

Rolling out the PPSN with follow up groups – the Scottish Experience

Sylvia Todman, Health and Wellbeing Practitioner, Thistle Young Persons Team

Thank you, John, Good morning everybody. I'd like to start by telling you a wee bit about the Thistle Young Persons Project and then talk about how our collaboration with Parents Plus came about, how it worked, what went well and what we've learned. Spoiler alert – it's been good!

The Thistle Young Persons project is a team of 2 part-time people and we're part of the Thistle Health and Wellbeing, based in Edinburgh. We work alongside young people from the age of 16 who have additional support needs - this is a wide spectrum of need including physical and learning disabilities.

We engage young people to think about what a good life after school might look like for them. We invite these young people, along with family members/carers, friends and our volunteer group supporters to take part in the Big Plan, our group- based person centred planning programme. The Big Plan is co-facilitated by young people who have been through the programme themselves. Over several weeks, we work together to recognise the unique strengths, dreams and hopes each young person has for the future and to create a plan to move towards this future. And we offer support until our young people are 25 years old.

What we were observing was that while we were doing a good job of supporting the young person through their transition from school, there was a wider need for support with the parents and carers. Our families were struggling to find what was out there, what their young person was entitled to, how to communicate with statutory agencies. And as many of you will know, there is a specific isolation that comes with being the parent or carer of a young person with additional support needs, your young person is likely to be transported to school transport so there is no chat at the school gates and the social activities available to young people with additional needs are limited so opportunities to develop friendships with other parents just don't arise in the same way as for other families. Additionally, for these families, time is incredibly precious, with medical appointments, maybe trying to keep a career going so you can pay the mortgage and possibly with the responsibilities of meeting the needs of siblings and older family members so we would want to offer something that was good use of time

So, we have identified a clear need. But how best to meet it? What if we were able to empower our parents and carers? These are the experts who know their young person best and who are in it for the long haul. If our parents and carers had the knowledge of what was out there, the confidence to ask for what their young person needed and was entitled to and the support of a group of peers travelling a similar path in life – what difference would that make?

And that is where Parents Plus came in.

Into our inbox popped an invitation to (bear with me) an Information Webinar on the Sponsored Practice Development Opportunity for Scottish Services in the New Parents Plus Special Needs Programme!

Looked good but how could we be sure this collaboration will align with Thistle's Unique strengths-based solution focused approach? Well, it turned out that the Thistle Approach is not completely unique. In fact, a lot of our group work has its foundations in the strengths-based, solution-focussed research of one Professor John Sharry. So, our collaboration was good to go. The Parents Plus team were generous with their time and met with us to discuss what we hoped to achieve and sponsored us to take part in the facilitator training last year. Our first Parents Plus group started in February this year and we had 10 parents and carers join us at a breakfast meeting in our Centre of Wellbeing and online. This is week 7 for our second cohort of 7 parents, to suit these parents and carers, this is an evening programme, starting with a light after-work buffet and a session that runs until 8 pm.

Our programmes have been well-received. The Parents Plus Special Needs programme is pitched from age 11 but we found there is lots of flexibility within it so we might introduce things in slightly different way but there is always material that was relevant and useful for our demographic.

At the end of our seven weekly sessions, we asked our parents and carers what they wanted the follow – up sessions to look like. And the feedback we got was unequivocal that our parents, with all their other responsibilities and commitments, wanted to meet in real life, for the same amount of time and look in more depth at things we haven't had the opportunity to fully explore in our groups.

So our first follow up session last month, our parents were really keen to go back to the sexuality topic. What we did was use the first hour of the group to review how things had been going since we had last met and for the second hour, we invited a local charity, Get2gether, which exists to create opportunities for love and friendships for people with additional support needs to come along, meet our families and answer questions.

Our second monthly check in session is tomorrow and our parents have asked to meet a parent 10 years further down the line from themselves And this parent will share her story - 10 years ago if you had told me my young person with a learning disability would be living in supported accommodation, in a house with his friends and would be travelling independently to attend college, I wouldn't have believed you. And yet he is.

What went well, the peer support naturally developed, our groups have all connected outside the group, we found the support from Parents Plus invaluable

Some feedback from our parents included

'I've never asked for help before, I don't know why not, because when I did, a door opened and warmth flooded out'

'I no longer feel that I am alone on this journey'

What we've learned is our parents have enjoyed the programme but want some practical connections and contacts layered in, and the follow up groups are a great opportunity to offer this. And, also, within the group, sometimes you'll hear the breakout groups go off-topic but, and I have this on good authority, thank you Eileen Brosnan, that's ok, the parents might not be talking about what you had planned they would talk about but they're talking about what is important to them

We can't remove all the challenges our parents face or change the entire social work system, we can offer hope, some skills to navigate the road ahead and some friends to travel along with.

I'd like to say thank you to John, Eileen, Ciara and Lesley of the Parents Plus team for sharing this programme with us and for all their support along the way. Now I'll hand you back to John and Eileen for any questions.