

The seven Home-Starts across Greater Manchester have been supporting families across the region for almost 20 years.

In various Greater Manchester communities we see families face many issues; poverty, domestic violence, illness, disability, isolation, the list is endless. But one issue that we see, (and that is sadly on the increase), is parents' poor mental health.

For many years, we have received referrals from health visitors, GPs and midwives for mums suffering with postnatal depression, (it's always been high on the list of reasons for our support). But in more recent years we have seen more and more referrals for a whole range of issues that are covered by the terminology 'poor mental health'; from anxiety and stress, to clinical diagnosis such as Bi Polar Disorder and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

But why? Are we just more aware of mental health? Has the media played a part in raising the profile of mental health issues? Or has life just become so much harder, (with fewer support networks in place), that many parents just cannot cope? Maybe it's all of these things...

Thankfully, there is much more focus on a parent's mental health nowadays, but Parent Infant Mental Health is something that we are keen to address; focusing as much on the child as on the parent. Research suggests that the lack of early attachment between a mother and a child can have a negative outcome on the child for the rest of its life.

At the end of their support with their Home-Start volunteer almost all parents in the last year said that we have met their needs and they no longer needed support in managing their mental health.

So why does this model work? Why do Home-Start families feel able to discuss such a taboo subject matter with their volunteer, more than some professionals in many instances? Twenty years of supporting families in Greater Manchester has shown us that parents open to their Home-Start volunteer because-

"My volunteer is there because she wants to be, not because she's paid to be."

"Home-Start do not judge you, you never feel like a bad parent in front of them, you know they have yours and your children's best interests at heart."

"They don't come in waving clip boards, the volunteers are just parents themselves who understand just how hard parenting can be. They empathise with you, they mentor you. I trusted my volunteer more than anyone else in the world."

So how can a volunteer who is not a mental health professional make such a difference? All our volunteers undergo a robust training course, they all have parenting experience, and crucially our experienced staff match a volunteer to meet the needs of a family, so in many cases it may be that a volunteer has themselves, (in this instance), experienced mental health issues. And the unique volunteer model of support is that we walk alongside the family for however long they need us- this is vital- there is no 'quick fix' to dealing with mental health.

We know that our volunteers are making a difference, we know because our parents tell us they are, because we see the outcomes and the change in a family as they progress with their volunteer support; we see their children flourish and grow.

But sadly, the voluntary sector is going through unprecedented times in terms of lack of funding and with volunteer recruitment at an all-time low; this at a time when families more than ever need the voluntary sector to step in. We urge a focus on investment into the charities like Home-Start because we know how much parents need us, we know just how much more we could do.

If you can spare just a couple of hours a week and train as a Home-Start volunteer, we'd love to hear from you. For more information, please visit

www.gmhomestarts.org.uk