

The following article was published in
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For the journey

Richard Barton tells how parent workshops can offer support, understanding and real friendship to families of children with SEN

I am a teaching assistant at a primary school for children with severe and complex learning difficulties. I am currently responsible for developing cultural activities within the school and I also work with families from ethnic minority groups.

In September 2010, I was asked to begin a parents' coffee morning. I have trained and worked in the theatre and, to me, the workshop format was a natural way to encourage people to talk about and share their experiences of having a child with SEN.

The parent workshops have now developed into a parent community. Out of a total of sixty school families, parents or carers from forty families have taken part in workshop activities over the course of the last year.

My intention has always been to create an atmosphere where people

feel comfortable, are not afraid to make mistakes, can be a bit silly and feel able to share their stories. I aim to give the group a little structure. It may seem unusual but, in practice, structure gives people freedom: the freedom to form relationships on their own terms. If everyone is focused on the same simple activity, working towards a shared goal, then without thinking about it, their social barriers tend to drop away and they begin to communicate freely. One of the most exciting outcomes of our parent workshops is that people have made real friends.

A place to talk

A special school doesn't have the school gate culture, where parents drop off and pick up children – standing around waiting, seeing the same faces every day – making friends by association.

I always say that the parents are their own best resource

Our school accepts children from the whole of the London Borough of Barnet and most of them arrive by bus. The group therefore creates a space for people to develop understanding and relationships. As the participants of the group are all united by being involved in the same task, they have the freedom to be themselves and let go. If people are laughing, I know the morning is going well.

Our Headteacher has often said that it is all the things that I am not that have helped the group be so successful; I am not a teacher, a therapist or an "expert". However, I always say that the parents are their own best resource. They are the experts. My role is simply to allow people to have the space to talk and the chance to listen.

Recently, we worked in two groups – one for parents of older children and one for parents whose children were all under six years old. A common question from the "younger" group was "How do you manage as your child grows up?" The answer from the "older" group was along these lines: as they grow, and outwardly become stronger or heavier, we grow too. We learn to adapt to our child's needs and to accept our relationship with them as it is. Our growth is less visible – physically we may even appear to be getting older and weaker – but inside our strength



Families can have fun while sharing ideas at workshops.

develops. Such responses display a deep level of empathy, which can be so helpful to less experienced parents.

When I asked the group how they would describe the workshops to someone who had never been, one mother said simply: “a warm bath.” To relax and to laugh are important things for everyone. Parents have told me that often after having a child with severe learning difficulties, their world becomes very small. Friends who have children at mainstream school find it hard to relate to them. They may express concern, praise or perhaps even pity, but they may not be able to truly empathise. One parent told me recently that she valued being able to share the frustrations of having a child with SEN in an environment where no-one was going to judge her. The laughter in the group is the laughter of recognition, of shared experience. I remember when a new mother joined the group and began to speak a little about their life at home and another parent stopped her and said: “I know it feels like you are all alone, but believe me you are not.”

Friendship and community

The success of the group dynamic has also created opportunities for activities outside of school. Many families had never been to the cinema or the theatre together before. I have recently supported families to apply for money from the Barnet Short Breaks Team. They have helped fund trips for the group, which I have organised. As relationships between families have developed, we have had a great response. Nineteen families took part in a cinema outing, while a theatre trip was attended by eighteen families. The school also provided members of staff to support mainstream siblings and help the activities run smoothly. These events function as big, sponsored play dates. Play dates are a staple of the mainstream school experience, but can



be very difficult to manage for children with SEN. I always organise a big lunch as well, so that adults have some time to share food and chat.

As well as providing people with the opportunity to make real friends, involvement in the group has given many parents a new confidence. People have discovered that they are neighbours, or that they share a common second language. Three mothers now go together to a Saturday swim session for children with SEN. One parent invited members of her son's class to his sixth birthday party.

Another welcome aspect of the parent group process is that fathers of children have become more involved in school events. Last term, I was able to invite two fathers to lead a Fathers' Day assembly for the whole school. Again, these relationships have been formed by the parents themselves, through participation in a series of activity-led workshops.

A common understanding of what achievement means for a child with severe learning disabilities is fundamental to the success of the group and this is often best described through story. The workshops have generated stories of family life which I have then developed into books for use in the classroom. These child-centred stories are designed to celebrate the experiences of non-verbal children. The inspiration for the stories always comes from parents, and usually develops from a workshop activity.

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The parent groups provide a space to discover more about the culture immediately surrounding the life of a particular child with SEN. It may be that the family uses a different language at home to the one the child experiences at school. Parents and children also often have shorthand forms of communication and objects or particular words that mean something very specific in the family context. Aspects of the child's communication that are not normally revealed in the classroom can therefore be better understood. Accessing these stories also helps to bridge the gap between a child's life at home and their life at school.

So far, the parent workshops have taken us all on an exciting voyage of discovery. Inevitably, the journey is ongoing, as the workshops are not about reaching a desired result or destination but about the process. Essentially, they are about the journey itself. **SEN**

Further information

Richard Barton is Parents' Outreach Worker at Oakleigh School and Early Years Centre for children aged two to 11 years who have severe and complex learning difficulties:

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