

## **Practice example: Planning, providing and reviewing care – therapeutic toddler group**

### Background

In Southwark, it was identified that there was a gap in assessing and supporting parents with mental health problems *along with* their children. This was particularly the case for parents who did not meet the threshold for Community Mental Health Team services. A therapeutic 'stay and play' toddler group, based on the Anna Freud model, was established at a local 'One o'clock club' for parents.

### Intended outcomes

The aim of the group is to support and assist parents with significant mental health problems, and to offer advice on the ordinary problems of parenting such as managing exhaustion, 'baby blues' and issues with self-esteem and confidence.

The group aims to provide a therapeutic environment, in a relaxed group setting, centred around normal play activities.

Originally, it was intended that parents would attend the group for six to eight weeks and then be referred on.

### Practical actions

The group was established by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) staff. It now also receives input from the specialist mental health team who provide advice and support to Children's Centres.

Parents can be referred from a range of services, or refer themselves. Prior to joining the group, parents receive a joint assessment in their home from a member of the Parental Mental Health in Children's Centres team and from CAMHS.

### What actually happened

The group has been running for about six years. It soon became apparent that a model of time-limited involvement would not be appropriate: it sometimes took a long time for parents to fully engage, and, when they did engage, there was demand for ongoing support from the group. The group has been mainly attended by mothers, although some fathers have also been referred.

The facilitators work with parents to help them think about their relationship with their child and how this affects the child's behaviour and their own mental health. The therapeutic approach is based on the Anna Freud model, although this aspect is deliberately downplayed and the parent and toddler group aspect is emphasised.

The facilitators also provide outreach: visiting parents in their homes before they come to the group, or collecting people to come to the group. Referrers to the service have particularly emphasised the benefit of this for hard-to-reach parents.

#### Advice for others

Embedding the therapeutic work within a relaxed parent-toddler environment has been a successful model.

A time-limited engagement period may not work – once parents are engaged they prefer to have ongoing support.

Joint working between CAMHS and adult mental health (via the specialist Parental Mental Health in Children's Centres team) has been particularly beneficial.