

Practice example: Putting it into practice – Southwark parents' group

Background

Since 2006, members of staff from Southwark Mind, a user-led mental health charity, have been providing a user perspective to the Southwark Family Strategy Group hosted by the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust (SLaM). Five out of the six Southwark Mind staff members were parents, offering a challenge to the historical assumption that people with severe and enduring mental health issues do not have children. At the launch of Southwark's Family Strategy in 2007, Southwark Mind hosted a user-only workshop, asking parents with mental health problems for their views and experiences. One of the recommendations from the workshop was that a regular safe space be established for parents with mental health needs.

Intended outcomes

The aim was to offer parents a safe space where their opinions and experiences could be validated by others who have been in similar circumstances.

As well as the parents' groups, parental representation on Southwark's Family Strategy Group was intended to keep the perspective of parents with mental health needs at the heart of local decision making.

Practical actions

Southwark Mind has run parents' groups funded by SLaM since 2009. The groups are facilitated by two parents who have used mental health services, and run for two hours. Lunch is provided, a complementary therapist works alongside the group, and most importantly there is always a crèche.

What actually happened

Common themes of the group discussions have included: how to get support before a crisis; managing psychiatric medication with the demands of parenting; changes in psychiatric service provision; and benefits legislation.

The parents' groups ensure that these themes, and parents' current experiences of Southwark services, are represented on the Southwark Family Strategy Group. For example, parents felt that staff needed more training to support them as parents, which led to parental participation in the Family Partnership Model Training, commissioned by SLaM and delivered by the Centre for Child and Parent Support. A parent was involved in the design of the course and one of the two trainers is a parent who has used psychiatric services. The training's objective is to increase staff awareness of child development and the tasks of parenting, to enable them to work in genuine partnership with parents using mental health services.

Parents from the parents' group were also instrumental in developing a staff training film, 'Nobody says congratulations'. The film aims to show service users and parents in their own homes, surrounded by the paraphernalia of family life. Through the

stories of three parents with mental health problems, it provides clear messages for staff in how parents want to be supported. At a recent parents' group, a parent spoke about how empowering she had found taking part in the film, which has a focus on the positive impacts of having a child. She is now less isolated, feels more integrated, and is standing as a parental governor at her child's school.

Advice for others

An important element of the group has been the dual function of providing a safe environment for people to share their experiences, but then also using the awareness that has arisen from that to make practical improvements to services. The opportunity for parents to tell service managers what they needed is highly valued by group members.

It is to be noted that a properly funded parents' group, with a crèche, facilitator, complementary therapist, lunch and a room, does have resource implications. The support provided, however, can be really valued by a significant number of parents, and can prevent the need for more formal, and more expensive, services.

Unlike all other groups I have been to, in the parents' group everyone has been there and can understand.

Parent group member