



Parent Champions – who we are and what we do

Parent volunteers providing peer-to-peer
information on childcare and family services

The Parent Champions scheme was created and developed by Daycare Trust. Following the merger with Family & Parenting Institute, we will continue to deliver Parent Champions under our new name, the Family and Childcare Trust.

We are most grateful to the Department for Education whose continued support and funding has enabled the development of Parent Champions.

Parent Champions for Childcare are parents who have positive experiences of using childcare and/or supporting their child's early learning, who act as advocates and peer advisers to other parents in their community.

At every stage of their children's lives, there is one source of information that parents rely on most – other parents. And when it comes to deciding whether or not to send your child to nursery, or choosing a childcare place, the direct experience of other parents is a powerful source. This is the thinking behind Parent Champions, a Daycare Trust initiative that started in 2007 with pilot schemes in three London boroughs, which tested whether parents with good experiences of childcare can act as advocates in their communities and influence the choice of other parents they may not have previously known. Since that pilot phase, with the support of government funding, Daycare Trust has delivered a number of projects around the country working in partnership with local authorities and local community organisations.

Parent Champions usually work closely with the local Family Information Service or children's centres and the objective of a scheme is to engage parents, provide accurate information and encourage an increase in participation in early learning activities and take-up of childcare and children's services. Parent Champions volunteer for an average of five hours per week and each project run has an ideal target of recruiting six–eight Parent Champions. The costs of running a scheme will depend on the incentives offered to the Parent Champions, the number of volunteers, the resources they are given and the costs of the delivery organisation, for instance, staff salary and overheads.

From 2011–2013 Daycare Trust delivered pathfinder Parent Champions schemes and a National Network of Parent Champions projects across the country. It is from this phase of the project that the case studies included in this booklet have been developed.

The case studies represent a cross section of the volunteers involved in both past and current projects and from a range of backgrounds.



1

Fadhila's story – Westminster Parent Champion

Fadhila was chosen by Westminster local authority to become a Parent Champion due to her links to the Arabic speaking community near where she lives in London. Fadhila, originally from Syria, has only been living in the UK for two years and has an 18-month-old daughter.

When her daughter was four-months-old, Fadhila's health visitor advised her to visit the local children's centres in the area. It was through the children's centres that she heard about English classes and later the Parent Champions project. Whilst at the children's centre, Fadhila became involved with translating some information into Arabic and through that work she was able to build relationships with the staff at the centre, who she got to know quite well. This helped in her subsequent Parent Champion role. Being relatively new to the area, and also with English as an additional language, it took a little time for Fadhila to build up her contacts and confidence.

"The first week was very hard, since it was new, and I was not fluent in English, but the second week I felt more comfortable, and then it became very easy."

As well as going to the local children's centres, Fadhila also spoke to Arabic speaking parents at colleges, at the library, near local shops and even when she was on the underground. She also selected one local children's centre and took the centre's timetable into the surrounding streets to explain to passing families about what was available there – "many of the local families thought you had to pay for all the activities". She also took information into local schools and talked with the families of the children attending.

Building on her previous translation work with children's centres, Fadhila helped translate some of the local Family Information Service leaflets into Arabic and was also able to sit down with some Arabic speaking parents to go through non translated materials,



ensuring that parents, who did not have English as a first language, understood what was written.

Fadhila received good support from Westminster Family Information Service (FIS) and knew she could contact them whenever she came across something she wasn't sure about. She also linked with the children's centre outreach workers. The FIS noticed a definite rise in enquiries from the Arabic speaking community, a result of Fadhila's contact with families in the area.

Before coming to the UK, Fadhila had been a journalist in Syria and had some volunteering experience with the Syrian Women's Union, helping refugees in Baghdad. Her Parent Champion role had been her first work experience in England. She has found being a Parent Champion transforming – her confidence has grown, she has made some friends locally, and now feels much more part of the community. She has also begun to study childcare at college and applied to volunteer at a children's centre.

"I feel very happy now, and know I can find help for people. I feel part of this community and my life has meaning now. Before I was scared to start work and leave my daughter with other people, but now I know I can do some work and still take care of her."

2 The Westminster Parent Champions project

The Westminster Parent Champions project ran for six months in 2012. The project was managed through the Westminster Family Information Service (FIS) and coordinated by the FIS Manager, Janese Samuels (pictured below with Parent Champion Fadhila, left).

The project focused on target groups of disadvantaged families in three localities and sought to engage parents of looked after two-year-olds in an aim to reduce child poverty and inform families about the free entitlement. Three Parent Champions were recruited for the project and were linked to three children's centres in the borough, through which they would be supervised. In practice the Parent Champions tended to link more closely with Janese and the FIS and built up a close working and trusting personal relationship, which Janese feels is key to any scheme succeeding. All three of the Parent Champions were Arabic speakers and as a result, the Westminster project ended up particularly targeting Arabic speaking families.

Prior to the project beginning, Janese made contact with all relevant partners in the authority, including children's centres and schools, in the maintained and private, voluntary and independent sector, family centres, libraries and locality managers to make sure they were aware of the Parent Champions work and to get them on board.

Recruitment started off slowly; there was little response initially to adverts that were circulated to children's centres and through local networks. The deadline was extended and recruitment was more successful – six parents applied and three of those were felt to have the appropriate skills and experience and were selected as Parent Champions. The target was to recruit six volunteers, but it was agreed to be far more beneficial to take on those who were known to be very capable of doing the role. By chance the project ended up with one Parent Champion per locality, which was ideal.

The Parent Champions were given Oyster cards, loaned mobile phones and given top ups and monthly incentives, which were provided through their supervision sessions. The monthly incentives were particularly valued by the Parent Champions.

Training was provided in short sessions over three separate days, which was seen as beneficial, as it enabled the Parent Champions to digest information and come up with questions that added value to the training. Training included basic childcare information, how to engage with parents and confidence building, using role play situations to work through different examples. The training was co-delivered by a Daycare Trust consultant and by Janese and so included information from the FIS perspective, which worked well.



"An important lesson that came out of the training was that you don't need to get too involved with individual stories you come across and you do not have to try and solve everyone's problems – just help guide them to relevant services."

Fadhila and Janese from the Westminster Parent Champions project



The Parent Champions had different reasons for wanting to take on the role, including gaining relevant work experience, improving their English, building confidence and improving communication skills, overcoming isolation and making friends, and becoming more involved in their community and society in general. All three Parent Champions felt that they had achieved these goals by the end of the project.

Janese has kept in contact with the Parent Champions and tries to include them in other FIS work. Since the project ended the Parent Champions have been involved in other Daycare Trust work, including speaking engagements at events, talking about their volunteering experience. One of the Parent Champions has recently been accepted for a post working in a nursery and directly attributes this to the experience she gained through working on the project. She was always quite clear that she was interested in getting paid employment, so the experience has been particularly beneficial for her. Also, through the knowledge gathered during the project, one Parent Champion successfully gained a free two-year-old place for her child and two were able to access funding for adult education.

If doing the project again, Janese says that she would ensure that sufficient local authority staff time would be available from the start.

"You need to keep it centralised rather than being managed through a number of children's centres and this would help to keep things joined up and would also help with monitoring."

It was a challenge for Janese to both coordinate the project and deal with the resulting increase in calls to the Family Information Service.

Janese has greatly enjoyed working with the Parent Champions and with the link now made she is sure that Westminster will continue to keep in close contact with the parents, and their reach into their communities.

Above: Parents at the Lambeth Parent Champions project (see page 14)

3 Sharon's experience – a letter from a Parent Champion in Hampshire

When I went to my first volunteer meeting, I was not sure what to expect. I knew that I had some spare time and that I would like to help in the community. After attending the first meeting I thought about it for the weekend and decided I would like to become involved with Parent Champions.

After the second meeting it sounded exciting. At first I was a little nervous about the role, but as soon as I started telling people what I was doing and how I could help them it became easier each time. I signposted a variety of people in different directions. One of my first ladies had never been to the children's centre after a bad experience, but I assured her our centre was friendly and welcoming and I even offered to accompany her on her first visit. This lady now attends on regular basis and has signed up for some courses.

I also attended a course with a lady who was shy and found it hard to join in with people she didn't know. I accompanied her and just gave her the confidence she needed – she now wants to know when the next one is! I love knowing I have helped someone.

The local school is very supportive and allows me to talk to people in the playground and even offered me their family room after school one day a week. I found most people just wanted to pick their children up, so I am going to try a different approach.

It is nice knowing that after speaking to a person/family we have made a difference to them by helping or just chatting and I find now they come back for more advice. I attended a volunteer event at the local pastoral centre but they were looking for people to volunteer and unfortunately I just didn't have the time to give. But they have asked me to go back and talk about my volunteering at some point.

I now volunteer at my local children's centre two days a week in the reception, which I love and I can also do some Parent Champion work here. I have been lucky enough to sign up for a NVQ in Business and even luckier that I'm getting support with my childcare. It is a nice feeling to be SHARON and not just MUM.

Sharon



Sharon is a Parent Champion from the Havant Parent Champions project. The volunteers there are working with fathers and young parents and are extending the use of the two-year-old offer.

4 David – a Bradford Parent Champion

David found out about the Parent Champion scheme through a support worker at his local children's centre, where he had previously received support for his son who has special needs. He had already been helping out with a dads' group there and wanted to be able to help other parents get the kind of information that he had been able to get. His motivation for becoming a Parent Champion was a combination of wanting to support other parents and transferring his knowledge of local services and wanting to improve and strengthen his CV and improve his future chances of employment.

As a Parent Champion, David chatted to parents in a number of places, including at the local college, at the children's centre and in the surrounding streets. He carried around cards from the Bradford Family Information Service, which people could fill in and send off if they wanted further information. He also regularly set up stalls in different places, including at the children's centre, with information for parents.

One of the main strengths of David's work as a Parent Champion was the connections he created between organisations and the way he actively promoted a strong partnership approach. He was able to link up agencies that did not currently have a professional relationship, as well as informing local parents of these services.

"I found it easy to approach people – they were part of my community, they knew me, I knew them."

Although David was relatively relaxed about chatting to people in his community, he felt being a Parent Champion boosted his communication skills and generally thought it had provided him with valuable work experience, which was good to include on his CV. He was also able to learn a lot more about the Bradford Family Information Service for his own needs.



"The volunteering gave me confidence. You can lose it when you have not really been doing anything for a while. I had been unemployed since January 2006, so getting work experience has been really important for me."

David really enjoyed the experience and has since gone on to do a course in Health and Social Care and wants to work with young people with disabilities. He's hopeful that the combination of the work experience and the course would help a move into employment in the future. He was disappointed when the project finished, feeling he had both more to learn and more to offer.

David was a Parent Champion in the Bradford Parent Champion Pathfinder project. The project lasted for six months and targeted fathers, BME families, lone parents and teenage parents. You can also hear David speak about his experiences in our Parent Champions film, available on our website – www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentchampions.

5 Sarah's experience of volunteering in Trafford



With a background in music and dance, Sarah used to work part time for a company that runs music workshops in children's centres. Through that work, she realised she was interested in working with families, and then found out about the Parent Champion scheme.

Sarah has helped to get information to families about the free two-year-old offer, one of the targets of the project in Trafford. She has found that although there are places available, there are so many parents out there that are just not finding out about them, and she feels there needs to be a lot more promotion. Having free places available in some areas but not others has also added to the confusion for some families. In her experience she found that sometimes those in poorer areas assume they are not entitled to anything and do not even try to find out about places.

"I was shocked about the number of people who did not know about the funding. As Parent Champions we have been definitely getting into the right areas. The more affluent people know about all the funding possibilities. But those in more deprived areas do not know about it."

Sarah has been through a lot of challenges herself and had personal experience of the benefits system, which has been very useful when chatting to other parents. She has met families at the local children's centre stay and play sessions, health visitor appointments, leisure centre toddler groups and the local Blind Society.

She helped a single mum, with a two-year-old boy, who was unemployed and still very affected by a past still-birth which meant she couldn't let her little boy out of her sight. Aside from the free place for her son, Sarah was able to tell her about counselling and other support available locally.

"She seemed very alone and in an awful situation, and not confident to say 'I need help'."

Sarah had experience of using the local Family Information Service when she was looking for childcare for her own child, but she hadn't realised the range of support they could give to families.

Through her Parent Champion role, she now has a better understanding of how the different services work and of how they connect with each other.

"I can understand why a lot of people don't know about their FIS – it is like a 'hidden service'."



Becoming a Parent Champion has been life changing for Sarah, and through the role she has found the career direction she would like to take, into family support and outreach. She has just completed her Early Years Diploma and is now studying towards an Open University BA Degree in Child and Youth Studies. She has given up her part-time work for the music workshop company and is now looking for entry-level jobs in children's centres.

Sarah feels she is now even more passionate about her daughter's education and sees how crucial the early years are. She sees many families who don't understand the importance of play and childcare sessions and just think everything will be fine and that their child will begin to learn formally when they start school. Sarah recently did some part-time work as a teaching assistant, and also in a special school for children with major behavioural difficulties. Although she was shocked by the problems facing some of the children, she enjoyed the challenge and the chance to make a difference.

"This was down to the outreach that I had done, my degree studies and my personality."

Ideally she would like to get part-time work since she would love to continue volunteering too, and especially likes the idea of mentoring others. She is currently bringing up a child, working and studying all at the same time, and has even found time to help with campaigning and giving out leaflets about the planned closure of some local children's centres.

Being a Parent Champion has been a great experience for her. She says the main thing she has learnt is that, **"you can change things"**.

6 Najma's experience of being a Parent Champion in Birmingham

Najma was chosen to be a Parent Champion to help the Birmingham Family Information Service particularly link up with parents of disabled children. She was already involved with 'Parents Views Count', a voluntary organisation led by parents of children and young people with disabilities, as a parent volunteer and when she saw the notice about Parent Champions she immediately put her name forward. She knew there were a lot of families who did not know about services available and wanted to help them get information.

Najma already had experience of running a parent support group at her child's special school and she had good links to the local community. As well as talking to parents in schools, she also chats with families in supermarkets and in the local park.

"Being Asian myself and speaking Urdu and Punjabi, I target the Asian communities. I give out information and explain what I do. Knowing I'm a parent, they let their guard down, relax and often happily offer their telephone number for getting back to."

She feels being a parent, having a sense of humour and joking about things is crucial for putting people at their ease.

Some parents that she made contact with were reluctant to talk to her at first: "some even have fears that the local authorities might take their children away if they talk about any problems they are having".

Najma keeps small packs of information in her bag and always has them handy if parents need them.

One parent she came across had an autistic child who had been excluded from school, leaving her to

struggle with two other children. With good support from the Birmingham Family Information Service, Najma was able to help the parent get the relevant information, which resulted in the child being able to return to school.

She hands out what they call 'The purple book', which lists local facilities and activities. Families who have found out about childcare have told her how grateful they are for having something to help their children develop, and also give themselves a break.

Being a Parent Champion has enabled Najma to further increase her knowledge about information for families, and she feels she has definitely become more confident.

On recommending the Parent Champion role to other parents, Najma advises:

"You need to know what you are talking about, and do as much research as possible. When talking to parents it's important to make them relaxed and not make them feel intimidated if it sounds like you know everything. You need to find a balance. You need to work together."

She feels that Parent Champions are really valuable because parents like to speak to other parents – they feel comfortable talking to a 'middle person' – someone who is a parent but can help link families up to local information and services.



7

Parent Champions in Liverpool

Anne Marie was chosen by Vauxhall Children's Centre in Liverpool to be a Parent Champion, to help them reach families who are eligible for the free 15 hour nursery places, as part of a pilot. She has four of her own children, aged from five to 19-years-old, and liked the idea of being able to help local parents, through the project.

Along with the other Parent Champions, she has been able to reach lots of families who were unaware of the free two-year old offer and fill places in the local nurseries with eligible children. She chats with parents in schools, clinics, children's centre groups and shopping centres. Families often face a number of difficulties, so the Parent Champions have had intensive training so that they can feel confident in supporting them.

"We have been really well accepted and had immense support from the children's centre and outside agencies."

Anne Marie has particularly enjoyed the fact that she is based in the children's centre, so she can see the families from the point of her telling them about the free two-year-old places, through to the children arriving in the nursery, and the families receiving wider support.

"We see the family right the way through – we get to see the results of our contact with families."

She feels that the project has been really successful, although there have been challenges. One challenge she highlighted is dealing with disappointed families, who come to the children's centre after word has spread about the two-year-old places expecting a place for their child, only to find that by then the eligibility has changed.

Even though she has been targeting families for the two-year-old places, Anne Marie has often also been able to inform and refer families who were not aware of their three-year-old entitlement, to the local Family Information Service.

Anne Marie was unemployed before becoming a Parent Champion. She has really enjoyed having the chance to meet so many families, and learn so much, through her role and feels she has been able to enhance her interpersonal skills, including being able to empathise with families.

She feels that the skills and confidence that she has gained since becoming a Parent Champion will be important when looking for employment in future.

She would love to continue being a Parent Champion and feels that the programme has been invaluable in the local community – "everywhere should have them!". She has discovered a really good sense of community and changed her opinion of the area. "It is really important to be able to talk to people, so that they open up to you. You should relax; although it can be a bit scary at the beginning, it gets easier."

"The families you work with, the people that you meet – they need Parent Champions."



8 Two Parent Champions in Slough – Robina and Hasiba

Robina lives in Slough with her five children, the youngest being five-years-old, who has recently started school. She moved to Slough from Oldham and after some years there, Robina became a single parent.

During this time she had no support and had to find out about benefits and other ways to help support her family, which she found very difficult at first.

As time went by she began to volunteer with Age Concern, offering advice and support to people who needed it. She took a break from volunteering to spend time with her youngest daughter, but as her daughter got older she found she had more free time on her hands and felt that she wanted to spend some of this time returning to voluntary work. She contacted a local support organisation that helps families, particularly those not accessing services, with advice, training and information. She helped families complete various forms and offered general advice on a range of matters. In September 2012 she became a Parent Champion volunteer, which felt like a natural progression from the volunteering she had been doing already.

"I feel that parents do not have all the information they need about the type of benefits, courses and childcare that is available – I wanted to see what I could do to help other people."



Robina spends time chatting with parents, helping them find out information and making sure they know where they can get information themselves. The Parent Champions in Slough go to a variety of places including libraries, swimming pools, schools, nurseries, children's centres, mosques, parks, a refugee support centre, toddler and play groups, and even a bowling alley! She particularly enjoyed attending a 'Slough Talks in Any Language' event, which encouraged parents to be proud of their home language. During the event, children across Slough were read stories in 58 different languages and Robina read in English to a group of children in a shopping centre.

"I am really enjoying my role as a Parent Champion. I hope to be able to continue helping people in the future."





Hasiba lives in the Manor Park area of Slough, with her three children, the youngest of which is eight-years-old. All her children have attended local schools. She moved to Slough from Pakistan in 2003 with her partner, but has since become a single parent.

She was keen to do something to help other people and completed a Community Champion course. She helped people in the community with form filling and general advice. Realising that so many people were not aware of the opportunities that were open to them, she welcomed and applied for the role a Parent Champion. Through her role she has seen first hand that there are lots of families that do not know about childcare or the activities that are available for them locally. She remarks "school information is often put into school bags and thrown away before parents even look at it!"

Hasiba has found that sometimes people are nervous when dealing with someone from the local authority and won't talk to them – "they worry that they might get into trouble about their benefits or some other matter."

She can see the obvious benefits of families being able to speak to someone like her, a Parent Champion, who is not an official and can understand their situation.

"As a parent I know that parents are more comfortable talking to other parents."

In Hasiba's area there are mainly Asian people and an Asian culture – where some husbands and in-laws may not allow their wife or daughter-in-law to go anywhere apart from taking children and to and from school. "I am a familiar face at the school. The people are relaxed and will often talk freely to me".

Hasiba feels that her volunteering has allowed her to feel much more relaxed about chatting to people. She enjoys talking to as many people as she can and feels very confident in being able to help people who need support.

"In the future I want to continue working with people, and enjoying life."



9

The Lambeth project



Lambeth is one of the newer members of the Parent Champions National Network. As part of a Department for Education pilot, Lambeth is using the Parent Champion model to reach families in the Coldharbour Ward, who are eligible for the free two-year-old childcare places. Due to the high levels of deprivation this is a majority of the children – around 146. The ward includes three main housing estates and has a high percentage of workless households and lone parents, as well as a higher than average number of vulnerable children. The approach to the delivery of early learning for two-year-olds in the ward will be co-produced through the development of an innovative Parent Champions programme to ensure that the diverse needs of the community are met.

The ten Parent Champions recruited for the project have been specifically chosen for their communication skills, knowledge of the area and diversity, coming from a range of backgrounds including Caribbean, Eritrean, North African, Polish, Portuguese and Sierra Leonean.

Daycare Trust has been able to provide materials and a trainer for the induction training of Parent Champions and Lambeth have been able to enhance this with Parents, Early Years and Learning

(PEAL) training, which focuses on how to involve parents and families in their children's early learning and development.

There are two strong children's centres which have excellent multi-agency health and family support services, in addition to some two-year-old places. As well as coordinating closely with these, the Parent Champions also play a key role in linking up with the childcare providers, especially due to their rapid expansion in response to the increasing two-year-old places in 2013 and 2014.



Social Return on Investment (SROI)

In 2012, Daycare Trust carried out a Social Return on Investment assessment of 1 of its Parent Champions projects, in order to prove the value of investing in such a scheme. The research found that every pound invested brings in a return worth nearly £13.

Working on Parent Champions since 2007, Daycare Trust has seen the many benefits of the scheme. However, it was decided that it would be beneficial to have an independent assessment of the benefits of the Parent Champions model to capture how much it is worth to society. In an era of tight budgets, Daycare Trust wanted to provide evidence that the Parent Champions model is an effective way of reaching parents and provides good value for money. The Liverpool Parent Champions prototype project was assessed using the SROI process.

In addition to the learning and social benefits, a detailed analysis of the SROI shows that investment in Parent Champions pays for itself many times over and benefits not only parents and children, but the taxpayer as well.

The final calculation from the project showed that the total benefit to society in money terms was £1,075,567 – a more than 12-fold return on the total original investment of £84,092.

Further information about the SROI assessment can be found at:
www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentchampions, including a briefing and the full report.



If you would like further information about Parent Champions or you are interested in starting a scheme in your area and joining the National Network, contact us on 020 7940 7515 to discuss your requirements. We can tailor the model to meet your specific local needs and can give you an indication of the costs involved.

**You can also find information at:
www.familyandchildcaretrust.org/parentchampions.**



The Family and Childcare Trust is the charity created from a merger of Daycare Trust and the Family and Parenting Institute. Together we bring over 40 years of experience in campaigning and research into family life and childcare.

The Family and Childcare Trust works to make the UK a better place for families. Our vision is of a society where government, business and communities do all they can to support every family to thrive. Through our research, campaigning and practical support we are creating a more family friendly UK.

Parent Champions started in 2007 with pilot projects in three London boroughs. Daycare Trust developed the model to reach parents who are missing out on information about childcare and early learning services, because they do not know where to find information and are not engaged with local services or networks. The recent phase of Parent Champions, which ended in March 2013, was funded by the Department for Education and further developed the model with the delivery of six pathfinder schemes and the development of a National Network of Parent Champions schemes across England.

Family and Childcare Trust has secured further funding to develop the Parent Champions model into the next phase, Parent Champions Plus, which focuses on developing delivery through children's centres, in partnership with Action for Children, and building the National Network.

October 2013

Registered charity no: 1077444
Registered company number: 3753345
VAT registered: 833 0243 65

All rights reserved.
© Family and Childcare Trust 2013

Want to find out more?

Family and Childcare Trust
2nd Floor, The Bridge
81 Southwark Bridge Road
London
SE1 0NQ

Call us

020 7940 7510

Visit our website

www.familyandchildcaretrust.org

Email us

info@familyandchildcaretrust.org

Follow us on Twitter

@FamChildTrust