

Putting down roots



A tree of life and relationships, from Mellow Ready participants in Falkirk

A new programme from Mellow Parenting, designed to help promote healthy relationships, is targeting young people pre-parenthood. *Kirsten Patterson* tells us more about the Mellow Ready pilot programmes, and what they have learned.

There is plenty of evidence which shows children's early attachment relationships create internal working models that influence their sense of themselves as a person which, in turn, shapes how they then go on to build relationships with others and their own children.

Mellow Parenting aims to promote healthy parent-child relationships to encourage the best possible relationships from generation to generation. Through our Mellow Ready programme we work particularly with young people who may not have had the opportunity to develop positive relationships of their own.

The Mellow Ready programme first began with a pilot in HMP Cornton Vale. Working with women who were not yet parents, alongside women who were mothers or were pregnant, the focus was on the social and emotional

development of babies. Feedback from the group was positive and participants were interested to learn more about what babies get from their caregivers in terms of communication and attachment. In particular, women who were already mothers commented that they wished that they knew this before they had become mothers. They point to the need for a specific focus on young people before conception, which could consider what information they might need before becoming parents.

Based on this feedback from the first pilot group, the materials were revised to focus on participants who were not yet parents. Thanks to funding from Young Start, we have completed a pilot of these materials, allowing us to further shape and develop the programme with input from both young people and group facilitators.

Three groups of care experienced young people aged between 15 and 20 were targeted, highlighted as statistically more likely to become sexually active earlier and with a high proportion of care-leavers becoming mothers between the ages of 18 and 24.

Two pilot groups were also delivered in educational settings with young people who traditional services were failing to engage, for example in behavioural support units or those with poor attendance. These young people typically had poor relationships with their teachers and peers and were finding school challenging.

The Mellow Ready programme covered a range of topics including "looking after myself", "friendship", "me and my body", "clearing the way [for future relationships]", "standing up for myself" and "circle of support". Each session also included baby brain development and what babies need in order to thrive. Throughout the programme there was time for relaxation based on our Mellow Bumps programme in which we promote anxiety reduction during pregnancy, with the intention that this would build the young people's coping skills and the tools to tackle stressful situations in the future.

From all our pilot groups feedback was positive, and the majority of participants showed improved scores on the Rosenberg self-esteem scale and adult/adolescent wellbeing scales by the end of the programme. However, we were also keen to hear what parts of the programme could be improved, and encouraged constructive criticism from those involved.

This programme was our first experience of working specifically with care experienced young people and we have learned a lot from those working in this sector, as well as from the young people themselves. We specifically created space to involve the young people in actively shaping the future programme, and held workshop sessions with partner agencies who contributed to the delivery of the pilot focusing on how to improve the programme in the future.

Feedback from the first set of pilot studies indicated that, whilst activities and topics were helpful, there could be more done to make a clear narrative throughout the programme. Therefore our renewed focus is on providing a programme that focuses on relationships and how young people navigate a range of varied and changing relationships.

The focus here is broad, with relationships including that with one's self, with family members (including children if the young people go on to become parents), friends, partners, others in the community and also considering how relationships can change and develop over time. This is particularly relevant to groups of care experienced young people, as often the changes that they experience in their relationships are unexpected, abrupt and turbulent.

By giving young people the space to consider their relationships and how these can change, it is our hope that they can work through some of the difficulties but also focus on positive aspects of past and current relationships,

recognising the impact that others have on their lives and the positive impact they can have on their own network of relationships and community.

Next steps

As this programme continues to be shaped and developed, we hope to further test the new materials for acceptability and effectiveness. In particular, we intend to continue to work with care experienced young people, and feedback from pilot groups delivered in educational settings has led us to believe that Mellow Ready will have application in secondary schools. In particular, we have identified a number of specific Experiences and Outcomes from the Health and Wellbeing section of the Curriculum for Excellence covered in the programme.

It is our hope that by increasing self-esteem in young people, promoting choice and encouraging them to consider their support systems, they will decide whether or not they want to become parents at a time that is right for them. By considering who they do and do not want in their lives, and also where they can turn to in times of need, if or when these young people do go on to become parents we hope that they will feel encouraged and supported. Importantly, they will also know what it is that a baby needs from them and what they have to offer in return, paving the way for positive relationships between these young people as parents and their children in the future.

Kirsten Patterson is Programme Assistant with Mellow Parenting www.mellowparenting.org

Mellow Parenting would like to thank the agencies who helped deliver pilots: Who Cares? Scotland, Scottish Throughcare and Aftercare Forum, Dean and Cauvin Trust, Falkirk Council, West Lothian Council and Clackmannanshire Council, as well as funders, Young Start (Big Lottery Fund).

What the participants say

"We learned about relationships and families and what's healthy within the family and what's healthy within a relationship. And we learned about how babies can like to start to learn things and how you can be a better parent." *Group participant, Falkirk*

"Like all the course work, it's nice to hear people saying some nice, positive things about you because you never think them yourself. And when they ask you to answer about yourself you find it really hard, so it's quite nice to hear it from someone else." *Group participant, Edinburgh*

"It like made me understand the types of like – if, like the type of things that a real friend would do, the types of things that bad friends would do, so it really helped." *Group participant, Falkirk*

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