

INFANT MENTAL HEALTH

Little voice

New mums from deprived areas are being helped to express the bond with their baby through a support project that has poetry at its heart. **Carry Gorney**, who led the pilot of the project, explains how it evolved



Baby's First Year was dependant on volunteers who demonstrated that knowledge about infant development exists not only within the brains of professionals and experts but within the core of our community. If we can respect and harness existing expertise at neighbourhood level more young new families will gain the empathic support and easier access to the knowledge required to get it right for the baby from the start.

This was a year long programme that aimed to support the relationship between new mothers and their babies during the first year of life. The initial pilot took place within Sheffield CAMHS. The programme used:

- Home visiting to give one-to-one support and also to capture mother and baby on video
- Creative group work designed to enable peer friendships and ground the mother within a community.

The programme was adapted from Project STEEP (Steps Toward Effective Enjoyable Parenting), an intervention developed in the United States in response to a study implemented in 1975, The Parent Child Project, by Egeland, Deinard and Stroufe. They were asking: What allows some children

to develop into healthy competent people even though they grow up in especially challenging environments?

The results from their programme involving 75 at risk families with a control group of 83 showed that mothers became more sensitive to their babies and were more realistic about their capabilities. Families coped better with stressful life events; children socialised more easily; and performed better in school.

The vulnerable young mothers we recruited in Sheffield faced issues such as post-natal depression, social and cultural marginalisation and restricted life opportunities. They all wanted the best for their babies and saw this programme as an opportunity for a new start. Offering a DVD of the baby's first year was a key incentive for joining the programme.

Evidence shows that consistent support from health professionals produces the best long-term outcomes, however, funding was not available at this level so we used Home-Start volunteer home-visitors, supporting them with regular professional supervision.

Our commitment to recruit mothers from low socio-economic backgrounds and our partnership with Home-Start, including specific training for volunteers,

complies with the recent independent review of CAMHS and the then Government's full response.

Neuroscience research demonstrates how our earliest experiences shape our brains' development, who we become and subsequently how we behave in society. The consequences of ignoring early infancy in areas of high deprivation include increased drug abuse, violence and other crimes. Constricted brain development creates citizens unable to predict consequences of anti-social actions and unable to feel remorse for crimes they might commit.

We worked with eight mothers and babies and supported eight Home-Start volunteers. Already trained to create a safe contained environment, volunteers learned more about attachment, addressing mothers' difficulties and involving other family members whenever possible. Their training also included use of video feedback to highlight the positive nurturing moments.

Impressively, none of the mothers left the programme. The intervention encouraged involvement because mothers could engage at different levels; some attended every group, some were more comfortable forming

BABY'S VOICE

7 AM – Mum come and get me so I can play
I've been awake for a while now. Mum, is it time for
breakfast yet? I'm starving.
I've had breakfast, can I play on the floor yet?
I've been up a while now, can we get ready and go out
and see people?
Mum I don't like it when you leave me so you can tidy up,
so I'm going to cry so that you'll come back and get me.
Mum I'm tired, can I have dinner so I can go
to sleep please?
Let's go to nan-nans and play
Tea time but I know not long after tea its bath and bed
but I also know that the next day we can do it all again.

We went to the seaside and I paddled in the sea
The sand was all soft and squelchy in my
hands like mud
I enjoyed the fish and chips too
I like my mummy massaging me because it feels
soft and her hands are really gentle;
Me and my mum got to be very close.
I love the feel of oil on my mummy's hands as its all
warm and slippery and makes me feel safe and loved.

MUM'S VOICE

I have been really surprised to love my baby as
much as I have.
The best moment in life used to be when I'd go to
bed after a long day at work.
Now the best moment in life is in the morning
when Jamal wakes up.
He is all smiles.
He looks at me like I came to save him from
some monster.
He smiles and talks to me with his eyes wide open.
He knows that I will pick him up and feed him –
in anticipation he wiggles and throws his arms at me.
He tries to reach me.
Once he is in my arms he relaxes and awaits his food.
Every morning is a magical moment.

I'm never bored anymore
I look at you like there's no tomorrow
Watching your smile
Playing and singing to you
Watching you grow day by day
When I feed you, you hold on to the bottle like you're
feeding yourself
You have given a purpose to my life.

closer bonds with the home visitor, and others made extensive use of video sessions.

We used poetry and photography. The group was encouraged to write about their experience of becoming mothers. Each mum sat close to her baby, writing in her own voice and in the baby's voice about their lives together (see examples above).

Showing and demonstrating love was a new experience for most of the women, who typically had been let down in their own childhood. Through their writing they understood how the babies expressed their love. They used their poems to understand the depth of emotion in the relationships with their baby.

Writing and reading each others' poems helped them to embrace change and grow into a new community. This was witnessed by their families at the celebration, which ended the programme. There

was a ceremony which included the launch of a photographic exhibition for a Sheffield-wide audience, presentations of the DVDs and cutting the collective first birthday cake together. To see their writing in public moved the mothers' private, individual expression into a public, social achievement. The audience was celebrating a transition into successful motherhood. That night the mums were an inspiration, showing hope for their babies, optimism for their lives and ambition for their future.

The use of arts to create community, I believe, made this intervention different to others in the domain of infant mental health. We used arts to empower and create a community around these women, establish identity and support change. Creating an exhibition of this process brought it into the public arena, thus creating a richer experience in the wider community.

"Just looking at the photos and reading the scripts made me think about what my mother meant to me and how I want to be remembered by my own children. It's a beautiful display."

Visitor to exhibition

Following the initial pilot, Baby's First Year was repeated twice by Sure Start and recently delivered through Home-Start in Sheffield. I have provided ongoing consultation for programmes using the Baby's First Year approach to reach different groups including refugee/asylum-seekers and young mothers leaving care. The exhibition of writing and photographs is available for hire. ■



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