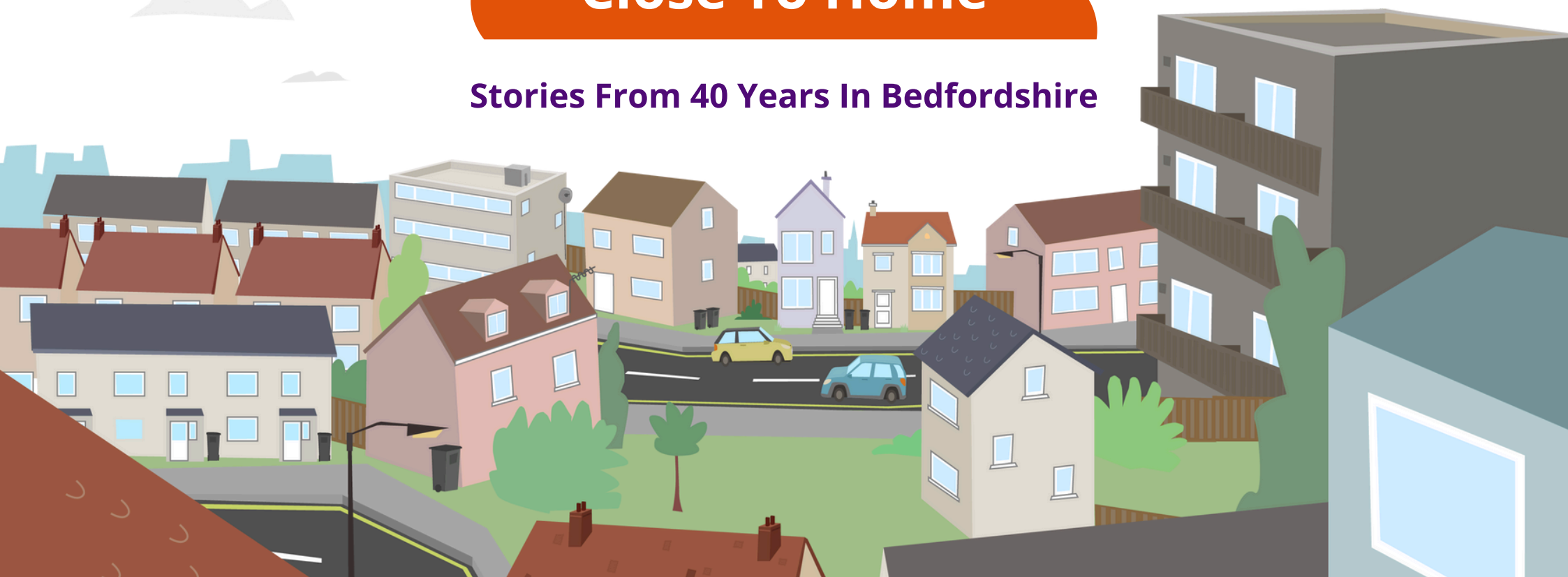




Close To Home

Stories From 40 Years In Bedfordshire



**Dedicated to local parents with young children
because being a parent is not always easy.**

It Takes A Village To Raise A Child

Childhood begins in the home. These early years of our children's lives are irreplaceable and vital for positive child development. Yet, for some of us, life can be difficult, unfair and even cruel. As parents, we do our best to shield our children. But serious illness, disability, mental health issues, domestic abuse, poverty and the loss of a loved one can strike any family.

Behind closed doors, many families struggle alone.

The well-being of parents and young children is connected. When life leaves parents powerless and unable to cope, childhood can be affected. That's why, in 1984, Home-Start Bedfordshire formed to:

- Protect the good health of children and parents
- Prevent cruelty or maltreatment of children
- Relieve sickness, poverty and need amongst children and parents
- Promote better standards of childcare.

Four decades later, we've witnessed too many heart-wrenching stories. However, with support from your community, we've seen families cope through hard times and children thrive. Here are some of their stories; perhaps from homes in your town, village or even your street.



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Being a parent is not always easy!
Find support at
www.home-startbedfordshire.org.uk

There's No Place Like Home

1

As you will see, families are usually leading happy lives until a major event happens. Many of us rely on help from nearby friends or relatives. But without help, parents with young children often end up trapped in their own home.

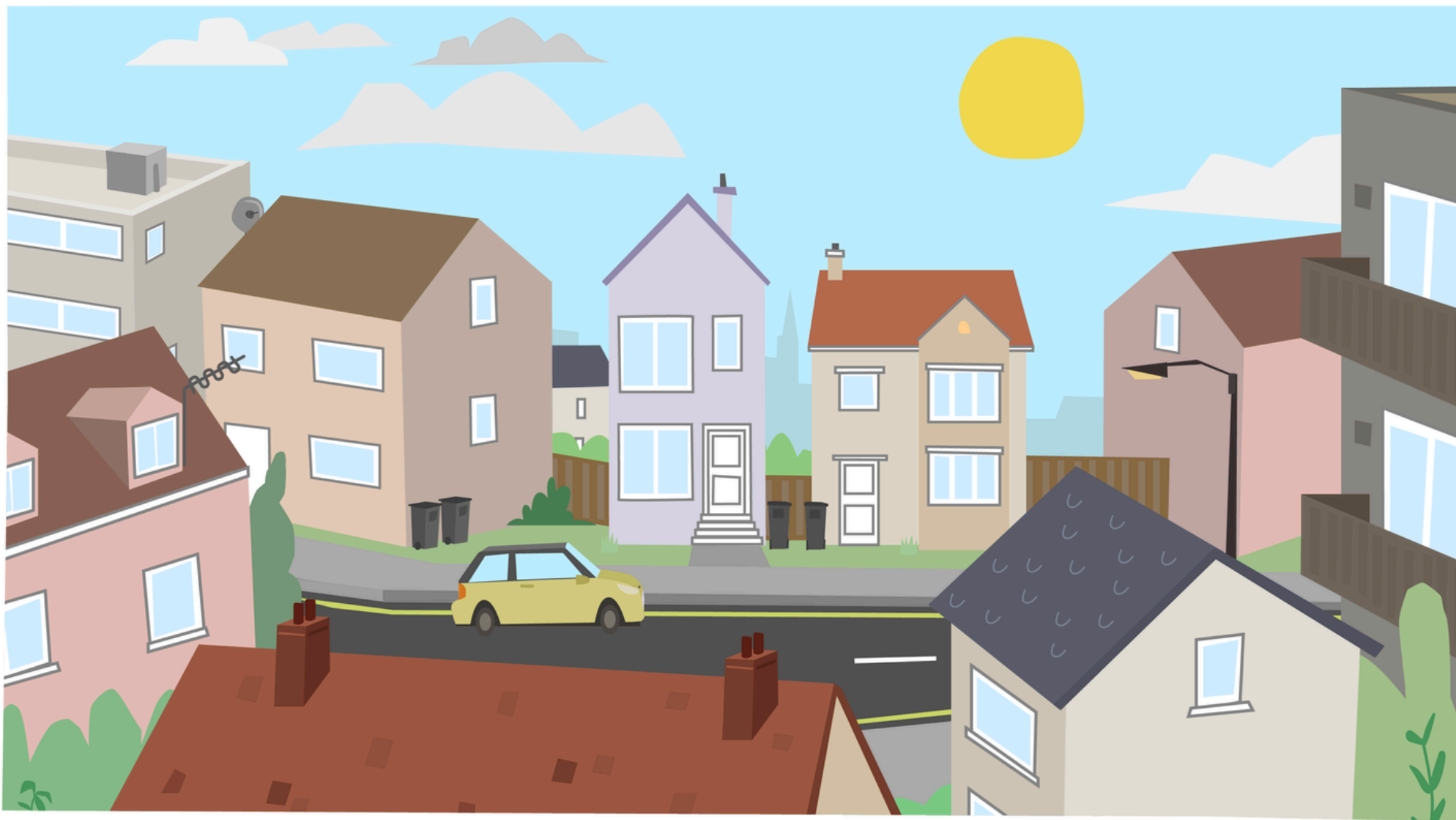
Home Visiting Service

Home-Start volunteers stand alongside parents during challenging times. Volunteers use their training and unique experiences of caring for children. They empower local families with authentic and effective support. Parents get the help they desperately need. Families become stronger. Children's early years are protected.

The service is for Central Bedfordshire families with at least one child under the age of five. It is free and confidential. You can contact us for home-visiting support. Help is both practical and emotional. It will be tailored to your family's needs. We also receive referrals from professionals such as health visitors, social care, children's centres and schools. This includes families where there's a 'child in need' or a child protection plan.

Last year* alone, **196 local families with 370 children** were referred for home-visiting support. Every child deserves the best start in life. When parents ask for help, we must listen. Because childhood cannot wait.





Lauren's Story

Life can be cruel. Just like us adults, children can be critically ill. No parent should struggle alone with their child's health. Especially, when they have the demands of other children. In these times, we all deserve a friendly face, a shoulder to cry on, and an extra pair of hands.

"I first got in contact with Home-Start after my son had finished chemotherapy and was starting immunotherapy. Chemotherapy had wiped his immune system so we were housebound most the time and very limited to where we could go.

I had also had a baby half way through my son's treatment so being stuck at home with a newborn and a three year old, who wanted my time was becoming difficult and extremely lonely.

Sandra used to come round once a week for two hours and would entertain my son while I could sort the baby out (who was very demanding and never napped for longer than 30 minutes). Sandra didn't just help out with the kids, she was a great support to me emotionally, having a cuppa and a chat with Sandra was all the therapy I needed sometimes most days she would lift my spirits and I would feel a whole lot happier by the time she left.

I will always be grateful for the time Sandra took to come and see each week, and she never let us down."

- A Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



Zahara's Story

Life can be unfair. Many families are facing multiple challenges, all at once. Both children and parents can suffer from disabilities. Families can become housebound. Children miss out on opportunities to play, learn and grow. We all deserve help to advocate for our children and access services.

"My twins were born 5 weeks early and my son was diagnosed with a rare genetic disorder. We belong to an Asian background. Our whole family lives in India and we hardly have a friends circle here... I was desperately in need of help. I am having a problem with my right arm and left leg. When my twins were 5 months old, their uncle in India met with an accident and my husband had to go to India... I was alone with my children and I couldn't bring my children up and down the stairs. I was stuck inside the house... My volunteer played a huge role in my life... I could now attend all my son's appointments and she helped me in finding a nursery... Her role was not limited to this only. She is my friend, philosopher, guide, mentor and a great supporter.

I couldn't have come through that dark phase of life without her support. We could go out of the house. I could take twins out for walk. I could do grocery shopping with the twins with her help. She helped me in attending so many doctors, physiotherapists and other appointments. Her visit gave me wings and I felt my freedom back again... I couldn't imagine my life without her. It made a major difference in our lives. It made me more independent."

- A Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



Amber's Story

Life can be complicated. Parents and infants share an important natural bond. Yet, mental illness can weaken these ties. When newborn parents struggle to cope, we must listen. Every parent and every child deserves early support in nurturing parent-child relationships.

"I started with my volunteer after being referred by my Health Visitor because I was struggling. I wasn't bonding with my new baby girl and I also found out I was suffering from depression and anxiety. She came and helped me with anything I needed doing like having a wash, tidying up at home, getting organised. Helping to bond with the kids and gain confidence as a parent and with going out as I couldn't with my anxiety. She helped me to eventually leave my house to go to a play group with my children which I know they loved.

Her support has been really helpful for both me and my husband. If I didn't have her I wouldn't have been able to cope a lot better with the kids on my own and leave home.

I felt like I learned a lot from her about how to be a mum and that no one's perfect and my best is good enough. That it's ok to struggle and breakdown but still find the strength to carry on. I am still struggling but I'm aware that there's hope and I feel more able so I shouldn't quit. Since she's left I'm a lot more aware of things so I don't panic as much. I can go out."

- A Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



As Safe As Houses

8

Many families live in harmful environments. This includes homes experiencing poverty or domestic abuse. Everyone deserves to feel safe and secure in their home.

Here, in Bedfordshire domestic abuse accounts for 16% of all crime annually [1]. However, this is just part of the picture. It is estimated that 80% of domestic abuse cases go unreported [2].

For every parent experiencing domestic abuse, there may one or more child victims. As many as 1 in 5 children in the UK are witness to or exposed to domestic abuse during childhood [3]. In fact, over half of the residents living in refuges are children [4].

Life can be distressing. Families are fleeing from their abuser. Sometimes with just the clothes on their backs. Now living in a refuge, they are starting from scratch. Understandably, this can be a traumatic time for both parents and children.





Alison's Story

Every parent and child deserves a life free from violence and abuse. That's why home-visiting volunteers support families with young children living in refuge. They provide some stability during an unstable time. This includes helping with the children, bringing some fun and joy, and helping families access what they need.

"So my family/household is me and my two sons. The eldest being 8 years old the youngest turning 1... We currently live in a refuge... The reason behind this is because I was being stalked where I previously lived which led to the stalker breaking in to my home. He was actually hiding in my cupboard when I came home one day and jumped out in an attempt to attack me. I was 4/5 months pregnant. I managed to run away with my son without being physically hurt. However the mental effects remain with me.

My volunteer from Home-Start has really helped me in attending multiple doctors appointments with me. Whether that's meant coming in with me or just waiting in the waiting room for me. I have since been diagnosed with PTSD and take medication to help me cope with my symptoms. I think without Erin I probably wouldn't have bothered going doctors. So she's been great with emotional support and practical. There's so much she helps with honestly. She helped me declutter the one bedroom flat I was staying in the refuge until moving [in] a two bedroom flat within the refuge... Erin was amazing... I've struggled getting my eldest to school since having my youngest and when Erin comes round it is a big help. The list goes on really."

- A Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



Erica's Story

Domestic abuse is damaging. Its impacts on adults and children are complex. They can be severe and long-lasting. Families who have escaped domestic abuse deserve compassionate, non-judgemental support.

"Due to stress my hair started to fall out, I became withdrawn, emotionally I was a mess. I wouldn't plan anything in the future because I believed that we might not be together for much longer. I couldn't see any way out and I was on the verge of giving up.

We discussed what was going on and how Home-Start could help. For me this was the part where I would sink or swim... But Becky has helped me so much more than that - with emotional support, round the house, helping with the kids, boosting my confidence and self-esteem. Helping me to be strong again. She made me feel like a person again and back to the old me. With Becky's help I feel like we began to swim. My children are so much happier than they were a year ago and they really are doing well. We are still in the process of getting help for my eldest to deal with his emotions and behaviour, but I can see that he has come a long way, we all have.

I think Home-start is invaluable and there is no price that can be put on the support that I have had from them. It is non-judgemental and helped me in the way that I needed. I can't thank you enough."

- A Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



Charlotte's Story

Life can be stressful. Most survivors of domestic abuse Home-Start volunteers supports live in regular accommodation. Many still suffer from the years of abuse. Often, they are juggling being a single parent alongside poor mental health and the court system. Every family deserves support to heal from trauma.

"I was just coming out of a very abusive marriage of 10 years, next to no support from family and trying to [keep] it together for the sake of my children... My confidence was next to nothing and the only thing I could focus on was making sure my children were fed, clean, had their basics, got to school on time, did their homework, had clean clothes... but inside I was worth nothing anymore...

The minute Abi came to our home, I felt at ease... It just wasn't with the children, which they adore her, even the older ones don't leave her alone, forever asking when Abi will be coming to see us. She continues to help me, mentally, (this is just a big thing, especially after the mental abuse I endured). She never looks down on me and her patience in when I'm speaking, is on another level...

Abi is forever coming up with ideas to keep them entertained...The little ones don't leave her alone. One of them will happily cuddle her the whole time and not let go. The adult conversation has helped me so much. I don't feel like I'm going crazy or that there is something wrong with me after the years of abuse. She helps me heal, a process I don't know how long will take, but she's very patient, caring and loving in the way she helps."

- A Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



Domestic Abuse Is Often A Hidden Crime

Find the hidden words...

PHYSICAL

CONTROL

EMOTIONAL

ABUSE

SEXUAL

STALKING

FINANCIAL

COERCIVE

RELATIONSHIP

C	N	F	I	N	A	N	C	I	A	L	P
E	O	E	M	N	I	M	O	D	K	I	N
M	M	E	I	G	R	V	P	A	H	R	L
O	J	Y	R	F	A	H	O	S	U	P	W
T	A	E	T	C	Y	S	N	K	S	A	F
I	P	C	E	S	I	O	H	E	T	D	L
O	U	R	I	K	I	V	C	S	A	T	O
N	A	C	S	T	A	W	E	A	L	Y	R
A	A	R	A	I	Z	X	P	L	K	C	T
L	S	L	A	E	U	O	O	E	I	I	N
S	E	I	C	A	C	L	E	S	N	A	O
R	A	R	L	A	B	U	S	E	G	E	C

Home Free?

17

As you've seen, life after domestic abuse does not always mean survivors are free from its impacts. In fact, too often their abuser still tries to control the family from a distance.

Own My Life

Own My Life is a free and confidential ten-week course. It educates and empowers women who have experienced domestic abuse. Helping them to recover, understand what has happened and spot abusive behaviours in relationships. Every survivor of abuse deserves to regain ownership of their own lives.

Own My Life is a safe space to help you discover your strengths and learn the skills to move forward in your life after abuse. If you'd like to attend, please get in touch. We also receive referrals from professionals including health visitors and social care.

Last year*, **32 local women with 51 children** attended Own My Life. Significant increases in emotional and physical health were reported.



"It's been an emotional roller coaster but it's been fantastic and very beneficial. I've learnt a lot about myself and it's helped me on my journey. Although every week has been extremely tough thinking and understanding what my relationship was, it's been empowering."

- An Own My Life Attendee.

"I would encourage anyone who has suffered from domestic abuse to complete this course, it has helped me understand my situation, my emotions and my journey so much better and the support from the course facilitators and the other ladies has been amazing. I feel really honoured to have been a part of it and feel it has really helped me with my progression."

- An Own My Life Attendee.





Home-School

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Prevention is the best solution to domestic abuse. As children grow their lives are mostly split between home and school. This period is an opportunity to teach them about healthy relationships.

Helping Hands Course

Helping Hands is a six-week course for children aged between 7 and 11. It is delivered for free in schools. During small group sessions, children learn how to keep safe, and better understand their right to a safe home environment. They learn to identify acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in themselves and others. This includes how to manage strong feelings and problem-solve without using violence. The course helps children to develop resilience and positive self-esteem.

Schools choose the students they believe would most benefit from the course. This could be for a variety of reasons, not limited to risks from unsafe home environments. Most children would benefit from the course.

Last year* **42 children** in local primary schools took part in the Helping Hands programme. The course is funded thanks to kind donations from our supporters.





"...Many children in school are showing increasing signs of anxiety, low self-esteem or attachment issues for many reasons. These sessions supported children to recognise key strategies for them to cope with whatever they are faced with, enabled them a designated person and safe space to talk each week and we have seen a lot more family members involving themselves with the strategies given and suggested which has opened more communication between parents and families..."

- Kensworth Primary School.

"Found feelings session fun. The Oh, oh signs were helpful, when I get these I know that I need to get help and with my Helping Hand I know who to go to."

- Child on the Helping Hands course.

"I enjoyed the keeping safe week, to know where to go and who to talk to."

- Child on the Helping Hands course.

"...They have all moved forward with their learning. In particular, our EAL boy has found a real enthusiasm for trying new things. One of our young carers is more able to cope with challenges and communicate her feelings"

- Laburnum Primary School.



SEND Help

24

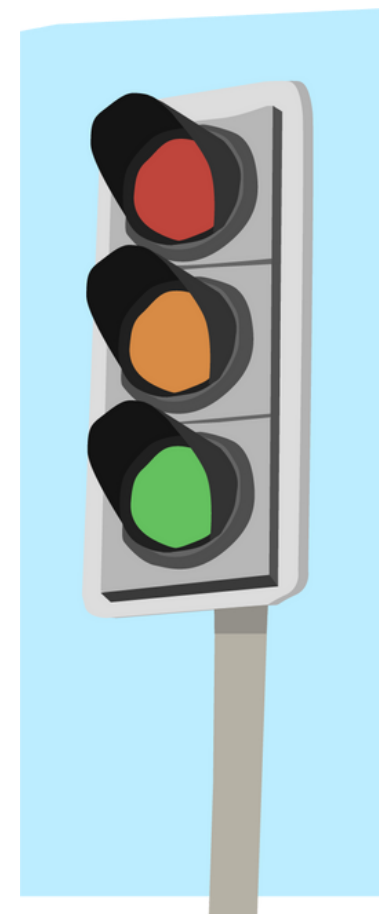
Raising a child with special educational needs or disabilities can be rewarding but overwhelming. Parents may not know where to get information, how to access services or simply what to do. They often have to advocate for their children to get help in their education. It can be a very stressful, lonely journey.

SEND Parent Mentors Service

Every child with SEND (or SEN) deserves support to progress in their education. All families with a SEND child deserve to be seen, heard and understood. That's why SEND Parent Mentors are here to help. They are volunteers who use their own experiences of parenting children with SEND. Mentors give one-to-one support to families with children (of any age) with additional needs.

If you'd like a SEND Parent Mentor, you can contact us. We also receive referrals from professionals including social care. Your child (or children) with additional needs can be of any age. A diagnosis is not needed to access this service. Support is free, confidential and tailored to your family's needs but could include emotional support, help and guidance with navigating the pathways to access services and further support.

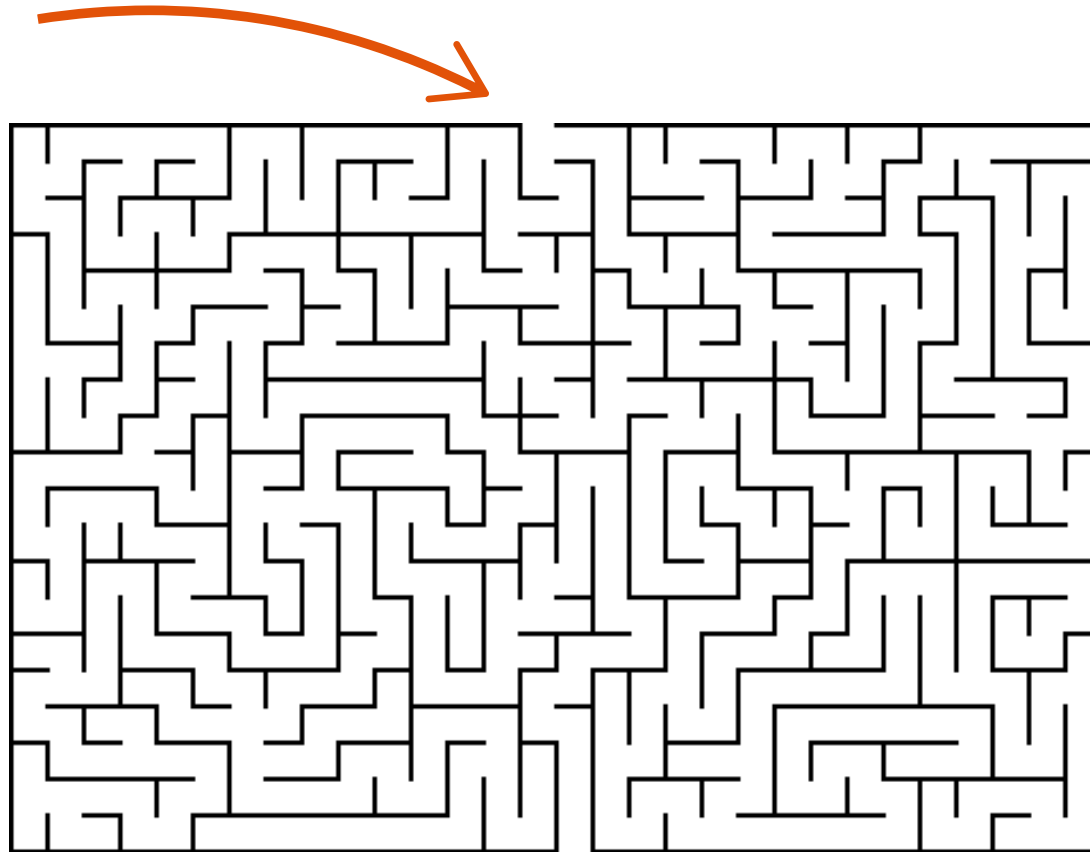
Last year* **96 local families with 188 children** were referred for SEND Parent Mentor support.



The SEND Journey Can Feel Like A Maze

Navigate your way through the following maze...

SEND
SUSPECTED SEND
DISABILITY



ADJUSTMENTS
SUPPORT
DIAGNOSIS

Sarah's Story

"I have 2 children with autism diagnoses, my son aged 6 years has an EHCP and is on a waiting list for a special school; my daughter is 8 years, and receives internal school adjustments but does not have an EHCP. I received an email from school with the Home-Start information and applied. When asked what area I was seeking support, I asked for help with formal processes and paperwork.

I was paired with Charlotte and had the best 6 weeks that covered so much more than I could have hoped to talk about. Each week we had a phone call, with the purpose of progressing my DLA applications and following up on my son's school place but our conversations always included how filling the forms out, or the chasing phone calls made you feel. Charlotte made me realise when I might feel sad after highlighting the worst days when completing forms, or how exhausting it is chasing information, and that this is all normal for parents with SEND children.

Charlotte helped me plan my tasks for the admin side of things, but mainly she understood what I was talking about and made me feel supported. And that support has made me much confident in moving forward, creating a place for my children to thrive."

- A SEND Parent Mentors Service Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



June's Story

"I can't tell you what an amazing thing this SEND mentoring is. I'm sure you both know what a lonely place it is for a send parent. Personally I am pretty much on my own with it all and like everyone else I am juggling all of life's other 'balls' too. Leia gave me the reassurance that I can do this. I just need the tools and gave me books and websites and groups to use.

It was also good to know that I am not the only one who is trying to fight the system to get help for my child. Although good is not the right word. None of it is good we shouldn't have to fight for our children to receive the education and understanding that they deserve.

My son is 17 and I had given up on helping him. Leia made me realise that I can't do that. If I don't fight for him who will!? She made me think positively again and I thank her for that. I don't feel alone anymore. Thank you both for your help in this journey/ battle. Hopefully future parents will have a smooth ride compared to a battle..."

- A SEND Parent Mentors Service Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



Experience Is The Best Teacher

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When we become parents, we aren't given a handbook. Simply, we all do the best we can with what we know. The truth is there is no such thing as the perfect parent. However, learning from the experiences of others certainly helps us on our journey.

Being A Parent Courses

Being A Parent courses are run online by volunteers who are parents themselves. Here, you can learn strategies for improving the quality of their interactions with your children, how to reduce negative child behaviour, and more. For parents of children with ASD or ADHD, we offer customised courses.

Being A Parent is developed by the Centre for Parent and Child Support, South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust. The courses are based on research and evidence showing significant impacts on children's social, emotional and behavioural results, parenting, family resilience and more.

Last year* **91 local parents of 137 children** attended a Being a Parent course. Attendance is free and confidential. If you want to increase your abilities and confidence in parenting, please get in touch to attend.



"I feel I am able to relate more to my daughter and feel able to better deal with her emotions and feelings."

- A Being A Parent Attendee.

"I have been on every ASD and parenting programme available, this has been the best so far. The facilitators really know the challenges of parenting as they have been there themselves which is refreshing from all other programmes."

- A Being A Parent (ASD) Attendee.

"It's been really useful to listen and to talk to other parents regarding experiences and techniques, so thank you for being part of our journey into ASD."

- A Being A Parent (ASD) Attendee.

"Best thing that ever happened to me. Made me realise how much I was getting wrong."

- A Being A Parent Attendee.

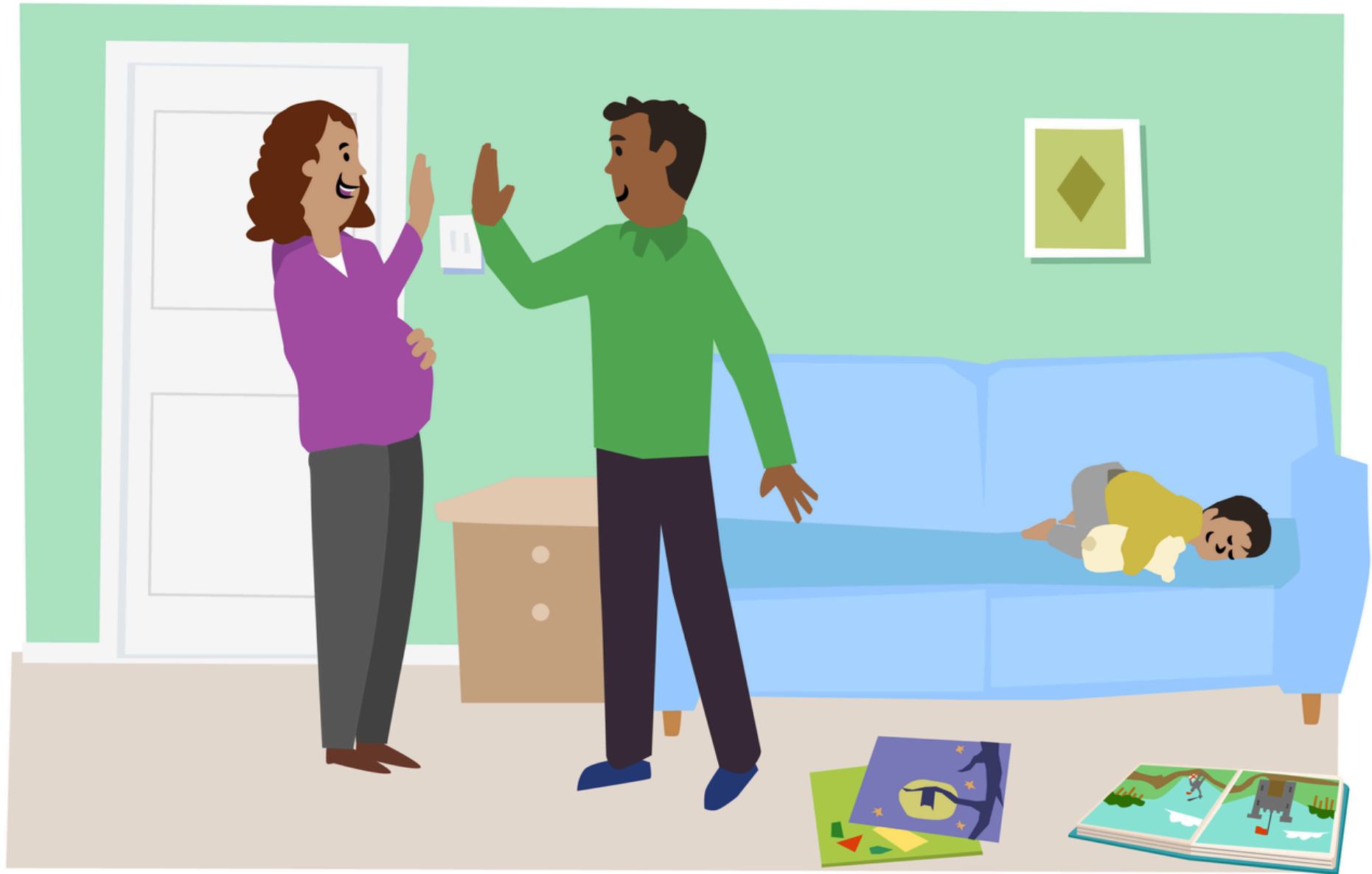
Tash's Story

"My husband and I signed up for the Being A Parent course as we were struggling to know what was the best approach for our toddler's behaviours. I am pregnant with our second baby. So we think it's important we're on the same page with how we parent our growing family.

To be honest, I wasn't expecting the course to be that great when it's free. Every parent should go on this, I haven't seen or heard what I learned elsewhere. We found the course really informative but also laid back. It was good to have a space where we could be honest about the difficulties of being a parent. The course leaders were really approachable and friendly. As they were also parents you could feel their genuine empathy. It's rare to find parenting advice you can trust, there's so much conflicting information out there.

We came away feeling stronger as parents knowing we had some helpful tools we could use now and as our children get older."

- A Being A Parent Attendee. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



The Home Team

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Volunteers supporting local families in their communities are the beating heart of Home-Start. The common ground they share is their compassion, training, and experience in caring for children.

Families benefit from support, as do volunteers in numerous ways. For example, many use volunteering as a way into work or education particularly in the fields of social care, nursing and midwifery. Equally, volunteers enjoy the social aspects and a sense of fulfilment.

As you've seen, we offer various volunteering opportunities for members of the community to get involved. This includes making the most of your valuable lived experiences as a home-visiting volunteer, running online parenting courses, or SEND mentoring via phone. If you'd like to help local parents give children the best start in life, please get in touch - visit www.home-startbedfordshire.org.uk





Jackie's Story

"When my first child was born, I suffered from post-natal depression. I went to the doctors and was prescribed anti-depressants. Due to the stigma of taking them, I decided against it. Instead, I stayed in the house for six months; during this time I felt lonely and silly about the way I was feeling. I thought I had a close group of friends. However, I soon realised they were only colleagues. They were not interested in a lady with a baby. With the help of toddler groups and coffee mornings, I soon found like-minded people. It was these people who supported and got me through my dark days.

Seven years later I had my third child. When she reached three years old, she got diagnosed with kidney disease. We spent many days and weeks backwards and forwards to hospitals, both local and in London. My boys often got left with family and friends. During this time, my oldest child's behaviour started to become challenging. He became angry and argumentative. My middle child grew to be insular; clinging to family members and not wanting to spend time with anyone else...

My daughter had her transplant, and things started to get less hectic. I felt like I wanted to do something positive for others in a similar situation. I soon decided to volunteer to make a difference in the lives of other local families. Home-Start gives them the support I wasn't fortunate enough to have..."

- A Home Visiting Volunteer. Names have been changed for confidentiality.



Since volunteering my confidence has grown significantly. Where I would sometimes struggle to make conversations, I have found I can now fill those awkward silences. It has also helped me to gain knowledge in Domestic Abuse and Child Protection. Most importantly, volunteering helps you realise that knowledge and skills you take for granted can empower others who are less fortunate."

- A Home Visiting Volunteer

"I spent a couple of years supporting a family where the mum suffered from severe depression and anxiety. She would not leave the house with her children and was adamant she would not send them to school as she was so fearful that they would be bullied. After some time, I managed to convince her to go and have a look at the local nursery. The day I accompanied her and she registered her children there, that was very inspiring as I knew that I had played a role in getting those children the opportunity to learn and develop. Seeing lives change and get better over time, that is so rewarding, knowing that you are making a difference just by being there for someone."

- A Home Visiting Volunteer

"I have really enjoyed meeting these wonderful mothers and grandmothers who are trying to do the best for these children and battling to get the help and support they need to ensure that they shine and grow to be talented and unique people that they are destined to be. If I can be just someone to share their triumphs and struggles with then I couldn't ask for more."

- A SEND Parent Mentor

Home Is Where The Heart Is

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A heartfelt thank you to our volunteers and trustees for giving your time and passion. With your support, we aim to see a Bedfordshire where every child has a safe and happy childhood.

On behalf of the families with young children supported by Home-Start services, we also give our deepest gratitude to our charity's funders, fundraisers and donors. You enable us to be there for parents when they need us most. The cost-of-living crisis continues to make life difficult for many families with young children. Our warmest thank you to the individuals and organisations who donated toys, books, laptops, and more.

Whilst there is a need for Home-Start, we can't stop. As we pass the 40-year milestone, we renew our unwavering commitment to nurturing children and supporting parents. Our charity will continue to be there for parents when they need us most because childhood can't wait.



"Really motivated by Dawn, she has a great personality, really positive, I admire her, she has told me to put my bad memories in a box and lock them away, accepting the past and moving on, trying not to let things from the past bother me. I am trying to be more assertive, saying no, putting words together without being rude. I am able to do stuff that I wasn't able to do before. I enjoy doing things with kids. The kids enjoy talking to her, she pushes them educationally, because of Dawn saying to praise our son that had anxiety he is better, this has gone down, more confident. Our daughter refused to speak to start, now speaking, doing better at school."

- A Home-Start Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.

"Thank you so much for the blanket. We received it in the post yesterday. I let Jack open it and he was so excited to put the blanket on his bed. He is very interested in pirates and treasure maps so the design was perfect for him. It looked even better than I had pictured it to be."

- A Home-Start Bedfordshire Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.

"I am so very grateful for the support that Julie has provided and she has honestly been amazing. I look forward to our catch ups as she has been kind, supporting, caring, had a wonderful ear for me to babble to. I must admit that I will really miss her contact."

- A SEND Family. Names have been changed for confidentiality.

Right now, in Bedfordshire, many families with young children struggle alone with mental ill health, sickness, bereavement, disabilities and additional needs, domestic abuse, poverty, and more. Together, we can support these families to see a Bedfordshire where all our children have a safe and happy childhood.

Volunteer / Donate / Get Support

Visit: www.home-startbedfordshire.org.uk

Stats & Sources

**Between 31st March 2024 - April 1st 2025.*

[1] Bedfordshire Police 2020/21, [2] National Centre For Domestic Violence, [3] NSPCC, [4] Women's Aid.



**Standing alongside local parents
because childhood can't wait.**



Home-Start Bedfordshire

www.home-startbedfordshire.org.uk

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