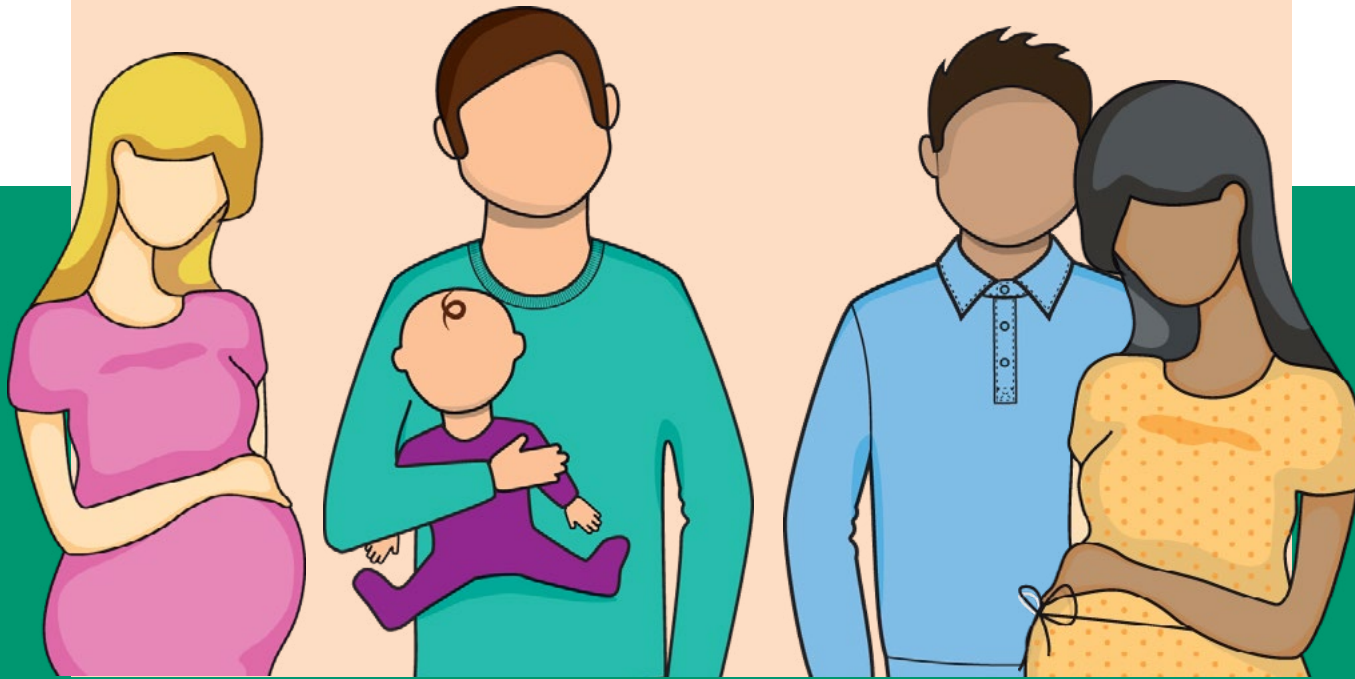


Positive Choices



A programme to support vulnerable parents during pregnancy and early years

Funded by





The Positive Choices

programme starts with the belief that, with the right support, our young people can be safe, successful parents now and in the future.

The programme supports young parents who are care or social care-experienced to prevent their children coming into care.

These parents are mostly vulnerable themselves, and have challenges to positive parenting as a result of things such as domestic abuse, learning difficulties, mental health issues, drug or alcohol misuse issues, or exploitation in the community.

3 key questions about the Positive Choices programme

What's different about Positive Choices?

The programme aims to keep babies and birth parents together safely, resilient for longer, and help them gain confidence that they can parent effectively and achieve things in their own right.

The Programme:

- Engages with prospective parents who are known to be vulnerable as early as possible in the pregnancy
- Uses a whole family systemic approach to deliver a structured, intensive, accessible programme of learning, role modelling and tailored support
- Aims to work with partners and families to change the culture from presumption of failure to one of seeking success
- Provides a skilled strengths-based key worker to come alongside, empathise and gain trust.
- Takes a holistic approach supporting in all aspects of the families lives
- Offers sometimes very intensive support but can be varied and flexible as needed and means that risks can be closely monitored and managed
- Continues to work with a parent even if their child comes into care, investing in them as people in their own right

What's the impact?

An evaluation by the Institute of Public Care (2020)* found an average 10 month engagement in the Programme led to significantly:

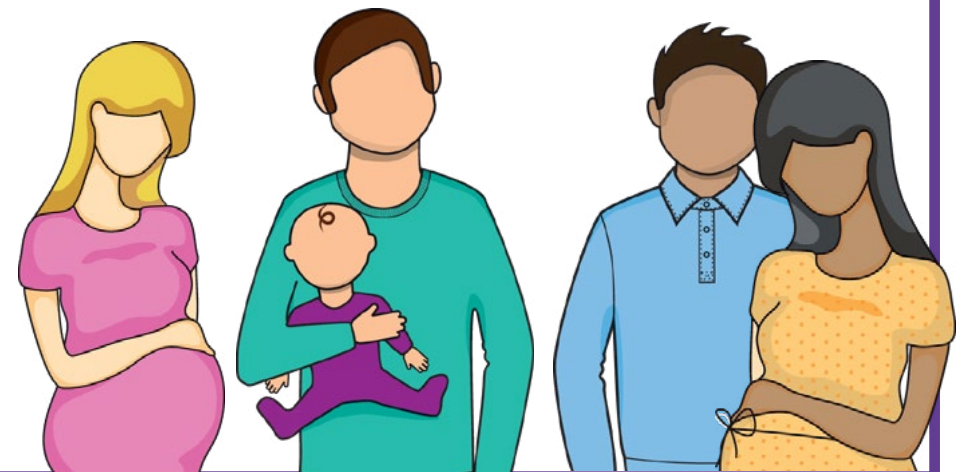
- Improved child to parent attachment
- Improved parenting skills including being able to manage behaviour when frustrated and life is difficult
- Reduction in risk factors such as domestic abuse, substance misuse or exploitative friendship groups
- Improved life choices amongst participants. For parents engaging well, their resilience (defined as an ability to parent without risk or crisis for a sustained period of time) was much better than parents accessing more traditional supports

Burch, K., Allen, V., Coombes, L at the Institute of Public Care (2020) Evaluation of Positive Choices in Calderdale for care experienced and other vulnerable young people. Department for Education, London.

How important is timing?

The evaluation clearly shows that:

- Starting an involvement during pregnancy is associated with much better outcomes including much better adult/child interactions and the child more likely to remain with their birth parent
- Around the time of the child's birth seems to be the worst time to commence support



Does Positive Choices work?

After Positive Choices intervention, a significantly greater proportion,

68%

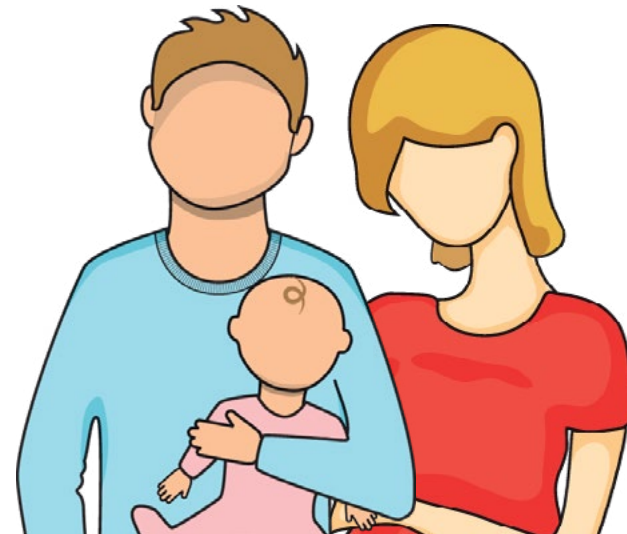
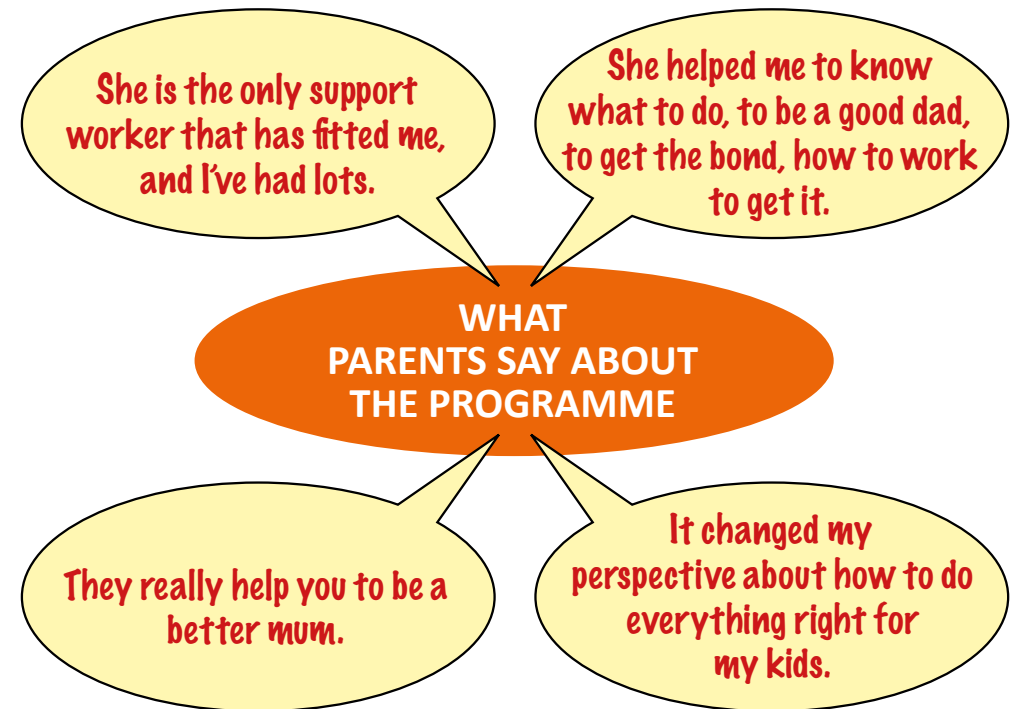
of the children were able to remain living at home with parents without substantial ongoing support compared with only 37% of a similar cohort who had not been involved with Positive Choices



The parent view

The programme dealt with a broad range of parents who had encountered a wide variety of challenges:

- Care experienced or had children social care involvement as a child
- Multiple professionals in their lives and felt very wary
- A learning disability or unmet learning need
- Fraught, violent or controlling relationships with intimate partners, friends, and family
- Misused drugs or alcohol
- Vulnerable to child exploitation, been exploited or suffered abuse as a child
- Mental health issues



The keyworker view

My caseload is protected so that I can work intensively and systemically with families for up to 3 times a week, more frequent during an initial or intensive and risky phase of the work and less frequent or 'tapering' towards the end. My work with mothers and fathers covers three elements.

Enabling

- Active listening to the parent's life journey, difficulties and concerns
- Demonstrating empathy and connecting in some way to the young person's life story
- Helping the parent to reflect on what they want for their child and how it might be different to their own experience
- Being reassuring, positive and supportive – you can do it!
- Supporting the young person's self-esteem and future planning

Educational

- Baby's brain development and how it is affected by exposure to regular or severe arguing or substance misuse
- Who is safe to be around my baby? Who is unsafe and why?
- The importance of play and stimulation for babies
- Role modelling what being a good parent involves, including responding to baby cues and being attuned to their needs
- How to prevent arguments getting to the point of shouting or violence

Practical

- Helping with 'forms and benefits'
- Accompanying parents to appointments or for the first time to baby groups
- Putting parents in touch with organisations that provide free or reduced price nursery items
- Helping with home conditions



Slightly different programmes for parents starting pre-birth or after birth, but always a mixture of structured sessions and more flexible elements.

The team experience

There have been valuable learning experiences for the team during the operation of the Positive Choices programme.

- A consistent key worker and a “cover buddy” who knows the family is essential
- Being willing to facilitate a collaborative multi-agency approach helps to draw in other important support services but do not have too many professionals involved with the family
- Getting referrals early in pregnancy can be challenging – you need to ‘keep selling the concept’ to social workers and midwives over time
- Support from senior leaders is crucial, to protect the model integrity in the early stages of implementation and embedding

The PC Key Worker is an excellent advocate for the families that she supports and she is always keen to ensure the best positive outcomes for the people that she is supporting.

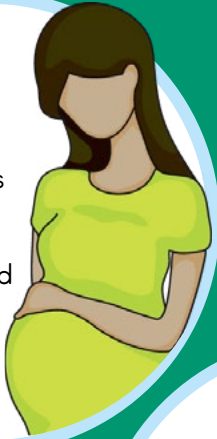
The service, expertise and professionalism was outstanding and the rapport and positive working relationship really did make a difference.

The PC worker has been invaluable in providing support to my service user and her partner, who are often quite difficult to engage.



Some key features of the Positive Choices programme

The cohort is very vulnerable young often first-time parents who are in care, care leavers or have experienced social care services themselves as a child



Active engagement and support starts pre-birth, where possible, alongside the social worker doing the pre-birth assessment



Uses a systemic approach working with mothers, fathers, extended family and the community



Each family has a consistent keyworker and a "buddy" who also will know the family



Tailored to the family's specific needs but within a structured modular framework



Provides intensive support as much as 3-4 times per week if needed so highly flexible and responsive, tailing off as appropriate



Takes a holistic approach looking at every aspect of the family's life



Family can choose to return to programme at any time without a referral



Continued support for the family even if the outcome is that the child can no longer remain in their care



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