Now I don’t feel alone: supporting refugees and asylum seekers to thrive as parents

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‘I have made a lot of friends ... I found family here because I am alone here. Now I don’t feel alone.’

For anyone, becoming a parent can be enormously challenging, emotionally and practically. But what must it be like to cope as a new parent when you have just arrived in a foreign country, perhaps without having anywhere permanent to live or knowing the language? These are just two of the challenges facing mums and dads who are newly arrived in the UK, as asylum seekers and refugees. They may be traumatised, isolated from family and friends, have difficulty accessing healthcare services, and may also experience poverty, racism, depression and anxiety.¹ ²

This is where NCT is making a difference for women who are refugees and asylum seekers in Leeds. A team of practitioners and volunteers host weekly drop-in sessions for women who are pregnant, and separately, postnatal sessions for women with babies up to one year of age, at Bankside Children’s Centre (previously known as Choto Moni). They make women feel welcome
and safe enough to talk about their experiences and situations, help them to prepare for birth, and then to find information and build their confidence about looking after their babies.

UK refugees and asylum seekers
Understanding what different terms mean
An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country of origin, who has formally applied for asylum in the UK and is awaiting a decision.

Refugee status is granted to a person who has been recognised as having a 'well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion'.

An economic migrant is a person who has moved to another country to work.

Starting with pregnancy
The antenatal sessions at Bankside were developed by Rose McCarthy, an NCT antenatal teacher who also works for the Refugee Council, and NCT breastfeeding supporter Val Winder. The team began at Choto Moni in 2003 delivering antenatal sessions in partnership with Sure Start. These consisted of eight sessions covering different topics in preparation for labour and birth, breastfeeding and the transition to parenthood. Val also provided breastfeeding support as a breastfeeding counsellor.

Most of the women attending are refugees or seeking asylum but there are also local mothers, particularly ethnic minority women and occasionally vulnerable women, and sometimes partners too. Mothers who already have children often share their experiences with first-time mothers.

After birth
In December 2015, Rose and Val, together with NCT postnatal leader Fran Bailey and NCT antenatal and baby massage practitioner Charlotte Hagerty, expanded the service to offer separate weekly drop-in sessions for women after their babies are born, with funding from NHS Leeds North CCG.

As Fran recalls: ‘Rose and Val had been running an antenatal drop-in for many years, but were really struggling to get the women they were working with to leave the drop-in once they had given birth to their babies. Rose invited me to come and lead a postnatal drop-in for these women. I originally thought it would work in a very similar way to a traditional NCT drop-in. How wrong I was!!

‘I have developed a drop-in which is very informal and relaxed, allowing opportunity for women to meet other new mothers, to ask questions, to borrow equipment and clothing for their children and to gain access to information and support from NCT practitioners as well as outside agencies, such as first aid for children providers and sexual health and contraception specialists.’
Positive outcomes for mums and babies

According to a recent NCT evaluation of the postnatal sessions at Bankside, in the period up to November 2016, 54 women had accessed the service, more than half (53%) of whom were refugees or asylum seekers. Around 59% of the mothers were from Africa, mostly Eritrea, with smaller numbers from Algeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia and Sudan. Around 17% of mothers were of Pakistani origin.

Overall, the postnatal sessions are intended to improve health and wellbeing. Part of the focus is to help women to develop new knowledge and skills around a selection of topics, including welcoming a new baby; sleep; crying; play and development; relationships and keeping healthy.

There are many positive outcomes for mothers who attend. Of the 18 mothers who gave their feedback, all reported that they felt they had benefited from the support they received and would recommend it to others.

Benefits included:

• Opportunities for mothers to meet and bond with other mothers
• Improved knowledge and skills to enable effective parenting
• Confidence in parenting
• Improved feelings of wellbeing and overall confidence
• Improved knowledge and confidence to access a variety of services
• Improving language skills
• Opportunity to become volunteers in the group

Fran Bailey certainly sees these benefits. ‘I love the work at Bankside, I love watching friendships blossom, seeing isolated women build relationships with each other. It is so rewarding seeing women grow in confidence in their mothering, share experiences with each other and feel more able to access local services such as local libraries and parks.’

‘I feel that coming here I have a rest because someone else 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. If I don’t come here I feel like something is missing. Although it’s far I come even in the rain.’

‘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 team also organises an annual day trip and a weekend to the Yorkshire Dales, hosted by local people. As Val notes, ‘It is these social activities that help the mothers to make friends and feel welcomed in this country. It is also great fun and is one of the aspects of this work that I really enjoy. It is such a privilege to get to know and to support such inspiring women and this helps to make my life and their lives richer.’

A new role for mothers

Four mothers who had previously attended both the antenatal and postnatal drop-in group have now progressed to volunteering in the postnatal group offering support to other mothers, interpreting when needed and providing support in the community.
'I feel more confident. I have made friends and I have learnt so much in both groups that I can now help people in my community. Last week I was at a caesarean birth. The woman only agreed when I talked to her. For the first time I thought I can do this, it made me strong.'

## Baby massage

Charlotte Hagerty began facilitating baby massage sessions at Bankside in January 2016. She recalls, ‘At the first session I felt quite nervous as I knew there would be a language barrier. Despite this, the session went really well and it was fantastic how much the women could follow the baby massage sequence. I offered to return the following week, and one week turned into 18 months! I provide group and one-to-one baby massage sessions, and act as a welcoming face for women to share and learn in the group. I do signposting to other organisations as well as finding clothes and equipment for women and their families.

‘One of the best moments of being part of this project was when we delivered a bed to a woman with a six-month-old son. Her English was limited but the smile on her face showed us how happy she was to have the support and a good night’s sleep ahead of her.

‘For the baby massage session, our main challenge is the space available to women and also that women need to build up the confidence to join in. We provide massage time at the beginning of the session when it is quieter, and provide dolls for women to use if their baby is asleep or they feel a little apprehensive. I have also developed a baby massage diary for each mum so that if they are unable to attend a session we can catch up separately on moves they have missed. Recently I had a very rewarding moment when a mum who was initially low confidence started massaging her baby at a later session before I was even ready!

‘I feel the Bankside project works really well as we create a safe place for women to come to. We understand the challenges they face and provide a listening ear where women can share and listen. The children play when we come together as a group and at the end we have family time with singing, musical instruments and occasionally the parachute! We have seen the babies grow and become confident about joining in during family time.’

‘This group is good for my child, he is playing and enjoying and I enjoy as well because I got some friends and the staff are friendly. I learn about playing with my child and baby massaging and singing.’

## References


## Further resources

- Vulnerable Migrant Women Network [www.vmw.org.uk](http://www.vmw.org.uk)
- Refugee Council [www.refugeecouncil.org.uk](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk)
- Maternity Action [www.maternityaction.org.uk](http://www.maternityaction.org.uk)
- NCT diversity and access [www.nct.org.uk/professional/diversity-and-access](http://www.nct.org.uk/professional/diversity-and-access)