An innovative parenting programme in Luton is supporting vulnerable families by helping mothers to interact positively with their children and recognise the past experiences that have influenced their parenting styles.

Nurses who facilitate the programme's group sessions are required to share personal experiences with the other participants and reflect on their own parenting.

The six women in the room, like most groups of friends, have a good deal in common. They are similar ages, ranging from early twenties to early thirties, and all have children. The warmth and easy banter between them makes it obvious that they know each other well.

But this is not a coffee morning for young mums; less than a year ago these women were living difficult, isolated lives.

All of the women had experienced violence from a partner before they found their way to Luton Mellow Parenting, an early intervention programme developed and commissioned by NHS Bedfordshire and Luton and Luton Borough Council. Domestic violence was just one strand in stories that, for some women, also involved depression and encounters with the police.

Vickie Poulton was walking past the premises of Stepping Stones – an agency offering support to women and one of the providers of the programme – when she decided to come in last September.

'It was the best thing I ever did. I was living in a refuge and I was not getting much support from them at the time.'

Her children’s behaviour had deteriorated dramatically after moving into the refuge. 'They didn’t listen to anything I said. I was a bit all over the place when I came here – the same as the kids. I did not know what was going to happen to us. But then…' – at this point Vickie adopts a comedy voice – 'I found this place and everything changed.' Everyone laughs. But she is not exaggerating. It would appear that everything did change, and the support she found through Luton Mellow Parenting was the catalyst – more practically useful and emotionally profound than anything she had experienced through conventional health or social services.

Positive relationship

Originally developed in Scotland by a team of psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers, all in the early childhood field, the Mellow Parenting approach is designed to promote positive parent-child relationships in vulnerable, hard-to-reach families.

It works by having facilitators – usually nurses, health visitors, psychologists or counsellors – support women as they examine not just how they interact with...
their children, but their own past experiences of being parented and the events in their lives that may be influencing their behaviour.

One of the exercises the women were asked to complete during the 14-week course, which is taken one day a week, was to write a timeline of events in their life.

‘That was the hardest thing I have ever done,’ says Vickie, prompting murmurs of agreement from the other women. ‘You had to go from birth all the way up to the age you are now.

‘There are things I have been through and done that really hurt me. I was on trial for possession of a firearm. I think, “Oh God, did I do that?”’ But [here] no one judged me, everyone was supportive.’

During the Mellow Parenting sessions, Vickie realised that many of her problems could be traced to her relationship with her father.

‘I was not allowed to cry – I used to grit my teeth so hard. Now I blubber all the time – I just let it out. I am not going to let my kids grow up thinking that everything that happens is their fault.’

Emma Paine’s experience in the group has changed her view of her mother: ‘I learned that my mum was not the person she said she was. She was brilliant, but actually she wasn’t there half the time. She was always at work.’

Understanding their past and seeing their parents more clearly has helped the women to reassess their own abilities as parents.

‘I tried to hide my depression,’ says Vickie. ‘I was scared they would say “well you shouldn’t have had a kid then”.

‘I had always wanted a little girl with blue eyes and then I got her and all of a sudden I couldn’t pick her up. I thought maybe I am not cut out for this. I felt like a failure and my health suffered. I got into trouble. I wasn’t eating, I had an eating disorder, and I was badly depressed.’

Eventually, Vickie did go to her GP. ‘No one actually spoke to me and said “what is going on?”’ It was “here, take these pills, they will sort you out”. I am not on them anymore, since coming here I have stopped taking them and I feel great.’

The group’s course ended several months ago, but they still meet regularly and the door at Stepping Stones is always open to them. None of the women are in violent relationships now and all say that they are more confident in themselves and their parenting.

‘I am a better parent than I have ever been,’ says Vickie.

In the afternoon I visit another Luton Mellow group for women and babies, at Redgrave Children and Young People’s centre on a
housing estate on the northern outskirts of Luton.

The women, only six weeks into the course, have had many of the same problems as the other group but their babies are in care, and they are only able to see them during supervised visits. All were referred to the programme by social services.

‘I needed a lot of convincing,’ says Lisa Best. ‘I was not too impressed when they told me I needed help with my parenting, but I don’t mind the course now. We do a lot of work on our self-esteem.’

For Donna (who does not want to give her surname), seeing herself on video with her child has been a boost to her confidence. All participants are videoed at home with their child, and watch and discuss the video with the group.

‘It is always interesting, watching how you behave with your baby. The main thing for me is that I can be myself. There’s not the pressure of someone writing things down. I can ask for advice but I am not being told what to do. They are not always trying to put you down.’

Positive bonding: a young mother plays with her son at Stepping Stones

Group facilitator Rachel Stephen, a nurse and health visitor, adds that the facilitators are also videoed with their own children as part of their Mellow Parenting training: ‘One of the programme developers found that she threatened her children constantly.

‘I found that I am easily distracted. What the mums tend to see is the stressful stuff as opposed to what is going well. But I don’t think there are any experts in parenting. Every time I run this programme I find I can do something different (as a parent).’

She emphasises that there is no ‘them and us’ between the facilitators and the clients. ‘The programme’s developers make it clear that this is not a parenting training course. You train dogs, not humans. It is about the belief that getting a group of people in the same room to explain their experience helps to develop relationships.’

Practical help

Donna has found that professional help is not always there when she needs it – and it comes with a price. ‘I have got a nice health visitor but she is so busy you cannot always get to see her. I am also wary of who I ask for help because it all gets written down and it makes you look like you cannot manage and goes against you in court.’

After the group session, I ask Rachel if it is difficult, as a nurse, to avoid taking on the role of the expert. ‘This is about resisting the urge to fix things,’ she says. ‘It is much better sitting on your hands and letting solutions come from the group. The focus is centred on relationships rather than coming up with strategies.

‘A lot of our clients are hypersensitive to criticism. They hear suggestions as criticism – and they have been criticised all their lives.’

Any nurse interested in training to be a Mellow Parenting facilitator should be prepared to take a long, hard look at their own life. The Mellow Parenting programme requires openness and honesty from all participants, and facilitators are expected to go through the process with the clients.

‘We talk about our own childhood and our own parents and things that happened to us,’ says Rachel. ‘We acknowledge that we have faced fewer difficulties, but if you dig deep there is always something.’

Nurses, she points out, are no more immune to life’s problems than anyone else. ‘A lot of us have experienced loss’

Short-term costs lead to long-term savings

The Luton Mellow Parenting programme was funded by the town’s borough council and by £100,000 of innovation funding from NHS East of England strategic health authority.

The council has agreed to support the second phase, and implementation lead Siobhán Cleary hopes the new clinical commissioning groups will also provide funding.

Early results from an evaluation of the first programme, supported by qualitative feedback from the mothers, suggest that it is saving at least £500 per family per month in reduced use of other services. The data was gathered from mothers in Luton so may not generalise to other populations.

Ms Cleary, a nurse and midwife, joined the targeted parenting programme for families with multiple difficulties in September last year. ‘We looked at parenting education because we knew there was a huge gap in Luton.’

Luton Borough Council and the local NHS began developing the programme in September 2010. Ms Cleary is hugely enthusiastic about Mellow Parenting, which provides facilitators with the skills they need to deliver an ‘intensive intervention to change relationships’.

‘It is about looking at the family holistically,’ she says. ‘As a midwife, what is the point of taking a mother’s blood pressure and finding it is sky high, if you do not address what is worrying her? In the past someone would ring me about their little boy and say “I don’t know what to do”, and I thought, that is not my job. But it is my job – it is their mental health.’

Referrals from a wide range of sources now go direct to Ms Cleary, who checks that women are willing to participate. ‘It will not work otherwise because it is so invasive,’ she says.

www.mellowluton.org
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