



*REPORT ON STEPS*

*PARENT SUPPORT PROGRAMME*

*FINGLAS, DUBLIN*

*2006*

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## **STEPS Report**

An evaluation of a parent support programme in Finglas

### **Introduction**

This Report documents the findings of a number of focus groups with parents who took part in a programme that was delivered in Finglas. The programme was put in place with the overall aim of empowering parents to fulfil their role as the primary educators of their children and as partners with schools in their work in education. The programme that was used was the STEPS programme (See Appendix 1 for description of programme) and its delivery was supported by the Home School Community Liaison Scheme's Finglas cluster and the Finglas/Cabra Partnership. Since 2002 one hundred and ten parents have completed the STEPS programme. All of them are parents or carers of children attending schools in the area.

### **Methodology**

In May 2005 the Education Co-ordinator of the Finglas/Cabra Partnership and a School Principal conducted a number of focus groups with parents who had taken part in the programme at some time during the previous 3 years. The purpose of the focus groups was to identify and record personal change as a result of doing the STEPS programme.

The format of the focus groups was that participants responded to a series of questions related to their experiences before, during and after having participated in STEPS and the changes that had occurred as a result of the learning from the programme. (See Appendix 2 for the questions.)

## The profile of Focus Group Members

		Age Range			
		30 - 39	40 - 49	50 - 59	60+
<b>Females</b>	27	9	16	1	1
<b>Males</b>	1	1			
<b>Totals</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>

Marital status	Married	Separated	Single
	24	3	1

Dependent Children	Aged 0-4	Aged 5-12	Aged 13-18	Total
	8	36	21	65

This Report will begin by giving a summary of participants' responses to questions that were explored in the discussions and will then be followed by some concluding remarks on what the Facilitators interpreted from what participants said

### Summary of Focus Group Members Responses

The summary of the focus group findings is based on three themes:

- (1) knowledge/information gained,
- (2) changes in attitude, behaviour, and feelings and
- (3) the difference in the person after completion of the course.

#### Knowledge/information acquired from the STEPS programme

The first stage of the discussion centred on the knowledge that participants gained from the STEPS programme. Most people talked about learning about the importance of being positive and the impact of having an expectation of positive outcomes.

*The course showed me ways of turning negatives into positives.*

*I realise there are no limitations on myself.*

What they found was that if they believed in their ability to do something then that enabled them to get where they wanted to be. They also understood that if they talked to

themselves in a certain way i.e. were positive about their ability to do something, then that influenced the outcome.

*The way you react can control the situation you're in.*

*For me, the most important part of the programme was the 'self talk'. It was like getting a bang on the head.*

This helped them to take on new challenges or do things that they had been afraid to do previously. One woman said that she had learned to overcome her fear of going to the dentist and was thus able to get some much needed repair work done on her teeth.

*I could visualize myself in a scary situation [at the dentist] and see myself getting through it.*

Other women successfully completed their driving test and attributed their success to the knowledge they had gained about the importance of staying calm and believing in their ability to be successful. Many talked of learning personal skills, such as how to set goals, how to make affirmations and how to visualise what they wanted to have happen.

Several women talked about learning how to say "no" and not feeling guilty about it.

*The world didn't end because I did what was right for me.*

*I learned that it's ok to say NO without feeling guilty.*

*It's like there's a list and now you're on it.*

Some of the women talked about learning about the mind, how it works and how it affects the way they see themselves and other people. One woman was prompted to learn more and had started doing a psychology course.

*I am more aware of the sub-conscious and the creative sub-conscious.*

*The most important thing I learned was to step back from a situation that I had no control over...realizing I didn't have all the answers.*

#### Change in attitude, behaviour and feelings

When the parents talked about the change that they experienced as a result of the new knowledge they gained they explored the change in terms of new attitudes, behaviour and feelings. These changes were interrelated.

As a result of learning the personal skills already mentioned and learning about the mind and how it works parents talked about the change in their attitude to their families and themselves and their friends.

*I became less judgemental.*

*I can admire talent and knowledge in other people without feeling inferior.*

*I stopped taking things personally.*

Such changes in attitude brought about changes in behaviour. One woman talked of feeling that she ought to be driving her children to every place they needed to go until she realised that it she not only did not have to but that it was better for the development of their independence if they walked or cycled with their friends.

*I've learned to step back from a situation I had no control over. We have to let people deal with their own situations. Before, I tried to manage situations for other people.*

Parents also learned how to do things in a different way so that duties that were seen as chores became enjoyable. One woman talked about the need to drive her children to music classes in another part of the city. She used to dread having to take the time every week and then having to sit in the car and wait until they were finished. Then she realised that she could reframe the situation and think about it as a time when she had the freedom to do something she liked doing. Now she does her knitting and enjoys listening to the radio in the peace and tranquillity of her car while her children have their music classes.

Many talked about the change that came as a result of changing their way of doing things

*I learned that if I was calm and positive when my children were doing their homework then they did much better.... and we all enjoyed the experience.*

*Allowing myself to feel angry made me feel more empowered... more honest about what I feel.*

### What is different about me now?

On a personal level .....

- *I walked out 10 feet tall*
- *I take time out*
- *I am a problem solver*
- *I gave up the smokes*
- *I have stopped putting other people first*
- *I am upbeat and positive*
- *I am more aware of my own destiny*
- *I can do things*
- *I take time*
- *I am not afraid anymore*

- *I have confidence*
- *I have a voice*
- *I can admire talent, ability, knowledge*
- *I am more interested in thing..... like I watched a programme on TV how art had transformed the world today.*

On a professional level.....

- *I went back to work*
- *I started studying*

Within the family

- *I am a motivator for my kids*
- *I am happier and it is infectious*
- *I listen to my kids*
- *I have stopped shouting – most of the time*
- *I respect my kids*
- *I am brilliant*
- *I took control of the house accounts – for the first time. .... my husband always did them before*
- *I love doing things I choose to do – driving the kids to activities and sitting in the car doing my knitting*
- *There is a better atmosphere in my house*
- *I am closer to the kids*

## **Conclusions**

Research in the 1960's and 1970's showed that the most effective schools were those characterised by positive home-school relations. Research also bears out the importance of parental involvement from the earliest age in the educational development of children. These discoveries have given way to the start of an educational trend to involve parents more actively in the education process based on the recognition that parents are both the primary educators and the partners in the educational process. The Department of Education and Science's investment in the Home School Community Liaison Scheme demonstrates its commitment to the principle of partnering with parents in the work of educating children.

However, participating in full and equal partnership and fully embracing the role of primary educator does not occur simply because everyone is in favour of it, particularly when parents, as a group, have traditionally been excluded from decision making in schools. Providing opportunities for new learning is an inherent part of the journey to partnership. Part of this learning process in adults involves discovering new frames of reference and transforming points of view, or put another way, learning to be critically reflective. Learning to engage in critical dialogue with others occurs only after personal and long held assumptions have been challenged. As parents, taking responsibility for

their children's education, this group of STEPS participants have begun to be involved in such a dialogue and in doing so, have realised that there is quite a substantial amount of common ground between themselves and the world of school.

What seemed clear from the feedback given by the parents during the sessions was that a profound change had occurred that affected them both in their personal and their family lives. Beliefs about themselves and attitudes, both their own and those of their families and communities, were fundamentally changed. Almost all of the group members referred, in some way or other, to the surprise they felt at the extent of the changes and at how they continued to experience change and have a different kind of perspective and motivation even after the course was finished. The changes occurred in a variety of different areas – first within themselves and then in their relationships with their children and their communities. They talked of feeling in control and of value. These changes enabled them to participate more fully in school and community life.

The way that parents talked about their new way of interacting with their children, is evidence that are ready to take on their assigned role as primary educators. The findings show a group of parents who understand the importance of being positive and motivated in order to support their children's learning. What is also clear is that they have learned a key element in the dynamics of learning – i.e. that children learn through positive reinforcement and that a positive, motivated atmosphere in the home is as important for educational success as the learning environment of the school. This cannot but have a positive effect on the educational outcomes for their children. Parents are now in a position to support the school in its endeavours. No doubt it will also empower parents to be constructively critical of practices in schools that do not foster a holistic learning environment and aspire to the highest educational expectations for all its pupils.

The second aspect of the empowerment of parents is the potential that it creates for development and leadership within the community. Parents now understood the unique potential they had for making a valuable contribution to their families and to their communities. They understood that they had a voice; that other people had roles and responsibilities and that the world around them was full of variety and possibilities. Parents also learned the skill of critical reflection and analysis which is the starting point for community transformation.

In conclusion, one can say that the parents who took part in the STEPS training had experienced transformation. They now felt different from how they felt before taking the course. They knew that life was going to still pose challenges for them and their families but they now had a realistic frame of reference with which to identify the things that they could do to achieve their goals and support their families in reaching theirs.

It is the belief of the authors of this evaluation that disadvantaged school communities are agents of transformation within the overall educational system. As these parents have shown by their participation in the STEPS programme, agents of transformation provide opportunities for emancipatory change. Theirs is a voice that is often unheard and undocumented but is a powerful force for change.

## Appendix 1

STEPS takes place over 6 half days. It consists of a series of 12 modules (units) and is supported by work manuals and video and audio tapes. It was developed by the Pacific Institute. [www.pacificinstitute.co.uk](http://www.pacificinstitute.co.uk)

### **Aim**

The aim of the STEPS programme is to enable individuals to take a fresh look at their lives. It helps individuals to see how much they are capable of achieving and offers the tools to make it happen. In the Finglas area the programme has been delivered through the collaboration of the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) Teachers in Finglas and the Finglas/Cabra Partnership. The action is aimed at parents, carers and guardians of young people at risk and is part of the strategy to support retention and progression in education in the area.

### **1. Programme Objectives**

The programme objectives are as follows:

- To focus on human motivation and behaviour by using easily understood language and illustrating the principles in stories and examples that people can relate to in their own lives.
- To provide opportunities that help people to develop and realise their full potential as individuals.
- To provide opportunities to participate in a positive learning environment.
- To provide opportunities for experiences of personal accomplishment and success and the tools to realise their full potential.
- To support people in making informed choices about their careers, the children in their care and their families.

### **2. Delivery Systems**

The programme is of, approximately 21 hours duration. It can be delivered over six half-day sessions or 3 full day sessions. A follow-up half-day after 4 weeks is recommended.

A unique and vitally supportive element of STEPS is the Participant Learning Package that is given to each participant. In addition to the Personal Resource Manual, used on the programme, the package also contains an Audio Support Programme with four CDs for home use by each participant. This provides structured follow-up support and reinforces and further explains the concepts learned on the programme, for ongoing use and referral.

**Sample Timetable  
9:15 to 1p.m.**

	<b>Monday</b>	<b>Tuesday</b>	<b>Wednesday</b>	<b>Thursday</b>	<b>Friday</b>	<b>Day 6 – 2/3 weeks later</b>
<b>9:15</b>	Introduction Course Objectives	Unit 2 Power of Beliefs	Unit 5 Self-talk or the First Tool of Change	Unit 7 Comfort Zones or Dominant Self-Images	Unit 10 Motivation	Review Group discussion
<b>10:00</b>	- Getting to know You - Expectations Group discussion	Unit 3 How our mind works	Review Group discussion	Unit 8 What We Think About	Unit 11 Affirmations	Unit 12 Staying on Track
<b>11:00</b>	Tea Break	Tea Break	Tea Break	Tea Break	Tea Break	Tea Break
<b>11:30</b>	Unit 1 Barriers to potential	Unit 4 Perception and More on the Power of Beliefs	Unit 6 Self -Esteem	Unit 9 Goal - Setting	Affirmations contd. Review	Presentation of Certificates Guest Speaker

**3. Expected Outcomes**

- Raised confidence and self-esteem
- Improved relationships with children, school personnel (principals and teachers), statutory organisations and community
- A feeling of using more of own potential
- Being more confident as parents, carers or guardians

- Taking steps towards addressing own personal and professional development – many parents register with the Local Employment Centre and enrol in education and training courses

## **Appendix 2**

### **Questions for Focus Group Participants**

1. What knowledge/information did you get from STEPS?
2. Did you change your attitude to things?
3. What changes did you make (behaviour) as a result of doing STEPS?
4. Did you change the way you felt (feelings) about things?
5. What was different about you after doing STEPS?

**STEPS Profiling Questionnaire**

**Purpose**

- To identify and record personal change as a result of doing the STEPS programme
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Please complete by ticking the appropriate box.

**General Profile Information**

1. **Are you:** Male \_\_\_\_\_ Female \_\_\_\_\_

2. **What age group are you in?**

20 – 29	
30 – 39	
40 – 49	
50 – 59	
60+	

3. **Are you:**

- |                                    |  |
|------------------------------------|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Married   | <input type="checkbox"/> Single – living alone |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Widowed   | <input type="checkbox"/> Divorced              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Separated |  |

4. **How many dependant children do you have in the following categories?**

	<b>Aged 0 – 4</b>	<b>aged 5-12</b>	<b>aged 13-18</b>
None	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
One	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Two	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Three or more	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

5. **How long ago did you do the STEPS programme?**

\_\_\_\_\_