



Working with children and families

Initiatives in Belfast

RONNIE FLYNN

What follows is an edited interview with May Blood, the Information Officer with the Early Years Project in Shankhill, Belfast. She begins by discussing the scope of the project and why it was set up.

MAY BLOOD

When we looked at the issues within our area, one was low education attainment, very few people taking up training possibilities and we had high unemployment. One of the major things that kept coming through was the lack of childcare facility. Because people were locked in the poverty trap there was no way out of it. They couldn't afford child care outside the area, and there was none existing inside the area that met the need. And so when we got the funding to set the programme up, child care became a major plank in that programme. We work with children from the day they're born. We have a home visiting scheme, at right through 'til 12, 13 years of age, we have after schools clubs, so we go right through that age group so we do, and we work with them at every level of their education.

We have over 50 home visitors work for us and they go out and visit the family, and that visit can be once a week, it can be once a month, it can be several times a week depending on the need of the family, and gradually we hope to wean them out of their home, back into the community, back into all that they offer in the community, and gradually become empowered to stand up for themselves, then they no longer need the visit.

We essentially set up a home visiting scheme, because one of the things we knew very early on, that you could put in as many things as you liked in the community, people wouldn't come out to that facility. We were having to go into the family, and meet the family at the point of need. Whatever that need could be, it could be health education, it could be a benefit problem, it could be just sheer isolation.

We have a whole range of stuff that goes on in the child care centre. We run for instance the high scope programme. It's an American idea which is to empower children from a very early age. We run that, we have French classes, we have a number of things, and we have families who put their children in for a full day, for a half day. We also work with children at holiday times, when we put on holiday schemes for them, that's when the schools are closed for the big bulk in the summer, or at Easter or at Halloween. We put on schemes there where we teach children drama, learning life skills, all those different things, and then we move on into supporting the local schools, and working with them on issues that are around children from five years up. And then we have a very good after schools club, which deals with children obviously, coming out of school, and going into an after schools, but we also put in support mechanism for children, around our eleven plus system, and we also run classes for parents, who want to learn basic English, basic mathematics, that kind of thing, so as they can also be interested in their children's education.

RONNIE FLYNN

The scheme has attracted many families from the area but the reasons for families entering the project are diverse.

MAY BLOOD

There's not one particular issue that would make a family come into this programme, it's a whole range. In some cases, for instance, it could be the mother suffering from post natal depression, we try to support that. We try to support where the mother might feel isolation, we try to support that. We simply try to meet the family whatever the level is, but it doesn't

essentially come into any one area, and we haven't found any pattern. We haven't found for instance it's all families with benefit problems that are coming in. We find it goes across a whole range, and probably one of the main things would be looking at health, and that kind of thing in a family.

We try to put on something like good eating and all, we try to cover all those aspects. And one of the things that has recently come into it is the whole domestic violence issue, and we have tried to work around that, both with our female and our male parents. We have a male team dealing specifically with men, and one of the issues that's been raised there recently is that men being victims of domestic violence, which is a new issue, and we're quite prepared to take on an innovated issue like that.

RONNIE FLYNN

The Early Years project is funded by a number of outside agencies. The voluntary nature of the organisation does allow some flexibility in their relationship with families.

MAY BLOOD

Certainly social services would refer families to us and we have doctors in the area who refer families to us, but we insist that the family themselves must sign the referral form. On the flip side of that, obviously we go into families where there is, is social need. And we are obligated by law to report that, but that is not our main function. We try and work with the family, we would also for instance in social services, where there would be case conferences round a family, our worker goes along and supports the parent to that level, and just feels that there's a friend there that they would need. So it works both ways, but we're certainly not there to police the families, by no means.

RONNIE FLYNN

Training their staff to work with all aspects of family life is a priority.

MAY BLOOD

We brought in a number of training organisations who deal with child development, child abuse, community development, all those different issues. Also how to knock somebody's door and actually go into their home and befriend them. And so they do nine weeks induction training. We have three geographical bases, and they're put out into a geographical base to work, and they're given a work load of families. After that the worker themselves can come in, we've our own training officer, and a worker comes in, and they plot with the training officer, what they want to learn. That's all paid for them. They get a number of books paid for, they get study leave, and very much the emphasis is on their own future, training and planning their own future training courses. And so it works very well, that's part of their working week. And they can take up a number. I mean we have workers within the system who are doing child development, and looking at qualifications. We also at the other end of the scale have perhaps workers who are looking at women involved in the criminal system. So it's all paid for, and it's a huge range, business, it has to be loosely attached to their work, but loosely would be the relevant word.

RONNIE FLYNN

The project had a number of jobs to offer in what was an area of high unemployment. So a great deal of thought also went into recruitment.

MAY BLOOD

We took four months to actually put a huge PR programme around this. Because this was a whole new innovated thing for the area. We had to convince parents that we weren't another section of social services going into their homes to police them. We had to convince the local population, that while we were getting six and a half million pounds, this was not going to show up instant successes, and it was about convincing a community to look long term, which was quite innovative because in most community work, when you get money people expect to see the results the next day. We were asking people to look way, way down the road. And so we put a four month programme round that. We'd done a number of things. We put on meeting professionals, doctors, midwives, we went and met them one by one. And we went to every community group in the area and told them about it. We put out a number of flyers. We

made a very attractive flyer, for the people to self-start into the programme, and we deliberately didn't put a great lot of writing on that, because we were aware that we had a huge problem with teenage pregnancy, and we were aware that many of these young people couldn't read and write. So it was basic knowledge on the flyer with the little logo we created. It was trade marked right away, and everyone knows about a little boy and girl, even if you can't read what it says. And so there was a lot of thought went round that.

RONNIE FLYNN

The benefits to all sorts of families has been enormous. Lynne, a lone parent, describes her experience with the Early Years Project

LYNNE

I was working part time as a cleaner and I had a young daughter Harmony, she was about six months then, and her grandmother used to take her to a mother and toddlers, and it was her that were first got connected with the Early Years. Then myself, I got a home project worker out through the home visiting service, and they just showed me all the things that was going on in the community, and it gave me a chance to get back into the community. They took us out to events, visit me on a regular basis, and got me involved with the Early Years crèche as well.

I'd seen the benefits that my daughter had gained, through the mother and toddlers and the contact with the project worker there, she'd already met her before I had, with her grandmother. So that put my mind at ease a lot. And when they actually came out, it was just a normal person you know it was, and they were very chatty, very down to earth and the first meeting was actually great. I looked forward to the next one after that. So from my point of view it got me interested in the leisure centre activities, mother and toddler groups, and the local library as well, took me and my daughter along there for trips and things like that, it was excellent.

RONNIE FLYNN

Whiterock Children's Centre in Belfast began as a crèche for parents attending a local college. It also provides an after school project for local children. Moira Brown is the manager.

MOIRA BROWN

When I first came along here I was horrified because the children in the area just played in the cemetery because there's nowhere else for them, no other structured play at all in the area. Now we have a number of after schools clubs in the area, and we are one of them. And it's great because our focus here is not on education although we have an educational background, but the focus is play, structured play in a child-centred environment. Our staff are all trained, and everybody at the minute is in training so while they are all trained to a certain level they're all progressing on to the next level.

The age range would be, well we've about five, five year olds at the minute then after that it's about eight and nines would be the main age range. Some of the children do stay on until they're twelve, in fact some of them would be here for ever, we just can't accommodate them. We have twenty four places, eighteen of them are for local children, that's just children in the area. Most of them will have been with us now since we started two years ago, and they come along to the summer scheme and whatever. But then in order to try and achieve some sort of sustainability, we decided that we would have six places, now I use this term loosely, on a commercial basis. So we would charge like six pounds a day, and for that, the children could come here in the morning, we'd take them to school, then we'd pick them up from school, and then their parents pick them up in the evening, whatever time they finish work at.

The other area of our work is social services, they have booked quite a number of places for children that they would have on their books for whatever reasons, we don't need to know those reasons, and they find it very useful as well. So we've quite a few of those sort of children as well.

RONNIE FLYNN

The children in the scheme can choose from a range of activities including drama workshops.

MOIRA BROWN

We have a volunteer, she's actually co-ordinator of the college next door, and she comes in and works with the children, and they have done two plays. The first one they did for summer scheme last year was Grease, and they had, it was just like the real Grease! They did that, and then, at the minute they're working on The Wizard of Oz, just because they wanted to do that, they wanted to do a version of that themselves. And then for the summer, the theme for our summer scheme is local history. So we've already started preparing for that, taking them to the public records office, Lynne Hall maybe that sort of thing, and the theme being say local history, but they'll start off learning about themselves, their family, their street, their community, their country, you know that sort of thing, so we're all really excited about that, and we're hoping that they're going to produce drama at the end of that as well, and perhaps a book.

We have use of a computer suite in the college so it's great, they're just going to start, that's just new. So they're going to do some computer training as well, and we're hoping that they'll be able to type up and print the book themselves.

RONNIE FLYNN

Moira often includes the children in planning the activities for the week, to encourage active participation.

MOIRA BROWN

I think it needs that sort of a structure and we do have a programme, there's a degree of flexibility as well, you know, so if the children don't feel like doing that particular thing we will always accommodate them. And some of them just like even getting into one of the smaller rooms there, you know there's one wee feller, he gets very tired in the afternoon and he would just go in and lie on the bean bag in with the babies.

The children are, like, very articulate, they know what they want, you know, and you know, you know what children are like, they would love you to take them away camping and things. So it's sort of trying to get that balance of what, you know what they want, and what the staff would discuss then, as I say we do have some children with special needs and different abilities and it's very hard to get a programme to suit everybody. So we constantly evaluate and re-write that programme. And it's very interesting because as I say, we find that most of the, most of them just love the arts and crafts, it's great for them and they have that room in there and they've all their equipment and they've got that bit of freedom and they love that creative, you know stuff, and as I say they love the drama as well. So that's really you know, how we work.

RONNIE FLYNN

The children enjoy the activities and friendship while the parents notice other benefits.

CHILD

I think I've been going two years, I don't know when I started coming.

CHILD

I just come round from the corner and, I play games and draw and write stories and all that with, till the holidays.

CHILD

I like doing art, sort of then going into the gym, if I have nothing to do. I draw Celtic pictures, there's one there.

CHILD

Everyone's, everyone's very good and, I like playing football with Annie and Mark and Daniel and Kieran and Conner and Ryan, all my other friends.

CHILD

There's another wee club down there, we go to that, it's not very good but, but this one is brilliant.

PARENT

I'm a parent, and my wee boy goes to the after school club, and he's been going for a year, maybe two years nearly now. His name's Conner, and he loves it, and he learns a terrible lot, and he does nature trips and he comes back and fills me in on all the information that he learnt about space. And they go to Collin Glen forest and that, so it's very educational, and I'm very happy with him going to the club and the staff's great. If the after school club wasn't here then my wee boy would just sort of be basically hanging about the house, in the winter and bored more or less so. The after school club's great for him, he looks forward to coming every day.

It's a pound a week, which is brilliant, that's I mean, that's 20p a day, and it's well worth it and, no there is no problem money wise, they don't ask for much off you at all, really they don't, and if they're going for a wee trip or anything, it's usually only about 50p to two pound, it all depends where they're going so it's great that way.

Conner was a bit hyper and whatever, but I think it was boredom half the times with him, lack of something to do, but he seems more interested and alert and some of the things he comes out with that he's learnt in the club like I think god that's great, the way he's learning in that wee club, so he has settled down, he's sort of turned a bit of a corner, and he settled down rightly.