

IVAR

Volunteering & Early Childhood Outcomes: Volunteers Supporting Families (VsF), Southend

Host organisation: Volunteering Matters (formerly CSV)

Project started: 2009

Funder: Southend Borough Council

Staff: Project Manager: full time, Project Coordinator: full time, Project Administrator: 20 hours

Current number of active volunteers: 30 active and in the process of training 6 more

Length of initial volunteer training: 18 hours over 3 days. Further training is provided.

Number of families supported per year: 50+

Location: Southend, Essex.

What the volunteers do

One-to-one support for families involved with social care services and subject to a Child Protection Plan, Child in Need Plan or Early Help Assessment (Stage 3 – complex needs or Stage 4 – acute needs). The volunteer visits weekly for one to two hours and gives emotional and practical support to help parents achieve the goals on their plan, for example by helping them to set routines, learn how to tidy their home, and attend appointments; and also by role modelling consistent positive parenting including playing and reading with children. The volunteer may visit for up to a year if needed.

What is known about the impact on ABS outcomes?

A mixed methods evaluation (Akister, 2011) found that in almost nine out of ten cases, the family had moved to a lower level of safeguarding concern. Parents felt emotionally supported and had learnt positive parenting skills, including playing with their children. Although the project works with families with children of all ages, it is clear that empowering parents with improved confidence and parenting skills could be an important step towards all three ABS outcomes for young children.

Key learning about working with volunteers in safeguarding

- It is essential to recruit volunteers with the right attitude and the ability to commit for a year. It took time for the team to develop skills to identify who is suitable for the role, and at first there was high volunteer drop-out, but they have developed a robust process which welcomes volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds but also enables people to eliminate themselves at any stage if they feel they can't progress into the role.

- The project needs to be able to do skilful risk assessment of volunteers who may themselves have a social care background, experience of domestic abuse, or other challenging issues, and to support them appropriately.
- The project needs to keep volunteers safe by doing careful risk and needs assessments of families referred for support. The training gives volunteers knowledge about keeping safe.
- The role can be frustrating as families may not engage immediately. The volunteers are offered regular supervision which enables the volunteer and the manager to reflect on progress and amend the plan if need be. This also helps the volunteer to understand the pace the family may need to work at and any positive steps that may have already been made, no matter how small they may seem to the volunteer.
- Volunteers were originally asked for a commitment of two to six hours per week, but this was reduced to one to two hours per week as families were feeling overwhelmed with their plan.

Challenges of working with volunteers in safeguarding

- The project has found recruiting volunteers demanding, and 50% of the project coordinator role is recruitment. To promote the project, they give talks at local events, groups and colleges (social work and counselling), advertise online and in newspapers.
- The training provides volunteers with the resources to write a report after each visit, with the parents' knowledge, but some volunteers need reminding to do this. The volunteer's relationship of trust with the family enables them to report both positives and negatives to professionals.
- Gaining the trust of vulnerable families can, in some cases, take several months. Volunteers need support to remain patient and not give up, and to understand that reliability and continuity does build trust over time.
- There is a risk that a volunteer could appear to be 'colluding' with parents, having heard only their version of events. Volunteers are invited to meetings of the multi-agency team working with the parents to better understand the broader picture. Reflective supervision also reinforces the importance of avoiding collusion.

Establishing good relationships with professionals in safeguarding

The VsF team in Southend has built a strong relationship with professionals:

- Co-location – the VsF team is situated within the social care team. Staff explain the project to all new social workers, and remind existing staff about what they do by holding 'doughnut days' in the communal kitchen (free doughnut in return for a chat about the project).
- Several of the project's volunteers have qualified as social workers and are champions for the project within the social care team.

- Establishing a track record of success – social workers and health visitors see the benefits to families and feel supported in meeting their own professional targets.
- Positioning the service as complementary to statutory support and defining clear boundaries – working with other agencies to identify steps for parents to take (the ‘what’ of change). Volunteers are able to give the time and persistence to support parents to take those steps over the long term (the ‘how’ of change). The volunteer support may be written into a Child Protection Plan (as a second phase following an intensive period of professional support) to help the parent to maintain their progress towards desired changes.
- Robust training, reporting and supervision – professionals are reassured that volunteers will report any safeguarding concerns at once to their project coordinator, and some see the volunteers as an extra pair of eyes and ears in the family’s home.
- Encouraging families to trust statutory services – volunteers, who are more acceptable to some families precisely because they are volunteers, use their relationship with families to promote the benefits of engaging with statutory services.

Tips for success

- To recruit the right volunteers, you need good administration and paperwork, prompt responses to enquiries, and willingness to turn people down.
- The relationship between the volunteers and the project coordinator is key to keeping the volunteer motivated and involved – keep trying different ways to make volunteers feel valued and to bring volunteers together for mutual support.
- Give volunteers working with vulnerable families skilful, regular supervision and access to immediate support at any time if there’s a crisis.
- Diversity of volunteers allows for more flexible matching of volunteers to parents. For example, the project has two male volunteers, one of whom has been matched to a single parent father, and the other to a single parent mother who wanted a male role model for her sons.
- Attend the local voluntary sector forum for advice on recruiting and retaining volunteers.