

A health visitors along sidedness

by Dr Robyn Pound



Introduction

“This project in Snowhill was built on an existing group and the previous **nesa** three month Fathers’ Art Project in 2007. It began in February 2009 by working in a group for families with young children that already met in Centre Track weekly. It expanded to groups after school for school aged children, men and youth in the day, silk painting for adults at night and moved to other wider community activities. My involvement as one local health visitor is to engage people in the community, maintaining continuity of relationships that respond to their particular preoccupations and forge links between community and agencies.”

The process

“The family group was experiencing difficulties retaining members since the end of Community Learning activities in the autumn 2008. Drop in attendance was partly because of lack of focused activity beyond health visitor-led discussion and because of deterioration in the dynamics and behaviour within and outside the group. Parents wanted more dedicated activities for their children and more interesting things to do for themselves. By Feb 2009 numbers had dropped to less than half a dozen families who came intermittently to use it as a place to go to meet others with young children and for health visiting support. These were mostly mothers, with children from baby to nursery age and school aged siblings. Men from the previous **nesa** Father’s Art group still dropped in showing how relationships forged through art groups sustain.”

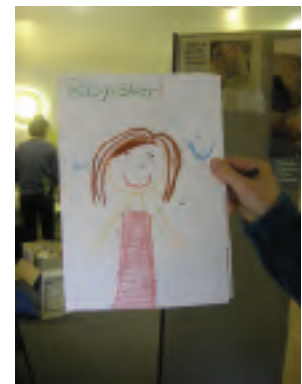


“For this project the artist and myself, health visitor, worked together with occasional help from other professionals and community members. The artist Philippa brought principles of the 5X5X5 Early Years Project providing creative resources to stimulate children’s play with their parents. Parents were encouraged to closely watch and enjoy their children playing and encourage their exploration following the children’s lead. Process of exploration was more important than producing a product. A climate of mutually rewarding, encouraging relationships was promoted.”

“After a few weeks we knew of enough adolescents around the estate in the day, teens and after-school aged children and fathers at home in the day, to begin activities for them. My job was engagement. Time constraints through staff shortage reduced my availability for door knocking than was previously possible. I believe the reduced attendances show the effect of this. This mirrors my experience of the Father’s Project when I was able to prioritise engagement time. School children were easier to attract because they need less encouragement to become involved.”

Some tangible results

“The group evolved from early weeks when the need to contain children’s impulses to attack each other was ever present. Mothers were encouraged to overcome their fears of poor behaviour and physical danger to allow their children to experiment. We cooked together, played with food, moved to floor activities encouraging cooperation, imagination and mess using a range of media. Behaviour became calmer, mellower and more cooperative. Gradually new families felt able to return and relationships softened.”



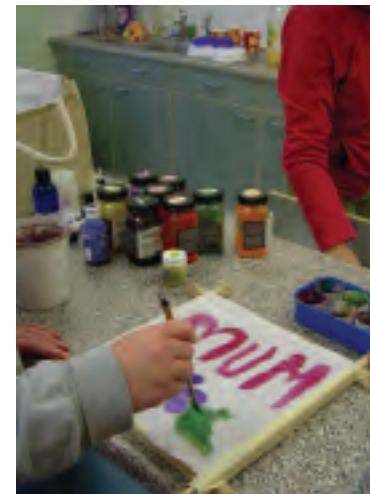
Processes of engagement

Creativity as an activity works

Creativity begins to work in processes of change

“It takes time to restore confidence and heal hurts.”

I witnessed mothers becoming more confident to be clear but kind in managing their children until ‘bad’ behaviour was no longer feared or the dominating feature of the group dynamic. The modelled practice was to be clear about limits to behaviour with encouragement and hopefulness about the present rather than punishment of past demeanours for fear of children’s future characteristics. Children were gradually given more freedom to explore without constraints of adult expectations. Children previously frustrated by limited ability to communicate, for various reasons, began to find ‘voice’ and grow in confidence, skills and ability to relate.



We were able to include a child with particular developmental/behavioural difficulties for short periods. It is intended that we will find ways to improve inclusion of such children in the future for the sake of the children, the parents and community cooperation. Because of this project it may be possible to attract affiliations locally with Speech and Language therapy, focused play workers and the Early Years Relationship project.

The group was deliberately kept small initially because of the difficult dynamic. As the climate improved it became possible to begin inviting families back to the group. It takes time to restore confidence and heal hurts.

In the estate there are 12 more families with young children and school children who have attended groups at the centre in the past, more first babies due and families with children who have not attended because they have different health visitors. Experience has shown that this particular client group will not come because they are told we are here. Health visiting contact through regular visiting, usually new babies, is needed to create safe access for isolated families into a community group. I estimate it may take around 8-10 hours of engagement to achieve one hour of attendance. This is important to bear in mind when we remind ourselves that one of the aims of this project is to tackle social exclusion.



This engagement barrier is particularly true of men who are fathers at home in the day. The Father's Art Project of 2007 still reaps the reward of easier on-going communication with me on matters of importance to them and shows the value to their family's access to services. These are the men who found it easier to walk into the current project and appear more able to access help even if they preferred to leave art to their partners. Contributors to the group before the current **nesa** project such as Community Learning, Stop Smoking Support, Young Parent Support (Off the Record) are interested in returning. A community nursery nurse newly appointed to the health visiting team is interested in carrying on the principles of 5X5X5 in promoting play within this group and the weekly drop in access to health visiting will continue.

I continue to be optimistic about increasing opportunities for engaging youth and men because I am known, constantly around the estate and have seen their interest. My learning from this latest project was that groups need to be ready to run as soon as interest is shown in them. Willow, ceramics and stone carving were all acceptable media. I have no doubt that this is a valuable venture towards our aims and will I support search for further funding.

Future engagement

People have long memories if the experience was a good one

