

Super Kids, Special Parents

I am reading this on behalf of my friend Fiona Day who unfortunately cannot be here today. I offered to read this for her as I feel it is so important for her voice to be heard.

I am the mother of four children aged 7, 6, 4 and 1. My 4yr old son is autistic and my health visitor referred me to the family support worker at Weston Children's Centre to do some home visits to help me manage my son's behaviour. Being bitten, having your hair pulled and being repeatedly hit on a daily basis is emotionally draining. If anyone else did this to me it would be assault. If my husband did this to me it would be domestic violence. But because it is my autistic 4yr old who is simply trying to express himself in this confusing and daunting world, I have to grin and bare it showing no reaction at all but remain still and silent, gradually getting him into a restraining hold.

Before having children, I had a background in childcare and working with children with special educational needs including Autism. But the difference between working with autistic children, and being the parent of an autistic child, is you can't walk away at 5pm. It is all day, all night, every day and every night. Autistic children are notoriously bad at sleeping and mine is no different. As the parent of a child who displays behavioural difficulties, you stop going to toddler groups and become very isolated.

The home visits I received were a highlight of my week. Someone was coming to help me, to listen to how my week had been. To listen to what that week's issue was and to offer practical help and support. Support like this can save families. It is well known that many marriages collapse under the strain of caring for an autistic child. Having support in place for these families at an early stage can save the tax-payer a lot in the long run.

A friend of mine in a similar situation and also living in Weston, had the idea of setting up a toddler group for children with SEN, seeing a need in our community. Initially we did not get very far, both being parents who are stretched to the limit. However, with the Centre's support within a few weeks Super Kids, Special Parents was launching its first session. This is a grass roots group, grown from a group of parents, getting together to support each other. However because we all have our own family pressures, this group would fold if it wasn't for the centre, not only because they provide us with a free room but also to be there to help us set it out to meet and greet families and to be available to offer support and advice and to put us in touch with other services. We simply could not offer this if we tried to run it on our own.

Our group mainly comprises of families from Weston - there are 5-10 families attending each week. Many of the parents at ^{the} group are on their own and this group is their only support. Don't get me wrong - life is still hard. Now the highlight of my week is going to Super Kids, Special Parents where I see my ex support worker as she helps us run the group. Our children play freely without judgment from others and as we play with our children we share stories and support each other.

You have all heard of vulnerable adults and you have all heard of vulnerable children. But let me tell you there is such a thing as vulnerable parents. Taking our support away now will only lead to a big expensive mess for the council to pick up later.

Nick Clegg said "It is absolutely clear, as Graham Allen's report 'Early Intervention: The Next Steps' confirms, that investment in the early years of life leads to huge economic, social and emotional benefits later on, both for individuals and for society as a whole."