

'Anywhere else you can't say it'

Evaluation of Mothers Living Apart from their Children North Kirklees Pilot Service: April 2012-March 2013

SUMMARY REPORT

Background

Over the past 12 months, the Mothers Apart service in Dewsbury has provided a space for mothers to come together every two weeks within a facilitated group environment to explore their experiences of living apart from their children through discussion and group-based activities. In addition, the group facilitator, also the Coordinator of the service, meets with many of the mothers outside of the group, offering them individualised 'case-work' support. The service is primarily concerned with fostering the health and wellbeing of the mothers which, for many, also means promoting healthy relationships with their children. During the pilot year, 29 mothers accessed the service in Dewsbury.

An independent evaluation was conducted by Icarus and this report provides a summary of the findings. The evaluation methods involved 10 interviews with 7 mothers, a diary review, an interview with the Project Coordinator and a review of monitoring data. The full evaluation report and a Return on Investment Analysis can be accessed separately from WomenCentre.

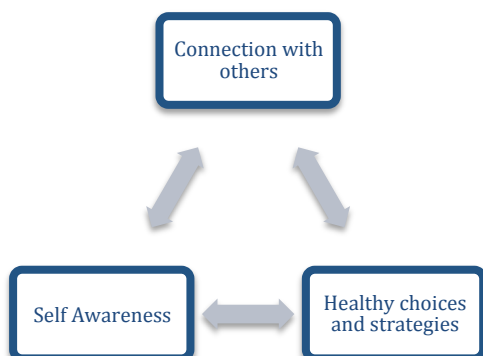
About the mothers

Entry point information was collected from 19 mothers highlighting the significant challenges that the mothers are experiencing. Over half the women said they had struggled with their mental health and experienced domestic violence in their lifetime; just less than half said they had misused drugs, committed a criminal offence, been a victim of childhood abuse and had money/debt issues.

That the mothers experience multiple challenges has had implications for their ability to engage with the Mothers Apart service. Whilst a core group of 5-6 mothers have attended most of the Dewsbury group sessions, a similar number have been intermittent attenders and over a third have attended only one group session, or none at all. Reasons for non-attendance include ill-health, pregnancy, poor mental health, family commitments and competing appointments. The Coordinator has maintained contact with most of the mothers that have been unable to attend the group sessions, and she has continued to offer them case-work support.

Understanding outcomes

The interviews with the mothers suggest that the Mothers Apart service has been a very positive influence in their lives over the past year. It has offered an important antidote to the sense of stigma and isolation that accompanies their situation whilst also creating valued opportunities for self-awareness and growth. The evaluation evidence suggests that there have been three broad areas of impact:



1) Connections with other mothers

"It was nice to talk about things yesterday rather than just holding it in...whenever I try and speak about it I cry. Yesterday, in the group, because they're all in the same sort of boat there was no judgement or anything. Everyone understood. Everyone was nodding their heads. Anywhere else you can't say it."

The facilitator has observed a very positive and healthy dynamic develop within the group, and despite some changes in the group's membership from session to session, there is a strong sense from the mothers that it represents a consistent and reliable presence in their lives.

All of the mothers spoke in their interviews about the stigma and judgement that they felt as mothers living apart from their children. In stark contrast to this, The Mothers Apart service is perceived as a space in which the mothers can talk about their experiences and acknowledge their emotions in the company of other women. This is hugely significant for the mothers, who referred time and again in their interviews to the lack of 'judgement' in the group, the sense of 'acceptance' by others and the reassurance that comes with knowing that there are other people 'in the same boat.'

2) Self awareness

"We had to write down our fears and I found that really really hard to do. But I'm so glad I did. And also, she made us aware of our inner critics and I'd never really thought about that for a long long time so its made me aware of mine and I'm now aware of how to try and avoid that sort of thing".

Through the guided exercises in the group sessions, mothers have explored the thought patterns, feelings and behaviours associated with living apart from their children. Over the year, the mothers have fostered a culture that is mutually supportive and respectful and this has helped them to focus on their own well-being and not just their relationship with their child. Some gave examples of how they have grown in confidence and are more thoughtful about how they behave with others around them.

3) Healthy choices and strategies

"It's made me want to go out more and experience other things. At one point I wouldn't have referred myself to counselling but I've done that now."

All the mothers spoke in their interviews about how the group has provided a safe space to think about the choices they can make and explore their ability to instigate change in their own lives. Some mothers have used the group to discuss how they address relationship difficulties with their children or with other family members and they were able to offer examples to illustrate how their relationships with their children had benefitted from this.

On a very practical level, a number of mothers have enrolled on other courses or joined other groups that support their personal growth.

Service features – what's been critical

The evaluation has highlighted three features that have made a critical contribution to positive outcomes for the mothers:

- **The hosting of the service by WomenCentre** because they: have local credibility; can offer access to a suite of support opportunities; bring expertise underpinned by a strong philosophy of empowerment; and are independent of statutory provision.
- **The local application of an established model**, which meant the North Kirklees group could draw on the relationships, tools and approaches that have been developed elsewhere. Local application is important because the time, effort and costs associated with travelling to Huddersfield were considered to be by most of the Dewsbury based mothers to be prohibitive.

- **A skilled and experienced Coordinator/facilitator** because the mothers value her skills, knowledge and style of working and see her role as critical to their positive experience of the service. In particular, the mothers spoke about the knowledge and experience the Coordinator brings to the role, the different perspective that she offers as an ‘outsider’, the fact that she is a stable, reliable presence in their lives and the active interest she takes in their wellbeing.

The service activities

The evaluation included an appraisal of the different methods and activities that have been applied over the course of the pilot project. This has revealed that one to one case work has been important for some and has brought the Coordinator into contact with many different agencies and organisations. Joint working and collaboration is an aspect of the Mothers Apart service that could be further developed in the future particularly given the positive reception that the service received in the Autumn seminar.

There were a number of methods that were only partly during the pilot year and therefore would warrant further investment/consideration because of their potential to add value to the group work and the personal development of the mothers. Amongst these were:

- Digital Diaries
- Reading of other people’s stories
- Text outs and regular newsletters
- Links with social work students at Huddersfield University

Concluding comments

Many of the mothers that access the Mother’s Apart service experience multiple challenges, which inevitably mean that they have contact with different service providers on a day to day basis. Unlike most of these services, Mothers Apart is focused primarily on their well-being and provides opportunities for group interaction and one to one support which is not available anywhere else. Mothers that regularly attend the group sessions greatly value the opportunity to talk openly about their experiences in a space that is supportive and, in their words, judgement-free. Through the group discussions and guided exercises, mothers have been able to explore different aspects of their lives and, for some, this has brought new insights that they been able to apply positively.

Not all mothers have been regular attenders of the group – a fairly large proportion have attended intermittently or only once. If the service is extended, it will be important to explore in more detail why this is the case and determine whether proposed changes in the model of delivery (co-existence of a curriculum group and forum) will help to rectify this.

What is particularly striking about this service is the extent to which it has benefitted from the input of the Coordinator. Whilst it is not unusual in the voluntary sector for a service to be heavily reliant on the contribution of one individual, it will be important for the longer term resilience of the service, to consider how aspects of delivery could be shared with others.

As the service moves into the next phase, it is clear that there is a strong desire to build on the lessons of the pilot year, extending and developing aspects that have worked well whilst also making adjustments to the delivery model to ensure that it can accommodate the range of experiences that mothers bring with them. Any evaluation of the service will need to explore the contribution of these service adjustments and developments, whilst also retaining a firm focus on the changes that mothers experience.