

Parents Opening Doors, the Parent Carer Forum in Telford and Wrekin; Supporting families with children awaiting assessment/diagnosis of Autism. The 'Waiting Well' project.

Parents Opening Doors (PODs), the Parent Carer Forum in Telford and Wrekin learned that a number of families, particularly those with children in mainstream schools who have a child on assessment pathway or undergoing diagnosis of Autism, needed better support around challenges outside school, and at home.

PODs took families' experiences to the SEND board which included the Principal Educational Psychologist. Working together, they planned to improve support for families waiting for assessment and diagnosis of Autism who were experiencing challenges. They secured funding from the NHS Learning Disability and Autism funding stream.

PODs and the Principal Educational Psychologist were able to offer "Challenges at home" sessions for these families. Families can discuss home/life concerns and seek information and advice from the Educational Psychology team around emotions, behaviour, socialising, anxieties, routines, and more. The sessions take a strength-based approach to work with families to find solutions together and offer mutual support in a safe and supportive place. The sessions began online due to pandemic restrictions, but are now face to face. Families needing a bit more support can access individual support. Further ad hoc sessions have developed from these sessions based on families' experiences and needs, such as emotion coaching and social stories.

Jayne Stevens PODs Strategic Coordinator said, "It has been really powerful, seeing families coming together to share experiences, to work through issues, and find solutions. Some have been for one session, others have returned to share their experiences and knowledge – what has worked well for them, and 'giving back' to other families. Families have gone on to develop friendship groups and attended activities together run by PODS Charity."

PODs want to reach all parent carers, they found having the projects in the evenings enabled dads to come along and meet others to share their experiences and work through them with others.

Feedback from parent carers has been really positive:

"Thank you so much for yesterday I found it a great help not only for (my child) but for myself too. For the first time I've not felt that it's my issues as a person and the way I am as others have put it to me. It's made me want to get help for myself and get a diagnosis not only for me but to be able to help (my child) through his life too".

"Just good to be able to speak to others in similar situations. An opportunity to download stresses. Good to be able to share strategies for dealing with specific issues".

"It empowered me greatly and I left feeling so thankful and supported with the confidence to parent my child."

The support PODs has developed for families by feeding in their experiences, working with practitioners, and accessing additional funding means that families don't now have to have a diagnosis of autism before they can access support.