

IVAR

Volunteering & Early Childhood Outcomes: Case Study Two – HENRY Parent Champions

Date: 2012–15

Funder: Big Lottery Fund: Reaching Communities

Members of staff: Project Coordinator: 0.6 fte, Volunteer Coordinator in each site: 0.4 fte

Total volunteers trained: 49

Length of initial volunteer training: 25 hours over 5 days.

Number of families supported per year: 128

Locations: Leeds and Telford & Wrekin.

What the volunteers do

The volunteers are recruited from 'graduates' of HENRY group programmes (an eight-session programme for parents of under 5s, focused on improving parenting confidence, healthy eating and activity). They offer a variety of peer support and community activities to help families adopt and sustain healthier and more active lifestyles after their HENRY parent group has ended. They also help to engage families who have not joined a HENRY group in community-level activities such as buggy-walks, fruit & veg tasting sessions, and 'healthy cooking on a budget' groups. They act as enthusiastic recruiters for HENRY group programmes, helping to increase access for more isolated families.

What is known about the impact on ABS outcomes?

Although the HENRY group programme has been shown to increase family activity and healthy eating, there is limited evidence for the added value of Parent Champions on family lifestyle and eating habits. As with other community champions projects, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate a causal link between volunteer support and behaviour change, in part because the informal and sometimes one-off nature of the support makes it difficult to follow up parents later, and in part because many of the parents receiving volunteer support had also attended a professionally-led group programme encouraging behaviour change (so it would be impossible to disentangle the specific contribution of the volunteers).

However, small scale qualitative research (Ives, 2015) indicated that parents valued receiving healthy-living messages and doing activities led by non-judgemental peers: peer recruitment was an effective means of engaging parents in HENRY groups and other children's centre activities, and the Parent Champions themselves became passionate and committed advocates of a healthy lifestyle. Children's centre managers were confident enough about the benefits to parents and their children to mainstream the volunteering after the project funding ended.

Challenges of running a parent champion project

- The project was originally designed with the expectation that trained volunteers would run peer support groups as a follow-on from a HENRY course, but this was not in fact what most parents wanted. As the project evolved, its primary focus changed to informal community activities and parent engagement, alongside some peer one-to-one and group support.
- Initially the project envisaged that volunteers would consult parents and organise activities in response to their needs and interests. This proved too daunting and open-ended for most volunteers, who needed a more structured role. Volunteers therefore worked with the project coordinators to develop a menu of activities from which parents could choose.
- The simple data collection system designed to measure the impact of peer support groups (a booklet for parents to track changes) was not suitable for one-off events, so was abandoned in favour of gathering parents' contact details so they could be asked about impact later (this also had limited success).
- During the project, public health was transferred from health to local authority responsibility, causing great instability for one of the project coordinators who was funded by the charity but employed by public health.

Key learning about working with volunteers

- Volunteers have a range of skills and bring with them different levels of confidence and ability, so it is important to offer a range of volunteer activities to suit them. Some did outreach for the group programme in their own social networks or at stalls at community events. Others took part in one-off community activities that were organised with the volunteer coordinator, such as a street play event. The most confident volunteers organised groups and activities in children's centres or other community venues, on their own or working in pairs, such as cooking sessions and a Zumba class requested by parents.
- Volunteers are most likely to stay involved when they are nurtured – the role of the volunteer coordinator is key to maintaining motivation (and quality control). The project worked hard to develop a team spirit for mutual support, with monthly meetings, a buddy system for experienced/recent volunteers, offering the chance to volunteer in pairs, and creating a strong project identity to which volunteers were proud to belong.

Tips for success

- Identify the win-win for professionals – where a volunteer can add value by reinforcing messages, complementing the work professionals are doing, and reaching parents who aren't currently using services – and work in partnership from the beginning.
- Be responsive and flexible, building in reactive learning as you go – match what parents want, what children's centres want and what volunteers are willing and able to offer.
- Accept that tracking outcomes is very hard for unstructured projects – design realistic methods for capturing feedback, don't overpromise outcome data, resource properly what you are collecting, and make data collection from parents an explicit volunteer coordinator responsibility.
- Offer diverse flexible roles that suit volunteers of different skills, abilities and confidence.