

Reviewing the Theory of Change for the Nurturing Programme

This report outlines the theory and essential components of the Family Links 10-week Nurturing Programme for Parents (FLNP). Based on work started by the Colebrooke Centre in 2013 and utilising a five stage approach, this report on the work on the Theory of Change represents the third stage of the overall review.

A Theory of Change is based on the idea of a “pathway to change” along which service users travel, from their initial presenting needs, to the positive outcomes after the intervention or programme. Working with “content experts” with inside knowledge of the programme the Colebrooke Centre facilitated four workshop style sessions in order to develop the Theory of Change, the essential elements of which are described below.

- **Identifying Root Causes**

The programme was found to be responding to root causes common to many parents (including stress, conflict and lack of parental role models), but root causes also included less prevalent issues at the parent and child level.

- **Identifying the Needs Addressed**

Those needs identified were primarily the cognitive and emotional underpinning of parenting, with behavioural aspects of parenting classified as a secondary need.

- **Identifying the Primary and Secondary Outcomes of the Programme**

Primary outcomes were identified as predominantly aimed at emotional and cognitive changes for parents. Secondary outcomes at the child level included feeling calmer and less stressed, and becoming more co-operative.

- **Identifying the Key Resources and Inputs**

The four constructs on which the programme is based (empathy; self-esteem and self-awareness; age appropriate expectations; and positive discipline) were closely aligned with the anticipated outcomes. Skills, aptitude and experience of the group leaders in delivering the programme and communicating with parents was felt to be crucial.

- **Identifying the Key Activities and Outputs**

Programme content was found to be underpinned by a firm theory base with planned and varied activities using a range of educative styles. Of vital importance was a conducive learning environment full of enjoyment, fun, reflection and nurture.

Future work beyond testing the theory of change developed during the workshops, will include a comprehensive review of the existing research on the essential elements of Family Links’ theory of change, and further research into parents’ presenting needs and related programme outcomes. Please read on to find out more about the development of the “Theory of Change” for the Family Links Nurturing Programme.

Family Links are very grateful for the time and expertise given by the content experts who contributed to the development and refinement of the Theory of Change.

The Family Links Nurturing Programme

Findings and recommendations from a strategic
review and development project

EXTENDED SUMMARY 2:

Reviewing the Theory of Change for the Nurturing Programme

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This is a summary of key findings, conclusions and recommendations on work to review the theory of change for the Family Links Nurturing Programme. The work formed part of an 18-month strategic review and development project undertaken by the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation for Family Links during the period Autumn 2013 to Spring 2015. A full report on the project was prepared for Family Links: for enquiries about that report, please contact: research@familylinks.org.uk

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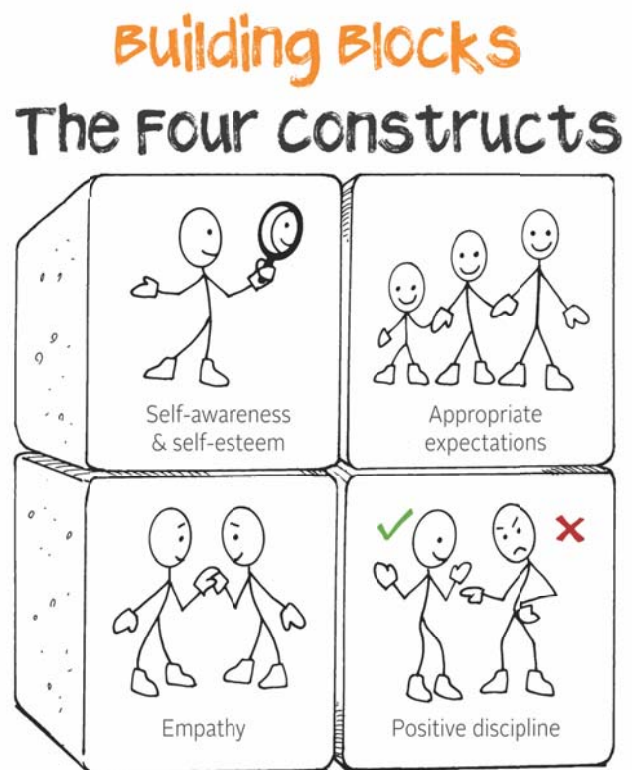
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Background to the Family Links Nurturing Programme

Family Links was established as a registered charity in 1997. Operating out of two central offices (one in Oxford in the South East of England and one in Hull in the North East, which we refer to collectively as ‘Head Office’ in the report), the Family Links Nurturing Programme (FLNP) has now been delivered in the UK for over fifteen years and although the number of local authorities delivering the Programme at any one time varies, over 50 local authorities and voluntary organisations around the country in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland have the capacity to deliver it. A highly popular programme with commissioners and providers alike, it is well-loved by practitioners and parents and enjoys strong local commitment. FLNP is one of several different parenting programmes developed by Family Links and forms the ‘core’ or mainstream programme on which other variants for specific groups are based, including antenatal parents, parents in prison, Muslim parents, and parents of children with special needs. Mainstream FLNP is a ‘broad spectrum’ parenting support programme, not a child behaviour management or behaviour modification programme, and much of its content deals with general principles of healthy relationships in families and with aspects of parenting confidence and self-efficacy. As such, research (our own, and that of others) shows that parents find the content relevant across a wide range of child age ranges. This is considered a strength by its commissioners, who use it both as a universal intervention, and for selective prevention when it is offered to parents with particular needs for support. Local areas therefore refer parents with children of all ages, although with an emphasis on pre-school and primary school-aged children.

Based on ‘*four constructs*’ that are the thematic building blocks around which content is delivered (self-awareness and self-esteem; appropriate expectations; empathy; positive discipline) the Programme locates its roots in a family of programmes known in the USA as the ‘*Nurturing Parenting Programs*’.

These were first developed in the 1970s and are now delivered in several countries, but predominantly in the USA (Bavolek, 2000). The Nurturing Parenting Programs are based on social learning principles, and most are



described as child maltreatment prevention interventions. The Family Links Nurturing Programme in the UK is different, in that it explicitly does not describe itself as a child maltreatment prevention programme, nor does it generally work with statutory referrals. It is offered in community-based settings open to the whole community, often in Sure Start Children's Centres, and although parenting support and other workers may (and substantially do) recommend the programme to parents they work with, in the majority of cases it is attended by parents on an entirely voluntary basis.

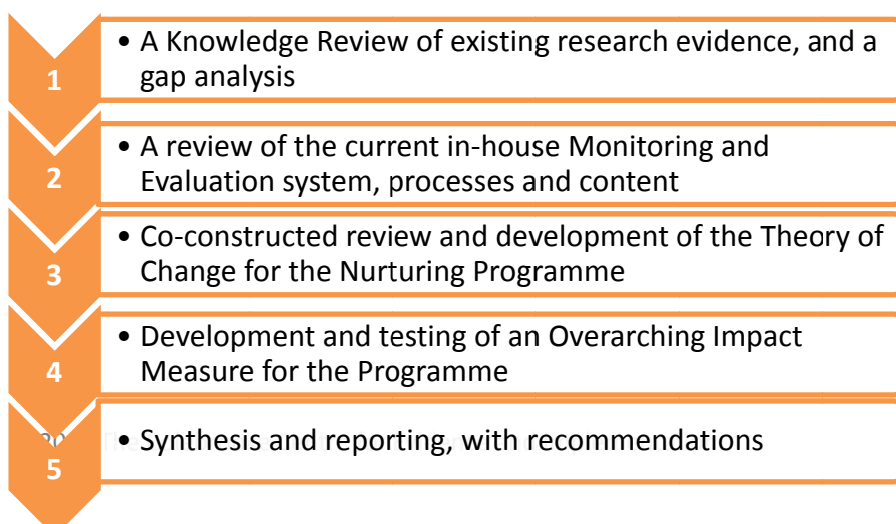
At local level, the Programme is delivered over a ten week period, sometimes with a prior week for introductions and preparation, in mixed groups usually intended to contain not more than ten parents, by trained facilitators, known by the Programme as Parent Group Leaders, PGLs). PGLs are not employed by Family Links, but the providing local authority or by other organisations to whom local authorities have contracted for the purpose of delivering the Programme. All PGLs have been trained in the Programme by Family Links, having undergone a four-day minimum training and approval process. There are two PGLs, per group. PGLs use a structured curriculum that is set out in the Parent Group Leaders' Handbook and in a book for parents, *The Parenting Puzzle: How to get the best out of family life* (Hunt, with Mountford, 2003). All parents receive their own copy of the book, and are encouraged to refer to it throughout the course.

The strategic review and development project

In 2013 Family Links commissioned the Colebrooke Centre to design a strategically-focused project to review and synthesise lessons from prior research on the Programme, and to carry out new work to review its foundations and identify ways to improve. As a specialist implementation analysis and improvement support centre, The Colebrooke Centre's approach uses an *implementation lens* (Fixsen et al., 2005) and draws on theory, frameworks and methods from intervention science and especially implementation and improvement science to inform and shape our work. Our approach, methods and many of our tools are innovative and unique in their application in children's services in the UK at present.

For this project, we designed a five stage approach as follows:

Figure 1 – the five-stage structure of the Strategic Review and Development Project



Below we summarise the key findings and implications from **Stage Three** of the work, a process to review and articulate the theory of change for the Programme. This summary should be read in conjunction with Summary 1, the General Summary of the project as a whole, and Summary 3, the Technical Summary of work to develop an overarching impact measure for the Programme.

Reviewing the theory of change for the Nurturing Programme

Background and Methods

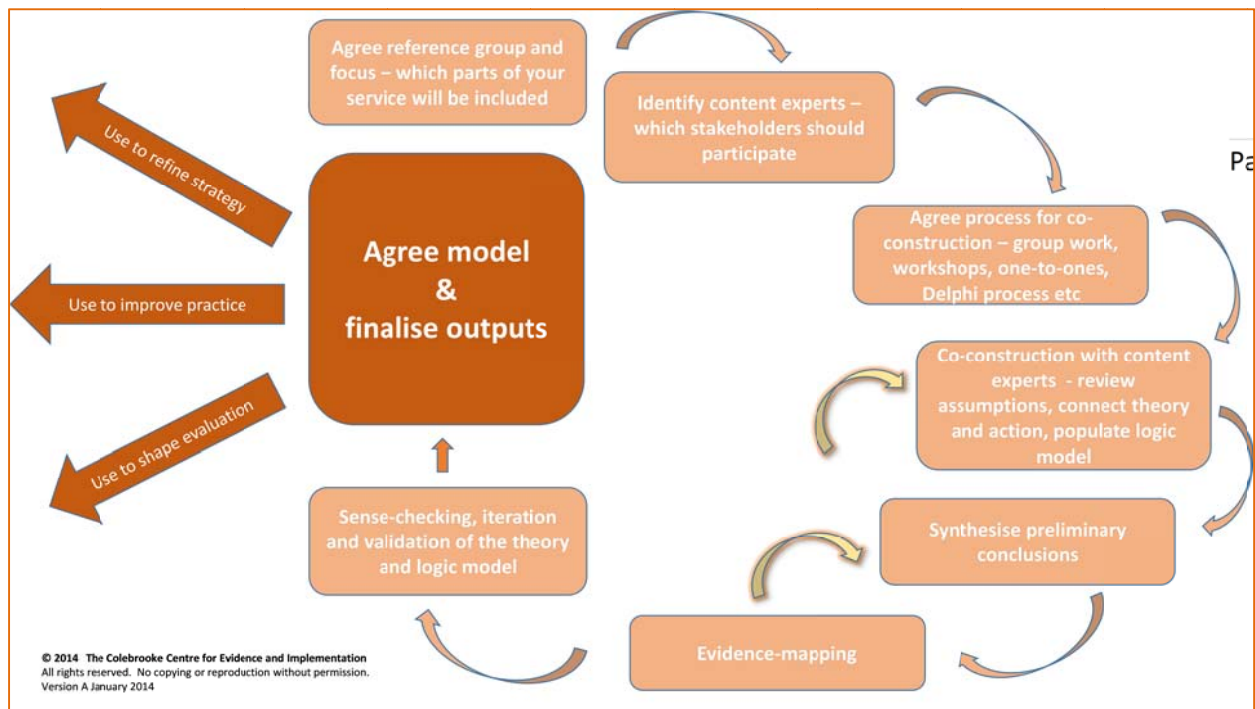
As a key part of the programme of strategic research and development, we jointly undertook to work to review and further develop a formal theory of change for the Family Links Nurturing Programme. This work was used as basis for the next stage of work (the development of an overarching impact measure) as well as being valuable in its own right.

The methodology that the Colebrooke Centre used for this work was adapted from the **Colebrooke Implementation Toolkit: Developing your Theory of Change**¹. A theory of change describes the logic, principles or assumptions that connect **what** a service or programme does, **why** and **how** they do it, with the **intended results** or outcomes. It is a formal articulation of the assumptions that underpin the rationale and design of the programme, and explains why the programme providers expect the programme to achieve change for service users. It is based on the idea of a 'pathway to change', along which service users travel, moving from their initial presenting needs or problems to the final positive outcomes that the programme hopes to achieve.

The Colebrooke Centre method for developing theory of change uses a *co-constructed* methodology, meaning that staff from the centre work alongside programme 'content experts' to elucidate thinking and build agreement about the core components or 'active ingredients' of the programme. On the way, we validate assumptions against experience and, where we can, against the wider research evidence of 'what works'. The intention is also not to create a fully comprehensive description of the programme, or to capture everything the programme does or intends to do. Rather, the aim is to achieve a succinct, clear and simple rendering of the programme that distils its 'real world complexity' down to the essential elements; see Figure 2.

¹ More detail about the model and its foundations will shortly appear on our website www.cevi.org.uk

Figure 2 The Colebrooke Centre Theory of Change development process



We carried out four separate sessions in workshop style with content experts on the FLNP as follows:

1. The then CEO of Family Links (original developer/adaptor of the UK programme from the American Nurturing Programme in the 1980s)
2. Members of the senior management team for Family Links: the Head of Programme Quality, and the Parent Programme Director
3. A group of four highly experienced Parent Group Leader Trainers (PGLTs)
4. A group of eight experienced Parent Group Leaders (PGLs) working in the county of Hertfordshire

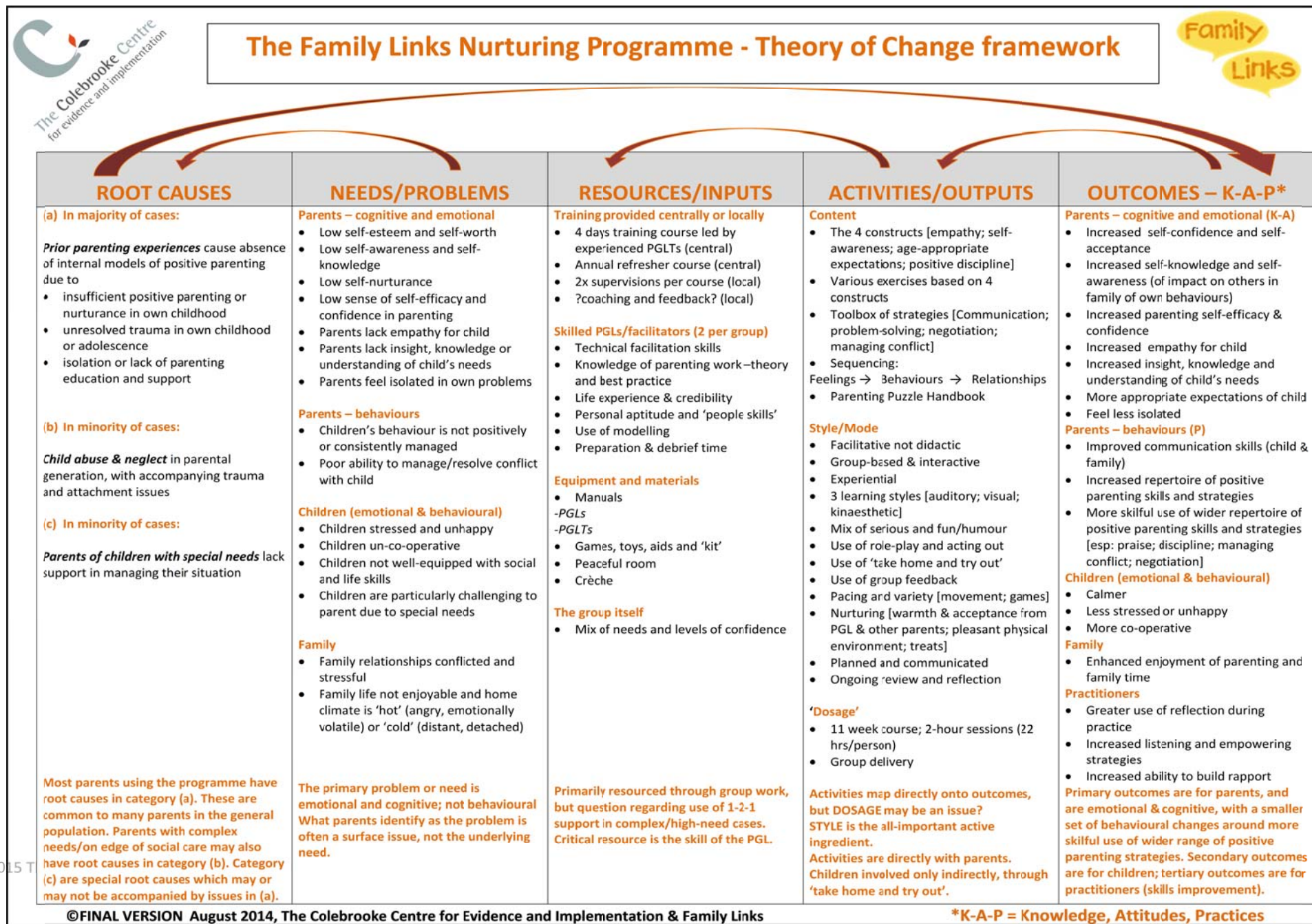
Parents were not included, but it was recommended that their inclusion form part of the continuing validation and review work that should take place over the coming years.

A final set of conversations resulted in an agreed and finalised **synthesis model** created by the facilitator, of the different discussions. (below, Figure 3). (Figures 4 & 5 show the same thinking in more graphic and 'higher-level' formulations).

The synthesis presents a formal sequence of stages along the pathway to change for service users as follows:

the **root causes** (the antecedent factors that give rise to the needs that are addressed by the programme)

- (1) the **needs or problems** addressed by the programme
- (2) the **resources or inputs** required or provided by the programme providers to enable the programme activities to take place
- (3) the **activities or outputs** of the programme: what is actually done with service users by the programme providers and facilitators
- (4) the **outcomes** (changes over time) or results that the programme intends to achieve for service users or for others as a result of its activities



Root causes

The discussions about Root Causes, or the antecedent factors that give rise to the needs that FLNP is trying to address, consistently focused on the issue of negative prior parenting experiences and the extent to which parents participating in the Nurturing Programme had themselves not been well-parented or well-nurtured as children. As a result many parents attending the programme present as lacking in inner resources, social scripts or models for parenting. In theoretical terms, the relevant opportunities for social learning from positive role models has not taken place, leaving parents themselves poorly equipped to parent their own children. They appear stressed by family life, which is characterised as full of conflict, and are anxious and lack confidence.

There was general consensus among content experts that all parents who attend the programme, whether self-referred or referred by local practitioners, almost always present with one or more specific difficulties or problems and most would acknowledge that they are having problems either in relationships with their children or in managing their children's behaviour. Most who asked to attend, or who were willing to attend the programme at the suggestion of a local practitioner, did so on the basis that they would get help with this issue or difficulty.

However, content experts noted that few parents themselves presented with a clear understanding or belief that this problem or difficulty might have its root causes in their own experiences of being parented. This was mostly a revelation that occurred during the course of the programme.

Content experts mostly indicated that the root causes noted in **Figure 3** as **category (a)** in the theory of change matrix were common to many parents in the general population, and not peculiar to a high risk, complex need or social care population. Thus, the Family Links Nurturing Programme was not described by content experts as primarily addressing problems that have their antecedent causes in child abuse or maltreatment, but as a programme that could benefit many parents on a 'universal' basis. This makes the UK nurturing programme distinct from the original Nurturing Programme developed in America by Bavolek² in that it is not intended to be primarily a child abuse or maltreatment prevention programme. By contrast, the Bavolek program is explicitly presented as a targeted intervention intended to be used mainly with high-risk populations, many of whom are at risk of child abuse or neglect.

Some content experts did indicate that parents attending Nurturing Programme groups in the UK sometimes disclosed experiences of child abuse and neglect in their own childhood, or in some cases practitioners had referred parents to the programme because of concerns around child well-being that potentially placed the family on the edge of social care. Hence

² <http://www.nurturingparenting.com/NPLLevelsPrevent.html>

content experts wanted a set of root causes listed under **category (b)** to be listed in the synthesis model. However, in general the programme was not intentionally used as a child abuse prevention programme, nor is it usually used in cases where safeguarding is an explicit issue.

Finally, there is specific group of root causes – **category (c)** - that apply only to parents of children with special needs, around isolation and lack of support in specific situations where children are more than usually challenging to parent.

Distinctive feature of the FLNP: Root causes

- (1) the programme is responding to root causes that are common to many parents in the population rather than antecedent factors specific to certain high need populations.
- (2) but the programme can also be used with parents whose own childhoods contain histories of child abuse or neglect, and as a form of support for parents of children with special needs.

Needs or problems addressed by the programme

The needs or problems most commonly identified by content experts as needs that the programme sought to address were predominantly (a) the **needs of parents rather than of children**, and (b) were in the **emotional and cognitive domain** rather than the behavioural domain. It is interesting however that at the commencement of the programme, from parents' perspectives, the child was very often identified as the predominant need or problem, and these needs were predominantly seen as behavioural in origin ('my child is misbehaves; my child doesn't listen to me; my child is uncooperative'). Parent Group Leaders in particular noted that parents often arrived at the group with a request that could be paraphrased as 'fix my child'. Content experts were however unanimous in their view that in the context of the Nurturing Programme, problems at the level of the child were almost always better understood and better helped by focusing on problems at the level of the parent.

The most commonly and consistently mentioned presenting needs were described as problems of **low self-esteem** and low self-worth, combined with **low self-awareness** and poor understanding by parents of the impact of their own behaviour on other people, and especially, the impact of their own behaviour on their children. Content experts also identified that many parents showed **low levels of self-nurturance**, failing to observe their own needs for rest, relaxation or positive affirmation. These were primarily needs of the *person* rather than the needs of the *parent* per se but they were seen as intimately

connected with a further set of needs of particular relevance to parenting that included **lack of empathy** for children and **poor understanding of children's age- or stage-related needs**. Finally parents tended to feel **isolated** in their difficulties and assumed that other parents did not suffer from the same problems.

The only parenting **behavioural** needs that were consistently mentioned were that children's behaviour was often **poorly or inconsistently managed** and in particular parents showed lack of confidence or sense of self-efficacy and skill in **responding to and resolving conflict** with their children.

Page | 10

Some content experts did also identify needs at the level of **children**, although these were generally clearly related to parents' lack of skilful attention to their developmental needs and to the ability to effectively respond to conflict with children. Thus children were sometimes described as **uncooperative or non-compliant**. Content experts (although not parents) also noted that the children of many parents who attended the Nurturing Programme appeared ill-equipped with social and life skills and were not easily able to concentrate, listen, or comply with simple instructions: in other words they were not 'school ready'. They often appeared **stressed or unhappy**. A small group of children were also especially challenging for parents, due to **special needs or disabilities**.

Many parents (and most content experts) also identified presenting problems at the level of **family relationships**. Relationships at home were often described as conflicted and stressful, with regular outbursts on all sides. Parents did not always feel well supported by their partners, where they had one. Parents did not appear to greatly enjoy family life or parenting to the fullest possible extent. **The atmosphere at home was** described as **uncomfortable**, either conflicted and angry, or else cold and detached, with low warmth and shared activities.

Distinctive features of the FLNP: Needs addressed

- (1) the programme has a primary focus on the cognitive and the emotional underpinnings of parenting; behavioural aspects of parenting are secondary
- (2) the programme is responding to parents' needs, even though parents themselves may diagnose the problem as located at the level of their child's behaviour.

Outcomes (changes the programme hopes to achieve, which can be attributed to the FLNP)

For programs to be built on sound internal logic, and so to be optimally effective, it is usually desirable for there to be a close correspondence between the outcomes or results intended and the needs identified and addressed. It is often tempting to cast outcomes within a much wider framework than is suggested by the needs addressed, or to aim for goals that cannot be realistically addressed by the actual activities that are undertaken by the programme. It is always helpful to begin by thinking of outcomes as both *person-specific* (outcomes for whom?) and *domain-specific* (in what area of functioning or wellbeing?), as this helps to keep the thinking grounded. Accordingly, the workshops spent some time reflecting upon and interrogating some of the assumptions about the desired outcomes for the Family Links Nurturing Programme. After reflection, content experts were generally agreed that the **primary** outcomes that the programme aims to achieve are most appropriately located at the **parent level**, rather than the child level, and are in the **emotional & cognitive domains**. A smaller set of behavioural changes around more skilful use of wider range of positive parenting strategies were also mentioned as objectives of the programme. These can clearly be seen to flow from the identified presenting needs discussed above.

Outcomes for children, it was generally agreed after discussion and reflection, were considered to be **secondary** to outcomes for parents. There were also, potentially, some **tertiary** outcomes for the practitioners involved in delivering the parenting groups in relation to learning new skills or modifying the way they practised in other areas of their work.

Primary outcomes

Content experts hoped for the following **primary** outcomes from the programme for parents, which fell into two groups: firstly, *cognitive and emotional changes*, connected with **improved self-worth and self-efficacy**, and connected with growing understanding and insight into their own needs and particularly those of their child. More **realistic and age-appropriate expectations** by parents of children's behaviour generally were also seen as a desired outcome of the programme. Increased parenting confidence and 'self-efficacy' (belief in one's ability to manage the daily responsibilities of parenting) was also considered to be a desired outcome, as was **feeling less isolated** and more supported. A smaller, secondary group of changes of the parent level concerned parenting *practices and behaviours*. After considerable discussion, the groups were able to narrow these down to outcomes connected with how the family and how parents **communicate**, and with a **widened repertoire** of parenting 'skills and strategies' particularly in terms of demonstrating warmth and praise, listening, and responding effectively to everyday challenges and conflicts. However a more thoughtful analysis of the practical outcomes of the programme

related not just to a widened repertoire of positive parenting behaviours, but a more **skilful use of that repertoire**, particularly in relation to the specific techniques that are taught as part of the Nurturing Programme including for example, the power of praise, techniques of positive discipline, and negotiation skills such as ‘choices and consequences’. Thus it was felt that parents ought not only to learn a greater range of ways of responding to children in ways that are optimal for their development, but they ought, by the end of the programme, to understand better when and in what specific situations to apply these differential responses; in other words, both practices and strategies could be improved and made more positive. Note that ‘preventing child maltreatment’ was **not** identified as a target outcome of the FLNP. All were agreed that the model could not necessarily deliver such an outcome, given there is currently no referral criterion that identifies parents ‘at risk’ for this, nor is the content specifically aimed at child abuse prevention but instead focuses on positive parenting practices and strategies on the broad spectrum.

Secondary outcomes

In terms of **secondary outcomes**, after considerable discussion desired outcomes for **children** were narrowed down to just three changes: two emotional and one behavioural. At the *emotional* level, it was hoped that children would benefit from higher levels of empathy and consistency in their parents by demonstrating **reduced levels of stress** and generally **feeling calmer and more contented**. It was also hoped at the behavioural level that more consistent positive parenting and more negotiation within the households would encourage children to become more **co-operative** with their parents.

After discussion, all the content experts agreed that it was probably not necessarily reasonable to expect the Nurturing Programme to reliably lead to measurable changes in other specific areas of child *behaviour* after just 10 weeks’ work with their parents alone. There are implications here for the use of instruments such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire to measure a much wider range of children’s emotional and behavioural responses.

Tertiary outcomes

Finally, in some groups of content experts, it was felt that there were a set of **tertiary outcomes** for the **practitioners** who are trained in and subsequently deliver the Nurturing Programme. It was felt that the high quality of the training provided ought to lead to improvements in specific practice skills, including changes in the use of **reflective practice** (both after and during direct work with parents), and an increased use of **active listening and strategies for empowering parents** to meet their own needs. Practitioners ought also to demonstrate increased ability to **build rapport** and engage with parents effectively. Although content experts groups themselves did not identify such an outcome, it is also possible to frame benefits for practitioners as benefits of the **wider system**, in the

contribution that they make to improving the quality of practice in working with families across a range of settings.

Distinctive features of the FLNP: Outcomes

- (1) primary outcomes are at the parent level and predominantly aimed at emotional and cognitive changes;
- (2) secondary outcomes for children are restricted to two emotional outcomes (feeling calmer; feeling less stressed) and one behavioural outcome (becoming more co-operative);
- (3) tertiary outcomes concern improvements in practitioners practice skills as individuals, and with benefits for the organisations and systems in which they work.

Activities (outputs of the Programme; what is done by providers and PGLs with parents who attend)

The activities or outputs of the programme were scrutinised after the outcomes had been carefully considered by the content expert groups. The discussion around activities divided into two main areas (1) the **content** of the programme and (2) the **style** in which the sessions are delivered. There was a general view that although the content is vitally important and generally very well attuned to the anticipated outcomes, the style in which the sessions are delivered was the all-important 'active ingredient' in whether parents benefited from the programme or not. It is important to note that the activities are directly carried out exclusively with parents attending the sessions. Children's involvement as recipients of the programme is indirect and only takes place to the extent that parents try out the suggested activities and strategies at home. There is evidence from the literature on FLNP that some parents do experiment with the 'take home and try out' element of the programme and report back on their success or lack of it at the next session. However, it is not known what proportion of parents attending the programme involve their children indirectly in this way. This indirect involvement, of some unknown proportion of children, is another reason for being cautious about expecting outcomes at the child level.

In general it was found that activities mapped well onto outcomes.

Content

The four constructs on which the core content of the FLNP rests [empathy; self-esteem and self-awareness; age-appropriate expectations; positive discipline] are derived from the original American Nurturing Programme model, though in that programme the balance of emphasis is somewhat different and the constructs have been adapted over time both in the US and by the UK programme.

There are huge literatures on all these constructs and their hypothesised and empirically demonstrated relationship to parenting and outcomes for children, which are not reviewed here. Suffice it to say that all are well-supported by the literature as appropriate foci for parenting support. The theoretical rationale and research evidence underpinning the focus on *empathy* is for example set out briefly in Bavolek (2000), although the focus here (as in many discussions) is on the role of lack of empathy in neglecting and abusive parenting. More generally, empathic parenting is known to be associated with sensitive and responsive parenting, and with the healthy development of children (e.g Dix 1995). *Self-esteem and self-awareness*, as discussed by Bavolek (*op cit*) is seen as an important factor preventing 'role reversal', and enabling parents to understand the impact of their own responses and behaviours on others around them (including children). We also know that low-self-esteem and low self-efficacy are associated with mental health problems such as depression, and that in turn, maternal depression is one the key predictors of a range of poor outcomes for children (Rutter et al 1998). *Age-appropriate* expectations reflect a sound grasp of what it is reasonable to expect a child to do, or understand, or feel, and again, many well-validated parenting programmes focus on equipping parents with better understanding and knowledge in this respect, including for example *Triple P* (Saunders et al 2003). Finally, there is substantial evidence in the wider literature that *positive parenting style* is an important mediating factor in reducing problems in child behaviour (e.g Gardner et al, 2010), and there is substantial literature on positive (non-coercive) discipline and its relationship child wellbeing (e.g Patterson, 2002)

Content experts agreed that the **four constructs** were closely aligned with the anticipated outcomes for the FLNP and that the various exercises based around these four constructs were important and helpful mechanisms in achieving change for parents. There are also a number of other exercises and activities which cover different aspects of content, primarily focused on the acquisition or improvement of important **skills** in communication, relationships, and problem-solving. The sequencing of the learning, which begins by exploring feelings and emotional reactions, moves to discussing the impact of these feelings on parents' behaviours and those of their children, and then subsequently to a consideration of how these behaviours impact on the quality of relationships within the family, was felt to be well aligned towards the emotional and behavioural changes that are desired from participants in the programme. It was felt to represent a plausible pathway of

change through understanding feelings and responses, understanding the impact of those responses on others, and finally understanding how relationships are shaped by these interactions. Finally, the **Parenting Puzzle Handbook** for parents was felt to be an essential supporting element for the content.

Style/Mode

The style, or mode of delivery of the content, was consistently identified as being equally, if not more, important than the formal content of the Nurturing Programme. The style of the programme is group-based and highly interactive, and utilises a mixture of techniques for securing the engagement and retention of parents in the programme; and for maximising learning, based on adult learning theories.

Content experts endorsed the focus on different **learning styles** [auditory; visual; kinaesthetic]. Other important elements of style are listed in the logic model, with the **interactive** 'light' and **fun** aspects felt to be especially important in moderating what might otherwise be serious and even emotionally overwhelming content. The use of **role-play**, acting out, and the encouragement to '**take home and try out**' tips in the family setting and **feedback the results** were also felt to be important aspects of reinforcing the content and making it relevant and real to the individuals who participate. This element of the programme is seen as an important counterpoint to some of the more intellectually demanding theoretical material which is included as part of the four constructs. The use of **pace and variation** in activity including plenty of physical movement was also felt to be extremely important, in that otherwise participants who might not be used to sitting and listening for long periods might lose concentration and engagement. Supporting this, content experts believed, was the emphasis placed on communicating the **careful planning** that had gone into each session and ensuring that all participants knew what to expect for each two-hour session. Finally, all content experts mentioned the modelling of a **nurturing** as well as respectful environment, expressed through elements such as taking care about the appearance of the training room, providing small treats and so on. This was certainly felt to be a very enjoyable aspect of the programme from the point of view of participants, although it is not clear to what extent the experience translates to the home environment.

An obvious observation regarding content is that the learning of the programme, in following a careful pre-planned sequence, of necessity builds gradually across the 10 weeks of its duration. It seems inevitable that parents who do not complete the full sequence of sessions will not be able to benefit fully from the programme. There is an open question concerning what is the minimum number of sessions or hours of exposure to the programme that is necessary to achieve specific outcomes. There is also a question, which may be resolved by examination of the wider research evidence, around whether even the maximum 'dosage' (that is, the number of hours of 'exposure' to the programme by participants and the intensity of the learning delivered during the current '10 plus one week' program, which is generally a maximum of 20 hours per person content delivery over the

duration of a single course) is in fact sufficient to achieve some of the more challenging outcomes that are considered goals of the programme. Certainly a consistent comment from PGLs is that the sessions often feel somewhat over-full and time pressured.

Distinctive features of the FLNP: Activities/outputs

- (1) content underpinned by a firm theory base, with planned and structured activities that mix the serious and the fun using a range of educative styles to cater to different learning preferences.
- (2) an emphasis on variation in pace and type of activity; reflection; fun; home work; and an enjoyable, nurturing environment in which to learn.

Resources (inputs necessary to allow activities to take place)

Compared to some parenting programmes, the Nurturing Programme is considered to be a fairly low resource intervention. First, it is a **group intervention**, typically serving somewhere between six and 10 individuals per session. This said, there is an open question about the extent to which one-to-one work is used as a way of supporting parents who might otherwise have less than optimal attendance or engagement at the groups. Although the 10 week course programme is not described as requiring individual one-to-one support, it is known that in many local areas, practitioners do provide one-to-one, individual support to parents who are attending a nurturing programme course, with some practitioners providing deliberate and structured reinforcement of the messages from the sessions in between each session by means of in-home one-to-one work, using modelling and working directly with both the parent and the children in the family. The extent to which this is a *required* resource for impact in more complex, high need families is an open question, and one which links with ideas about 'core (essential, fixed) and 'variable' (able to be adapted) components in implementation science. (Fixsen et al 2009)

By far the most expensive element of the resource input is the **training provision**, which consists of three main elements. First a four-day training course; second, annual 'refresher' courses for those already trained; and third, supervision during the course of each group, provided by local managers for group facilitators at least twice during the running of each 10 week course. The four-day training course is obligatory for all facilitators of the Nurturing Programme in order to become officially recognised as a facilitator of the Programme. There is evidence that the four-day training programmes are extremely positively received by trainees (e.g. Roker, 2011) and that the vast majority of attendees feel significantly more confident and better skilled in running parenting programmes by the end of the course. The

quality of the trainers on the four day course is highlighted as a significant factor here. Annual refreshers are considered by content experts to be highly desirable, but it is not known what proportion of trained PGLs do in fact take up the annual refresher offer each year. Finally, supervision twice during the course of each group is a matter for local determination, and again, it is not known to what extent this does in fact take place. There is international evidence to support the importance of coaching and one-to-one clinical supervision in maintaining the effectiveness of trained practitioners in delivering interventions in a range of services (Fixsen et al 2005) and it remains a question as to what extent this aspect of the resources required for the operation of FLNP operates (or could in future operate) as a critical factor in maintaining its effectiveness.

The next resource input highlighted as critical by content experts is that of the **skill** of the PGLs/facilitators of each course. There is substantial research evidence to support the contention that the skill of the practitioner delivering an intervention is a critical active ingredient in its effectiveness, and content experts were unanimous that the desired outcomes for the nurturing programme were only possible if facilitators were appropriately skilled and confident. During the process of creating the logic model five key elements of individual skill or experience were highlighted by content experts. Personal aptitude and what are often colloquially known as **people skills** (skills at forming warm and trusting relationships and building rapport, so that all members of a group may feel comfortable and able to participate) were highlighted as exceptionally important; but **life experience** and credibility (which some but not all content experts characterised as including the experience of having been a parent oneself) was also felt to be important in imparting confidence amongst group participants. **Knowledge of parenting work** was also highlighted, and there is a question about the extent to which those trained in the Nurturing Programme who do not also have substantial expertise in working with parents in other contexts are able to be as effective as more experienced parenting practitioners. Although this was not explicitly mentioned by content experts, it is likely that **technical facilitation skills** are an extremely important element of the skill set required by effective Nurturing Programme facilitators. Again, there is question about the extent to which formal skills in the techniques and strategies of effective facilitation are also a fundamental requirement for Nurturing Programme facilitators to be effective. Finally, effective facilitators of the nurturing programme also need to be skilled in **modelling** the desired reflective and behavioural responses so that parents participating in the groups can see nurturing and empathic relationships in action.

Another aspect that appear to be important in terms of resource inputs was time. This includes the staff **time** of two trained PGLs, since it is obligatory that each group is facilitated by two trained PGLs, in order that the facilitators can support one another in delivering the various activities, and also in order that all members of the group are given sufficient attention during the session. All content experts highlighted that groups of parents attending Nurturing Programme courses are typically mixed, and that relatively little

is known about their background before the start of the group. Given that the subject matter of the programme touches on some potentially sensitive and intimate aspects of family and childhood experience, content experts were unanimous that two facilitators were required in each group in case any individual required additional support, or personal attention, during the course of the session. This requirement is therefore an important resourcing matter, which may perhaps be a distinction between the Nurturing Programme and other parenting programmes that might be available locally, which are typically led by a single facilitator. Also, content experts also stressed the importance of facilitators having adequate time to prepare for each group, and also to undertake joint debriefing and reflection at the end of each session.

The resources required in terms of **equipment and materials** for a Nurturing Programme session are again, relatively modest, although not without cost implications. Facilitators each require a manual, (and trainers further require their own specialised PGLT manual), and each parent attending requires copy of the Parenting Puzzle book which is referred to throughout the session and is intended to assist parents to continue their study at home.

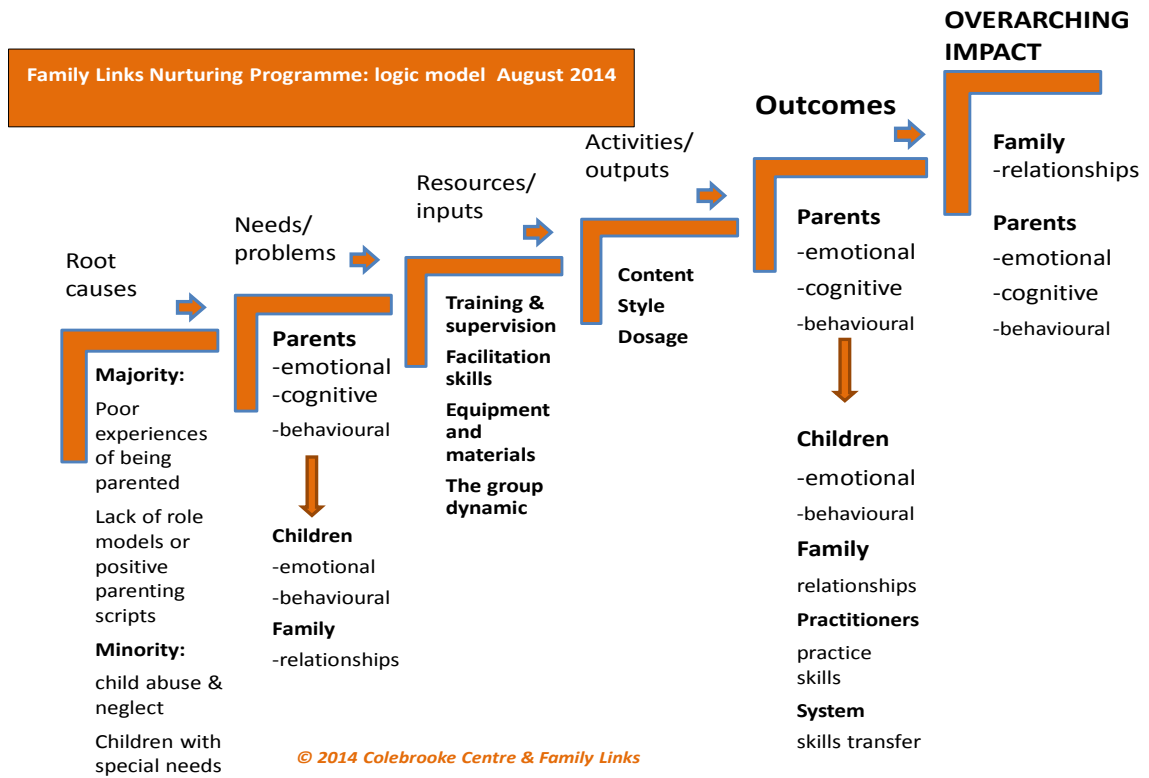
There are then various games, toys, aides and aspects of the facilitator's 'kit' including small treats and 'goodies'; a peaceful room suitable for group work; and most importantly (and expensively) the provision of a crèche. Most content experts considered that the provision of a properly staffed crèche was essential, although acknowledged that this substantially increased the costs of running a Nurturing Programme group, and can also create some practical constraints.

Lastly, **the group itself** is an important resource for each Nurturing Programme session. Each session actively uses the group dynamic to create discussion, debate, reflection, interaction and energy, and for this reason, and perhaps somewhat counterintuitively, content experts were insistent that groups should generally ideally contain a mix of different types of parents with differing levels of need, confidence, and life experience. Again, there are implications for the ideal structure and size of groups, and also questions around possible implications for effectiveness if groups do not conform to the ideal in terms of size and diversity.

Distinctive features of the FLNP: Resources/inputs

- (1) a group based programme with comparatively low resource requirements, chief amongst which is an obligatory four-day training course.**
- (2) facilitator skill requirements are high, and include technical facilitation skills as well as knowledge of working with parents and people and the ability to model effective interpersonal relationships.**
- (3) the use of two facilitators for each group may be a distinctive feature.**

Figure 4 High level Logic Model (1) for the Family Links Nurturing Programme revised 2014



Validating the theory of change: next steps in moving from theory to evidence

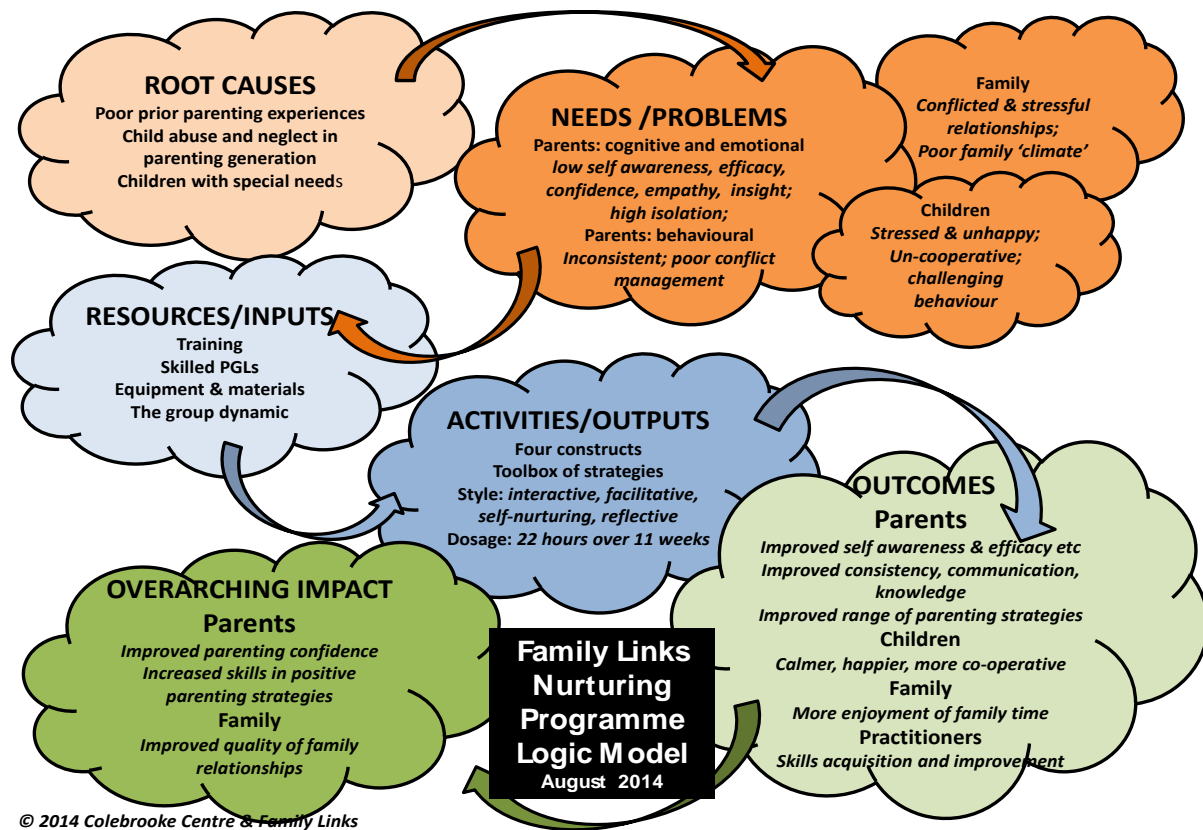
After the process described above, all content experts were agreed that the resulting synthesis model accurately reflected their own understanding and beliefs about how the FLNP is structured and delivered, and what it reasonably can be expected to achieve in respect of outcomes if delivered with fidelity. We agreed that the specified outcomes were plausible, and in principle testable, though our work did not extend to a review of outcome measurement possibilities, and this remains work to do. However, to complete the validation of a theory of change (ie, to move from theory to evidence), one wants to verify that the assumptions made in the logic model are supported in evidence, as far as that is possible (generally, by exploring whether other services or programmes have succeeded in obtaining the desired outcomes using similar approaches); and then test the hypothesised relationships between the stages of the model in the real community settings in which the programme is delivered. One therefore wants to review in depth the wider (general) evidence base, and conduct specific research on the programme itself. Both of these remain areas for future and ongoing work for FLNP. In addition, it is always valuable to check whether the implementation model implied by the theory of change is recognised by service beneficiaries (in other words, is the programme experienced by service users as intended). In the case of FLNP, this work is yet to be completed, and should ideally be part of a strategic programme of further research and evaluation.

The UK Family Links Nurturing Programme is, we believe, quite distinctive, especially in its implementation model. Although it has its roots in the American Nurturing Programmes developed and still delivered by Bavolek and colleagues in the USA, FLNP has departed from these programmes in a number of ways, most especially in terms of the populations served (unlike the US programme, FLNP is not aimed at high risk child welfare populations, known or suspected to be at risk for child maltreatment). In terms of content, although similar social learning principles and encouraging positive parenting practices based on age and stage-appropriate expectations are found in many parenting programmes, the emphasis on parental self-nurturance and self-awareness that characterises the FLNP is not a key part of many other programmes. It uses a cognitive-behavioural rather than a purely behavioural model, yet groups typically focus to an extensive degree on real parenting scenarios and teach tips for responding to different types of child behaviour (both desirable and challenging).

In its implementation model it is also distinctive. In taking place in universal settings, but intentionally combining parents with mixed levels of need and children of mixed ages in the same groups, FLNP is hard to categorise within the orthodox commissioning categories of 'universal' and 'targeted' programmes, or as a programme aimed at a particular child developmental stage or at parents with a particular type or level of parenting need. This means that the wider evidence base on 'what works' in parenting support and intervention

only maps imperfectly onto the programme (ie, there is no evidence from directly analogous programmes that neatly maps onto the FLNP model), and robust and extensive specific testing on the FLNP itself will eventually be required in order to fully validate the theory of change.

Figure 5 High level Logic Model (2) for the Family Links Nurturing Programme revised 2014



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