

“Parenting Pathways” – a joint pilot project by Reading Mencap and Home-Start Reading supporting families where the parent(s) have learning disabilities or difficulties (LDD). The project was funded by a private trust matching two generous individual donations to our two organisations.

- A parent with learning disability/difficulties is a big risk factor for their child being taken into care.
- A safe and happy home for a child was the priority consideration

**But we asked**

- Could extra resource and targeted help enable some parents, who genuinely care for and want to bring up their children, but who themselves have learning disabilities or difficulties, to demonstrate good parenting?

Six very different families of young children on child protection plans, including families who had already had other children taken into care, were referred for the 18 month project. However, one had their child taken into care before the course could start and one left the project after a few weeks due to a falling out with one of the other families on the course.

- The remaining families were given an 18-week parenting course delivered by in-house Mellow Parenting/Mellow Futures practitioners
- The course concentrated on emotional responses as well as practical parenting and there was a dedicated crèche and a warm, sociable setting with group craft and other activities.
- Alongside the course, each family was linked to a Reading Mencap Family Advisor to address the ‘environmental’ barriers facing the families which impacted on their ability to parent.
- One family was linked to a Home-Start volunteer visiting weekly at home; the other three were linked with volunteers/staff at a Home-Start weekly ‘Family Group’.

**At the end of the project:**

- The children were out of child protection measures
- Support continues for one family still in a rather precarious situation; one is now resigned to having contact but not responsibility for the child; one is managing well

with family support only; one with severe family illness is managing with some continuing support.

- Two of the families have said they want to help other families in a similar position

### **What have we learned?**

- Traditional parenting courses were tried and rejected by the parents ; the Mellow approach – no longer offered by RBC – seems to work better as it focuses on attachment which is missing from Triple P
- Though painful at times, the parents valued being able to open up about their feelings in a small group of other parents sharing their difficulties
- The environment for the course was very important - the parents came along reliably over a long period because they had some pleasure in the group
- Intensive help in staff accompanying parents to meetings and so on cemented trust, and helped them get their views aired more effectively
- The social/friendship aspects of both the course and the H-S Family Groups proved very important to the families, who rarely mixed with other people
- Improvements are needed in the way family and child protection meetings are run. Parents should always be offered independent advocates to support them through the Child Protection process. Families and advocates also need documents in good time to absorb the contents, and their views should be listened to and respected
- The families seem motivated to keep trying, and they want to help others. They have been given a better chance to demonstrate what they can do and future decisions about their children can take that into account.
- Intensive Family Advisor support, with a specially designed parenting course like Mellow Future can bring confidence to some parents who have LDD
- Providing a small group, trusting environment is important to the families emotional wellbeing and their learning - as is regular and long-term engagement “keeping them close”
- Two organisations working together can be logistically difficult, but we both feel we can, funds permitting, now offer better support to families with LDD

- We hope to encourage the Council to reinstate Mellow Parenting when funds permit,
- And to put in place guidelines and additional special training for social workers, so that family meetings, advocacy, paperwork and attitudes give parents with LDD the best chance of understanding the processes and having their views recognised.

### **What did the parents say?**

*It's frightening at the start, but now we've made friends."*

*"I feel more confident in the group now. I wouldn't feel the same in another group. I trust this group."*

*"There isn't a group like this anywhere else."*

*"It really helps. You can share problems and get help to solve them."*

*"It's really built our confidence. You don't judge. We've learnt a lot."*

*"It was great meeting new people and it's boosted my confidence.."*

*"[it helps] understanding that other people have the same issues."*

*"It's friendly, relaxed and a good laugh. We're able to talk and get practical help. We're able to smile at this group, with mates. We want to stay in touch."*

*"We've got C into her own bedroom now." (re 5-year-old who had been unwilling to sleep anywhere except with mother)*

*"I think more about safety now"*

### **Thank you to the project funders, and**

- to the families who showed such commitment during the course and subsequent support.
- to the staff and volunteers who made the project work: Zia, Liz (kindly seconded by Reading Borough Council) and Pauline, the course facilitators; Ali and Cheryl the Family Advisors; Jackie, Charlie, Shazia, Mirna, Avril and Sue, crèche staff; Rose and John, individual support volunteers; Sarah and Mandi for overall guidance as Manager of Home-Start and CEO of Reading Mencap, and their support staff.

Jill Lake and Leslie Macdonald, for the Trustees of Home-Start Reading and Reading Mencap. April 2016.