Now I don’t feel alone
Supporting low income families and asylum seeking women for birth and postnatal life in Leeds
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References

“I think that coming to the group makes me feel like I am doing my best for them (children). I feel better about raising my child if I come to the group. I feel more confident because they are advising me about how to be a good mum.”
The transition to parenthood can be a challenging time for all parents but for new migrants and asylum seekers, pregnancy can be a daunting and uncertain period. Asylum seekers are a particularly vulnerable group to lack of familiarity with the UK healthcare system, language barriers and a lack of confidence to ask questions about their care. As a result they are more likely to have been dispersed during pregnancy or soon after delivery and may have poor mental and physical health. Their health can deteriorate further as a result of living in fear of their immigration status, and being alone in poor housing conditions with little financial support.

NCT has worked in partnership with Bankside Children’s Centre for several years to provide antenatal and postnatal drop-in support services to vulnerable and disadvantaged women living locally. Bankside Children’s Centre is located in Hanwell, which is one of the most economically and socially deprived areas of London. A significant proportion of residents are asylum seekers or from non-white ethnic groups, including Pakistani and Bangladeshi women.

Benefits of support for mothers

Women who come to the drop-in groups are referred by midwives, Children’s Centre services, voluntary and community organisations and friends. They present with a variety of complex needs, often experiencing feelings of loneliness and isolation, low self-esteem and confidence, insecurity or transitional housing, and relationship difficulties including domestic abuse.

In 2016, the antenatal service supported 70 pregnant women and the postnatal service supported 54 mothers. More than half of the women (53%) attending the groups were asylum seekers of African origin, from Eritrea, Algeria, Cameroon, Eritrea, Gambia and Sudan. A further 17% were from Pakistan, most of whom were here on a Spouse Visa. Feedback from the 15 women who completed questionnaires and 11 women who took part in interviews about the service was very positive, and they spoke of how the support alleviated feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Mothers’ feelings of wellbeing and confidence improved as a result of attending the groups. All women said that they felt more positive, reporting that they felt “better”, “less stressed”, “having a fresh mind” as a result of having someone to talk and listening to. 94% of women reported feeling more confident about being a parent.

“I feel that coming here I have a rest because someone else is watching my children... I feel free, feel safe. Feel like I am not stressed, and in case you have a problem there is someone who can listen for you. If I don’t come here I feel like there is something missing. I think I could not live even in the rain”

94% reported that they had been helped to access further support including midwifery and Children’s Centre services, voluntary support services and support to attend English classes.

“There is one place which I go on Friday which is like a playgroup and like NCT practiced told me about this. They helped me to register with a college to English classes with children”

93% said that they felt supported by others in the drop-in groups and would stay in touch, and that this helped to reduce feelings of loneliness.

“I was homeless and pregnant and after 5 months pregnant then I got a house from charity. I came to the group, I know everything about breastfeeding, if you have pain and how you to hospital and when to go to hospital”

“I have made a lot of friends... I found family here and someone is watching my children… I feel free, feel light, feel like you are not stressed, and in case you have a problem there is someone who can listen for you. When it is raining”.

A key theme from interviews with women was that by attending the group they had been able to form new friends and form a supportive network helping to alleviate feelings of loneliness.

“They made a lot of friends... I found family here because I am alone here. Now I don’t feel alone”.

94% reported gaining new knowledge and learning new skills to prepare for birth and care for their baby.

“There is one place which I go on Friday which is like a playgroup and like NCT practiced told me about this. They helped me to register with a college to English classes with children”

93% said that they felt supported by others in the drop-in groups and would stay in touch, and that this helped to reduce feelings of loneliness.

“Come and my baby enjoys and they talk different topics like baby sickness and other things for one hour. It helps me because sometimes when my baby got something stuck in her throat or anything there is someone who can listen for you. It made me strong”.

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Asylum seekers are a particularly vulnerable group to lack of familiarity with the UK healthcare system, language barriers and a lack of confidence to ask questions about their care. As a result they are more likely to have been dispersed during pregnancy or soon after delivery and may have poor mental and physical health. Their health can deteriorate further as a result of living in fear of their immigration status, and being alone in poor housing conditions with little financial support.

In Leeds, NCT and Bankside Children’s Centre have been working in partnership to provide antenatal and postnatal drop-in support for some of the most vulnerable families in the area. An evaluation of the services reveals how the support has had a positive impact for the mothers who have attended.

Conclusion

This model of antenatal and postnatal drop-in support has been effective in providing vital support during pregnancy and after birth to vulnerable women who had very complex needs. The practical and emotional support provided helped them to feel more confident, knowledgeable and less lonely or isolated, whilst ensuring that they are a key priority to enable access to specialist services when needed.