

Case study: Workforce training, Gateshead

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Gateshead describe their approach to workforce training as 'incremental'. They commissioned Tavistock Relationships to provide introductory training to the workforce and more specialist training to a group of specialist practitioners.

Raising awareness

Think Couple training was delivered to 57 practitioners from the family intervention team, health visiting, safeguarding & care planning, youth offending team, family group conference service, Children's Centres and the Positive Pathways team. The one-day relationship awareness raising training helps participants to develop their knowledge about family relationships, including conflict and attachment, and introduces them to ways of identifying and responding to relationship problems.

The majority of participants reported increased knowledge about relationship issues and greater confidence in working effectively with couples following the training. They were keen to look at how they could use the training in their everyday work with families. Practitioners were aware that their work tended to be focussed around mothers; they wanted to challenge this and become more inclusive of fathers. Just over half of respondents were hoping to use what they had learnt in their teaching or supervisory practice, ensuring that they used their learning in supporting their staff. The majority of staff felt they would benefit from greater skills development to complement the knowledge base they had acquired.

Couple conflict training

Training on 'Couple Conflict' was delivered to a small group of more specialist practitioners, over half of whom work in specialist domestic violence and abuse services. The course is designed to help practitioners to develop their capacity to think relationally about couple conflict, intimate partner violence and abuse. The course was deliberately designed to challenge practitioners to think about working differently with couples involved in domestic violence and abuse and adopt more relational approaches where appropriate and safe. Gateshead report seeing a change in the culture of working with some of their higher need families. This has also generated greater debate among Local Authority leads and workforce about approaches to domestic violence.

"We see more practitioners working with couples not on the basis of how the practitioner wants things to be but on the basis of what the family wants, assessing the relationship dynamics in depth, enabling and encouraging couples to be open and honest about the nature of their relationship and work with them as a couple rather than just separating them" (Team Manager, Family Intervention Team, Gateshead Council).

Looking ahead

Gateshead plan to build on the significant progress they have made with workforce development and train staff in Parents as Partners (individual family approach), Incredible Years (baby care) and Standard Teen Triple P (parenting teenagers). They will also develop the skills of management staff through training in supervising and and developing 'relational practitioners'.

SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO

Case study: Relationship support navigator, Dorset

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Dorset created a Relationship Support Navigator role, whose main aim is to advise a range of practitioners in directing parents to the appropriate level of support. The post is co-funded by the local authority and the Chesil Education Partnership.

The Navigator's role is to raise awareness in school staff about the importance of providing support to parents around relationships, to build their skills and confidence in responding to issues and knowing where to refer people for more help.

"Teachers are busy people. Looking after the emotional health and wellbeing of parents is not the only thing they have to do. This role has made it possible for professionals to work more as a team, and it has strengthened trust between teachers and parents." (Relationships Navigator, Chesil Education Partnership)

Sustaining and embedding change

As part of her role, the Navigator developed CPD training sessions on relationships for school staff. She also created drop-in sessions on relationships for parents and adapted the content to be suitable for secondary school pupils.

Recruiting to the Navigator post was challenging due to the unique skill set required. In the end, a trained counsellor with a teaching background was seconded from Relate into the role.

To establish this as a sustainable service the Navigator is embedded in the wellbeing team with other frontline practitioners (including family support workers, an educational psychologist, and a social worker). She is also training teachers and head teachers to grow their awareness and skills in supporting relationships.

"One impact of the work has been building trust between different layers of support (ie, teachers and counsellors) and making better connections between them."

Working with families

Initially the role was to be limited to providing advice and signposting for practitioners and did not include any direct work with families. However, as some of the families that were referred to counselling services didn't follow up, the Navigator started having initial meetings with some parents to discuss their situation and outline possible support available.

This made clear that working directly with some families was extremely helpful. The Navigator, who is a trained family counsellor was able to take on a small caseload of parents to whom she offers counselling. This helps to ensure that the service does not 'lose' the most vulnerable people due to the delays in referral, or through having to establish a relationship with a different professional.

"In the beginning it was hard to turn down direct referrals for families. When you introduce delay you lose some families and these may be ones that really need the support. We have now flexed the role to address this. I can only hold a small caseload, but being able to directly offer more intensive support and continuity in the relationship makes a very big difference for some people."

The role has evolved flexibly during the course of the project to respond to emergent learning. The plan is for this to be a two day per week post, with one and a half days spent on support and advice to professionals and supported conversations with families and half a day on direct counselling.

SOURCE: LOCAL FAMILY OFFER GUIDE, DWP/IU/OPO