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# **‘Celebrating Difference’ Expansion**



## **Project Evaluation**

## **BACKGROUND**

The 'Celebrating Difference' training was created by a community group, Voices4Bettws (V4B), Newport. It was developed to bridge the gap between the reality that families experience and professionals' perceptions of the needs of children with Additional Learning Needs (ALN).

Parents reported that bias, such as assumptions blaming parents rather than recognising ALN, creates barriers to getting support. Schools want to work more effectively with parents but face relational challenges. Research with parents, professionals and children echoes this, showing parents may hesitate to discuss their child's needs due to stigma and lack of trust, while professionals also struggle to build strong relationships.

The training programme created compassionate, stigma-free spaces where meaningful conversations could take place. By centring and amplifying the expertise of parents with lived experience, the training helped to deepen understanding, challenge stigma, and strengthen the effectiveness and accessibility of ALN support within communities.

This training was shaped and led by parents with lived experience of poverty and ALN, ensuring that professionals gained insights grounded in the real experiences of families.

Parents are 'experts by experience' in their own lives. By having their experiences at the heart of the programme, professionals can understand what children and families really need.

## **EXPANSION PROJECT**

This project built on the successful partnership with Voices4Bettws (V4B) in Newport and expanded this innovative ALN/Neurodiversity training programme into three new geographical areas. These were Bridgend, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf.

This growth involved developing, adapting and replicating the V4B resources to support its long-term sustainability and increase wider impact of the training. This was achieved through the development of a train the trainer model, training parents to roll out the 'Celebrating Difference' training package in their local area.

## EVALUATING THE PROJECT



A mixed-methods approach was used to evaluate the impact of the project. Data was gathered at several stages, before the project began, at the midpoint and after completion of the project. Both qualitative and quantitative data were analysed to identify key patterns and themes.

All parents who took part were invited to complete brief surveys at each stage, measuring their confidence, knowledge, sense of support and overall experience. In addition, a sample of parents and professionals who were involved in the delivery of the project, took part in informal interviews, providing them with an opportunity to share their personal insights.



## **FINDINGS- Key Themes**

### **Strengths**

- ***Increased confidence and skills development***

Parents reported significant growth in confidence, particularly in public speaking, training delivery, teamwork and drawing on lived experience of neurodiversity. They felt a growing sense of belonging and mutual support

- ***Strong empowerment and wellbeing outcomes***

Parents described greater self-belief, feeling heard and supported, strengthen advocacy skills, and a deeper understanding of neurodivergence. Parents reported improved family wellbeing and helped parents reconnect with a sense of purpose

- ***Safe, supportive community building environment***

Both parents and professionals emphasised the value of a compassionate, stigma free space that enabled trust, open conversations, and meaningful relationship-building. This environment reduced isolation and reinforced a strong sense of community.

- ***Positive impact on motivation and identity***

Parents reported their motivation to influence change in schools had been reignited and they felt recognised as experts in their lived experience, expressing pride and renewed confidence.

- ***Consistency and peer connection supported progress***

Regular sessions and meeting new people helped reduce anxiety and build trusting relationships. Peer learning and observing others in practice contributed to confidence.

## FEEDBACK FROM PROFESSIONALS RECEIVING THE TRAINING



Professionals were overwhelmingly positive about the training, with enjoyment and usefulness rated highly, with many highlighting the value of hearing from parents as 'experts by experience'. They particularly valued the practical and reflective activities, which helped deepen understanding of neurodiversity/ALN and strengthen empathy for children's and families' day-to-day experiences.

Many described intentions to change practice by listening more to children and parents, improving communication, and adopting a more inclusive, rights-based approach. Professionals reported substantial increases in confidence, particularly in understanding families' day-to-day experiences, working respectfully with parents/carers, and challenging stigma relating to poverty and ALN.

Suggested improvements focused on extending the length and/or number of sessions and incorporating locally relevant data. There was also strong demand for further training on topics including PDA, autism/ADHD, sensory needs, co-occurring needs, and local support networks.

## SUMMARY

Evaluation of the project showed clear patterns in parents' expectations, concerns and development throughout the project. Initially, parents were motivated to create change but felt uncertain and lacked confidence. As training began, parents worried about confidence, credibility, and delivering training effectively, though they remained hopeful that their lived experience would be valued.

Over time, parents demonstrated significant growth in confidence, particularly in public speaking, training delivery, teamwork, and using lived experience. They also developed a strong sense of belonging and mutual support.

Parents anticipated challenges in delivering training to professionals, including imposter syndrome, practical barriers, and uncertainty about professional follow through. Despite these concerns, they experienced increased confidence, self-belief, strengthened skills, and improved community connections.

***'I feel much more confident in speaking up for my child and empowered to deliver training. I've also made some lovely friends'***

The value of the project's safe, supportive environment was highlighted and there was an emphasis on the need for emotional preparation, clear role expectations, and continuity planning. Suggested improvements included more time to develop content, slower pacing, and providing space for relationship building.

Parent delivering the training also reported reduced anxiety, growing confidence and beneficial peer support. They valued opportunities to develop confidence, try new experiences and support other parents' development.

***'Shown parents matter to when it comes to understanding their own child'***

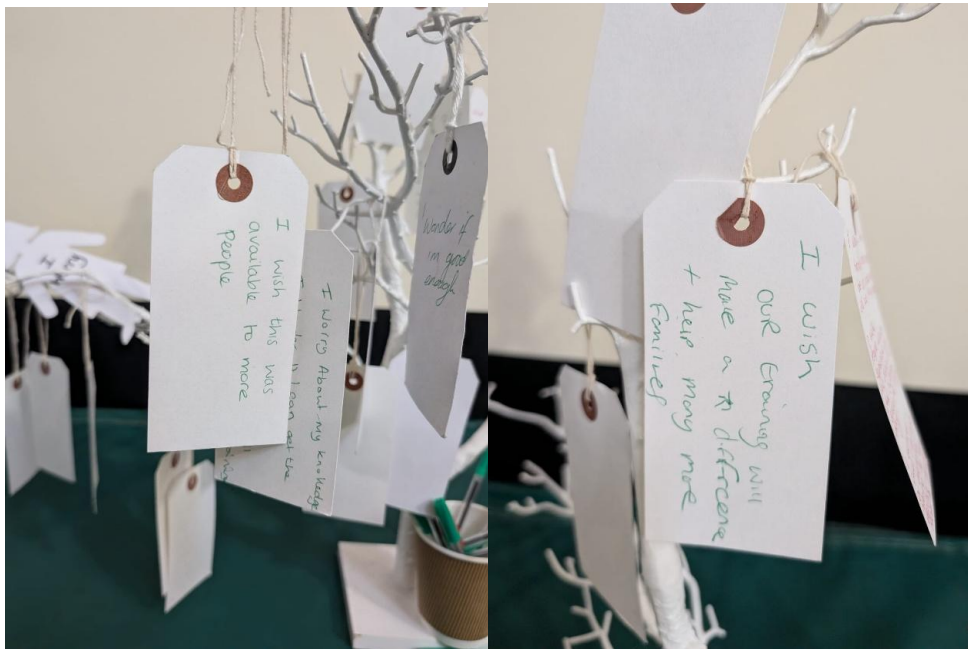
Parents felt recognised, validated, and empowered and highlighted improvements in family relationships, wellbeing, reigniting parents' motivation to promote positive change in schools. Parents particularly valued the supportive environment, peer connections, and opportunities to observe and learn from others. They identified early peer mentoring, closer together sessions and observation opportunities as key enhancements. Parents also gained confidence in their own skills and abilities and developed a recognition of their own value as an expert in understanding the needs of their children.

***I wish....***

***'That even if I only manage to touch one person into understanding difference in a positive way, that I will have made a difference'***

***'People would appreciate all the difficulties ALN children encounter every day'***

## REFLECTIONS



- ***Need for more preparation time and slower pace***

Parents and professionals suggested allowing more time to develop and adapt training content and slowing the pace of delivery.

- ***Earlier and stronger support structures***

Parents highlighted the importance of early peer mentoring, especially during initial training deliveries, to ensure they feel fully supported and ready.

- ***More opportunities for observation and gradual responsibility***

Parents recommended opportunities to observe training before delivering it themselves, helping build confidence and readiness for delivery roles.

- ***Addressing concerns around delivering to professionals***

Parents anticipated challenges, such as imposter syndrome, practical and organisational barriers, and uncertainty about whether professionals would act on the learning. This indicates a need for stronger support when transitioning into professional facing delivery.

- ***Role clarity and sustainability planning***

Clarifying expectations regarding parents' time commitments, defining roles more clearly, and plan for continuity once funded staff exit.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### ***1. Strengthen early support***

Clearer expectations and early reassurance would support readiness, building emotional preparation at the start of the project through confidence building activities.

### ***2. Expand and formalise peer support structures***

A strong sense of belonging, mutual support and reduced isolation were central to parents' growth. Building peer connection time during sessions and introducing peer mentoring to new parents could improve readiness to delivery.

### ***3. Ensure training is delivered in stages to build confidence***

Provide shadowing opportunities and gradual responsibility building stages. Offering co-delivery opportunities before independent delivery and allowing more time for content development and slower pacing across sessions.

### ***4. Strengthen professional feedback***

Establish feedback mechanisms with schools and organisations to demonstrate impact of training.

### ***5. Develop a clear sustainability and continuity plan***

Ensure a sustainability plan covers support and resource continuity with ongoing mentoring and practical support beyond initial project period.

## FINAL SUMMARY

The 'Celebrating Difference' expansion project had a strong positive impact on participating parents, boosting their confidence, skills and sense of belonging. Parents who initially felt motivated yet uncertain developed greater self-belief, stronger communication and delivery skills, and a shared sense of community grounded in lived experience. They valued the safe, supportive environment and the chance to build consistent relationships and learn from one another. The project also improved family wellbeing and strengthened parents' advocacy skills, helping them feel better equipped to influence change within schools and services.

Both participants and professionals highlighted practical and emotional challenges, including imposter syndrome, role clarity, time pressures and sustainability concerns, and emphasised the need for additional mentoring, structured onboarding, and more time for preparation and relationship building. The project delivered meaningful empowerment and community connection, with clear pathways for strengthening long-term support.

Overall, parents grew in confidence, gained new skills and felt more able to speak up for their children. Although some felt less clear about accessing services or being heard by professionals, this reflected greater awareness of existing barriers rather than a loss of confidence.

Parents also described feeling more supported, less isolated, and more ready to influence change. The project ultimately boosted confidence, strengthened skills and built a sense of belonging, while highlighting the importance of sustained support and strong professional relationships.

***'This has been a fantastic opportunity and it has empowered me to speak up for my child and other children. It's also given me the confidence to support other parents who are going through the same. This has also given me a passion to look into more training and hopefully get a job to do with neurodivergent learning/people so I can pay it back and help others'.***



We would like to thank all of the parents who contributed their time to take part in this project.

To find out more about the 'Celebrating Difference' project visit:-

<https://www.childreninwales.org.uk/professionals/our-work/celebrating-difference-project/>