Volunteering in Children’s Centres:
Results from a volunteer questionnaire survey carried out by 4Children for Family Lives

*Instructions not included*
Increasingly children’s centres are seeking to engage volunteers to help with a range of activities that take place at their centres. The coalition government is in clear support of this development. They want to see much greater involvement of the voluntary and community sector in children’s centres, as they can play a vital role in strengthening families and communities.

Volunteering in Children’s Centres

A Family Lives/4Children Survey

This report presents the findings of a volunteering questionnaire survey that was carried out by 4Children on behalf on Family Lives, during the summer of 2011. 181 children’s centres across the United Kingdom took part.

At present, volunteers in children’s centres can be engaged in all sorts of roles, from simply providing refreshments at a parent and toddler group each week, to undertaking more involved roles such as becoming a parent mentor, doing home visits or contributing to the running of the centre. The diversity of volunteering roles will have implications for the kinds of support they may need: from when they first begin to further on as they progress.

Our survey results describe the ways in which volunteers are participating at children’s centres:

- What kinds of activities they are doing
- How they are recruited
- What types of training they currently receive.

Using key case studies from parents who are currently volunteering, this report highlights some of the innovative ways in which children’s centres are engaging volunteers and describes the benefits for both the centre and the volunteers themselves. This report also identifies the current gaps in training and what children’s centre managers need to improve their services.

“Karen is a mum of twins and is the co-facilitator of our twins club. As a parent of twins herself Karen knows all the issues and she is really confident in her parenting message. Our parents really listen to her advice.”

Louise, a Children’s Centre Manager taking about Karen, a parent volunteer

Key Findings and Recommendations:

- Volunteering in children’s centres is widespread. In our survey 87% of children’s centres are currently using volunteers to run services. Typically children’s centres have 3 or more volunteers engaged in different activities, highlighting the fact that volunteers are becoming integral to service delivery.

- Volunteers are engaged in a range of activities at children’s centres. The most popular are: stay and play groups for children; participating in children’s centre governance and specialist groups such as breastfeeding support and healthy cooking.

- Parenting and relationship support is not generally provided by volunteers in children’s centres. We recommend that the government should engage the voluntary sector to provide resources and training to help develop these services in children’s centres.

- Training for volunteers is mostly conducted ‘in-house’ and is not generally accredited at present. Only 26% of volunteer training is accredited. We recommend that Children’s Centres should consider prioritising making provisions for volunteers to undergo accredited training programmes. Government should look to support this work in line with its national focus on increasing volunteering and helping people back into the workplace. Accredited training for volunteers is essential for ensuring quality and driving up standards.
There is a clear need for more support for managing volunteers. Over two thirds of centres surveyed stated they would like more information on case studies and evidence of what works when supporting family support volunteers. Government should facilitate the sharing of good practice in volunteering amongst the voluntary sector. **We recommend that the government and voluntary sector develop ‘information hubs’ to support best practice.**
Volunteering in UK Children’s Centres

This report presents the results of a volunteer questionnaire conducted by 4Children for Family Lives during the summer of 2011. 181 Children’s Centres, across the UK took part.

Patterns of Volunteer Participation

Use of volunteers in UK Children’s Centres

From our survey sample, it is evident that the vast majority of children’s centres are using, or have used volunteers in the past. Currently 87% of children’s centres are using volunteers, rising to over 90% of centres that have used or are currently using volunteers in their children’s centre.

For the children’s centres that had never used volunteers, the biggest issue was a lack of capacity in their centre, but a number of centres also responded that they lacked the confidence or didn’t have the knowledge to work with volunteers. A lack of capacity was also the most cited reason for centres which had stopped using volunteers.

Length of participation

Children’s centres typically use 3 volunteers at any one time and on average volunteers work for 4 hours per week. Children’s centres currently have good rates of retention, with the overwhelming majority of volunteers (88%) participating for at least six months, with some 38% participating for a year or more.

How long do volunteers participate?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 6 months</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Up to one year</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One year or more</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

“I was apprehensive about going to a group with my daughter – I didn’t know anyone and felt there may be an age gap between me and other parents. I heard about the befriending service and emailed the Children’s Centre. A worker there listened to my concern and introduced me to a befriender.”

A parent supported
Recruitment

Typically children’s centres recruit volunteers from parents who are using or have used the services of the children’s centre itself. 86% of children’s centres had recruited volunteers this way and this was by far the most common form of recruitment. Some 64% of centres said that they had recruited students on placements or work experience and just over a quarter (26%) of the survey respondents reported having recruited from a local volunteer bureau. 20% of centres also found volunteers through links with job centres.

Volunteer Activities

Volunteers can be involved in a range of activities and carry out a number of different roles within children’s centres. These tasks can range from helping in the nursery, office or existing groups based at the centre, to conducting outreach work, home visiting and sitting on Parent’s governance boards. We asked children’s centres what kinds of activities their volunteers were involved in. From our survey data, we found that the majority of children’s centres had volunteers helping with ‘stay and play’ and other centre-based groups.

Just less than three quarters of centres had parents represented on centre management or parents’ board groups, highlighting that volunteers are actively participating in the governance of children’s centres.

“I was a jack the lad, left school with no qualifications and thought everyone was against me, it wasn’t until I had my baby son that I came into the Centre and started chatting to the staff, they asked me what I liked doing and suggested that I might want to volunteer to teach dance, that was the turning point, and I haven’t looked back since’

Leon, a parent volunteer teaching street dance
Support Groups in Children’s Centres

For the children’s centres who stated that they used volunteers for groups at their centre, nearly two thirds held breastfeeding support groups. Roughly a third of all centres held groups to promote healthy cooking; Dads’ support groups and groups for teenage parents. In the category denoted ‘other’, a range of innovative or more specialist groups are currently being held at children’s centres. For instance, a few centres use volunteers to provide music groups, toddler groups and creative art and craft clubs. One centre used volunteers to create a group specifically for Polish parents.

Parenting Support in Children’s Centres

We did not find significant evidence that children’s centres are actively using volunteers to provide peer-led parenting and/or relationship support. In our survey only 3 centres used volunteers to help other parents with parenting or couples support.

The range of activities in Children’s Centres

We find evidence that volunteers are participating in a range activities at children’s centres. Nearly 70% of children’s centres used volunteers for 3 to 5 different activities, suggesting that volunteers are actively being engaged across children’s centres and becoming integral to service delivery.

“I have had lots of positive feedback, cards and letters thanking me for the help I’ve given. A lot of mums would have given up breast feeding after a couple of attempts and given their babies the bottle, but with my support and help they have continued to breast feed past 6 weeks. I’ve made lots of new friends and have a strong support network, plus it’s another string to my bow. It also encourages new mums to think about becoming breast feeding support peers.”

Alice, a parent volunteer supporting breastfeeding
Case Study

“We are quite new to volunteering. We placed an advert in our Christmas newsletter for volunteers to come and help in our centre. We decided to advertise for quite specific roles as we really wanted volunteers to fit in with our service delivery plan.

Two parents became our parent volunteers. The first, Carole, has a child at infant school and a baby. Carole was looking to build up some skills with a view to going back to work. She works a few hours once every two weeks in our office doing general admin which gives her a chance to dip her finger back into the workplace environment. Carole is an invaluable help to our children’s centre; it is such a benefit to know that Carole can be there to help out when the Children’s Centre is really busy and when our administrator has limited hours in which to get all the tasks done. She has been a brilliant support.

The other parent, Karen, is a mum of twins and is the co-facilitator of our twins club. As a parent of twins herself Karen knows all the issues and she is really confident in her parenting message. Our parents really listen to her advice. Although our centre play workers are always there too, she has unique insights that come from having been there and done that! Karen also acts as a parent befriender and mentor. Parents really feel comfortable coming to the centre knowing that they know her and she will introduce them to other parents. She is brilliant at it!

All of our volunteers get an induction training session which covers professional behaviours and boundaries and they undertake a safeguarding programme and a CRB check”

Louise, a Children’s Centre Manager.
The Benefits of Using Volunteers

Using volunteers can have a range of benefits for both the centre and the volunteers themselves.

Our survey data found that over four fifths of centres stated that a clear benefit was to help encourage volunteers to return to work. Participating in voluntary work in children’s centres can be beneficial for those wanting to gain workplace skills and experience and can provide a helpful transition for parents who want to return to work after looking after young children. As Carole’s story shows (see case study on the previous page) volunteering at a children’s centre can be a chance to dip a finger back into the workplace. For Debbie (see overleaf), volunteering has helped her gain confidence and helped her to build up a range of skills such as public speaking and making presentations. For the managers of children’s centres, volunteers can be invaluable help, especially where there are limited resources and time. Over half of children’s centre managers stated that the use of volunteers increased the cost effectiveness of running their centre and over a third stated that they could increase the range of services provided.

In addition, as the Manager’s Story shows (overleaf), using volunteers really helped the centre to understand the specific local needs of the community.

Benefits of using volunteers

- Volunteers return to work: 88%
- Improved familial outcomes: 71%
- Cost effectiveness: 56%
- Engagement with families of diff backgrounds: 50%
- Access to hard-to-reach families: 44%
- Range of services increased: 37%
- Other reason: 11%
A Volunteer’s Story

“I first started going to the children’s centre as a parent attending Baby Play and other groups. It was there that I spoke to another parent who was a community parent. That’s how I first got interested in volunteering at the centre.

I had an interview and was successful in getting onto the community parent training programme. It’s a 12 week course, where you learn lots of skills to work with other parents. Once I had finished the course, I became involved in running the weekly Baby Play group and also do home visits to parents who have low level support needs.

The Baby Play group is for an hour every Friday. We engage with other parents, helping them listen to their baby. I’ve really enjoyed it. It’s really helped me understand myself as a parent, especially as we fill out evidence sheets after the sessions.

If a parent has low levels of vulnerability we can do home visits. We befriend them, especially if they are anxious or lack confidence and give them information about our groups and what goes on at the centres. I had a real success with a mum of a 2 month old baby. She didn’t have any confidence to come to the centre, but because I run the Baby Play group I could bring her into the group, to introduce her to the other parents and integrate her in the conversation. Now she comes on her own to the centre and goes to other groups. I’ve really felt that’s where I have gained confidence and I have been able to pass that onto someone else.

Through volunteering at the centre I have really gained a belief in myself. From doing the community parent training programme I decided to join the Parents’ Choice Group where we discuss the children’s centre services, upcoming events, funding and legislation. Any parent can go, but I wouldn’t have unless I had gained confidence from the course. After a few months, the chair had to leave and I was elected as chair for the monthly meetings. I was also elected as chair of the Advisory Board which helps with the direction of children’s centre services and how they meet the needs of the community so now I chair that every other month! I really overcame my fear of speaking up and now I am happy to do presentations.”

Debbie, a parent volunteer at children’s centre A
A Manager’s Story

“We have six volunteer Community Parents who work across the 3 centres and who co-run both universal and targeted groups at our children’s centres. Our community parents are really involved in the groups: they help plan the content against the Early Years Foundation Stage framework and help to support parents in playing with their children. They are also involved in evaluation of the groups to encompass their future ideas.

We really look to support our volunteers. All our volunteers attend the Community Parents’ Programme which is a 12-16 week course for 1 day per week offered locally. This gives them a clear idea of how best to support other parents taking into account the need for boundaries and being aware of safeguarding issues. It gives them a clear framework which is followed through in regular supervision. We have a twice yearly planning session, where we always invite our community parents and members of the Parents’ Choice Group. Parents make suggestions to us and their views really run through the whole of the centre; it’s systemic.

For us, parent volunteers are about capacity building and giving us the ability to work really closely with parents to get a real sense of what the community needs. For the parents themselves it is a chance to give something back and for some to build a range of experiences and training which will help their future employment. I am always amazed at how long parent volunteers stay with us, even after their child becomes school age; I really feel that it is because they enjoy it and feel supported.”

Jane, manager at children’s centre A
Volunteer Management

Over 73% of centres currently using volunteers stated that they had a volunteer management policy in place. Nearly all of the centres had management policies which covered safeguarding, measures to protect confidentiality, support and supervision and other day to day management. 19% of centres had a volunteer management policy which covered home visiting.

Of the centres which currently have volunteers conducting outreach or home visiting, only 33% of centres have a management policy which covers home visits, suggesting a gap in the current management practice in this area.

“I love volunteering, I have met so many new people, its good going out and people coming up and saying I know you, you work at the Family Centre and children who come to baby and toddler group coming up and wanting a hug. I’ve got my computer qualifications and love helping the people on the basic IT course, I would love to get an office job soon so I am putting all my volunteer experience on my CV’

Kelly, a parent volunteer
Training Support and Development

Currently, the majority of children’s centres (87%) deliver their training ‘in-house’. Nearly three quarters of the centres we surveyed stated that their training was not accredited. Currently, over half of centres, do not use any external guidance, resources or support to help manage volunteers or develop management policies.

Is your training accredited?

- Yes: 26%
- No: 74%

Additional Training Needs

According to our survey data there is a clear need for more information and support for centres working with volunteers. We asked centres what would be useful to them in order to better manage volunteers. Over two thirds of centres stated that they would like more information on case studies and the latest evidence of what works when supporting family support volunteers. Just over half of centres would like more practically orientated support such as advice on training, fact sheets and example volunteer forms (i.e. application forms, volunteer agreements, supervision sheets) and just over 40% suggested that virtual information, in the form of a virtual library would be helpful.

What extra support would be useful to manage volunteers?

- Case studies of good practice: 68%
- Latest evidence: 66%
- Advice on training: 57%
- FAQs and factsheets: 54%
- Example volunteer forms: 50%
- Virtual resources: 41%
- Advice on safeguarding: 38%
- None of these: 4%
Conclusion

Children’s centres are actively engaging volunteers in a range of activities. At present, 87% of children’s centres are using volunteers. Volunteers are being engaged across a range of activities, highlighting that volunteers are becoming integral to service delivery. This is a welcome development, as volunteers can help to provide additional services that would not be available without their expertise. Engaging volunteers can really help a children’s centre understand the needs of the local community, engage other parents and help to develop and maintain services when additional funding is scarce. In this way, engaging volunteers is one of the key principles of the big society: supporting voluntary, community and neighbourhood groups and enabling peer-led support.

Key Recommendations:

- Parenting and relationship support is not generally provided by volunteers in children’s centres. We recommend that the government should engage the voluntary sector to provide resources and training to help develop these services in children’s centres.
- Training for volunteers is mostly conducted ‘in-house’ and is not generally accredited at present. Only 26% of volunteer training is accredited. We recommend that Children’s Centres should consider prioritising making provisions for volunteers to undergo accredited training programmes. Government should look to support this work in line with its national focus on increasing volunteering and helping people back into the workplace. Accredited training for volunteers is essential for ensuring quality and driving up standards.
- There is a clear need for more support for managing volunteers. Over two thirds of centres surveyed stated they would like more information on case studies and evidence of what works when supporting family support volunteers. Government should facilitate the sharing of good practice in volunteering amongst the voluntary sector. We recommend that the government and voluntary sectors develop ‘information hubs’ to support best practice.

Endnotes:

2 From our data, respondents who had never used volunteers were asked to explain and given a list of options. 50% stated that they did not recruit due to “No capacity to supervise of manage” and 16.7% due to “Lack the confidence/knowledge around working with volunteers”.
3 From our survey data, 3 volunteers was mode of the sample.