

COMMUNITY MOTHERS

COMMUNITY MOTHERS PROGRAMME: Supporting parents within the community

The Community Mothers Programme has been running since the 1980s in order to aid the development of parenting skills among first-time parents, mainly in areas that experience disadvantage, writes **Brenda Molloy**, Director of Community Mothers Programme.

Set up in recessionary times, the programme has found a cost-effective method of providing one-to-one support, with volunteers taking the place of nurses in community outreach. It is based on the belief that more experienced parents are in a unique position to provide skilled help to families. In the greater Dublin area, which includes rural as well as urban communities, around 150 volunteer Community Mothers provide support to around 2,000 parents each year.

The programme is offered to all first-time parents; choosing to participate or not, it is up to them. But in many neighbourhoods like Finglas in Dublin, over 90 per cent sign up.

In 2009, 68 per cent of women who enrolled in the programme were single mothers and seven per cent were teenagers.

This support is highly-structured and provided chiefly through monthly meetings of the Community Mothers with the parents in their own home during the first two years of their babies lives. The visits focus on healthcare, nutrition and overall child development, while recognising that parents know their children best and want to do their best for them. The one-to-one support is sometimes complemented by group sessions.

VOLUNTEERS IN A PROFESSIONAL STRUCTURE

The aim of the programme is to aid the development of parenting skills and enhance confidence, self-esteem and parenting practices among the parents

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supported. The Community Mothers also benefit, as the programme is based on models usually implemented by professionals and they are recruited, trained and supported by the eleven Family Development Nurses who work with the Programme. The Programme Director guides the work of the Family Development Nurses.

The Community Mothers have an added advantage however in that they have already existing relationships within their communities. One of the main challenges, therefore, is to avoid professionalising the Community Mothers, as this can have a negative effect on their relationship with the parents and their communities. Some Community Mothers

have stayed with the programme for many years, while others work for only a few years before leaving, either to work professionally in community support services or to use their experience and skills in their own family environment. It isn't unusual for mothers who have received the programme to go on to become Community Mothers themselves.

AN 'EMPOWERMENT' MODEL: PROVIDING NON-PRESCRIPTIVE SUPPORT

The approach is non-prescriptive and supportive of the parents' own ideas. During the monthly meetings, the Community Mothers discuss with parents any problems they are experiencing, as well as general childrearing issues, encouraging them to find their own solutions and allowing them to set themselves targets for achievement by the following meeting. This helps to build and maintain trust between the Community Mothers and the parents and communities they work with. The Community Mothers also give the parents some health information and parenting educational teaching tools produced by the Community Mothers Programme. These materials serve to enhance the work of those who present the Programme.

MEASURABLE RESULTS

Several outside evaluations including a randomised controlled trial over the lifetime of the programme have found that it made significant improvements to children's diets and parents' skills. It has been shown to lead to fewer

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+ **Above:** Young mother Adrienne and baby Kate who participated in the Community Mothers Programme

+ **Right:** L-R: Patricia Curtis, Community Mother and Teresa Keegan, Family Development Nurse



FROM FAMILY DEVELOPMENT NURSE TO COMMUNITY MOTHER TO NEW MOTHER

Family Development Nurses such as Teresa Keegan visit the Community Mothers on an individual basis each month to have one-on-one discussions on all the visits carried out by the mothers in the previous month.

During a recent individual session, Teresa and Patricia Curtis went through each parent and baby that Patricia had visited in the previous month. They discussed the support given to each parent and how the babies were in terms of health, nutrition and stimulation through play and so on.

Community Mothers fill out a report on each visit which forms the basis for the discussion with the Family Development Nurse. In the case of each baby, Teresa would give Patricia new material to guide her visits over the following month.

Teresa works with 18 Community Mothers in the Finglas area, who are currently visiting 140 mothers in their own home between them. Each Community Mother carries out in the region of 5 to 15 visits a month.

In addition, the Community Mothers in Finglas run mother and toddler groups and a breastfeeding support group.

admissions into hospital due to household accidents, reduced physical abuse, increased immunisation rates and even made parents more likely to breastfeed any subsequent children they have. The randomised controlled trial of the Community Mothers Programme has been included in the UK's Cochrane Review 2010.

In conclusion, the Community Mothers enable parents to maximise their role and in doing so, help children to reach their full potential.