

Dreamnight at the Zoo 18 August 2017

“We loved that it was a special night for special people. It felt like such a treat.”

Working with Edinburgh Zoo and Partner Charities

Contact have been working in partnership with Edinburgh Zoo to hold a special evening event for families with disabled children in Scotland. The initiative was a unique opportunity to be one of four charity partners to be allocated 500 free zoo places each to distribute to families that we support. The aim of the event was to provide a stress-free, memorable night for children and young people with an illness, disability or additional need, along with their families. In order to be considered one of the partners, we submitted a partner application detailing the beneficiaries of our charity, our aims and the potential outcomes for families attending this event. We were successful and were delighted to work together with the 3 other charities – Save the Children, CLASP and The Yard.



By working with Contact, Edinburgh Zoo hoped to engage with more families with disabled children who otherwise may not have been able to visit the Zoo or get the most out of the zoo experience. In addition, it would allow the charities involved to facilitate the distribution of places and provide discreet support on the evening.

Reasons for Taking Part

Contact has provided help and information to thousands of families with disabled children over the years. Families don't need to qualify for our support as we put families at the heart of everything we do. Parent carers often express concerns that their children are unable to take up activities, visit attractions and social opportunities because of their personal circumstances. Some don't feel as confident in going out in public because they fear other people's reactions to their child's

appearance or behaviour. Or their children are unable to take part in wider events because of an inaccessible environment or sensory concerns. Another key factor is the expense. It costs 3 times as much to raise a disabled child in the UK*¹ and the cost of attending attractions can be a barrier. As a result of this families can become isolated – whether they are in a city or a rural environment.

In April 2016 Contact conducted a survey*² with parent support groups in Scotland to find out what kind of needs their families required. A key finding clearly highlighted that many families often felt isolated and struggled to find appropriate, affordable and accessible activities for their children.

Working with Edinburgh Zoo on this event would help families access a world- renowned visitor attraction in a supported environment, providing an opportunity to meet other families and for parent support groups to have a group outing. Having free places meant families could try a visit to the zoo with the reassurance that if they had to leave quickly (because their child felt uncomfortable) then they would not lose out financially. It was also a relaxed chance to enjoy a family outing with siblings and to alleviate some of the isolation felt by families.

Reaching Families

The Zoo issued 500 free wristbands for families through Contact and our aim was to reach at least 100 families through our support groups, enquiries and our e-bulletin.

The places were booked on a first come basis. Bookings were recorded securely on an internal database system. The full allocation of places was taken up quickly and an additional 15 were given from a partner charity which allowed families on our reserve list to come along too.

“This is not something I probably would have done if it wasn't for dreamnight as it becomes exhausting taking my son to places and always apologising for his behaviour as I think most of the public assumes I am a terrible mom from his behaviour. I knew I wouldn't be needing to apologise to anyone at Dreamnight.”

“My daughter enjoyed the story book you put together as she read this on the way in to the zoo – as a result this eased her anxieties as she has a fear of a lot of animals...”

Families were sent a booking form, wristbands and Zoo information in advance along with a story board so that they could share and plan with their children all the things they would be able to see and do on the night. The families who attended really appreciated this.

Families from parent support groups who responded included condition specific conditions such as Epilepsy, ADHD, Autism and rare conditions such as Sickle Cell. Families travelled from 18 different local authority areas in Scotland including The Scottish Borders, Glasgow and Aberdeenshire.



Footnotes

*¹ Paying to Care: the costs of childhood disability by Barbara Dobson and Sue Middleton

*² Contact a Family Scotland Strengthening Families through support groups survey

Our Volunteers

To help provide support on the night Contact were delighted to have 7 dedicated volunteers - four from the Scottish law firm Gillespie Macandrew LLP, our own information volunteer and 2 young volunteers Connie and Eilidh.



With their help we were able to welcome all our families as they arrived, provide maps and information and also signpost to facilities and entertainment on site.

Their warm, friendly approach made families feel special and very much part of a unique and magical evening.

"The effort put into the event by everyone and the attention to detail was wonderful... It was lovely to see the staff putting so much effort into making sure everyone got to have a great night."

"I was very touched by the effort all the staff and volunteers ..."

"[It was a] relaxed atmosphere, very good organisation and support, variety of things to do, friendliness and approachability of zoo staff."

Our 2 young volunteers Connie and Eilidh brought their own experience and skills to the event. Reflecting on Dreamnight Connie said "it was lovely to see all the families enjoying the evening". Eilidh explained that the experience "made me want to volunteer again in the future".

The Families

A total of **124** families took up the offer of places, many making considerable travel and accommodation arrangements in order to attend. Some families had not visited the Zoo before and many families went along in groups as a social occasion. A family took the opportunity to attend in trepidation as they were not sure if their son would be able to cope but wanted to try it. Another said they had not had a break so far that year so having an event that all the family could go along to and feel comfortable at was a treat.

"It was an opportunity to meet other families with complexities and be reminded that we are not alone and there are others out there in a similar position. It would be lovely if there were more opportunities to meet these families at fun events."

Staff and volunteers heard many positive comments during the event. We also sent out a request for feedback after the event to all the families who had attended to find how they felt their evening

went. We asked them what they and their children enjoyed about their visit and whether it had made a difference to them as a family. They also had the opportunity to submit photos too. Here are the voices of just a few of the many parent carers who responded and some memorable images.

"the atmosphere was amazing, everyone was so happy!"



"[My daughter] loved it, she even got to hold and perform ultrasound on a giant snail. She's braver than me!!!!!"

"... met lots of lovely families and definitely feel less isolated ..."



"Kids made to feel 100% accepted."

"It was good getting to speak to families with similar difficulties and Robyn said and I quote " it's good as I don't need to hide my tics because the other kids have some things the same"."

"The fact that [my son] has gone into school and openly talk about it was great, he also used a picture collage of the night to put into his meet the teacher box."

They loved the disco .. meeting the costume animals and getting photos... the whole night was magical...



"He enjoyed going to the Zoo with all his friends from the PALS charity."

"Dream night allowed us to have fun without worrying about money to treat the girls. Money is tight when you have a child with additional needs. You have to sacrifice work and replace it with appointments meaning there is never very much in the way of disposable income."

What Made a Difference?

In summary what made a significant difference to the families was the opportunity to go along to an event that was designed around their needs. The zoo was accessible for the whole family. It gave an opportunity for families to meet others in a space where children felt comfortable enough to be themselves. The event was fully supported by the charities and zoo staff which families appreciated. Parent carers felt less isolated and more confident to take part in future events and trips after Dreamnight.



The event provided a space for siblings to enjoy a fun evening and meet others too. By ensuring a good number of staff and volunteers on the night gave families the confidence to come along knowing that they would be fully supported. Information was sent out to parents in good time at the start of summer which meant that families could not only look forward to it but allowed them to prepare for the trip in advance. The story board was a welcome resource used by many families to visually share with their children before they arrived at the zoo.

“Having a child with a disability can be very lonely. It felt comforting being around families who had children with varying needs. It was like there was a pressure lifted.”

Many of the families used the experience to learn more about the work and roles of the staff at the Zoo and to find out more about the animals so their experiences was both informative and fun.

In some instances it was the first time that parents had taken their children to the zoo. The free places made a difference to them being able to take up this opportunity as otherwise they would have hesitated about going along due to the cost. The families appreciated that the restaurant food was sold at cost price and made it easier to afford a meal out on the night.

For some families with children who had sensory/communication difficulties they were concerned that they would not be able to stay at the Zoo to make the most of their day. The free places gave them the opportunity to try it.

“Opportunities are thin on the ground to enjoy activities you can approach in a more – how should I put it – childlike way? As young people get older, understandably the focus is on fitting in with the kinds of events their peers enjoy, so nightclub/pub/social outings. It’s important to do that of course, but it was really refreshing to focus on something for enjoyment’s sake, without the pressure to behave in a certain way by trying to be cool or cynical or grown up. It was really relaxing and meant my daughter could simply be herself. Still talking about it, so must have been good.”

The fact that the event was closed to the public and was just for them generated a sense of belonging and security.

Parents also told us that opportunities for young people to enjoy activities with the whole family were often very limited so Dreamnight was a chance to just enjoy themselves without any pressure.



Dreamnight was a night we wouldn't have done if it was not for Contact, because the zoo would have been too expensive for us and my daughter who has Adhd can get really stressed at the unknown which sometimes puts us off doing some things

Thank you to all the families who attended and for taking the time to share their experiences with us!

Report by Donna Tomlin, Information Officer, Contact

Photographs by Rebecca Lee Photography

Photo of *Casey and the Snail* by kind permission of Nicola Meek

Full feedback, comments and photos available from donna.tomlin@contact.org.uk