

Mellow Futures - A facilitator's perspective

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A Mellow Futures practitioner describes how the combination of a safe group environment, strengths-based feedback, encouragement from peers and the reinforcement of learning and skills at home, enable mums with learning difficulties to lead their lives and to parent as independently as possible.

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Becoming a parent is a stressful time. From the moment of a positive pregnancy test, during the pregnancy, the birth and throughout the child's early years and beyond, there is perceived pressure to conform, to tick the healthcare and social expectation boxes, to sift through all the conflicting advice and to be that perfect parent portrayed in the media.

This can be extremely difficult and many families feel they are failing their child as well as letting down others if they do not follow everyone else's expectations. As a midwife I often found myself suggesting to teary new mums and their desperate partners that they take a bit of time out. No visitors; ignore phone calls and politely put off the well-wishers who come bearing equal amounts of kind thoughts, beautiful gifts and unsolicited advice, just for a day or two, and simply take time to accept this seismic change in their lives and get to know the tiny person who has caused it.

For many parents, just that short time of withdrawing from the spotlight can make all the difference; but for some, in particular parents with learning disabilities or difficulties (LD), this is not an option as ignoring visits from health or social services, whether planned or on the spot, can potentially increase the risk of having their child removed from their care.

While the safety of the child must always be paramount, 'A learning disability is not a loving disability', as Adrian Brown, an experienced dad with a diagnosed learning disability, articulated at a MENCAP conference. (MENCAP is a charity working with and for people with a learning disability). The vast majority of parents with LD love their children as much as the next proud new mum and dad. However, many people with LD did not enjoy positive childhood experiences and this can in turn bring barriers to their own parenting. If someone hasn't experienced a successful parent-child relationship when they

were young, how do they know how to form a bond with their own children when they become parents themselves? Yet good attachment is key to strong relationships and positive outcomes for babies and children.

A learning disability is not a loving disability

STRUCTURE OF MELLOW FUTURES PROGRAMME

Mellow Parenting has adapted two of its programmes, Mellow Bumps and Mellow Babies, to create a bespoke, LD appropriate, relationship-based, perinatal programme called Mellow Futures. In the first instance, for two hours a week over a six week period between 23 and 30 weeks' gestation, parents take part either in a mums' or a dads' group to help them to build a relationship with their unborn child. Difficult issues are touched on but in a way that they can be accepted as part of the participants' lives and then put aside for the duration of the pregnancy to avoid unnecessary stress.

After all the babies are born, the group come back for fourteen weekly sessions. The personal group in the morning focuses on the parents:- their past and what makes them the parents they are today. At lunchtime, facilitators, parents and the babies (who are cared for in a children's group during the morning and afternoon sessions) come together to eat and to take part in age-appropriate, very low or no cost activities that the parents then practise with their children at home. In the afternoon, there is discussion around babies and their needs, baby brain development and how promoting positive attachment or being 'tuned in' to your child can help to build strong relationships, which in turn are associated with a reduction in behavioural problems as the child grows and develops. The group also share videos of themselves with their child, previously recorded

by the facilitators at home, with the emphasis on strengths-based feedback. Each week, the session ends with relaxation, something the mums have often never tried before. Mothers are encouraged to continue to benefit from this by continuing relaxation at home themselves.

The emphasis in the groups is on strengths-based feedback

In addition to the weekly group meeting, participants are allocated a Mellow Mentor, who is a trained volunteer or a staff member who is not involved in facilitating the group. Mentors go out each week to support the mum and to help reinforce the group learning in the home setting, as often transferring knowledge from one setting to another is a difficult process for people with LD. Mentors are paired with their group member before the group begins and stay with them throughout the perinatal period. When the antenatal phase ends, during the gap before the postnatal group sessions begin while everyone waits for all the babies to arrive, the Mentors continue to visit each week at home or meet their mentee in the community to catch up, offer support and ensure continuity.

CHALLENGES

Running such a group has its challenges and recruiting participants can be extremely difficult. Many learning difficulties are undiagnosed and healthcare professionals are often understandably reluctant to be the one to 'label' someone as having a LD despite the fact that this may facilitate appropriate support being put in place. The result is that issues may not be flagged up until after the baby is born and the family situation becomes one of chaos or even crisis.

Another challenge is that social workers are keen to receive progress reports and information on how a particular parent is interacting in the group. As Mellow groups are closed groups, something which is essential in providing the safe and nurturing environment that makes them so successful, facilitators are not in a position to disclose anything that happens in the group beyond whether a parent attended or didn't. This can sometimes cause frustration on both sides.

WHAT THE FACILITATORS LEARN

Being a facilitator on the perinatal course is a joy. It brings new learning and leads you to challenge your own practice continually. As with all Mellow programmes, the facilitators are very much a member of the group and take part in all discussions and activities, disclosing whatever they feel comfortable with in each situation. Although this may initially concern new facilitators who fear being so vulnerable (particularly those whose experience is to 'teach' a group and to reveal as little as possible about their private lives), in reality, it has quite the opposite effect and helps everyone feel very comfortable and open. 'The facilitators were great, they were just like us', said a mum from Stirling in Scotland, and similar quotes are common in the post-group evaluations.

Facilitators are part of the group and share in self-disclosure

Being part of the pilot groups for Mellow Futures has given me insight into what works and what doesn't in a group setting involving parents with LD. Building strong relationships pre-group can take quite some time and these must be in place well before the start if the programme is to run successfully. Furthermore, it is important to appreciate that a parent's LD may to them be the least of their issues in a big picture of poverty, abusive relationships, debt, health issues and fears that their child may be taken into care (or is in care and that this may be made permanent). These situations, which are common in all of the most vulnerable groups in society, are also prevalent for parents with LD.

As a facilitator, it is inspiring to see group members gain a voice and support one another as they address issues together that they have never spoken about before. Mellow Futures offers parents the opportunity to build their confidence so as to take as much control of their lives as is feasible and to feel able to voice their needs without fear that asking for support will cause more problems for them. Their success in doing this is extremely rewarding to witness.