

FAMILY BUSINESS

Balancing work demands with home life is a challenge for most parents – so when three companies trialled Next Generation’s parent coaching, it came as no surprise that the courses were inundated. **Sarah-Jane North** reports

Babies and children do not come with an instruction manual. Most parents admit to having found themselves at a loss at times when facing challenging behaviour. Babies who won’t sleep, tantrumming toddlers, unruly schoolchildren, monosyllabic teenagers – all can take their toll, especially on parents who are juggling work demands, too.

So when three organisations took the unusual step of offering a parent coaching programme, they found themselves inundated with candidates.

Software company Oracle, financial services provider Egg and fleet management company FMG Support all recently decided to offer a new programme from parent coaching specialist Next Generation – and had their hands bitten off by employees

eager for one of the 18 places on each course.

Sonya Shellard, director of Next Generation, is not surprised. She believes the demand is being fuelled by feelings of isolation and confusion experienced by countless parents. Many are starting families at an older age, making their experience of parenting very different to that of their own parents. Add to that greater geographical dispersal and constant bombardment with advice and criticism from the media and government, and the whole picture becomes very clouded.

Shellard, a parent to two children and stepmother to four, designed the three-day programme along with colleague and mum-of-two Kim Morgan based on their executive coaching work. Again and again they found themselves dealing with clients struggling to achieve their goals because of the way they were



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parented, or issues with their own families that were preventing them from being fully engaged at work.

Family benefits

Help is available in the form of state and private parenting provisions, but these are often

oversubscribed or restricted. Family therapy, meanwhile, addresses specific problems at home but requires the children to participate. The Next Generation programme approaches parenting in a more positive way and is aimed solely at the parents.

“Parental coaching is not an adaptation of therapy but a combination of effective coaching skills and practices and modern psychology, all placed within the context of the family,” Shellard says. “Counselling and therapy suggest something is not

working. With parental coaching, no one is suggesting that anything is broken.”

Shellard stresses that the programme is not about telling people the right way to parent. “We are not standing there as expert parents but as experts in coaching and getting the best out of people. It’s about making the most of family life,” she says.

Next Generation coaches parents to be more self-aware and to adapt their behaviour to their children, and passes on valuable coaching tools they can use with their offspring. The programme employs a variety of tools and techniques (*see panel, facing page*) aimed at helping parents to understand child development and the parental role.

A crucial part of the process is to challenge parents’ expectations of their children, as well as those placed on themselves when they were young. Participants are taken through a number of exercises to help them see through the eyes of a child and to increase self-awareness.

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“The more self-aware people are about how they behave, the easier it is to change behaviour,” says Shellard. “One of the most powerful sessions discusses how self-limiting beliefs are formed. It is not a case of childhoods going wrong, but while some of the labels our parents give us are good and powerful, others aren’t.

“We examine what needs to change to make the parent happy so they can deal with their children’s development needs, the key ones being responsibility, new experiences,

praise and recognition, love and security,” she adds.

A child’s view

The benefits to parents are obvious, but what about the benefits to the organisation? According to Next Generation, gains include increased employee engagement and retention; a more fulfilled, happier and productive workforce; and an improved employer image, with the added benefits that brings for recruitment and meeting corporate social responsibility (CSR) targets. Staff also gain a range of new skills that are transferable to the workplace: coaching, listening, providing praise and recognition, and tools and techniques to help them stay in control.

For Nicola Wilson, HR director at FMG Support, employer benefits include all of the above – and more. She firmly believes the programme is another tool in her HR kit to create a great place to work so that staff can focus on the company’s customer

Mum’s the word

Nicole Mackew balances life as a licence optimisation specialist at Oracle with that of being mum to a two-year-old son and stepmother to her partner’s 10-year-old boy. She attended the “Coaching skills for parents” programme last year.

“The course helped to alleviate some of the guilt I had about working by making me see that children can experience some of their happiest times with other carers,” she says. “Also, as a working mum there is the potential to overcompensate for not being there, and we forget that children need to learn through taking more responsibility.

“By using the technique of really listening, and not just listening while cleaning, I believe my stepson also feels more appreciated. When I had my son it was difficult to spend as much quality time with my stepson but now when we talk he has my full attention.

“Focusing on my partner’s expectations of parenthood as well as my own helped me to understand what his views were – it’s all too easy to make assumptions. I hope we will be better parents as a result.

“I feel happier knowing that giving our children their basic needs – love, security, self-esteem, responsibility – can be met without me being at home full-time. This means that I can focus 100 per cent when I am at work.”



service goals. “I fully expect that they will learn to look at life through the eyes of their children, but if it also helps them to look at work through the eyes of the customer then we really win,” Wilson says.

The programmes at Oracle and FMG are still running, but Egg’s head of HR operations, Sharon Winstanley, is currently sifting through feedback from the first batch of parents who completed the programme in March.

Like Oracle and FMG, Egg went for a mix of male and female, cross-departmental and cross-functional employees on the pilot programme. Staff from the call centre found themselves sitting beside managers from IT and HR. The only criteria were that they attend the three full days of the programme – and were parents.

Great expectations

Winstanley is clear about what her expectations of the programme are: “We expect to see greater employee engagement because they feel we are investing in them, and therefore greater productivity too, and also to be seen as a great company to work for, which is crucial because we are expanding our Derby base and need to recruit the best,” she says.

If these expectations are met there is potential for the programme to be rolled out not only within Egg but across its parent company, Citigroup, too.

Winstanley has also identified another organisational gain from the course. Those who have attended so far have employed their new coaching skills to good effect with their colleagues. “The course helps them to gain valuable coaching skills and encourages them to take on a coaching style,” she reports. ■

The generation game

Sonya Shellard believes challenging people’s expectations has a crucial role to play in coaching parents to relate to their children. Many of the key coaching elements used by Next Generation to help parents understand their child’s development and their parental role are aimed at doing just that.

● The possibility mindset

This technique encourages parents to take a new perspective – for example, on their expectations of their children and the roles they have assigned to them. A typical exercise would be for each parent to select a family member and write down all the words that describe that person, then how others might see them. This encourages a fresh perspective.

● Positive psychology

Parents are asked to list all the labels they wear in life and the characteristics other people attribute to them – mother/father, employee, friendly, bossy and so forth. Some of the labels we carry are helpful and empowering, while others are limiting and constraining. A label is a repeated description that becomes set in people’s minds. In the context of parent coaching, parents can see the labels they have assigned to their children – naughty, shy, wilful, clever, outgoing – and examine whether these are helpful for their children’s development or not. Parents are able to see the power of positive expectations, the potential that both they and their children may have.

● The power of communication

Closely linked to the possibility mindset and positive psychology, this technique looks at how self-limiting beliefs are formed in childhood. Children will believe what a parent tells them because:

- they see the parent as an authority figure;
- they are highly suggestible;
- they have no other point of reference.

Children then go through life seeking evidence that backs up that belief. By using language to influence positively, a parent can implant some very powerful and positive messages in their children’s minds.

● Listening

An often underrated skill, parents are taught how to listen to their children, by making time for them to voice their thoughts and opinions and not being distracted by more mundane household tasks. The child feels included, appreciated and listened to.

● Know-how

This coaching tool gets the parent to identify the goal they wish to reach and then visualise themselves having attained it. The coach encourages them to describe what it feels like to have reached that goal. The parent is then asked to describe how they got to that point. The technique employs the power of imagination to reveal the solution.

● Timeline

Using this technique, a coach will encourage the parent to examine their past successes and achievements and mentally collect all the resources they employed to achieve those goals. Parents can identify those strengths and skills and draw on them to reach their new goals.

● Wheel of life

A popular tool that requires parents to divide up a wheel (a large drawn circle) into the various segments of their life according to the amount of time and energy they devote to each – family, work, health, friends, and so on. It demonstrates which areas of a person’s life need to be addressed to make the wheel turn smoothly.

● Anchoring

This technique is about developing an individual’s personal trigger that will change their state of mind, to make them more focused, relaxed, positive and happier. Possible triggers include a piece of music or a click of the fingers.