AIMS For a better birth...

Pregnancy and Parents Centre

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Nadine Edwards shares an example of the difference good support can make

The Pregnancy and Parents Centre, or PPC (www.pregnancyandparents.org.uk), formerly the Birth Resource Centre or BRC, is a community based charity in Edinburgh which offers practical and emotional support to pregnant women, dads-to-be, new parents and their families. It provides a range of groups, workshops and drop-in sessions, one-to-one support, alternative therapies, a library, birth pools, nearly new maternity and baby clothes and more.

The Centre had its beginnings in 1985 when I began to run pregnancy groups in my home. It has continued to grow, and now has its own two-storey premises between garages and warehouses, beside the Union Canal in central Edinburgh. It is managed by a group of voluntary Trustees, and is run by a co-ordinator and two administrative staff. Over 400 parents, babies and young children attend the Centre's daily activities led by facilitators and volunteers, each week.

The drop-in groups - for those new to Edinburgh, for mothers with very young babies, the home birth support group and the La Leche League group - are free and open to anyone. Some of the sessions are run by suggested donation and some ask for a fee. But our central premise is that no-one should be excluded for financial reasons.

The Centre is used by many women whose first language is not English and the weekly group for those new to Edinburgh is vital in providing support, friendship, local information about maternity services and other local services and resources for families.

The excerpts from the two stories below, published in full in volume 4 of Sara Wickham's Midwifery Best Practice[1] series, perhaps epitomise the Centre's underlying philosophy of support and sharing knowledge and experiences.

Jane's story

Jane had suffered severe mental illness. She and her husband wanted a family, and at the age of 35 she felt that she could wait no longer:

It happened surprisingly quickly. I immediately stopped taking the tablets, and wanted to know if taking medication for the first three weeks of my pregnancy could have caused any problems. Nobody seemed to know (or care).

As I entered the second trimester, my mood began to sink lower and lower. Severe antenatal depression set in.

Things became so bad that the GP and psychiatrist recommended that I go back on the medication. They believed my mental state was more threatening to myself and the baby than the risks of abnormality from the drugs. With support from my husband, I refused, although every day felt like a lifetime and I just wanted to escape from my own mind.

During this time I began attending NHS parenting classes. At the end of the session I spoke to one of the midwives and explained a little of my situation. She suggested I opt for a nice easy birth with an epidural, as traumatic birth has been shown to increase the risk of postnatal depression. This made sense to me and I decided to take the advice.

I did discover at these sessions that health visitors were available to support women antenatally. No one had offered me anything other than drugs before. This was to be my turning point. My health visitor had previously worked as a midwife and gave me a whole afternoon of her time every two weeks. When I was 26 weeks pregnant, she brought me a flyer for the Birth Resource Centre. 'I think you should do some classes here,' she said. 'The yoga would be good for you, I think it would help.'

Nervously, I called the number and began to attend class every Wednesday morning. At each class we began by introducing ourselves, then we performed gentle yoga-based exercises and relaxation, as our facilitator gently told us to listen to our bodies, do what felt right, and tune in to our babies. After this, we had tea and talk. Someone in the class usually had a question, an issue to discuss or a parenting book they had read, and we learned from each other while the facilitator skilfully and imperceptibly deepened knowledge or dispelled myths. Women who had given birth returned to show off their babies and tell their stories. They were eagerly questioned and their experiences added to our knowledge.

Gradually I realised that I was relaxed and happy during these classes. I was beginning to trust my body and my baby, and it was then that I realised that an epidural as first resort would not be right for me. I had learned of the risks associated with epidurals: how could I spend months trying to protect my baby to then expose him to unnecessary intervention?

Having been told that she could not use the midwifery-led unit at the local maternity hospital because of her age, Jane says:

With my newfound confidence I phoned the normal delivery unit myself. I spoke to a midwife who said she would be delighted to book me there. With my husband's full support and belief in my ability to birth my baby, I began to feel calmer and, as forty weeks approached, I felt serene, powerful and whole.

My labour was calm and beautiful. I couldn't stop smiling as I welcomed each contraction [...] in the normal delivery unit, with soft lights and a single midwife, I travelled to my innermost being and birthed our first baby in consciousness and strength. And the power of this glorious birth has achieved what no

doctor could. I now have three beautiful children and have never since taken any medication for mental illness.

The support I had from the BRC [PPC] was huge. It helped my relationship with my baby, with my husband, with my whole life.

Fiona's story

Fiona explains that she was 'somewhat at sea' during her first pregnancy and how she felt 'held' by the Centre both before and after the birth of her daughter.

None of my friends had children, and I had never held a baby, yet I was to have one of my own. The Birth Resource Centre was to become my anchor.

I loved the yoga classes and never missed a single one. They were the highlight of my pregnant week. The exercise and relaxation were wonderful, but the tea and chat at the end were the key. Information was acquired almost by osmosis - there was no set 'curriculum' but through conversation and questions and answers, those of us at the class found out what we needed to know to help us on our journey through our pregnancies into motherhood.

I thought of the birth rather as a bridge that would take me from my present life to my new life with a child. I was excited, but also rather apprehensive about what I would find on the other side. One of the important things for me about the BRC was that there was a wide range of postnatal sessions as well as the antenatal classes, so I would have somewhere to go back to with my new baby. I did not intend to return to my old job after I had had my baby, so I knew I needed to make new friends and forge a new life around being a mother, and the BRC felt like a community to which I could belong. That was exactly what it proved to be for me.

We know that there are parents who still meet together, who first met through the pregnancy groups in the 1980s. These friendships have supported and sustained both women and men as they faced the joys, uncertainties and challenges of parenting. The friendship and sense of community that is consciously developed at the Centre, especially through the social time at the end of each group or workshop, has been described as a 'lifeline' or 'sanctuary' by numbers of women:

'It's been such a privilege coming along to the classes and learning about impending motherhood in such a supportive nurturing environment! I also cannot praise the dads-to-be course enough. With the section my husband has needed to take the lead on bathing and some of the early nappy changes and the course gave him the confidence and practical skills to cope with this - it's been an absolute lifeline' (First-time mother)

'The classes were a sanctuary in the week where everything else seemed to disappear.'(Mother of three)

The aim of the PPC is to provide support and information in a non judgemental environment where everyone's knowledge and experiences are valued and where everyone is accepted, no matter who they are. Parents' comments confirm this:

'I was desperately searching for somewhere friendly and supportive to take my often cross and wailing baby. After weeks of rushing away from groups and coffee mornings feeling tearful and lonely, as my daughter was the only fretful baby there, I was told about the baby music group at the PPC. Immediately I felt welcome and supported. For the first time I was able to talk honestly about my feelings as a new mother. Funnily enough my daughter was always notably cheerier and more content in this environment too and Tuesday afternoons became a haven for the both of us. (pregnancyandparents.org.uk/about-the-brc/comments/)

The Centre provides a holistic approach to pregnancy, birth and parenting, acknowledging that it is a physical, social, emotional and perhaps spiritual, life-changing journey, during which parents need to be nurtured and enabled to explore possibilities and find their own confidence.

'I wanted to thank you for the phenomenal support... the reading material you pointed me in the direction of has been - well life changing! I went from an overwhelming sense of panic at the prospect of another labour, to actually looking forward to it.' (Third-time mother)

'I came to the PPC pregnant for the first time and relatively naive about the politics of pregnancy, what my options were and the difficult choices I had about where and how I would give birth to my children. I never could have imagined what a life changing experience those yoga classes would be, ultimately for both my partner and me and our experience of becoming parents.' (Mother of three)

'The workshops and the support of the PPC helped take the fear out of birth, and changed it into something we could own as an experience.' (Father expecting second child pregnancyandparents.org.uk/whatweoffer/active-birthworkshops/).

The Centre also has a political dimension. For example, one of our Trustees is a member of the local Maternity Services Liaison Committee and we host some of its meetings. We attend and present at conferences, and respond to policy documents. We are involved with midwifery education and super vision and provide a placement for student midwives. We meet with local midwives and those involved in other ser vices for new families, and our Bir th Project Group works with the University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University and Trinity College Dublin, running workshops for student and newly qualified midwives and others. As one of our volunteers remarked:

'The BRC is a beacon. It is hugely politically significant. If birthing autonomy is to remain a reality and not just a pie in the sky concept, communities like the BRC need to be sustained - beacons need fuelling.'[1]

References

1. Armstrong F, Clayton L, Crewe J et al (2006) The Birth Resource Centre: A Community of

Women. In Wickham S (Ed) Midwifery Best Practice Volume 4. Elsevier 106-11.