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Focus on St Albans charity Home-start

1:25pm Friday 20th February 2009

By Adam Binnie »

"Being a parent is the most difficult job in the world - and there is no training for it" says charity Homestart. But help is at hand. Reporter Adam Binnie meets real-life Supernannies and some of the families they support.

"I DIDN'T want somebody else to look after my daughter, I wanted somebody to help me do things that I can't. I can't lift her onto my lap, and rather than have someone lift her onto their own lap, I wanted somebody to help me do it as if I were able bodied."

Chantelle, who has spinal muscular atrophy, told me "It's a muscle-wasting condition. I have an electric wheelchair, because I can't bear weight on my legs at all. My arms are also quite weak are well."

Every Wednesday a volunteer from Home-Start visits Chantelle's St Albans home. The charity, which has an office in Spencer Street, is made up of 45 volunteers - who each work with a family - and four full-time staff. Fourteen volunteers are also being trained.

What's obvious from the start of my conversation with Chantelle is how much she and her 17-month-old daughter Maya rely on support provided by the charity, and how adaptable her volunteer Julie is.

Chantelle said: "What they offer is emotional support, physical support, errands, things that you can't do. If you're overwhelmed you might need someone to take the weight off, or just someone to talk to.

"They offer an awful lot but what I needed was physical support. They fulfilled that for me."

Since Home-Start was introduced in 1973 in Leicester, it has grown to 350 schemes nationwide. The charity stands apart from other initiatives because its volunteers visit homes directly, so they can often help families who are housebound.

Unlike other forms of social care, no intervention can take place without the family's prior consent. Most referrals come through visiting health workers or GPs but a large number come from the families directly.

Chantelle said: "I first heard about Home-Start when I was pregnant - my health visitor actually told me about them and said they'd probably be able to help me, because I was quite concerned that I wouldn't be able to get out and about and do enough activities with the baby."

Later I spoke to Sally Patterson, who manages the St Albans district scheme full-time, with the help of two part-time managers and an administrator. She takes care of funding, training and support for the volunteers, but also has a family caseload of her own.

She said: "Reasons for referral really vary, there's post-natal depression, multiple births, or sometimes a parent or child is ill or disabled."

Much of the time, it is crucial emotional support that volunteers can provide.

Sally said: "You also get social isolation in this area. Perhaps partners work in London, or have moved away from extended family."

"It's about going into the home and giving the children the best start in life."

Gill, the mum of twins, told me : "Home-Start was a lifesaver during my twins' first year. Without family nearby,



Home-Start volunteers from St Albans.

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my volunteer provided a much-needed break and a listening ear."

A Home-Start report for the year 2007-08 reveals the breadth of needs expressed by families. Out of 14 categories listed, parents' emotional health came out on top.

"Feeling isolated" and "the need to manage children's behaviour" were also near the top of the list, but what really surprised me was the variety of needs that volunteers must be prepared to face. Their ethos really is, as volunteer Barbara said: "All sorts of issues, all sorts of families."

Chantelle said: "What I feel is very important is that they match you. If you're somebody who needs more emotional support then they pick a character who's more of a counsellor, and can offer you more emotional support.

"They matched me exactly with somebody who would meet my needs entirely."

Barbara, a volunteer who is entering the fifth and final year of her placement, said: "In some families the situation doesn't change with time.

"Consistency has helped with this family, just to know that someone will be there every week," she said. "You'd like to wave a magic wand, but you can't."

Currently Home-Start provides assistance for families with children under five, as the scheme is set up to help families cope without their volunteers.

Barbara, when asked whether it can be difficult to detach herself from work, said: "Being there for five years, it would be difficult not to become attached - I can't imagine not seeing the family again."

It's quite obvious to me, after talking to Barbara that the volunteers, as the charity's front-line troops, are very well supported. She has a passion and emotional attachment to her family, and the personal reward she derives from her work is evident.

The path to becoming a volunteer has to be strictly defined to provide the families with the support they need.

Sally said: "When someone volunteers we will go to their house to interview them. There's a ten-week training course, which looks at stresses and strains of family life and the boundaries our volunteers should expect to encounter.

"It also teaches listening skills and to be non-judgemental."

Unquestionably, the gratitude for the support provided by Homestart is reflected in the donations it receives.

The charity's funding is mainly from grants and donations. Homestart is eligible for statutory funding from Hertfordshire County Council, from the local primary care trust, and the district council.

Home-Start works very hard to organise vital fundraising events such as teas at St Albans Abbey and charity stalls at the St Albans and Wheathampstead markets.

When asked how hard life would be without Julie, Chantelle said: "I get a visit once a week, we go out to a baby music group. My daughter absolutely adores it and adores Julie.

"Without her we wouldn't be able to access those sorts of activities. I couldn't lose her actually - I'd be gutted."

*To find out more about volunteering for Home-Start in St Albans telephone 01727 833810.

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