



Learning together to be good parents

A joint research project developed by Mellow Parenting with input from Mencap and the Elfrida Society aimed to find out how vulnerable mothers could be helped to become good parents. **Beth Tarleton** explains.



Background

Parents with learning difficulties can struggle to understand pregnancy and parenthood and often lack access to easy information or support networks which could help them increase their knowledge, skills and understanding.

A new programme called 'Mellow Futures' has been developed by Mellow Parenting (<http://www.mellowparenting.org/index.php/zoo>) in association with Mencap and the Elfrida Society to support new mothers. The overall project was known as 'Parent Pioneers'.

Mellow Parenting programmes are relationship-based. They aim to improve the interactions between parent and child and have been developed for vulnerable families who may struggle to engage with support. Two Mellow parenting programmes were adapted to become part of the Mellow Futures programme: the

Mellow Bumps programme which is a six week antenatal course and Mellow Babies a 14 week course which mothers attend with their babies.

Included in the Mellow Babies programme is a crèche for the babies for part of the day so that the mothers can think about their parenting and any problems they may have encountered. The mothers learn about topics such as bonding, babies' social and emotional development, etc. Mothers, babies and facilitators have lunch together and take part in a parenting activity together, such as baby massage. The mothers with learning difficulties were also provided with a volunteer mentor who visited them each week during the programme to provide emotional support and help the mum with the 'take home activity' which reinforces the learning from the group session.

The programme was adapted for mothers with learning difficulties with support from Mencap and a 'Parent Expert Group', a group of parents with learning difficulties involved with the Elfrida Society in London. These parents provided advice about making the programme materials easier to understand, tested out adapted sessions and discussed how mentors should support parents.

This research review provides an overview of the mothers' views of the first two pilot programmes. Mothers were interviewed before and after the programmes. Eighteen completed the programmes.

Findings

The majority of the mothers were involved with child protection as there were concerns about their current

ability to care for their baby or their older children had already been removed from their care. A number of these mothers were initially resistant to attending the programmes saying they only attended because they were told they had to. However, all of the mothers engaged with and enjoyed the programmes. This was primarily due to the development of trusting relationships with the facilitators who

Key Messages

- Mothers with learning difficulties are often isolated and may have little access to information and support about parenting.
- The Mellow Futures is an adapted programme specifically developed for mothers with learning difficulties. It appeared to provide the small number of mothers involved in the evaluation with a safe environment where they could reflect on their lives, develop new understandings about their baby and build relationships with other mothers.
- The mothers also enjoyed the non-judgemental relationships with the Mellow Parenting facilitators and mentors who provided weekly in-home support.

Summary

Title: Evaluation of the Mellow Futures programme (part of the Parent Pioneers project).
<https://www.mencap.org.uk/parentpioneers>

Aims: To investigate mothers' views of this newly adapted parenting programme.

Methods: Interviews with mothers with learning difficulties before and after taking part in the programme.

◀ provided a safe space for the mothers to discuss the issues in their lives.

One mother said: "I know everything's confidential, so I can say what I want in here. Like I can't say it to half the people, like I can't even speak to my partner about stuff. And I'll mention it here and I know that they can't go and say, 'Ah, she said this, and she's done this, and this has happened to her'. I know they've got to keep it to themselves".

The mothers also recognised that the facilitators shared their personal stories with them during the activities. This sharing by the facilitators created a feeling that they were all working together rather than professionals and group attendees.

The mothers also reported enjoying developing relationships with mothers in a similar situation to their own. They enjoyed 'having a laugh' and supported each other when they were down.

This mother summed up the connection between the parents: "I met a mom having a similar experience. This was very important for me because I feel she 'truly' understands".

The majority also enjoyed their relationship with their mentor. That the mentor was not a professional was important to the mothers as they felt able to talk freely to them as they related to them mother to mother.

For this relationship to work, it was important that the mentor was a mother. A few of the mentors did not have their own children. The relationship between the mentor and mother needed to be natural, they needed to 'click'. The relationship did not work if it was 'forced'.

The mothers enjoyed the content of the programmes and said the material was easy to understand. It was presented in an accessible format and often used video or creative activities rather than being literacy-based. The mothers felt they learnt a great deal about caring for their baby and about themselves. This personal learning was sometimes

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Holiday memories

Rosemary Trustam recalls some holidays which didn't always go to plan...

In a loud piercing voice Linda said "I've got a pair of shoes just like that"...

Given it was all the woman was wearing, it could have been a comedy call, but we were in the cinema watching an X film by popular demand.

upsetting for them but also beneficial and confidence building as they recognised their abilities and increased understanding of their baby.

One mother said: "I feel more confident. I can do more with my child than I could when I first had him".

Conclusions

The mums enjoyed the pilot programmes which provided them with parenting information, a safe space to think about their lives and connections with the facilitators and other mothers.

Comments included:

"It was a good laugh, I enjoyed it"
"I'm not sure what I'm gonna do with that day each week now. I didn't want it to end".

The Working Together with Parents network – wtpn.co.uk – is a free resource for professionals working with parents with learning difficulties.

The full evaluation report will be available later this year from Mencap (<https://www.mencap.org.uk/parentpioneers>).

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In a forthcoming issue:

User led evaluation of health services

Sarah Woodin, Leeds University

The B film of women wrestlers along with it had been of more interest to Jack who was definitely more taken with the fight moves than the women, and he'd spent most of the main film fumbling around his seat as he'd dropped something. What the rest of the cinema felt was going on might not have been so hard to guess!

However, these were some young adults with learning disabilities on holiday in Bournemouth pre-Mental Capacity Act days in the late '70s/early '80s. All definitely had capacity to decide and we could have answered any questions had they asked any.

Maximise opportunities

An advantage of residential homes at this time was that if people went away for up to two weeks they could retain their weekly fee. This led us to see how we could maximise their opportunities to go away.

Bournemouth held the three storey house of the parents of one of our team who had offered for free the opportunity of two weeks for a number of residents to go there on holiday while they were away. We'd borrowed a mini-bus and worked out that if two groups used it on consecutive weeks, one group could travel down on the minibus and have its use for the week and travel back on the train, whilst the second group reversed this. Clare and I were in the second group. We did no risk assessments as it was before the health and safety police took over. We knew people well and the hostel was arranged in three units which self-catered so people were well-versed in taking care of their home.

The first thing that happened was that when the train divided into two, we were in the wrong part so had to get off and go back on another train to continue our journey. Fortunately, everyone thought it hilarious that their 'competent' staff had messed up.

We arrived a bit later than intended so dumped our bags and went for a stroll along the front, which was not