



The great temptation every time a young person gets into strife in the community is to ring the "alarm bells" and predict doom and gloom regarding the level of antisocial behaviour in the community.

While there is little doubt that crime committed by teenagers and other forms of risk-taking behaviour is extremely worrying to parents and the community at large, we should always ask: "Could these problems have been prevented?"

Many years of research have documented clearly the critical role of parenting in influencing all aspects of children's development, including their involvement in antisocial behaviour, violence and drug abuse.

Children who grow up in family environments of criticism, negativity, uncertainty, inadequate monitoring and supervision and family conflict are at greater risk of becoming involved in crime.

The key to prevention of antisocial behaviour in young people is the quality of parenting children receive in the early years of life.

Safe, caring, nurturing environments that provide children with plenty of loving attention and affection, where limits and boundaries are enforced, where parents have reasonable expectations of their children, and where parents look after themselves as parents is a formula for avoiding a life of antisocial behaviour.

Cynics will always say children who need strong parenting the most are least likely to get it. They point to similar failings in parents who themselves can be impulsive and anti-authoritarian to confirm their belief that it is "bad" genes at work. However, children are not born to steal, lie or cheat, or to be violent towards others.

Much learning takes place, particularly, in the first five years, to determine whether children have the social, emotional and behavioural skills that they require to do well in life and to avoid serious problems. Most parents begin their parenting careers with reasonably positive expectations that they will be a good mum or dad and in my experience most want to do the right thing by their children.

As a community we have a responsibility to ensure that every parent has access to good quality parenting information and advice from the early years of life.

Modern parents, however, are looking for different ways to access such information. Parenting groups and seeing a professional are only two of a number of ways parenting advice can be provided.

Television programs, the internet, telephone counselling services and workplace family programs provide other options for parents.

As long as participating in a parenting program is considered a failing of parenting, only a minority of parents will participate in them.

We need to dramatically increase support for the parenting role, so that doing a parenting program becomes completely de-stigmatised and is considered a normal and healthy thing to do. After all, all parents participate in birth preparation classes with no stigma.

There is increasing evidence that parents who participate in quality parenting programs run by properly trained professionals are more positive with their children, experience fewer behaviour difficulties, are more confident in the task of parenting, have less stress and experience less partner conflict.

When young people are involved in serious antisocial behaviour, this is in part a failure of our social system in providing children with the kind of parenting they need.

This is not to say that parenting is the cause of all antisocial behaviour. Peer-related problems, lack of age-appropriate activities which are supervised for young people, all contribute to antisocial behaviour.

It has been estimated that it takes only a 1.5 per cent reduction in the prevalence rate of children who develop a conduct disorder (a serious form of antisocial behaviour) for an entire public health system of parenting support and advice to be paid for.

In the Queensland population the availability of evidence-based programs such as the Triple P-Positive Parenting Program, for all parents of children from birth to age 12, is estimated to save the Queensland Government \$360-\$685 million.

When children develop serious problems of antisocial behaviour the consequences are serious and expensive for the community. All too often governments provide rhetoric about supporting the parenting community but the stark reality is that these types of programs are still not readily accessible.

Survey data from the recently completed Every Family Initiative conducted by The University of Queensland indicate that only 14 per cent of parents of four to seven-year-olds had completed any form of parenting intervention. Like any other public health crisis, we compose the question, "How many parents need to participate in a parenting program for there to be a significant reduction in antisocial problems in children?"

However, good parenting programs for some children are insufficient and they do need to be complemented by appropriate school-based interventions, and programs that target peer relationships of children. However, these programs, even if well delivered, will be inadequate in solving this problem without significant parental involvement. The single most important thing we can do as a community to reduce behavioural and emotional problems in children and child abuse is to increase the confidence, skills and knowledge of parents in the task of raising their children.

Government has a crucial role in ensuring that programs that are supported have been properly trialed and evaluated so that the public can have confidence in these programs.

There are hundreds of parenting programs throughout Australia. However, most have never been properly evaluated, and hence their effects, positive and negative, are unknown.

The establishment of the future health and wellbeing of our children and reduction of serious problems of antisocial behaviour with young people will be greatly aided when a level of investment in parenting programs reaches a point where parents throughout the state can access programs that work.

This article was written by Professor Matt Sanders and published in The Courier Mail on November 25th 2007.