

# Becoming Families:

## The creation, growth and impact of a local perinatal education and wellbeing service

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Like many great ideas, the seed for Becoming Families was sown over coffee at the kitchen table. It was 2011 - we had recently qualified as antenatal teachers having trained with a large national charity, but were finding that working within its organisational constraints did not afford us the autonomy and flexibility that we wanted. With goals initially no greater than to provide local, personalised antenatal education that was affordable and accessible, we began running stand-alone birth preparation workshops at a local Children's Centre, under the name of 'Birth Choices Worcestershire', Worcestershire being the county in the west of England where we both live. We could not have predicted that in just a few short years we would be running Becoming Families, a charity that supports over 300 local families a year from pregnancy through the first two years.

**KEY WORDS:** antenatal education, support, parents, continuity, parental mental health, charity



A combination of circumstances provided the conditions from which Becoming Families grew. By 2018, we were a respected, well-known provider of antenatal courses locally and our service users were asking for a continuation of services into the postnatal period. Concurrently, statutory services were being eroded through cuts and restructuring, opening a gap in provision which we felt well placed to fill. We operated as a Community Interest Company (CIC) for three years, after which we decided to convert to a Charity: firstly, to access funding which we had found limited as a CIC; secondly, as we were increasingly relied upon by

the community, we felt a responsibility to become a sustainable, accountable service that would continue beyond our own involvement, hopefully for decades to come.

Our team has expanded in response to increased demand for our services and currently consists of six self-employed educators and wellbeing practitioners, five peer support volunteers and several additional volunteers providing social media, fundraising and auxiliary support. All our volunteers are previous service users thus ensuring that our ethos is maintained.

We offer a range of educational and support services across the pregnancy and postnatal period:

Pregnancy Services	Postnatal Services
Antenatal Courses Breastfeeding Workshops Homebirth Workshops Pregnancy Yoga	Baby Massage Baby Yoga Postnatal Yoga Motherwise (New Mums' Course) Drop in Groups Dads' Stay & Play Pelvic Health Workshops Infant First Aid Awareness
Pregnancy Wellbeing Support Groups	Postnatal Wellbeing Support Groups Online Mental Health Course Dadwise (New Fathers' Support Group) Single Sex Partners' Support Group
One to One Wellbeing Support Sessions	

### OUR AIMS

The first 1001 days of a child's life, from pregnancy to age two, are recognised as a critical developmental phase, laying the foundations for future health, learning and wellbeing (NICE, 2016). Babies' brains are shaped by their experiences and therefore, the environment into which they are born and spend their early years, and particularly the parent- infant relationship, have a significant impact (Gerhardt, 2025; Balbernie, 2013). Poor mental health impacts a parent's capacity to provide sensitive caregiving and emotional availability (Bernard et al., 2018; DeFalco et al., 2014) through which secure infant attachments develop (Bowlby, 1988). It is therefore imperative to support parents in order that they can provide the best possible environment for their babies to thrive.

Our aims are:

- to promote parental, infant and family wellbeing through the provision of education and support across the perinatal period;
- to enable babies to have the best possible start by protecting parental mental health and promoting positive parent-infant relationships.

In order to provide a safe, nurturing environment, parents need access to reliable, evidence-based information about infant care and development, coupled with compassionate support as they negotiate their way through their own unique transition to parenthood.

### EDUCATION

In the digital age, parents are bombarded with information of variable quality and reliability, often conflicting, and generally driven by a consumerist market. Becoming Families aims to be a reliable source of evidence-based, up to date information across the 1001 days, enabling parents to make informed decisions.

This begins in pregnancy through our antenatal courses and pregnancy yoga classes and is important as perceived autonomy is a significant factor in women's perceptions of their birth experience (Bell & Anderson, 2016) with profound consequences for maternal mental health and the maternal-infant bond. A good birth experience can impact new mothers' self-esteem, assist a positive regard for their baby and a smoother adjustment to motherhood, all of which in turn predict maternal caregiving behaviours (Reisz et al., 2015). Fathers, too, experience an easier transition to parenthood if they are fully included in the antenatal period and have an identifiable role (Machin, 2018).

Once babies are born, education continues more informally, with each group or course that we run offering opportunities to share knowledge around infant needs and development and aiming to manage parents' expectations of normal baby behaviours.

Realistic expectations increase parental self-efficacy and confidence and are protective of mental health (Henderson et al., 2016; Fahey, 2013). Our practitioners are skilled at facilitating discussions around baby care issues that commonly cause anxiety and worry, such as infant sleep, crying and feeding, and at supporting parents as they find their own way with their baby.

Understanding the unique vulnerabilities of new parents is imperative when delivering services to this community, and the real skill is in providing education and information without adding to the pressures and judgement new parents are often highly sensitive to. We are able to achieve this by providing continuity of services so that parents develop a trusting relationship with our practitioners over time and receive consistent, evidence-informed messages about infant development. We continually strive as an organisation to meet each parent where they are on their parenting journey, without judgement, and respectful of all the factors that impact their choices.

### SUPPORT

Becoming a parent is a time of unprecedented change and development, forcing adaptations not only in lifestyle, but also emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. Parents may be confronted, perhaps for the first time, with their 'ghosts in the nursery' (Fraiberg et al., 1975) as caring for their baby elicits emotions and reflections about their own experiences of being parented. There are hormonal shifts and a seismic reworking of identity and responsibilities that impact sense of self and relationships. Couples commonly experience significant relationship challenges (Leonhardt et al., 2021) and must adapt to changing dynamics with wider family members and peers.

Becoming Families supports new parents as they negotiate the changes and challenges of the perinatal period. Our practitioners have a sound understanding of the transition to parenthood and are highly skilled at creating safe spaces where parents feel nurtured, respected, and accepted. Every contact with a parent is, therefore, an opportunity to offer support to those who may be struggling with being a parent.

New parents are increasingly isolated from the community and family support that previous generations benefitted from, as families are geographically dispersed and/or grandparents are less available due to remaining economically active much later in life. The courses and groups that we provide offer multiple opportunities for parents to develop friendships and peer support, and the sense of community that our service-users find is one of the key elements of our effectiveness. Within groups, parents can grow in self-esteem and confidence and develop

sensitive parenting skills (Celebi, 2017). Groups have also been identified as an effective intervention for postnatal depression and anxiety (Gillis & Parish, 2019). Repeatedly, we see antenatal groups bond and move through their parenting journeys together; new parents develop solid and enduring friendships through our postnatal groups and courses.

#### BECOMING FAMILIES' CORE VALUES:

- **Education** - we believe that providing quality, evidence-based education enables parents to make informed choices about birth and parenting.
- **Support** - we provide a relaxed, safe and nurturing environment to support parents in their journeys, and facilitate the development of peer relationships.
- **Respect** - we believe that informed adults make choices that are right for themselves and their families.
- **Nurture** - we believe that new parents need to be nurtured in order to nurture their infants.

#### PROMOTING PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH

New parents are at increased risk of poor mental health. Statistics commonly report that 20% of new mothers (RCOG, 2017) and 10% of new fathers (Williams, 2020) experience depression, anxiety or other mental health disorders in the perinatal period. However, those working with new parents recognise that many more are struggling than the official figures capture, including those who do not seek support (which, in our experience, includes a significant number of fathers and partners) and those who do not meet clinical thresholds for statutory intervention.

The implications of poor parental mental health are multi-faceted. Suicide is the leading cause of maternal death in the first postnatal year (Felker et al., 2024) and remains the leading cause of death in men under 50, with increased risk during the perinatal period (Williams, 2020). Mental illness contributes to family breakdown, which impacts outcomes for children. Poor parental mental health directly affects infant development (Glover, 2015), with consequences lasting into adolescence and even multi-generationally (Myers & Johns, 2018). The economic cost of poor parental mental health is staggering - an estimated £8.1 billion for each annual birth cohort (Public Health England, 2021). The importance of protecting parental mental health is, therefore, clear.

At Becoming Families, new parents find community, peer support and friendship, which normalises and validates their experiences and feelings, and provides a space in which to explore them and thereby prevent mental health decline. We also offer groups and one-to-one sessions for those who need additional support with their mental health. Services are easily accessible as parents can self-refer to our Pregnancy

#### FEEDBACK FROM BECOMING FAMILIES' CLIENTS

In bringing families together, a village of support has been created, not only for me, but for my partner and children too.

Navigating parenting in a world full of noise from social media and bombardment from conflicting information is a challenge. Becoming Families has helped me to filter this and been a consistent source of up-to-date and reliable information and education.

Becoming Families is so special because they have provided me with consistent and reliable continuity of care throughout every stage of my family's journey.

It is a safe space to openly talk about my concerns and mental health without feeling judged. It is refreshing to be around other mums who are feeling the same. It has made me feel a lot less isolated.

Without these sessions, and the postnatal wellbeing group, I know that my already fragile mental health would have worsened significantly.

The group enabled me to process experiences and feelings and share how I was feeling in a safe space. There wasn't anywhere else I felt I could share such things. Without it, I don't know how I would have got through the early days of being a mum. As time progresses, knowing the group is there as a support through the various challenges that come about is so comforting.

This group has been a huge support to me and I have felt safe enough to disclose things I haven't told my closest friends and family and I am grateful to have been able to access this amazing service. Without this group, I would have definitely been more unwell and for a longer time.

Little did I know, walking through the door for my first antenatal class, that this would be the first of many years of classes, groups and events, and that 5 years and 2 children later, I would still be walking through that very same door for weekly drop-in groups!

Wellbeing Support Group, our Postnatal Wellbeing Support Group, our support groups for fathers and partners, and to our flexible one-to-one support sessions. Our support groups are facilitated by appropriately qualified practitioners and trained volunteers with lived experience and our one-to-one support sessions are led by a perinatal wellbeing specialist. Clients are made aware that our wellbeing services are not formal counselling or therapy. Although we are not obligated to adhere to a

regulatory body, our processes are informed by guidance issued by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), and our perinatal specialist receives regular clinical supervision. We have developed excellent working relationships with statutory mental health care providers including our local Perinatal Mental Health Teams and specialist Parent-Infant Service. We have robust signposting pathways to ensure parents receive the most suitable care when their needs exceed our level of expertise and can support families through the referral process. A strong commitment to safe practice is imperative when working with such a vulnerable population.

### **IMPACT**

Measuring our impact is challenging as we do not offer a fixed intervention with a clear beginning and end. Metrics to evaluate services - given the complexities of the perinatal period - go only a little way to demonstrate the value of what we provide. Whilst we collate some quantitative data to satisfy funders, the depth of our impact is far more eloquently highlighted in the feedback from our families.

Many families return to us when they have their second or third babies. They feel safe with us, and we provide continuity of support as they move into their next parenting stage. We are, therefore, in the privileged position of being able to see the impact we have in real time over a period of several years. And this continually informs our development.

One of the most enduring impacts of Becoming Families is the creation of micro-communities within the local childbearing population. We regularly receive updates, stories and photographs from groups that came together through Becoming Families, as they celebrate parenting milestones together. The benefits of peer support continue far beyond the critical 1001 days and parents' engagement with us.

#### **IMPACT OF BECOMING FAMILIES**

- Improved parental self-efficacy and confidence
- Improved parent-infant relationships
- Reduced isolation
- Improved parental mental health and wellbeing
- Safeguarding of couples' relationships with each other and with family
- Reduction of pressure on statutory services
- Development of peer groups, friendships and communities that provide ongoing support

### **CHALLENGES**

It has been a steep learning curve since establishing Becoming Families as a charity three years ago.

- At the start of our journey, the administrative challenges came as a surprise and brought some frustration. For example, we were unprepared for the time we would need to

find a bank willing to take on a new charity. Since our inception, the administrative demands have increased exponentially.

- We have had to educate ourselves in aspects of charitable law and learn how to keep accounts that meet our accountant's requirements for compiling end-of-year reports.
- The challenge of securing funding is continual. Compiling reports and providing evidence for funders that we have spent their money appropriately have proved unexpectedly time-consuming. The importance of building relationships with funders and establishing a reputation as a reliable organisation are now priorities for us. We generate a small amount of revenue from antenatal course fees but rely primarily on funding to run services that are free at the point of access. Funding to date has been on a short-term, project basis, meaning that the core costs of running the charity are not covered. The need for continual fundraising outside of funding bids is, therefore, essential to the sustainability of Becoming Families, meaning significant additional work.
- As our team has grown, so has the need to provide support, supervision and professional development opportunities for our practitioners and volunteers. We are currently working towards a sustainable financial model that ensures the time required for these essential activities can be appropriately remunerated.

### **THE FUTURE**

Each of our services has developed in response to consultation with our community. Future plans include providing services for younger parents (18-25), support around baby loss, and workshops for grandparents. We anticipate growth in the number of our team and in the geographical area we cover. We acknowledge that our current demographic is largely white, educated professionals, and are keen to improve inclusivity by expanding into culturally diverse areas and providing services that are easy to access for people without having to travel. As we continue to grow and develop, we are driven by the importance of remaining authentic and serving the families within our community. This means ensuring that all services are responsive to need rather than developed on a commercial basis. We are, therefore, navigating on the one hand the need to generate revenue to sustain the charity and on the other, our commitment not to become part of a market that preys on the vulnerabilities of new parents.

From its foundation, running Becoming Families has been a little like becoming a parent for the first time! There has been a lot of 'learning on the job', trial and error, and





*The Becoming Families community*

numerous decisions to make. Bringing Becoming Families into the world has been accompanied by a huge sense of responsibility and a desire to nurture an organisation that will one day operate independently of us, its metaphorical parents. As we move out of our early years and embrace all the challenges future stages will bring, we maintain focus and momentum by staying firmly connected to our ethos. Becoming Families is a local charity, rooted in, informed and driven by its community, for the benefit of local infants, parents and families.

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