

**Radio Four
Woman's Hour Transcript
"How the fear of being judged stops parents seeking help"
Mary Crowley and Dorit Braun
Wednesday 6th March 2008**

Jane Garvey: The phone-in we had last week on motherhood really did illustrate just how difficult many of us find parenting. One of the hardest aspects of all, perhaps, is admitting that you might need help. How do you get good support without also being labelled a 'bad parent' or much worse, a risk to your own child?

Case Study 1: After a traumatic labour and delivery with my first baby I developed post-traumatic stress disorder, so when I became pregnant again and felt overwhelmed by the fear that I would suffer the same experience I asked my GP to refer me to the local perinatal unit. I thought they would offer support and counselling to help me through the pregnancy and birth – how wrong and naive I was. After four short sessions with the psychiatrist my case was referred to the child protection team and my family and I were subjected to a shocking and aggressive investigation by social services. It was decided not to take the matter any further as long as I behaved myself but this disquieting experience made the last three months of my pregnancy hell. Fortunately, everything went well the second time round but ten months on I still have nightmares about the whole social services affair. I also live in fear that anything I say to my GP or local health-visitor can be used against me and that I can be referred back to social services at any time for further investigation.

Case Study 2: Because my son's disabled, I had to have contact with quite a few professionals and I found that in some cases, rather than try to work with me, it seemed to be easier to label me as a difficult mother because I was asking for things that my son wanted. I found that other people were very judgemental when they came to visit, implying things like if your house was tidy, you cared too much about your house and not enough about your child and that might imply you weren't a good enough mother. I just found that there was always someone sitting in judgement of me. I found it very, very difficult and was conscious all the time of everything that I did.

Case Study 3: The problem with parenthood in general is there is so much expectation on everyone to be a perfect mother and everyone to do a fantastic job with their kid. If you admit that it's difficult and you're not coping and certainly if you admit to the professional establishment that it's difficult and you're not coping, then the fear is you'll always be labelled that way. You'll always been seen as someone who can't do even the most basic thing in life, which is to raise your children.

Case Study 4: I got postnatal depression after the birth of my second child and after having it for about a month, I decided to go and seek help from the doctor. I went to the doctor because I knew the doctor would be highly confidential. The last person I would have thought of going to would have been my health visitor. You hear stories of health visitors giving people questionable advice and not being very

helpful and also classifying you as not being a very fit mother, not being able to cope with your children and I never wanted that on my record. Irrationally in my hazy mind I think I thought that there was probably the risk of people coming round, checking up on me and checking my house. So it was all completely paranoid thinking but it really did put me off the idea of going to the health visitor.

Jane Garvey: Well there were the experiences of some of the listeners who contacted the programme after the phone in with Jenny last week. Well today the Government has announced a new package of support for parents focusing on new technologies like the internet and text-messaging. So what is the best way to support parents and allow them to feel entirely free to talk? Dorit Braun is the Chief Executive of Parentline Plus and Mary Crowley is the Stakeholder Advisor of the very grand sounding National Academy for Parenting Practitioners. I think it's fair to say Mary that you had some trouble with the title, didn't you?

Mary Crowley: Well the title does describe what we are really, but perhaps to many people parenting practitioners are the mysterious part and we use the word practitioner to talk about people who are working to provide services and support to parents. We try to avoid the word 'professional' because there is a tendency to think of a professional as somebody in a white coat who talks down to parents as some of your correspondents were describing and we want to avoid that image. So we call ourselves The National Academy for Parenting Practitioners because we're not offering services directly to parents. We were set up to, and our mission is to, transform the size and quality of the parenting workforce so that parents can get the help they need to raise their children well.

Jane Garvey: You're a government body with a budget of how much money?

Mary Crowley: We have £30 million over three years which sounds like a lot but there is a lot to do with it because we have three arms to our work. We're mounting a training programme in partnership with other providers, we're developing a programme of research so that we can know that the work we're doing has an evidence base and we're not just trying out our own ideas, that there is actually a solid basis for it. We're also sharing information with people who are working in this area and providing a whole regional network to help policy makers and service providers at local and regional level.

Jane Garvey: And the reason I hadn't heard of you is because you are in fact new, aren't you?

Mary Crowley: We launched in November so we're very new indeed.

Jane Garvey: Ok and Dorit Baun, Parentline Plus is a charity isn't it?

Dorit Braun: Yes it is, yes. We're an independent charity and we've been going for quite a long time and we provide a wide range of support services to parents including a 24-hour parent line.

Jane Garvey: So let's go through, not in detail, those experiences we just heard about where the gist of it was that at times, one parent in particular felt that the might of the state had descended upon her when all she did was express some misgivings about what she was going through. That's not satisfactory is it Mary?

Mary Crowley: It's one of the reasons that the Academy was set up, to transform the quality of the workforce because people who work with parents should work with them in a helpful and respectful way not in condemning them. Parents are doing the best job they can so when they seek help, they need someone who respects them and who is alongside them, not talking down to them. Many people who have been doing the best they could in their jobs up to now do not get the kind of training that they needed. The national evaluation of Sure Start which was launched yesterday found that many staff were inadequately trained for the work to be done.

Jane Garvey: Which staff, where?

Mary Crowley: The staff in Sure Start children's centres at local level, the children's centres which are in a number of areas across the country and will be expanded by 2010, so there will be 3000 available across the country. They are there to help parents of children aged 0 – 5.

Jane Garvey: But you acknowledge that some people working within these centres are just not up to the job?

Mary Crowley: Well, it's not that I acknowledge it but Professor Ted Melhuish who carried out the evaluation found that many staff were inadequately trained. So, it's not their fault as the training wasn't available and the point of the Academy is to transform the whole availability of training and the quality available. It's not just people who are directly working with parents, there are people like health visitors who are mentioned by your correspondent and also social workers, people who are working in youth services, all of whom need some additional training to work in that respectful and partnership way with parents.

Jane Garvey: Dorit, tell us about the average caller if there is such a thing to Parentline Plus. What kind of problems are they having?

Dorit Braun: Well, I'm not sure there is an average caller but about half the people who ring ring about teenagers and I think a lot of that is because the isolation is increased – you don't meet parents at the school gates in the way that you might with younger children and also the challenges that they're presenting you with may be ones you don't want to reveal, illegal drug use for example. But by the time people decide to contact us, because of the stigma that was described earlier, people have reached quite desperate straits quite often, so they are talking about serious difficulties. Parents of teenagers are talking about a lot of violence in the home, very high levels of conflict, misuse of drugs, staying out, not going to school, you know, the full range of difficulties.

Jane Garvey: And when you offer them help what kind of help is it and is it all done anonymously?

Dorit Braun: It is done anonymously and I think that is one of the huge advantages that a service like ours can offer. Whether it's on the phone or the internet, it can be anonymous and it's confidential and that makes a big difference to parents, as

we heard. But what we would do is help the parents talk about what the behaviour might be indicating about what their child needs.

Jane Garvey: Well often of course the blame is put squarely onto the parent – bad parenting. We hear such a lot about it, maybe compared to a generation ago. Were people better parents a generation ago?

Dorit Braun: I'm not at all sure. I think there has been a lot more interest taken in parenting and so it appears higher on everyone's agenda but there has also been a lot more interest in what children need, so we know a great deal more about what we're supposed to be doing for children, which makes the job of parenting that much harder. We're also more isolated – working patterns have changed and so you don't need your family and your friends perhaps as regularly as you did a generation ago – they don't live so close to you. So that more informal chatting to people about how things are and realising that what's happening to you is normal or isn't normal even just doesn't exist in the same way.

Jane Garvey: Are you at risk of being labelled a bad person or a bad parent if you at any time ask for help?

Dorit Braun: Well I think the difficulty is that you perceive yourself to have that risk and there are times, if you turn to statutory agencies as indeed were described earlier, where you will be labelled in that way. Though there is a curious and very difficult mixture of people's own fears that they are going to be labelled and then their experience is that unfortunately sometimes they are.

Jane Garvey: So how do we make sure, Mary, that the right help gets to the people who really need it?

Mary Crowley: Well we're looking at a new era really in services for parents. When I first came into this area in 1995, if you said to people 'we're hoping to improve work with parents', they said 'you mean children?' and we'd say 'no parents'. But now that has changed dramatically and people do realise that to change the lives of children is to work with their parents and provide them with services. So, the vision set out in the Children's Plan and earlier in Every Child Matters is that every children's centre which is a local provider for parents with children aged 0 – 5 will be an access point for services for parents – a universal access point, a bit like your GP, you just go in and say you need some help and you can be referred to help. And this is a whole range of help, not just classes because some people don't like classes, but services like Dorit's excellent telephone services, one-to-one drop in, home based – a range of services.

For parents with older children, the schools should be the access point. The vision is that by 2010 all schools will provide extra services, for example: sports facilities, family learning, arranged childcare but also they will be an access point for services for parents, not just providing in school because many people don't want to go to the school, they should actually be able to refer parents. One of the pieces of work that the Academy is doing is training people in these ordinary access points to actually refer parents for help. So when a parent says 'I'm going to kill him', instead of saying 'oh yes, if I were you I'd do this', it's to train people

to know where the help is available and know how to refer parents so they don't feel that they are stigmatised or bad parents.

Dorit Braun: I think that that vision is a great one and at the same time we need to be making much more noise publicly in terms of a culture that says when you ask for help it's a sign of how much you care as a parent, it's not that you're a bad person, it's actually a sign that you're doing a good job.

Jane Garvey: I just want to put a word in for social services. We don't want to seem like we're criticising them – God knows, if they don't intervene then we really get to them don't we?

Dorit Braun: Well, I think the difficulty for social services is that the stigma around how they are perceived as opposed to what they actually do is miles apart. Most social workers do not remove children from their parents – they work extremely hard to keep children within the family. And yet, the perception among the public is that social workers are there to remove children. The other difficulty I think for social workers is that they are often working with situations which can be quite dangerous, quite chaotic, quite volatile. They are very well trained and their services are quite scarce – you're not eligible for a social worker unless the situation is quite difficult, but almost by definition people aren't going to know much about what they do.

Jane Garvey: Dorit Braun, thank you very much indeed and Mary Crowley thank you too.

Mary Crowley: Can I just add one thing which is that we are actually a charity as well. I gave the impression that we are an arm of Government. We have been funded and set up by Government but we are actually a charity and a company in our own right so we do have an independent voice as well.

Jane Garvey: Thank you both very much.