

# Parents' evaluation of 'Understanding Your Child's Behaviour', a parenting group based on the Solihull Approach

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**Abstract**

Understanding Your Child's Behaviour (UYCB) is a 10-week parenting programme based on the Solihull Approach model, which has previously been shown to reduce problematic behaviour in children. This study examined the views of 236 parents of all literacy levels who attended 37 UYCB programmes provided by the Solihull Borough's children's workforce between 2005 and 2010. Simple weekly evaluation forms were used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. Ninety-five per cent of parents reported that they found the group relaxing, 89% found it very effective at helping them make changes to their parenting and 88% found it very helpful for understanding their children. Qualitative themes demonstrate that the group enables parents to implement the three cornerstone theories of the Solihull Approach: containment; reciprocity and (sensitive) behaviour management in their parenting. The study also supports the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines that parenting programmes should be eight to 12 session long.

**Key words**

Solihull Approach; Understanding Your Child's Behaviour; parenting group; parental satisfaction; parent-child relationship.

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No potential competing interests declared

**Introduction**

The Solihull Approach Parenting Group, 'Understanding Your Child's Behaviour' (UYCB), aims to help parents with universal to complex issues concerning children aged 0 to 18 years by enhancing the parent-child relationship and promoting a reflective style

of parenting. The Solihull Approach (Douglas, 2012) has used the psychotherapeutic concept of containment (Bion, 1959), combined with the child neurodevelopment concept of reciprocity (Brazelton, 1974), and learning theory's behaviour management as the basis for developing a relationship model that focuses on providing a containing experience for parents so that they are able to be calm, process emotions and retain the capacity to think.

This, in turn, enables parents to be more in tune with their child's feelings and developmental needs so that, where necessary, they can use individualised, sensitive and appropriate behaviour management strategies with their children. Douglas (2010) argues that combining these theories contributes to positive emotional and mental wellbeing in both the parent and child.

Systematic reviews have consistently shown that parenting programmes are effective in improving behaviour problems in young children (Barlow, 1999; Barlow et al, 2010; Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2000; Gibbs et al, 2003), children with conduct disorder (Dretzke et al, 2009) and teenage children (Barlow et al, 2011). Bateson et al (2008) demonstrated that attendance at a UYCB group results in a decrease in problematic behaviour in children (as measured by the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, and the Child Behaviour Checklist) and can significantly

decrease the anxiety of parents (as measured by the Becks Anxiety Inventory).

Parental satisfaction with group-based interventions tends to be high, with parents citing the support they receive from other parents, including a mirroring of problems as beneficial (Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2001).

In a review of a range of parenting programmes 97% of parents indicated that they had enjoyed the programme they attended and 83% reported that it had been successful in improving their child's behaviour at home (Hallam et al, 2004), although the sample size was small in this review (n=73 parents attending up to 30 different programmes). The purpose of this study was to measure parents' views about the UYCB programme.

**Method**

UYCB is a parenting programme that takes place two hours a week, for 10 weeks, and which forms the basis of the universal level parenting support strategy in Solihull to parents and carers of children aged between birth and 18 years. Up to 15 programmes ran each term from September 2005 to July 2010, grouped into parents of children aged 0 to 4, 0 to 11 and 10 to 18 years, during the day and evening in children's centres, schools, community buildings, church centres and health clinics across the borough. Parents self-referred but were required to commit to

Table 1. Programme sessions

Session	Title
1	Introduction
2	How are you and your child feeling?
3	Tuning into your child's development
4	Responding to your child's feelings
5	Different styles of parenting
6	Parenting child partnership – having fun together
7	The rhythm of interaction and sleep
8	Self-regulation and anger
9	Communication and attunement -- how to recover when things go wrong
10	Celebration

Table 2. Weekly evaluation form

How was the session today? How helpful was the group today?	Great	OK	Poor
To help you relax and share experiences?			
To help you understand your child better?			
To help you identify any changes you want to make?			

all 10 weeks; they were not permitted to join after session 2 and if two consecutive sessions were missed they could not continue with the programme. Detailed demographic data were not collected. Parents known to have complex issues were redirected to other services, such as Mellow Parenting, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or children's services. Programmes were free to attend, including free crèche where necessary.

Two professionals from a range of agencies (health visitors, school nurses, education welfare officers, family support workers, extended schools child and family support workers, psychologists, education workers, learning mentors), who had attended a two-day Solihull Approach Foundation training, plus a one-day UYCB facilitation training, facilitated one or more of the 37 groups. A manual set out the content and methods (presentation, group discussion, role play, video, homework setting) for delivering the programme, and mentoring was provided by the local CAMHS service (see Table 1 for session content).

Data were collected via simple, weekly evaluation forms designed specifically for UYCB and piloted with 72 participants (Bateson, 2008) (see Table 2).

The use of a simple visual Likert scale enabled parents of all literary levels to respond. In the final session open questions were added to those in Table 2. These were:

- What do you feel has changed as a result of you being in this group?
- What do you feel you have learned in this group?
- Any other comments?

Parents were familiarised with the form by facilitators and each parent was asked to complete it anonymously every week before they left the group.

Ethical approval was not required as the study

is classed as a service evaluation (National Research Ethics Service, 2009).

Results

There were 37 groups during the data collection period, with a total of 345 attendees. Attendees are defined as parents/carers who joined the programme by session 2 and missed no more than two consecutive sessions. There was an average response rate of 58% (n=200), with a maximum of 236 respondents in session 2, and a minimum of 137 in session 9. See Figure 1 for response rates. A total of 199 parents responded to the open questions in session 10, giving 404 comments.

The Likert scales were converted into numerical scores. These data were then subjected to descriptive statistical analysis, enabling comparison between individual sessions, as well as an evaluation of parents' overall satisfaction with the group. Open questions were

analysed using Content Analysis, a qualitative methodology that involves identifying coherent and important themes, patterns and examples in the data (Patton, 1987).

The percentages of responses for each of the three points on the visual Likert scale, at each session, are shown below (Figure 1). Of note is that the 'poor' response is consistently low (0 to 2%) across all three questions, indicating that at least 98% of responses were neutral or positive at all data points across the 10 sessions.

From the very first session the vast majority (82%) of parents reported finding the group relaxing and felt it was a place they could share experiences. Figure 2 shows that the number of parents reporting 'great' in response to this question steadily increased across the 10 sessions and that by the end of the group this reached an impressive 95%.

The extent to which the programme helped parents to understand their child is shown in Figure 2. Only 52% scored this as 'great' in session one but this increases session by session reaching a consistently high level (81 to 82%) in the latter half of the group (sessions six to nine) finishing at 88% by the last session. Of note is a 'dip' at session 5 which is rated 'great' at helping parents to understand their child by fewer parents (62%) than previous sessions (76% at session four). The content of session five focuses on parenting styles and intergenerational patterns of parenting, and thereby purposefully shifts the focus away from the child. It is considered by facilitators to be a powerful session, usually involving a great deal of self-reflection, and is often the first time parents share emotionally vulnerable content with other

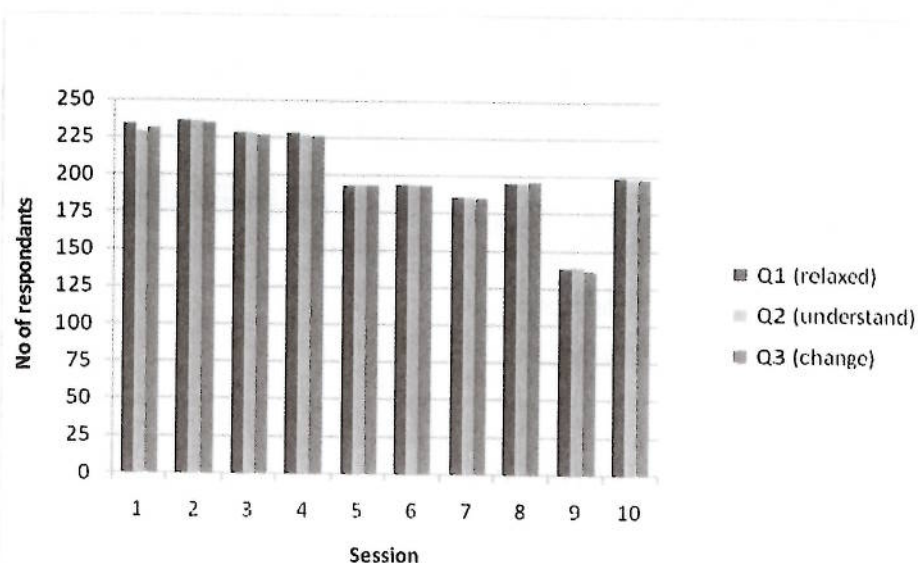


Figure 1. Number of respondents per session

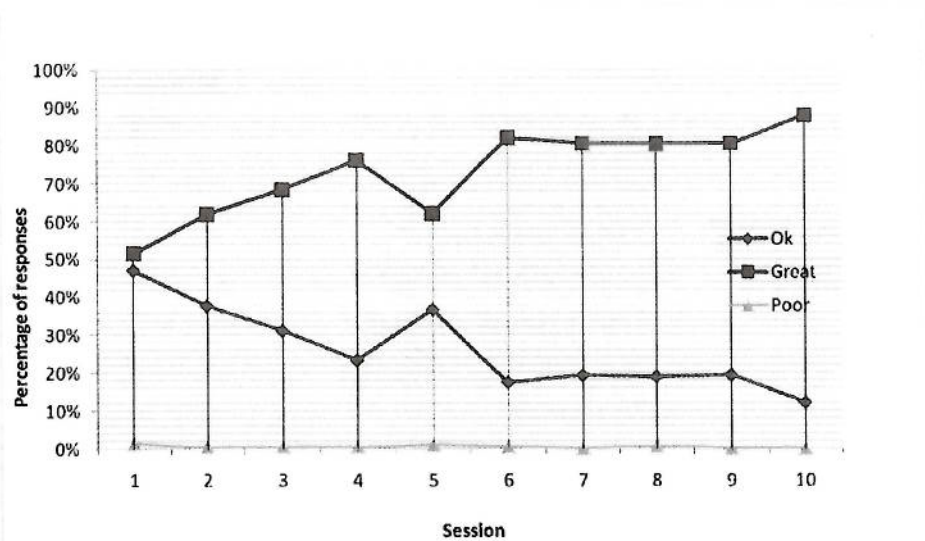


Figure 2. Parents' views about the impact of the group on their understanding of their child, as a percentage of all responses for this question, across 10 sessions

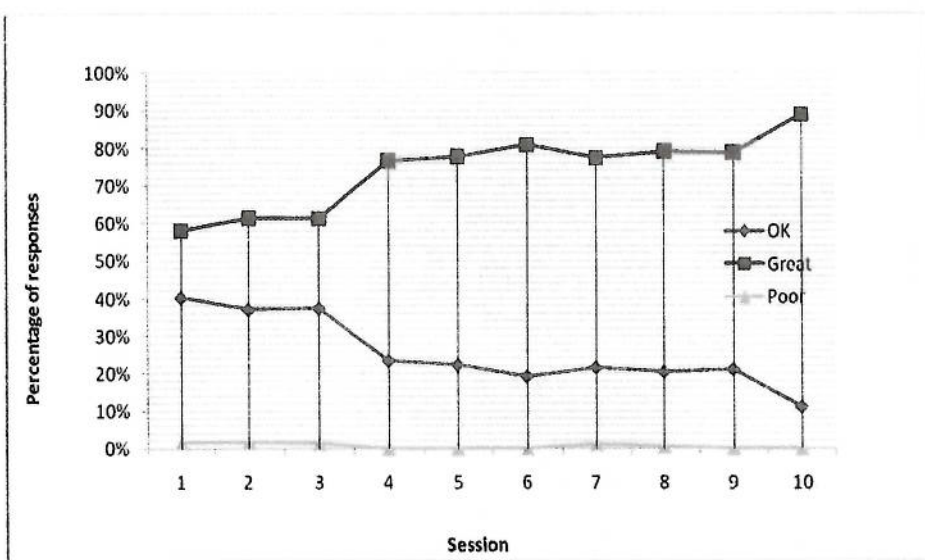


Figure 3. Parents' views about the impact of the group on them to make changes, shown as a percentage of all responses for this question, across 10 sessions

group members. Interestingly there is no such reduction in the percentage of parents reporting session five as 'great' at helping them make changes (see Figure 3), suggesting that a focus on parents themselves, rather than their children's feelings and behaviour, does not diminish the likelihood of change occurring.

The percentage of parents who gave the highest rating in response to the third question, about the group helping them to make changes, rises only slightly between session one and three, when it might be assumed that something is being established, such as group dynamics or an understanding of the principles behind the Solihull Approach model. However, this leaps

from 61% in session three to 77% at session 4. The content of this session builds on the previous topics, which are all aimed at helping parents to see things from the child's perspective, but begins to focus on how parents can respond to this increased awareness. Figure 3 clearly shows that from the fourth session onwards parents increasingly report that the group helps them make changes, with 89% of parents scoring this as 'great' by session 10.

Content analysis of the open questions revealed five broad themes which have been labelled as follows: 'Making Changes'; 'Feelings'; 'Improved Interactions'; 'Increased Knowledge (of Strategies, Solutions and Child Development)'; and

'Improved Understanding'. These are presented in Table 3, which includes a description of each theme, a selection of illustrative quotes and the distribution of themes.

The most frequently occurring theme was 'Making Changes', which accounted for almost 30% of comments. The second most frequently occurring theme was 'Increased Knowledge (of Strategies, Solutions and Child Development)', which accounted for 25% of the comments. This finding suggests that parents feel satisfied with the strategies and parenting skills they feel they gain as a result of this programme, despite the fact that behaviour management is not an explicit focus of UYCB.

### Discussion

The results show that parents found UYCB highly satisfactory as measured by a simple, non-literacy-based evaluation form. By the last session all three measures were scored neutrally to positively by 100% of respondents, with 95% rating the group as 'great' at helping them feel relaxed and safe at session 10, 88% describing it as 'great' at having helped them understand their child, and 89% 'great' at helping them make changes.

The number of parents rating the programme 'great' at helping them make changes increases significantly after session 4 and subsequently increase as the sessions progress, suggesting that it takes four to six sessions for parents to understand the issues and report making changes, with sessions 7 to 10 allowing for consolidation and further development of these gains. This supports the recommendation that parenting programmes should be eight to 12 sessions long (National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), 2006).

The most frequent comments made by parents were in the categories of 'Making Changes' and 'Increased Knowledge (of Strategies, Solutions and Child Development)'. The theme 'Improved Interactions' fits with the concept of 'Reciprocity' (which focuses on attention to children and enhancing parent-child interactions). The 'Feelings' and 'Improved Understanding' themes demonstrate an appreciation of 'Containment' and parents' improved ability to connect behaviour with the child's perspective and feelings, as a result of the group. These data show that parents comment positively on the three cornerstone theories of the Solihull Approach model, which indicates consistency in the delivery of the programme across a range of facilitators from a range of agencies.

Table 3. Description of themes

Theme name	Description	Examples	Percentage of all comments (n=)
Making Changes	References to changes of attitude, behaviour or routine. Indications of more time given to children, references to becoming more confident	'My outlook and attitude towards parenting have changed. My understanding of my daughter and the way I deal with situations. I have re-evaluated everything and made changes for the better' 'I feel I have changed the way I manage my life and my child's life' 'I personally am a lot calmer' 'I have more empathy for my child' 'Lots of things have changed like my son's sleep routine and the way I ask the children to do something' 'I'm a better me'	29.5% (119)
Increased Knowledge (of Strategies, Solutions, and Children's Development)	Accounts of parents learning new strategies for managing behaviour or solutions when their children show challenging or emotive behaviour. References to learning about children's developmental stages, and learning parts of the Solihull Approach	'It's made me step back and look at the situation and relate it to the child's age' 'It has made me step back and look at how I am sometimes, ie, occupied with something else and not noticing the frustration building up in the child' 'I try to deal with problems in a different way' 'I've been able to look at different ways to approach things and look at ways how others feel'	25% (101)
Feelings	References to the feelings of either the child or parent. References to parents' experience in the group of not feeling alone as a parent and to their support network	'I can link into my child's emotions and vocalise them' 'I feel I have learnt a great deal about understanding feelings, my own as well as my child's' 'I have learned to listen to my child and respect their feelings' 'I have learned that anger is OK and that you can repair situations rather than leaving'	16.8% (68)
Improved Understanding	Indications that the parent thought to see things from a child's perspective, understand the behaviour, and can think how to help their child in particular	'I feel I have learned more about understanding a child and looking at everything from a child's perspective' 'I feel I can listen and understand them better' 'My behaviour towards [child] has started to change as a result of understanding more about why she is behaving in a certain way' 'My understanding of my child's behaviour is better. My child's tantrums are shorter and less often'	15.3% (62)
Improved Interactions	Interactions between parents and children, references to relationships at home, including partners, or interactions with other mothers and the group	'I have learned how to communicate with my child effectively. I'm more relaxed playing with the kids and I feel calmer and more organised' 'Taking a step back and thinking first about what and how to say to a child' 'I definitely listen to my child more and spend more time with them in terms of playing and "quality time" 'Playtime with the children has changed. If I want to do something I play with them first'	13.4% (54)
Total comments			100% (404)

Limitations of the study are that the three-item evaluation form does not provide objective evidence of actual changes occurring as a result of attendance at UYCB and, therefore, of the programme's effectiveness. However, it does show that parents like and value the UYCB programme. One major limitation of the study is that demographic data are not available, which means it is not possible to demonstrate for which parents the programme is more helpful; nor to rule out the possibility of a response bias on weeks with a low response rate. Also, comparisons cannot be made between individual participants' responses in subsequent sessions, nor between the 37 groups.

#### Recommendations

The implications for practice of this study are that more parents are ready to change their parenting after four to six weeks of a parenting programme, with improvements continuing over the remaining sessions of a 10-week programme. Therefore, it is important to continue to offer parents the full programme rather than reducing the number of sessions; for example to six weeks.

Further research is required to measure the effectiveness of the group against longitudinal child outcomes; compare the effectiveness of the group with a control group; and to investigate its effectiveness with specific groups of parents, such as fathers, teenage parents and parents with learning disabilities.

#### Conclusion

This evaluation demonstrates that UYCB is very well regarded by parents. The vast majority of participants (95%) found the UYCB parenting group highly satisfactory, as defined by how relaxed they felt in the group. By the end of the group 88% of parents reported that it had been very helpful at helping them understand their children and 89% said it was highly effective at helping them make changes to their parenting.

In addition, 100% of the remaining parents rated the group neutrally, with no parents rating it poorly on any of the evaluation questions by the end of the group.

Themes emerging from parents' comments demonstrate that parents leave the group having: made changes; increased their knowledge of strategies and solutions for responding to behaviour and of what

#### Key points

- Understanding Your Child's Behaviour is liked and valued by parents
- Parental satisfaction with strategies learned as a result of the programme was high, despite it being relationship based, rather than behavioural
- Session content that focuses on parents' experiences rather than children's behaviour still results in satisfaction with the programme's ability to help make changes
- Parents need time to understand the issues, which paves the way for changes, suggesting that the full 10 sessions of the programme are required

to expect at different ages and stages of childhood; improved their understanding of their children's behaviour; improved their interactions with children and others, and enhanced their ability to recognise and respond to feelings in themselves and in their children.

The length of UYCB is compliant with NICE guidelines that effective parenting programmes should be eight to 12 sessions long (NICE, 2006) and this study supports the view that parents need time to understand the issues before they change, plus time to consolidate change.

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