Supporting parents of teenagers in Wirral

With early intervention as a priority, the Family Intervention Service at Wirral Borough Council supports troubled families with challenging and wide-ranging needs. As a non-referral service, the team uses data-matching criteria to identify and support the most complex cases and takes a holistic approach to the services they deliver, looking not just at individuals but at families as a whole. Triggers for intervention include poor school attendance, criminal activity, anti-social behaviour, domestic abuse, mental health issues, child protection and worklessness.

Already successfully using Family Links' 10-week Nurturing Programme to support family groups, the Wirral team identified a gap in their services: the need to address teenagers’ quite specific needs.

“The Talking Teens Programme is a natural addition to the support we already provide to families within our service,” comments Family Intervention Service Senior Practitioner, Melanie Hanmer. “We noticed that parents had developed close relationships with each other on the Nurturing Programme and that parents of teenagers in particular had very specific needs with a common theme, so we invited those parents to join the Talking Teens Programme.”

Delivered over four weeks, the Talking Teens Programme helps parents understand and adapt their relationships with teenaged children. Implementing boundaries, improving communication, and tackling school refusal were just some of the topics the Wirral parents covered in lively group discussions, and the Programme was supplemented by hands-on activities designed to illustrate the physical and emotional changes that teenagers experience, and how to respond to them.

“Recognising that certain behaviours are commonplace is key to understanding and overcoming relationship challenges,” Mel continues, “and identifying and talking about common problems helps parents to feel supported. The Talking Teens Programme enables those conversations.”

Case Study

School refusal is a common battle with children of all ages, but for Sue* her teenage son Liam’s* refusal to go to school had led to the threat of her prosecution and a potential prison sentence. Liam, who has Asperger's Syndrome, is reluctant to leave the house and Sue had become anxious about him and overprotective.

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Wirral Family Intervention Service invited Sue to join Family Links' Talking Teen Programme to meet the parents of other teenagers, learn from their experiences and share her own. Through the Programme, single parent Sue began to acknowledge that she was reluctant to let Liam grow up, and that her parenting style needed to change in order to empower him and encourage his independence. She also recognised that consistency was not only key to managing his behaviours, but also her own anxieties about him.

As Sue's confidence grew, keyworkers were able to encourage Liam to explore alternative educational programmes; a huge step forward for Liam and progress that he continues to build on. Sue, although sad when the Talking Teens Programme came to an end, recognises how positive her experience within the Programme has been for them both, viewing Liam's progress as the sowing of an important new seed. In particular, Sue's relationships with other parents on the Programme empowered her and gave her the confidence to adapt her own responses.

All parents who took part in Wirral's Talking Teens Programme wanted the course to continue. They found the friendship and support they received from the team and other parents gave them confidence, helped them build relationships with their teenagers, and develop new friendships outside the Programme. And, for those who hadn't already participated, Family Links' Nurturing Programme was one of the additional services signposted for families once the Talking Teens Programme ended.

At a time of extensive internal restructuring, requiring Wirral's Family Intervention Service to develop the support it provides to 0 – 19 year olds, the last word goes to Melanie, “The Talking Teens Programme came along at exactly the right time for us, proving to be an excellent addition to our existing families support toolkit and a valuable new resource for our service users. What's more, the Talking Teens Programme could easily be adapted to benefit a range of other youth services providers, including schools.”

*names have been changed to protect their identities*