

Briefing paper

Reaching out to families with disabled children

What's the issue?

Families with disabled children might not use a children's centre because:

- they may not think the service is aimed at them and therefore don't think their needs will be understood or met
- some parents may not trust mainstream services because of bad experiences in the past
- parents may not want to speak to someone who is not familiar with their child's disability particularly if the condition is rare.
- both parent and child are nervous about going into a new situation, where they don't know anyone, and they don't know about the disability (e.g. speech & language difficulties which impacts on being able to express yourself, following instructions, interacting with peers).

For many families simply getting out of the house is a major challenge, often because parents are too busy or tired from their caring responsibilities, some need transport to access even very local facilities. Others maybe worried about the attitude of other parents and children using the children's centre particularly if the child has challenging or different behaviour.

Children's centres are struggling to attract families with disabled children usually because they:

- do not have the links with the specialist organisations and services that families use
- aren't in contact with professionals that families are in contact with
- don't offer the type of services/activities families can access
- are unsure where local families live or understand the impact of disability and caring

Ideas for attracting families to your children's centre

Organise information days – try inviting different services from across your local area, for example, the Family Information Service, Speech and Language therapists and the At Home Care Service. This is a great way for parents to engage with a variety of services (and also for professionals to get to know one another). Make it fun by offering face painting and goody bags for the children. Provide lunch and pamper sessions so parents can relax and socialise too.

Themed workshops on topics that parents need help with e.g. sleeping, challenging behaviour. These could be advertise through local support groups or via your local authority disability register such often send newsletters out to local families.

Offer advice/drop in session – for example, family support workers and volunteer parent representatives from Contact a Family are based at various children's centres across England. They offer practical and emotional support such as help with benefits. They help parents feel welcome and introduce families to other services offered at the centre.

Invite a parent support groups to use your centre to host their meetings and **involve** parents in planning the type of services your offer.

Linking up with child development centres, special schools, parent partnerships, and specialist agencies/professionals (e.g. therapists, wheelchair services, incontinence) etc.

This will help to raise your profile and spread your message about what you offer. Families tell us they feel more confident about using a children's centre if a professional they are familiar with introduces them to their local children's centre such as portage.

Your **outreach workers** will have a key role in identifying local families especially those ones not already access services. When trying to reach out to Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) families with disabled children making links with community groups can be a good method.

Contact a Family can provide:

- a resource pack of all our guides so parents can see you have information relevant to them available.
- free online access to our directory so families and professionals using your centres get get medical information and details of condition support groups
- the designer children's centre, a workshop to help children centres involve parents in planning services
- group action packs on starting a parent support group, reaching out to BME families and fathers.

Sources of support:

Contacts	What can be offered
Child development teams www.bacdis.org.uk or ask local PCT	Assess and support disabled children where input is needed from more than one health professional. They are likely to know about sources of support, such as parent groups, specialist playgroups. They might help you reach out to families with disabled children living in your area
Parent partnership schemes Tel 020 7843 6058 www.parentpartnership.org.uk	A local statutory services offering information, advice and support for parents of children and young people with additional needs to help them access educational support
Carers UK http://www.carersuk.org/Information/Findinghelp/LocalOrganisations	Details of local carers organisations
Contact a Family Tel: 0808 808 3555 www.cafamily.org.uk	Holds a comprehensive and regularly updated database of national and local organisation that support families with disabled children. Includes details of local parent support groups that can be a good way of contacting parents.
Contact a Family local support Tel: 0808 808 3555 www.cafamily.org.uk/cafiya	Contact a Family has offices, family support workers and volunteer parent representatives in some areas of the UK . They can provide a listening ear and signpost families to other local support including parent groups.

This is one of a series of briefing papers to help children's centres and family information services begin to support families of disabled children on specific issues. You can browse all of these at <http://www.cafamily.org.uk/childcentres.html>

To find out more about how the children's centre team at Contact can help please contact: Karen Robinson, Senior Children's Centre Adviser tel: 01706 220578 e-mail: karen.robinson@cafamily.org.uk