

Reaching all parents: Muslim women in Edinburgh

Antenatal teacher Nicola Goodall describes a pilot scheme to offer antenatal information and peer support to Muslim women.

Our women-only group for pregnant and breastfeeding Muslim women in Edinburgh was set up as a pilot project in March 2009. It was run as a joint initiative by the NCT, the NHS, the Pregnancy and Parenthood Centre (PPC) and Amina - The Muslim Women's Resource Centre (a charity that promotes the social welfare of Muslim women in Scotland).

Our aim was to create a peer support group for Muslim women, which would run for six weeks and give them the opportunity to meet other women, discuss their concerns and share information and perhaps expose them to potentially new and useful ideas. We hoped it would help Muslim women to feel empowered about childbirth and have a safe space in which to be heard.

Why the service is needed

Muslim parents are frequently marginalised during pregnancy and childbirth, particularly in their antenatal care. A Maternity Alliance report¹ has found that Muslim women often receive maternity care that is insensitive to their needs and those of their partners. As well as poor understanding amongst health professionals about Islamic beliefs and practices, insufficient resources, including a lack of interpreters and information available in the appropriate languages, mean that women's needs often can go unmet.

In Edinburgh, the problem is intensified because our local maternity services are struggling with a big rise in birth rates, which is having a major impact on our community midwifery services.

Getting started

By the time the group was launched, we'd put together a strong team, which included me as antenatal teacher, an NHS nutritionist, a La Lèche League breastfeeding specialist, an aromatherapist and a member of staff from Edinburgh council's Advice Shop who was able to give information on benefits.

We held free, weekly sessions at the PPC, a charitable organisation offering a wide range of groups and facilities for new parents, all of which are accessible to the members of our group. We provided lunch every week, and Amina managed to gather some impressive free samples to give away.

Although primarily aimed at Muslim women, the group was advertised as a women-only antenatal group accessible to all. Attendees have included a non-Muslim single mother and a Chinese mother, which has made for lots of interesting information sharing.

Altogether, we attracted 11 women, the majority of whom were from low-income Arab and Asian Muslim communities. We ran weekly two-hour sessions, focusing mostly on antenatal and breastfeeding support, over the course of six weeks. One of the sessions included a yoga class run by Nadine Edwards, vice-chair of AIMS and director of the PPC. We gave out information leaflets from the NCT and the NHS on subjects such as positions for labour and birth and copies of NCT's *Bumps and Babies* magazine.

'Many of the women have had very little time with their midwives'

Challenges and lessons learned

Partnering with Amina was a good way of making links with the Muslim community in order to overcome the challenges of recruiting women from a hard-to-reach group.

Many of the women have had very little time with their midwives and feel isolated and unsupported, so the group provided them with an opportunity to meet other women and offer support to each other. These discussions have been incredibly powerful and we have all learned an enormous amount.

We used professional translators from an Edinburgh agency for the sessions, using at least one translator, sometimes

two, in each session, and for that reason it's been much easier to base our classes around discussion and visual activities rather than written activities. The visual activities worked brilliantly – our infant-feeding adviser came in with a game that showed pictures of babies' faces and titles such as 'hungry' or 'happy' to look at feeding cues. This worked perfectly, with no need to translate.

Because of our use of translators, we have sometimes got our wires crossed, and have learnt how important it is to meet with the translator before the group to discuss her birth experiences so that they don't overflow in a negative way into the discussions.

Although it was just a short pilot scheme, we believe it was successful in offering women a secure space to learn, where they were treated like normal citizens rather than people with special needs. In October, we ran a second group, and in March this year, began running a third one. We would love to see other similar groups set up in the UK.

Editor's note: If you are interested in organising a similar scheme, Nicola would be happy to offer support. You can contact her at nicolagoodall@googlemail.com.

References

1. Maternity Alliance (2004), *Experiences of maternity services: Muslim women's perspectives*. Available from: <http://tinyurl.com/MA-MuslimWomen>

What the women say

'The breastfeeding class was lovely, really useful and informative.'

'I've had three children and I didn't know any of this.'

'The midwives are always so busy and just don't have the time to discuss things like we can here.'

'Thank you SO MUCH for today – you really put my heart at rest over a lot of issues'