and not discussing the true aims), the EP should act as a critical friend, promoting ethical practice to ensure that parents are treated fairly. EPs could achieve this through supporting nurture group practitioners in developing information leaflets about nurture groups for parents so that they are fully informed in a diplomatic and sensitive way.

CONCLUSION

The current study explored the impact of the nurture group intervention upon parent-child relationships. The findings suggest that both parents and children are able to identify several ways in which their interactions had changed as a result of the intervention, including increased communication and affection. The key factors perceived as being responsible for these changes included the small group size, and the relationship that the children develop with the nurture group staff. Despite the majority of parents holding nurture groups in high regard, this research supported other research in this field in finding that parents had little knowledge and understanding of the nurture group intervention. This implies that practitioners may require support in being confident to discuss the nurture group intervention openly and honestly with parents.

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