

An evaluation of Contact's early years (Brighter Beginnings) workshops – 2017-18

Executive summary

***"I want to say thanks, it's really helpful –
it changed my life"***

- Parent of diagnosed child aged 3

Executive Summary

Between April 2017 and September 2018 Fiveways conducted an independent evaluation of Contact's early years workshops, now known as Brighter Beginnings.

The workshops are aimed at parents of children aged 0-5 diagnosed with a disability or additional need, or whose development is causing concern. They aim to increase families' access to support services, childcare and financial benefits as well as to improve parental wellbeing.

The evaluation methodology involved "before and after" quantitative research amongst workshop participants and a comparison group who had not attended the workshops, as well as some qualitative research amongst participants.

1.1. Who is attending the workshops?

- Over three quarters of parents attending the workshops (105)¹ have had a diagnosis for their child.
- Most workshop participants have already had some engagement with support and childcare services and have already claimed some financial benefits.
- Use of services and childcare, and the number of financial benefits received increases with the age of the child and when a child has had a diagnosis.
- Roughly half of the workshop participants feel that they do not know what to do when their child starts behaving badly and a similar proportion feel alone. A quarter do not feel confident dealing with professionals. These feelings are more likely to occur amongst parents without a diagnosis and parents of children aged 4 and over.

1.2. How do participants rate the workshops?

- Participant satisfaction with the workshops is extremely high. Of those who completed a follow up survey eight weeks after the sessions (32), 94% agreed that the workshops had made a positive difference to them and their family (no-one disagreed).

"If it wasn't for the workshops, I would be anxious and down in myself. They have changed my and my son's life – they have made things better, they really have. I would advise anybody who has a child with additional needs to go." – Parent of diagnosed child aged 3

1.3. What short-term changes occur after the workshops?

- The workshops clearly make a positive short-term impression on those that attend them. Feedback from participants gathered immediately after workshop sessions indicates that most of them feel better informed, more confident, less isolated and better able to deal with stress.

¹ Numbers in round brackets are the number of respondents to a survey or question.

- This is supported by insight from the evaluation – amongst those who were surveyed both before the first workshop session and after the last workshop session (47) the proportion of those feeling alone reduces by over a half, as does the proportion of those not knowing what to do when their child demonstrates behaviour that challenges.

“Last year I felt I was on my own - I avoided playgroups and I didn’t speak to anyone. Now I have friends who I can talk to who don’t judge.” - Parent of diagnosed child aged 3

1.4. What medium-term changes occur after the workshops?

- For those participants who completed both the baseline survey and the follow-up survey eight weeks later (21) the average number of benefits they had received increased by 22% and the average number of services used increased by 21%.
- In total, 52% of participants increased the number of different services they used and 38% increased the number of different benefits they received.
- There was little change in the average number of childcare options being used, however the average number of hours of childcare used increased by 15%.
- There has been little change in how these participants rate their happiness and anxiety between the baseline and follow-up (improvements of 4% and 7% respectively).
- Nonetheless, qualitative feedback indicates that the positive changes in dealing with behaviour that challenges, isolation and confidence dealing with professionals noted in the short-term feedback (above) continue into the medium-term.

“I feel so much better about myself and more positive about how to look after my child and knowing what’s available to make my life easier.” – Parent of diagnosed child aged 3

1.5. Would this change have happened anyway?

- Attending the workshops is associated with greater increases in subsequent service use, childcare use and benefits received compared with not attending.
- Parents in the participant group (21) on average increased their use of services by 21% compared with 12% for the comparison group (29)
- Parents in the participant group (15) on average increased their childcare hours by 16%. The comparison group saw a slight (5%) decline in hours used (12)
- Parents in the participant group (21) increased the average number of benefits received by 22%, the comparison group increased by 7% (29)
- However, the comparison group saw a larger increase in happiness and a larger decrease in levels of anxiety compared with those who did attend the workshops.

1.6. Key learning for the workshops

- The agreed evaluation method was not designed to generate insight on how Contact’s delivery might be improved. However the findings indicate that, although there is evidence

that the workshops have a positive influence over practical outcomes, there is less quantitative evidence of an improvement in emotional outcomes such as an increase in happiness or a reduction in anxiety levels.

- To address this issue, Contact are already considering steps to increase the emotional impact of the service through increasing attendance at the “Support for you” session, using positive parent testimonials to boost morale, and ensuring the charity keeps in touch with participants through their regular newsletter (if attendees opt in to receive this).

1.7. Key learning for the evaluation

- In general, the evaluation methodology was effective and has enabled us to measure the desired outcomes.
- Measuring changes in childcare use was challenging as requirements and options change depending on the age of the child. Future research might resolve some of these issues by clarifying that nursery attendance was to be counted as “childcare”, collecting years and months for children’s age, asking specifically about the 30 hours childcare entitlement, and by using online surveys (rather than paper) to “route” parents through relevant questions.
- Changes to participants’ ability to deal with behaviour that challenges, their levels of isolation, and their confidence with health professionals should also be measured in the follow-up survey.
- Further clarification is needed to ensure participants understand whether they are being asked about *current* service use or benefits received, or whether they had *ever* used those services or received benefits.
- If Contact wish to gather insight to improve the delivery of the workshops, or better understand the issues faced by the audience, then the evaluation method would need to include more qualitative research.

1.8. Conclusion

This evaluation reveals that Contact’s early years workshops have a positive *practical* influence on parents. On average, those who attend the workshops go on to access more support services, use more childcare provision, and receive more financial benefits than those who do not. There is less quantitative evidence of a positive *emotional* impact on workshop participants in the medium term (although in the short term the proportion of respondents feeling less alone reduces by a half). However, it is clear from qualitative feedback that many parents attribute attending the workshops with feeling more supported, confident and more “in control”. In addition, 94% agree that the workshops have made a positive difference to them and their family.

“Beforehand I was a bit lost but now I know that, if I need help, there is help there. I feel like I’m in charge - I’m the Mum.” – Parent of diagnosed child aged 2