



Who looks out for young mothers?

Right Here Fermanagh, a partnership to improve the well-being of young people led by YouthAction Northern Ireland, ran a year long young mothers group in Enniskillen as part of their work around mental health early intervention with 16-25 year-olds locally.

When we think of life in rural Northern Ireland, we often think of rolling hills, traditional towns and beautiful villages, of growing up in a place where everyone knows your name and where there is space to breathe. For many people this translates into a recipe for happiness, but not always for everyone.

Being a young mother is often a lonely and isolating experience. In rural areas it may be even more so.

In Enniskillen, County Fermanagh, the Right Here project tried to tackle this well-being challenge by setting up a group to help young mothers connect with others and escape from "just being mothers" and rediscover what, apart from their kids, makes them happy in life.

What challenges do young mothers in Fermanagh face?

Being a parent is a valuable and valued role in society and one which is keenly fostered and supported within YouthAction Northern Ireland. However, for some young mothers it becomes the only role that they feel defines them and the only one that society seems to value. Right Here Fermanagh's work with young mothers encourages the women to take on other roles that can be equally valued.

The eight young mothers that met for two hours every week at Enniskillen's Lakeland Forum leisure centre from March 2011 through to March 2012 also raised issues of unemployment, drug-taking, the high cost and infrequent timetables of public transport, leaving them isolated both physically and socially, lack of services, expensive childcare and lack of social activities and opportunities.

For Liz McArdle of lead project partner Youth Action Northern Ireland, young mothers in Fermanagh have given up seeing themselves as young women: "They know the role of a young mother is valued in society and they've seen it being important so that's something that they feel easy with; but being a young woman they feel that's something they have to leave behind."

What was The Young Mother's Group trying to change?

The Young Mother's group was an attempt to address the mental health needs of this sometimes forgotten group of young people. Says Liz McArdle: "The work that we do is to help them to think beyond the traditional things that women do... To look beyond and beneath these things at what actually might make you feel better. What are the kinds of activities that might enrich your life and your child's life?"

"Sometimes these young women over compensate for their youth by trying to be even more grown up and more responsible. They tend to deny or forget their youthfulness and their own sense of independence. Their mental health can be affected whether that's for the short or long term."

The young mothers themselves spoke about the ways in which their situation led them to stay at home, feeling bored, lonely, and low and without confidence. Said one member of the group: "I was depressed before and lonely. I had no time for myself. Thanks to the group, my independence has grown... and I have time without my children. You all need time without your children." This isolation, and the fact that people saw themselves only as mothers rather than people in their own right, gave them little opportunity to explore their identities and to meet others. The stress of this, and their responsibilities as parents, left them either experiencing mental health difficulties or at higher risk of developing things like depression and anxiety.

How did The Young Mother's Group work?

The group was supported by Right Here's local partners. The venue and, importantly, a free crèche, were provided by Fermanagh District Council which has taken a keen interest in the project.

Initially, Right Here Fermanagh got in touch with the young mothers who eventually formed the group via a Sure Start Children's Centre that was itself facing uncertainty and instability in the face of funding cuts. In their informal weekly meeting, supported by a Right Here young women's development worker, the young women discussed issues such as diet, sexual health, mental health, suicide, stigma, first aid, life tips, drink and drugs awareness, self esteem and what it means to be a young woman. They also got to grips with relaxation tools like meditation and dance and went on trips together.

In the words of one regular attendee: "The group is the highlight of our week. Right Here gets us out of the house and meeting new friends. There's nothing to do without this group or anywhere to find information on mental health. This group has increased my confidence."

What worked well?

A number of the young women formed a strong bond with the Right Here staff supporting the group and with other group members. As one of the young women said, the Right Here staff member was "like a big sister who we can chat to. We feel comfortable talking to her and to each other."

Both Right Here staff and the young mothers themselves were sad that the group came to end, but felt that they had done something worthwhile that would last for years to come. As one group member said: "I have learned more than what I did at school about health and mental health and had my eyes opened."

Says Liz McArdle, "One of the big things that went well was having social space for those young mothers to meet. A social space without their children. Sometimes it takes a while for them to feel confident and comfortable about not talking about their children but it opens up a new world for them. They became involved in doing gender sessions and sessions about what life was like being a young woman, so opening up their thinking to an awareness of equality and inequality."

One of those new things was contributing to a collective artwork exploring what it means to be a young woman in Northern Ireland by decorating 30cm high tailors dummies. Each young woman was encouraged to use these dummies to show their feelings and ideas about the issues they face, writing a short message to accompany their work. Their work formed part of a major exhibition of young women's work created by YouthAction Northern Ireland to show the thoughts, fears, aspirations and wishes of young women across the province.

Challenges and concerns

The project failed to reach as many young mothers as hoped in the target age range 16-25, something that the group members put down to a lack of advertising locally and a certain degree of suspicion: "We have told loads of women but they don't believe us that it is that good" said one group member.

Finding young mothers and getting them to attend the group was a time consuming activity. Liz believes that many young mothers are very insecure and uncertain, both in their role as a parent and in their idea of where they fit into the world, making the choice to engage with a project like this a significant leap of faith: "We meet lots of young mothers, go out and stop them in the street ... when you see women walking the workers might just stop them and have a chat about the programme. The young mothers, in that initial moment, will show you great enthusiasm and great commitment, show themselves to be very interested in the the programme. But getting them through the door on that first day requires an awful lot of follow up, or maybe a worker to call to the house or to say 'I'll come and pick you up'.

In deciding whether to engage with a project like the Right Here Fermanagh young mother's group, says Liz, young women are asking themselves: "Are they going to feel embarrassed turning up on that first day? If they can't read well are they going to be asked to read something? If it turns out to be rubbish will they be stuck? Will other people be better with their children than they are and make them feel even more insecure? One of the very prominent driving forces for young women is embarrassment. If they don't turn up on the first day, it could be because they're too embarrassed."

Right Here Fermanagh had hoped that the Enniskillen young mother's group would become self sustaining, but the young women involved wanted to have continued

support from a worker. Says Liz McArdle of what the women valued about the group: “[I] think that [they valued] the stimulation that they got to do different things to, you know, do new things, to take themselves in new directions that they might not naturally have said.”

There are plans to develop another young mother's group in a different area of Fermanagh. In the meantime, there are plenty of other activities on offer to young women and young men in the county through Right Here Fermanagh: the Youth bank small grants scheme, run by young people to give grants up to £750 to other young people to make mental health and well-being project happen; Lisnaskea Coffee Shop discussion groups; Rutledge Joblink programme, working with young people outside education, employment or training; research opportunities; and a Young Men's Volunteer Scheme. The project also delivers a wide range of awareness-raising and information events for young people to help them learn more about mental health and well-being.

Mark Brown, Social Spider

