

# Community Mothers

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*This extract is from a report of a seven year follow-up study of mothers and children who participated in the Community Mothers Programme (CMP) in Ireland.\* The CMP is a home visiting support programme for first time (and some second time) parents of children aged 0 to 24 months who live in mainly disadvantaged areas. The programme aims to support and aid the development of parenting skills, thereby enhancing parents' confidence and self-esteem. It is delivered by non-professional volunteer mothers known as Community Mothers, who are trained and supported by Family Development Nurses.*

Over half the Community Mothers gave altruistic reasons as their motive for joining the Programme, with only a small minority giving personal gain as their main reason for joining. This need to help others appears to be rooted in culture, tradition and in working class experience and involves caring based on empathy rather than on doing good.

The majority of the Community Mothers were supported in their volunteering by husbands, children, relatives and friends who could see the value of helping others and who also

felt that the Community Mother might have a need for developing an identity outside of the home. The Programme appeared to be mobilising not only the 'natural helpers' but also new helpers who, through their involvement in the Programme, felt confident about getting involved in other community endeavours.

A number of Community Mothers mentioned how they felt when they were first time parents; they remembered the difficulties they experienced in bringing up their own

children and the loneliness and isolation they had felt at this time. For those Community Mothers who talked about the need to meet people, or who said they had time to spare, or who identified with the aims of the Programme, there was also an expressed desire for independence that comes through participation in the Programme. They were often looking for a sense of personal identity outside of their home and family, so that participation could function as a diversion or a therapy. As a person with such a need said,

*I was busy at home but I wasn't meeting anybody. My life wasn't going anywhere and I had lost my self-confidence. I wanted to meet people.*

A number of parents who had themselves been visited later became Community Mothers because they were motivated by a desire to help others in the same way that they felt helped. As one such woman commented:

*I had the Programme myself and I liked getting praise for the things I did even when nobody else praised me.*

*I decided that other people should get the same, so the reason I am involved is to give back what I got out of it.*

The Community Mothers saw themselves relating to parents as 'ordinary' women and not as 'mini professionals'. Being able to share their own difficulties in rearing their own children with the Programme parents may be another factor in the development of a positive relationship because Community Mothers, unlike professionals, do not have to remain objective with families. As one Community Mother commented:

*You can understand when the mother says, 'I feel like strangling her.' You can say, 'Yes I know. I have felt like that myself.'*

Involvement in the programme affected the Community Mothers in several ways. They had developed friendships with their colleagues, the social milieu of the project being a source of benefit. For a minority, their relationship with their husband had improved, with the relationship now being felt to be more respectful with more open communication. Three-quarters of the

Community Mothers stated that their relationship with their children had improved because they were now more aware of their children's needs, listened to them more, understood them better and had more patience with them.

The majority of Community Mothers also noticed differences in themselves, particularly increased self-confidence and greater self-worth. This appeared to be related to the acquisition of new knowledge and the development of socially useful skills. It also appeared to be related to the role of women in society with housewives seeing themselves as having low status. Over half stated that they now felt more in control of their lives, that they could now deal with those in authority better because of increased self-confidence and knowledge, and that they felt they now had more power in relation to their community and they could influence the community in their role as a Community Mother. Only a minority felt the need to get involved in pressure groups and/or political organisations.

The volunteers in the Programme are all mothers. One school of thought sees

this as negative. They would see women as being asked to shoulder the main burden of care within the community both as kin and as volunteers. Others would argue that community action is an area particularly central in the struggle for women's emancipation and would stress not only the possibility of achieving specific targets but also the importance of process. In becoming involved with community action, women begin to challenge not only the social definitions of their role but also internalised perceptions that may serve to limit their self-expectations. So it could be argued that women's voluntary action is motivated by a feminist awareness and is the creator of a wider awareness. ○

\* Molloy B (2002), *Still going strong: a tracer study of the Community Mothers Programme, Dublin, Ireland, Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections No. 17* (see page 59).



*A young mother learning in her own home*