



Article

'Finding My Tribe'—The Mixed Blessing of Neoliberal Parenting Programmes for Parents of Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of parents of children with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) who have participated in parenting programmes in the UK. The parents attended generic programmes before they were able to access more specific programmes geared towards the needs of children with ASD. The parents found that the generic programmes were detrimental to the needs of their children and disruptive of family life, resulting in parental relationship breakdown in some instances. Whilst the ASD-specific programmes did provide some level of support, the most decisive factor was the sharing of experiences amongst those parents as well as the ongoing support that this fostered. The conclusion of this study is that the neoliberal responsabilisation of parents via parenting programmes is undermining the support networks of parents of children with ASD, and an asset-based community development approach would be more beneficial.

Keywords: autistic spectrum disorder; parenting programmes; community; policy; neoliberalism; children; parents



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1. Introduction

This paper explores the experiences of parents of children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) who undertook parenting programmes in the UK. Parenting programmes have minimal long-term research around their effectiveness, particularly for parents of children with ASD (beyond the claims of those who benefit financially from them). It is therefore imperative to understand the impact of these programmes from the parents' perspectives. This paper offers a detailed critique of the effectiveness of these programmes and suggests that they reflect the neoliberal ideology of both parenting and wider society and that a community development model which builds on the assets of the parental community would be merited.

1.1. UK Parenting Policy

From 2006 to 2008, the Pathfinder study implemented in 18 local authorities looked at the national rollout of parenting programmes [1]. Following on from this study in 2008, the Parenting Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) was funded by the Department for Children and Schools and Families, and local authorities received PEIP funding to offer one or more of five parenting programmes in their local areas [2]. The initial five evidence-based parenting programmes (EBPPs) that were chosen were Incredible Years, Triple P,

Strengthening Families 10–14, Strengthening Families, and Strengthening Communities and Families and Schools Together. However, the ambiguity around these programmes is that they have not been developed for children with SEN; instead, these courses have been developed to target specific presenting behaviours in neurodivergent children [3]. Prior to this, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) produced a report [4] with guidance on the provision of parenting training programmes for children with conduct disorders.

Parenting programmes support families with ongoing issues that are said to impact children's outcomes. In England, the early intervention term sits within a broader framework as a form of support that helps to narrow the gap for individuals, strengthen families' resolve, and inform social support [5]. Moreover, Allen [6] believes that early intervention offers children opportunities to make improvements to their social conditions and allows the public long-term savings. However, Allen [6] also suggests there is bias in the UK, in favour of existing policies that deliver late intervention where social issues are entrenched, as opposed to investing in early intervention. Chowdry and Oppenheim [7] point out that GBP 17 million a year is spent by the government on late intervention and does not address deeper issues that could have been dealt with earlier on, whilst summarising that governments are unable to commit to large-scale spending to provide an integrated early intervention system. Additionally, there are no governmental departments or ministers in charge of putting early intervention into action. Early intervention must therefore be a cultural shift across the UK embedded in each local authority and set out as a priority. This view is mirrored by UNICEF [8] (p. 1), which states the following:

Governments must plan and prepare for the future to ensure that improvements in child well-being are sustained. This means choosing policies that set a strong foundation for children and for society as a whole.

Furthermore, comparisons between the UK and other nations evidence that behaviour, family, and peer relationships are less effective when compared with other high-income nations [8]. Moreover, the UK ranks 35th in providing effective child social policy and 30th for child health policy, which is in stark comparison to Norway, Iceland, Finland, Sweden, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, which are consistently in the top five for effective policies for children. Evidence from Sweden shows that by joining childcare with education, lone parents and lower-income families have greater access to childcare early on, resulting in greater social inclusion, improved finances, and better outcomes overall [9].

The need for early intervention around parenting support has shown that parents are crucial players in stabilising children's social and emotional behaviours and that parenting programmes are also useful strategies to resolve children's issues [10], helping parents to improve children's behaviour, making children more socially acceptable [11]. Moreover, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation discovered that through parenting intervention, parents support children in obtaining the skills and knowledge needed for the challenges they might face in the wider world [12]. A meta-analysis of 1435 studies showed that children, when parented with negative parenting styles and strict control, showed higher externalisation of problems, leading to later social problems [13]. More recently, in 'Supporting Families 2021 to 2022 and Beyond' [14], the UK government has reiterated its support for families to build on their strengths and resilience with the help of a variety of services including parenting programmes.

Between 2006 and 2008, the UK Government Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) funded the Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder (PEIP) across 18 local authorities (LAs) in the UK. This implemented: 'One of three selected parenting programmes with parents of children aged 8–13 years: Incredible Years, Triple P and Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities, selected as having a sound evidence base for their effectiveness' [15] (p. 3).

The evaluation of the PEIP found that the parenting programmes helped to support more positive behaviour in children and improved parenting skills and mental health [1,2,15]. However, Gray et al. [16] argue that there is limited evidence of the effectiveness of parenting programmes, not least because the interventions ignore the context of poverty, social exclusion, and other additional or special needs, including neurodivergence. Bornstein et al. [17] concur that ‘funds supporting them have too often been spent achieving only limited effects’ [18] (p. 189). They go on to claim that ‘parenting programmes are popular and prolific, but many outright fail to deliver meaningful effects’ [17] (p. 201). Although some strides have been made in more systematic assessments, Jarvis [19] highlights that poverty and deprivation still play a significantly greater role in children’s outcomes. Parenting programmes in the neoliberal mode [20,21] over-individualise the issue and are oriented around behaviour modification, utilising punishments and rewards [22]. The differing starting points in life for children are largely ignored, as is the role privilege plays in future outcomes. As well as parenting becoming a moral duty, White and Wastell [23] describe this as the creation of ‘prevention science’ which creates a new discourse around the relationship between state, family, and children, which prioritises technical solutions to decontextualised problems.

Discourses surrounding the support to parents are often removed from the context of poverty. As the Dept for Work and Pensions [24,25] notes, children’s lack of development is due to being born into environments impacted by drugs, alcohol, and domestic violence, as well as mothers impacted by postnatal depression. As Gillies [26] points out this emphasises parental responsibility while ignoring the importance of social inequalities. This reflects the dominant political ideology of neoliberalism in the UK. Rooted in the work of Hayek, neoliberalism is both a social and economic doctrine which is grounded in a market economy and conceives of a minimal role for the state to support and sustain social welfare. It places an exclusive emphasis on individual agency and personal responsibility and therefore denies the existence of social structures such as class, poverty, or racism and sexism. This results in a valorisation of those who succeed and demonises and blames those whom it considers to be failures [27,28]; in short, one’s problems are always of one’s own making, and it is not the responsibility of the state to resolve them. This neoliberal approach in the UK was cemented in 2007, with the introduction of ‘Every Parent Matters’ [29], which put further pressure on parents, deeming them the most crucial factor in their children’s health and well-being. This has continued with the ‘Helping Parents to Parent Report’ [30], which highlights children’s poor outcomes as being a direct consequence of poor parenting.

Parenting ‘education’ was no longer a choice but a moral obligation, and the parent’s role was to drive children to be work-ready [31]. Neoliberalism in UK family policy is almost complete. As Hartas [32] argues, it is now an economic doctrine centring on human governance, whilst Doepke and Zilibotti [33] highlight the parent’s responsabilisation of childhood outcomes regardless of the social–economic context. The discourse now centres particularly on the ‘problems’ of lone parents as well as feral children and ‘feral parents’ [34], despite research carried out by Mencap [35] that suggests that in 2020, there were approximately 349,000 children living in the UK with a learning disability where parents are struggling to manage behaviours (through no fault of the child or parent).

UK policy is framed solely around dysfunctional working-class parents failing to regulate their children’s behaviours and perpetuating social problems. This is exemplified by Gillies:

Discourses of ‘social exclusion’ construct working-class families as lacking in personal skills and moral responsibility, destined to transfer disadvantage to their children in a ‘cycle of deprivation’. [20] (p. 5)

Policy is framed around a simplistic dichotomy of good and bad parenting which (intentionally) ignores context. Judgements of bad parenting therefore do not consider additional factors including children with complex needs or poverty. This view is echoed by Kellet and Apps [36], who suggest that poor parenting is assessed and judged, but the family's holistic needs are rarely considered [37]. This view is also supported by Yoo, Racorean, and Barrows [38], who suggest that parenting assessment focuses on deficits and risk and does not assess a family's holistic situation or needs. The notion of bad parenting inevitably stigmatises the parent and locates the root cause of the problem in the parent without considering any additional or external context. Arguably, this is contrasted not with good parenting but with perfect parenting, which is of course unachievable but must always be striven for. Sometimes framed in the language of effective parenting, this concept is readily linked to children's outcomes [39]. For example, effective parenting is defined by the Centre for Parenting Education [40] (p. 1) as 'the ability to interact and engage with children in such a way that they learn and grow into remarkable adults'.

Alternatively, parenting could be conceptualised around the paediatrician and psychotherapist Donald Winnicott's idea of 'good enough parenting' [41]. Winnicott recognised that perfection as a parent was an unrealistic objective. Winnicott argued that good enough parenting was a more realistic concept, and importantly, it should have no critical connotations. Whilst Hays [42] is perhaps right to some extent that it becomes hard to determine what good enough parenting is, viewing parenting in terms of what is good enough is both realistic and non-stigmatising and trusts parents as the best advocates of their children's needs [43]. Good enough parenting is far from impossible to characterise [44], and Conley [45] has taken steps to clarify it based on a survey with practitioners, arguing that good enough parenting should include four key elements: putting children's needs first, providing routine, acknowledging problems, and receiving support and meeting children's developmental needs.

1.2. Parenting Programmes

'The Incredible Years' (TIY) is regarded as the 'Gold Standard' American-based parenting programme and is now embedded in the UK's early years services. It uses goal setting for both parents and children in a prescriptive way. This approach uses a behaviourist approach with sanctions and rewards and requires parents to complete homework. Research carried out by The Incredible Years [46] claims that the programme develops parenting skills, improves emotional competence, and reduces unwanted behaviours. This programme is offered globally in 26 countries [46]. However, Dababnah and Parish [47] researched TIY in 2014 and found that the programme was not as effective as it claimed. They discovered that parents had barriers to success due to the content of the interventions, especially in cases where those parents had children with additional needs. Kleve et al. [48] also found a high dropout rate, giving an inaccurate picture of its effectiveness. Bae [49] also found that parents felt pressure to conform so they would no longer be labelled as incapable parents.

Triple P is another American parenting programme where outcomes are measured in terms of behaviour, emotional stability, and aggression. Triple P is sold as a '*Cross-cultural and cost-effective parenting support*' [50] (p. 8). They claim that no other programme has an evidence base as extensive, and that the programme is ranked as the number-one programme on the United Nations ranking. However, research into Triple P by Sanders et al. [51] raised some doubt about these claims, concluding that although some positive results were shown, effectiveness was more apparent through partnership in addition to attending the programme. The Parenting Intervention Programme (PIP) claims that 79% of parents showed an increase in mental well-being, and the behavioural difficulties in children fell

from 62% to 36%. However, as Lindsay and Cullen [2] point out, only 73% of parents completed the courses. Kuppens and Ceulemans [52] found in a study in 2019 of 600 families completing courses that the data was limited as only parent self-reports were used, which led them to doubt some of the claims. Clarke and Younas [30] also argue that much of the assessment carried out around parenting intervention is short-term and there is no longitudinal evidence.

There are alternative approaches to the (mostly American) programmes based on behaviour modification such as 'The Solihull Approach' [53]. This was devised by a group of health visitors, midwives, and education and parenting workers in 1996, who created the programme to 'increase emotional health and well-being through both practitioners and parents' [53] (p. 1). The programme addresses the relationship between caregiver and child and promotes reciprocity and containment using a humanist approach.

2. Materials and Methods

The research had an inductive paradigm grounded in a constructivist epistemology which aimed to uncover the experiences of participants and the meanings created in a malleable social world. The data generated enabled an in-depth and rich account of participants' experiences, which generated insights into the challenges they face. The qualitative methods utilised enabled the participant's voices to be heard and, in particular, highlighted the voice of a number of marginalised families, which Sylvia et al. [54] argue has been made more challenging by the neoliberal policy climate, especially in vulnerable and impoverished communities. This research is also interpretivist, which is subjectivist and positions itself to understand the participants' lived experiences and world view. Smetana [55] confirms the appropriateness of the move towards interpretivist research in studies of parenting in order to unpack its diverse dimensions. The research aligns with Nguyen and Thanh [56] (p. 17), who point out that '*the investigator who follows the interpretative paradigm uses those experiences to construct and interpret [their] understanding from the gathered data*'.

The research methods involved a series of semi-structured interviews and a follow-up focus group, which Lavrakas [57] confirms is an effective method which allows participants more freedom to express themselves. These combined well to successfully elicit the lived experiences of the research participants and addressed the research question concerning the impact of the parenting programmes. It was important to establish trust and rapport. As Leech [58] (p. 11) points out, '*Without rapport, even the best-phrased questions can fall flat and elicit brief, uninformative answers*'. The idea of the focus group was to explore the participants' responses in more depth to understand their experiences more fully and follow up on queries and explore commonalities.

The participants in this study were parents of children diagnosed with ASD, all of whom had attended both generic and specialised parenting programmes delivered through a combination of in-person and online formats. Recruitment was conducted via invitations on Facebook and Instagram posts seeking participants; this was shared across a range of informal networks. The invitation aimed to capture a broader understanding of parental experiences from individuals who had attended parenting programmes, to contribute to a study that explored their perceptions and experiences. As responses were received, it became evident that the participant pool was both diverse and reflected a range of lived experiences. Respondents included working and non-working, single and married individuals, representing a broad socio-economic spectrum ranging from households identified as affluent to those in receipt of benefits. The final sample consisted of individuals aged between their 30s and 50s, with 80% identifying as female and 20%

as male. All participants engaged in semi-structured interviews online and took part in a larger focus group to further elaborate and draw out the emergent themes.

While the study aimed to capture a diverse range of parental experiences for parents of children with ASD, several potential sample biases must be acknowledged. Firstly, the use of social media platforms (Facebook and Instagram) for participant recruitment may have inadvertently favoured individuals who are more digitally literate/aware, which may have led to an under-representation of those without access to such platforms. Secondly, those participants that responded to the post may have had particularly strong opinions and experiences, making them more motivated to share, which may not represent those that were less compelled or indifferent about their experiences. Thirdly, although the recruitment strategy was non-targeted, apart from requiring participants to be parents of children with ASD (or going through the process of diagnosis), and did not target educational backgrounds, ethnicity, and geographical locations, it is important to highlight that these factors can influence both a parent's ability to access parenting programmes and how they perceive their usefulness. Someone living in a rural area may struggle with access to programmes, while cultural or educational differences could affect how a programme is experienced and understood. Moreover, because participants chose to take part in the study themselves, rather than being randomly selected, the sample may not represent the wider population of parents with children with ASD. Therefore, whilst the findings may not be generalisable to all parents in similar situations, the authenticity and richness of the qualitative data gathered from the varied participant pool does provide valuable insights into how parenting programmes are experienced by parents and their impact on families and children with ASD.

Thematic analysis offers a valuable method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. It is particularly suited for exploring shared experiences, such as those expressed by participants in parenting programmes. However, it is important to consider that when interpreting others' language, the result is co-constructed, as both the participants' meaning-making and researchers' interpretation are combined, making the process subjective. To avoid as many biases as possible and enhance the rigour of the analysis, we used Braun and Clarke's [59] six-phase framework to encourage reflexivity, transparency, and depth, which helps to ensure that themes emerge authentically from the data while also remaining grounded in the research. It provides a structured yet fluid method for capturing the complexities of how parenting programmes influence both parents' and children's lives. Below is an outline of the six phases of thematic analysis and how each phase contributes to producing valid and reliable findings (Table 1):

Table 1. Six phases of Thematic Analysis.

Phase	Description	How This Supports Validity and Reliability
1. Familiarisation with the Data	Involves transcribing, reading and re-reading the data, and initial observations.	Enables immersion in the data, helping the researcher build a holistic understanding of participant narratives. Early engagement and familiarity enhance the authenticity of subsequent theme development.
2. Generating Initial Codes	Systematically identifying features of the data that appear meaningful and relevant.	Promotes transparency and consistency in how data is broken down. Coding provides a foundation for ensuring that end themes are data-driven and not imposed.
3. Searching for Themes	Collating codes into potential themes and gathering all relevant data for each.	Begins the process of abstraction, allowing for patterns to emerge. Ensures that theme development remains anchored in multiple data sources.
4. Reviewing Themes	Checking themes against the coded data and the entire dataset; thematic mapping.	Helps ensure that themes are coherent, well-supported by the data, and reflective of the dataset as a whole—supporting dependability and credibility.
5. Defining and Naming Themes	Conducting detailed analysis of each theme and refining them into clear, distinct concepts.	Encourages analytic clarity and consistency in interpretation, which strengthens the trustworthiness of findings.
6. Producing the Report	Selecting compelling examples, finalising analysis, and linking back to research questions and the literature.	Synthesises analysis into a coherent narrative. Demonstrates methodological rigour and relevance to existing research, contributing to confirmability.

The flexibility of thematic analysis allows us to explore the complexities of parental experience while maintaining methodological integrity and trustworthiness through systematic coding and theme development using reflective practice.

3. Results

All the participants had taken part in both universal/generic programmes followed by parenting programmes designed for children with autistic spectrum disorders. Overall, the parents were positive about the prospects of attending a parenting programme and hoped they would give them a greater insight into, and support for, their child's behaviour. All participants had attended universal parenting programmes—which were advisory whilst they waited to access specialist parenting support—such as Incredible Years and Triple P. The participants subsequently attended the ASD programmes, including Time Out for ASD, Passionate about the Spectrum, and Passionate about Parents. Most of the participants found that the universal programme they attended did not support their needs. However, they agreed that the specific parenting courses for children with ASD were useful.

3.1. Experience of Generic Parenting Programmes

One participant felt that the generic programme 'Incredible Years' exacerbated her daughter's behaviour. This sentiment was mirrored by a participant who stated that the reward systems made behaviours worse and that many of the strategies were not suitable for children with ASD. Another participant felt that the generic programme was too general and that things like star charts were ineffective. One parent described the strategies as '*a bit of a mixed bag*' and said that she had '*hit a wall with*' the general strategies employed such as 'timers' and 'time out'. Overall, most parents considered the generic programmes unsuitable. As one participant suggested, '*You need certain things for neurodivergent children and a different approach*'. One participant felt that the Incredible Years programme did not make any difference, stating '*I felt like they had given me the wrong manual for my child*', going on to claim that the Incredible Years strategies she was asked to implement were actually causing harm to their child: '*It was really not a helpful way of managing my demand avoidant children*'. Many of the participants felt '*affronted*' by the generic parenting programmes and felt that they had to prove they were a good parent. One parent said that '*aspects of the Incredible Years [programme] made me feel like I had failed*'. Another suggested that they felt that the parenting courses had '*a huge stigma, almost used as a punishment for parents*'.

Sadly, many parents had developed beliefs that the difficulties they were experiencing were their own fault. As one participant recounted, '*I thought it was completely my fault they were behaving in the way that they were*'; another participant admitted to '*thinking that I was not mother material*'.

3.2. Experience of ASD-Specific Parenting Programmes

The majority of participants found that the programmes tailored towards the needs of neurodivergent children, such as 'Time Out' and 'Passionate about the Spectrum', were really helpful, enabling the parents to better understand the diagnosis and the journey of the children. For example, one participant said it was '*really good and more than I thought it was going to be*'. Another reflected how the course gave her insights into the experiences of children with ASD and said '*Now I let him get lost in his own world*'. The ASD-specific programmes provided parents with a '*toolbox to use*' to help manage the behaviour of autistic children, for example, seeing things from the child's perspective: '*When you feel yourself start to get angry about things, I always try to look at everything now from how he sees it. I go back to the old iceberg picture where you have the behaviour and what is going on underneath*'.

Many parents found the ASD-specific programmes empowering; for example, one parent said the Time Out programme *'gave me permission to pick my battles, to do what is right for us'*. Another participant noted how the 'Passionate about the Spectrum' programme was really effective: *'It was almost intangible, almost like it gave me the confidence to know that I am right and knowing what I was doing'*. Whilst another reflected on how the ASD-specific programme was helpful in enabling her to accept her child and recalls *'It was so instrumental in fully accepting and believing the situation I was in... a breath of fresh air'*. As Beighton and Wills [60] argue, appreciating the positive aspects of having a child with a disability is really important, and yet so often, interventions are framed around resolving the constructed negativity.

The most helpful aspect, however, was the sharing of experiences. For example, one participant said *'It was so positive as I was amongst other parents of children with ASD, it was a shared feeling group'*. Another reflected that *'it was a place of knowing and understanding of a system you were in'*. One parent described how invaluable the support from other parents was in making a difference to their whole family and how important it was that they were able to learn about others' experiences of supporting their children: *'Just talking to other people in the group was great... I just found that whole course was brilliant'*. Another participant explained that shared experiences enriched her family life and how she now supported her child better, stating *'Hearing everyone's experiences and being so open and honest, everyone shared their experiences, it was great to feel like you were not alone'*. One participant even referred to this aspect as 'momentous' and described it as *'finding your tribe, where you are all together and you have journeys that are not the same, but they are similar, and you have that understanding'*.

It is important to remember, however, that these programmes are not necessarily a panacea and not all parents found either programme successful; for example, one participant did not find any of the strategies from either the generic or behaviour-specific programmes useful, recalling that *'I had to find my own way of working'*.

3.3. Impact of ASD-Specific Programmes

A total of 80% of the participants continue to use the strategies they were taught in the ASD-specific programmes. They felt they were effective and had embedded the strategies into their daily routines. For example, one participant remarked *'I do not know where we would be right now, they definitely changed my life and his [and] I have seen the improvement in him, and that has been magical to watch. It is like it has given us a whole new lease of life'*. Another participant recalls how the attendance of the Passionate about the Spectrum programme equipped him with strategies to help deal with certain behaviours associated with autistic children. They supported him in understanding how his child processed things; importantly, this had not been considered in the generic programmes.

Interestingly, all participants reported that there was no follow-up support after any of the programmes. Each participant felt that follow-up support would have been helpful as there are often stumbling blocks and having someone to speak to would have been beneficial. It was also suggested that signposting would be helpful in case there was a crisis. For example, one participant stated *'I think it would be hugely important to have the follow-up if possible'*, and another participant suggested that *'It would be a positive thing, I think follow-ups would be really useful even if it's just a gathering of the group of those that want to'*. Many parents reported that although no follow-up support was offered to them, they had decided to establish their own informal support group and continued to meet with other parents from the programme and found the support of the group particularly helpful. For many parents, this was the most significant aspect of parenting support. This is a point that will be discussed further below.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Need for Tailored Support for Parents of Children with ASD

What was apparent from this study of parents of children with ASD was that not all interventions are supportive. As Prinz and Sanders [1,61] state, *'Many families in need are not participating in services, and when they do, the most efficacious interventions are not what is usually provided'*. One participant exemplified the unsuitability of a number of the strategies central to the generic programmes when she questioned how children (with ASD) can be sanctioned for non-compliant behaviour if they do not understand or cannot process what compliant behaviour is. The use of punishments when children do not understand their own behaviour or the strategy being implemented is counterproductive, harmful, and potentially traumatising. This ultimately makes the children harder to reach and more difficult to engage, and it makes parenting more difficult. For many parents, it would have been better if they had never attended the generic programmes at all; they were the antithesis of support they were purported to offer or provide. Ultimately, the parents were left feeling like the generic programmes were 'policing' their parenting to rule out 'ineffective parenting' before they were allowed access to specific interventions.

The 2009 report by Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) [4] on the implementation of parenting programmes found a range of problems, including difficulties with access and high levels of dropout. This was most common for parents of children with complex needs. This research found that, in many respects, the lessons have not been learnt, and parents continue to be referred to ineffective and inappropriate programmes. However, in another crucial respect, this study demonstrates that if parents are referred to an appropriate course which aligns with their specific needs, the experience can be transformational and empowering. In some ways, this reflects the child-centred approach to supporting parents recommended by Todd et al. [62], who argued programmes need to be tailored to the specific needs of parents of children with ASD. Only then are they genuinely supportive and add value to families' lives. This person-centred approach was exemplified by one particular parent in the study, who, despite being one of the few to experience some benefits from the generic programme, had received it in the family home on a 1:1 basis. She reported that she found the strategies were useful due to the tailoring of the approach to the specific needs of her child.

The complexities of parenting a child with ASD were discussed by participants in detail in this study, and it was apparent that they felt that they were on a lifelong journey tackling each new stage at a time, and there were no quick fixes. This view is mirrored by Assarsson and Aarsand [63], who argue that the process of learning to be a parent of a child with complex needs must be seen as a lifelong process needing tailored support. The new National Strategy for Autistic Children, Young People and Adults (2021–2026) [64] highlights, however, that *'too many autistic children wait for diagnosis and do not receive support tailored to their needs at an early enough stage'*. This study clearly shows that support is lacking but that tailored support is effective when it can be accessed and that this can dramatically improve the experiences of parents of children with ASD.

4.2. Perfect Parenting and Neoliberal Responsibilisation

Parenting programmes primarily originate in North America. Their commissioning in the UK reflects the dominant neoliberal policy discourse of individual responsibility and instrumental short-term interventions to remedy problems [65]. As Bae [49] (p. 1) suggests,

Discourses of parenting programmes such as Incredible Years promote the economic and neoliberal discourses as societal norms which imbed and reinforce power relationships, inequality, and injustice.

There is minimal long-term research about their effectiveness and the *'evidence base on the efficacy of interventions—on what works and why—is patchy'* [66] (p. 223). It is 'sold' to families as a tool to remedy behaviours and bring them in line with dominant values, but this research suggests they are largely inappropriate for children with special needs.

The Incredible Years generic programme has been designed to provide specific strategies to elicit socially acceptable behaviours. This model was based on that by Baumrind [67], who believed that parental control moulds children and in turn supports their own self-control. This narrative is extended through reference to Goleman's theory of emotional intelligence, which suggests that raising emotionally intelligent children better enables them to deal with conflict and anger, making them more socially acceptable [68]. Emphasis is placed on parents to help their children manage their behaviours to become more socially tolerable, with the underlying motivation being to bring children in line with standardised behaviours.

ASD-specific programmes are designed to provide precisely the types of support that parents in this study alluded to needing. Unlike generic parenting interventions, which are often a first step required in the process of diagnosis, these programmes offer a more holistic and nuanced understanding of children's behaviour which focuses on how to navigate conflict through relationship-based strategies and fostering of safety. Moreover, there is a keen focus on communication between parent/carer and children to support them with everyday tasks and navigation of the wider world. These programmes also acknowledge that they are not the experts in 'their' children and allow parents/carers space to chat and exchange thoughts through validation of their own experiences. They are delivered using neuro-affirming principles, viewing autism not as a deficit or disorder to be fixed, but as a different way of experiencing and processing the world. This shift in perspective leads to less judgement, helps to reinforce their understanding of children's behaviours, and validates their instinctive hard work as parents.

4.3. Neoliberal Responsibilisation

Moreover, there is increasing emphasis on how parents should, and should not, behave and the need for them to take responsibility to raise morally responsible children and become active citizens. This view was highlighted by participants who suggested that they had concerns about their child's next stages, feeling like they had to mould them into being 'normal' children 'fit for purpose'. Moreover, Horton and Kraftl [69] discuss how formal neoliberal parenting education is replacing what was historically a private family responsibility, in the pursuit of shaping future economically active compliant citizens. This in turn creates stress for families, impacting their functionality and togetherness. This all occurs under the watchful gaze of professionals monitoring children's behaviour and development, often resulting in marginalising families and promoting further exclusion. Henderson et al. [70] describe the stress associated with being the perfect mother, and, as noted by Hornby [71], there is often a lack of focus on fatherhood. Lyon [72] suggests this emphasis on perfection is reinforced and perpetuated through a Foucauldian model of surveillance and responsabilisation, guilt, and the need to always do better.

Fletcher et al. [73] discuss the difficulties of raising autistic children, including the cost to family life and the financial impact. As Solomon and Chung [74] (p. 250) point out, *'Parents of children with autism experience a variety of chronic and acute stressors that can erode marital satisfaction and family functioning'*. Many participants in this study discussed the strain placed on the family as a result of participating in a generic parenting course, and in some cases, this directly contributed to parental separation. They explained that the strategies they were asked to employ were counterproductive and exacerbated their children's behaviour, and this contributed to arguments between the parents. The parents felt that

there was a lack of understanding that the behaviours were caused by the disability and not because of ineffective parenting. They did not believe they were ‘heard’ or ‘believed’.

4.4. Parenting Programmes and the Missed Opportunities of Community Development

The findings of this study demonstrate that for all the participants, the chance to socialise with other parents on a similar journey was the most important aspect of their experience of ASD-oriented parenting programmes. Importantly, this socialisation facilitated some of the most significant outcomes for the parents, independent of the course content. Participants revealed the importance of listening to others and understanding each parent’s respective journey, and how this provided a sense of normalisation and alleviated the feelings of guilt for ‘failing’, or at least struggling, as a parent. Participants referred to simple things like having a chance to talk over a cup of tea and sharing experiences over breaks as instrumental, and how this helped to form attachments rooted in empathy and shared understanding. As alluded to previously, one participant referred to this as *‘finding her tribe’* and she described how the newfound connectedness was priceless to their family’s navigation of the world of ‘good enough’ parenting. This is echoed by Richardson [75] (p. 6), who suggests that *‘By binding together people who have had the same experiences, the collective story overcomes some of the isolation’*. Britto [76] also notes that many communities have hidden resources to support parents, and this resource is often ignored in discussions about parenting programmes.

Similarly, in a study involving families of children with ASD, Hayes & Watson [77] identified that support from peers and family is crucial to improving their overall well-being. The importance of peer networks for support to parents was also reiterated by the recent report from the Children’s Commissioner for England in 2022 [78], which found the following: ‘Most families choose to access protection and support from their own networks. . . And I heard time and time again the importance of peer support—the value of being able to share experiences with those in similar circumstances.’ As Vaughan & Super [79] argue, parents are a valuable resource both as advocates for their children and to each other for knowledge support and advice. Families from this study effectively built themselves micro-communities of support, both during and following the end of the programme. These communities were pivotal in enabling parents to face their respective challenges. Schlegelmilch [80] refers to the parents of children with disabilities, who have this valuable inherent knowledge, as ‘Native Experts’. He describes how they are the real experts and are well-placed to give advice on raising children with ASD. This point is echoed by Ytterhus et al. [81] in the management of youth transitions and by O’Hare et al. [82], who demonstrated the power of parents in advocating for their children to mitigate the discrimination experienced as a result of their autism.

Although a by-product of these parenting programmes—and far from their intended outcome—the parents drew crucial support from each other, and this was often continued after the programme ended with the formation of informal groups. Many participants expressed that the support of these newfound communities of interest was the most important thing for them. Whilst the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) supports the importance of community support in stating their belief that *‘Communities are the places where preventative programmes can flourish. Having a broad offer of community services supports people’s self-care and well-being’* [4] (p. 1), they also state how it is clear that community support once programmes are finished could prevent further intervention from being needed years later on. The lack of follow-up on the parenting programmes and the lack of community development built into them are therefore clearly serious deficiencies. The programmes remain framed in a neoliberal policy discourse of individual responsibility and instrumental short-termism [16] disconnected from notions of community. As O’Dell et al. [83] suggest,

the knowledge within these ‘epistemic communities’ is undervalued and remains largely unacknowledged but can act as a powerful resource.

Note that, in the 21st century, these communities no longer need to be geographical; such communities of interest can be developed online. This was the case for one participant in this research, who shared how online support played a pivotal role for her. She recalls how she secured support for her child through research and support on the internet. She expressed that through online forums and talking with other parents, she gained her most effective ideas. This idea is echoed by Madge and O’Connor [84], who refer to the internet as a place of support where parents are empowered and can dip in and out of support as and when needed. Furthermore, research carried out by Plantain and Daneback [85] suggests that parents access support online due to the lack of support networks at home, with the 24 h accessibility and option to remain anonymous and unjudged seen as added benefits.

Clearly, communities of parents of children with ASD have a number of assets or strengths within them [86]. A recommendation of this research would be that an asset-based community development approach [87,88] would better support families by fostering relationships and supporting their capacity to parent. Advocates such as Morgan and Ziglio [89,90] argue that asset-based approaches offer individuals and their communities the chance to strengthen the quality of their lives and increase resilience and self-esteem. This research demonstrates that this approach would be far more beneficial than the narrow impoverished individualised approach of current parenting programmes.

An asset-based community development (ABCD) approach would foster connections with others and promote the ongoing development of peer relationships [84]. ABCD would offer parenting support when and where it is needed and could be present in a variety of settings in both local communities through community hubs and online, providing 24 h access. Ultimately, ABCD provides a much more inclusive approach. As McKnight and Russel argue, ‘*ABCD places a particular emphasis on the inclusion of those who have been marginalised*’ [88] (p. 12). Adopting asset-based approaches would bridge the gap in support for those that need it most. If parenting programmes are to continue, they must integrate existing cohorts of parents to share their experiences with new cohorts. The use of volunteer mentors could also be effective in making long-lasting connections and establishing supportive relationships with struggling parents. Parents struggling to cope need understanding, empathy, and resources to pull on so that they can build resilience and the capacity to parent in challenging times. ABCD is best placed to provide and ensure this.

5. Conclusions

The experience of parenting programmes for parents of children with an autistic spectrum disorder in this study is probably best depicted as a mixed blessing. Initially, there were many negatives. The strategies used in the generic parenting courses provoked anger, anxiety, and confusion in their children and made parental relationships more fraught, leaving them feeling marginalised and judged. However, their subsequent experience of a specialist parenting course was significantly better, with some of the strategies proving to be useful and productive in the parenting of children with ASD.

The most notable aspect of their experience with the ASD programmes was the socialisation with other parents with similar problems. This produced a normalising function for parents who were able to see their ‘problems’ as consistent with the experience of other parents. The sharing of their problems and solutions to them occurred both during the course and after it, where parents formed micro-communities of support. Here, the power of connectedness flourished, and opportunities to share experiences were key in effecting change. This enabled parents to move beyond the destructive model of ‘perfect parenting’ within the dominant neoliberal policy discourse to a more realistic concept

of ‘good enough’ parenting. It is evident that there is a wealth of knowledge within the parenting community of children with ASD and these strengths would be better utilised with an asset-based community development model to better support and educate parents of children on the autistic spectrum.

If parenting programmes are to be continued, this study suggests they must be appropriately tailored to the needs of parents of neurodivergent children; only then will they effect positive changes in children’s outcomes. However, the lessons of this study suggest an asset-based community development approach should underpin this implementation. Only then will it effectively provide ongoing support that is crucial for these families.

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Abbreviations

ASD	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
ABCD	Asset-based Community Development
PEIP	Parenting Early Intervention Programme
EBPP	Evidence-based Parenting Programme

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