

“It’s a lifeline”: Generating a sense of social connectedness through befriending parents of disabled children or children with additional need



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study explored the influence of a parent-to-parent peer support scheme on the wellbeing of parents of disabled children or children with additional need who joined a befriending scheme.

Methods: A longitudinal concurrent mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) research design collected data (telephone interviews, Footsteps Tool, Resilience Scale-14) with 33 befriendees (1:1 or group support) and 33 befrienders at time-point 1 (TP1). TP2 data were collected from 20 befriendees and 16 befrienders 6–9 months after recruitment.

Results: There was some improvement on average scores between TP1 and TP2 on both tools. The strongest evidence of change - ‘a sense of positivity and hope’ and ‘connection, belonging and sharing’ - was in the parents’ reports of how the scheme helped them to build secure and valued social connections within a community of other parents who understood their lives.

Conclusion: Both the befriendees and befrienders reported the sense of hope and a feeling of belonging as key benefits that resulted from the social connections they gained from the scheme.

Practice implications: Social connectedness is likely to be a more useful concept than resilience in examining change.

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1. Introduction

Being the parent of a disabled child or a child with additional need, such as intellectual or developmental disability, is almost always a life-altering experience [1] taking parenting beyond ‘ordinary’ parenting [2] into something more unexpected and demanding [3]. There is a tendency to assume that having a disabled child or child with additional need will negatively impact the family although there is convincing evidence that this is not inevitable or universal [4–7]. Research focusing on the transformative benefits of having a disabled child reveals personal growth and attitudinal changes to disability [1] and family resilience [7]. Despite these potential benefits, many parents of disabled children face financial difficulties [6], adversities [5] and challenges related to their child’s particular needs. These challenges can be compounded when formal [8] or informal support services are unavailable or inaccessible requiring parents to battle systems that do not necessarily effectively meet their child’s needs [3,9].

Such challenges can increase the risk of family relationship problems, stress and depression [10]. Parents, most often mothers, who have a disabled child tend to have higher stress levels than those of typically developing children [4,11], and their stress levels are often high or very high [9,12]. When parents’ practical and emotional resources [13] are stretched they can feel isolated and socially marginalized [6,14], lonely [10], and disconnected [15]. Social support is an established protective factor for parents and there is evidence that social support can mediate parenting stress [16], promote parental happiness [17] and well-being although how such support is implemented is dependent on different policies, models and local practices at national and local level [18]. Social connectedness can be described as a “subjective evaluation of the extent to which one has meaningful, close, and constructive relationships with others (i.e., individuals, groups, and/or society)”p43 [19]. Although we were unable to identify any studies focusing on social connectedness and parents of a disabled child or child with additional need the generic parenting literature shows associations between poor social connectedness and poorer emotional, mental and physical outcomes for parents [20] and there is a proliferation of interventions aiming to foster social connectedness [21].

Social connectedness is important in relation to parenting in general as it relates to the informal (parents’ own social networks,

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such as support from grandmothers [12]), semi-formal (volunteer led resources, such as peer support from trained volunteers in parenting support programme [9,22–24] and formal (professional or needs based) resources that parents can draw on to gain support [8,25]. Different forms of semi-formal parent-to-parent support exist including individual or group-based face-to-face contact [9,23] or remote contact [26] and often rely on charitable funding. Schemes can either be generic or targeted on a particular aspect such as managing their children's behaviour [27].

Typically parent-to-parent programmes aim to enhance perceived or actual social support [28], provide emotional support [26], build relationships and enhance positivity [24], share experiences [15] and promote problem-solving skills [6]. Schemes are underpinned by principles of mutuality and connectedness [15], based on pragmatic knowledge gained from personal experience [28] and aim to engender a sense of community and belonging [10,15,29] in order to improve the holistic wellbeing of the parent and family [6]. The benefits of parent-to-parent support across a wide variety of programmes are established [6,9,24,26,30] with qualitative evidence demonstrating that schemes have a positive influence on parents' social identity, opportunities to learn from the experiences of others and personal growth [9,23]. There is less quantitative evidence, although one study reports that while befriending may reduce the distress and difficulty experienced by parents, both those parents volunteering (befrienders) and those receiving support (befriendees) continue to experience psychological morbidity [9].

However, parent-to-parent support can be challenging. Befrienders need to be appropriately prepared and be ready to take on the role [23,24,31], and have the time and capacity to deal with the additional emotional burden [31]. Befriendees must be ready to accept help to effectively engage with the service [23]; those who are stuck, judgemental, negative and looking for cures [24] are unlikely to be ready to gain support through parenting support services.

1.1. Background to the scheme focused on within this study

Scope, a UK-based charity, co-ordinates Face2Face - a parent-to-parent peer support (befriending) scheme - that aims to help parents of disabled children or children with additional need make positive changes to their own and their family's lives and promote parental mental health and wellbeing. The scheme focuses on supporting parents to talk through their feelings, reflect on their strengths, identify challenges and search for solutions. Trained, volunteer parents (befrienders) who have experience of parenting a disabled child or child with additional need and who often have experience of being befriended provide one-to-one (1:1) and/or group support to befriendees (parents who are seeking support). Support involves giving parents the opportunity to listen and share experiences with one another, as well as sharing practical information and knowledge about resources and sources of support. One-to-one befriending support typically consists of six to eight sessions spread over several months and usually takes place in the home of the befriendees. Group support is available through drop-in sessions that parents can access on an on-going basis; whilst befrienders may attend the groups and offer support, these groups are typically democratic and participatory with everyone contributing expertise. Some parents just access the groups for a few sessions, others have more sustained access over a couple of years.

2. Study design

2.1. Aim of the study

The aim of this study was to explore the influence of a parent-to-parent peer support scheme on the emotional and psychological

wellbeing of befrienders (who have varying levels of experience in giving one-to-one support to parents), befriendees (who are receiving one-to-one support) and befriendees (who are attending group support sessions).

2.2. Overview of the data collection methods

This study used a longitudinal concurrent mixed methods (qualitative and quantitative) research design [32] underpinned by the principles of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) [33] to support our exploration of what worked well in particular situations and contexts. In particular, AI principles informed both the way in which we constructed the questions we asked within the interviews at the two time-points (TP) and the way we directed our focus to affirmative experiences such as what worked well with the befriending scheme, positive experiences and solutions, as well as exploring challenges and how these might be overcome. Longitudinal data collection was undertaken with parents at two time-points: TP1 at recruitment and then TP2, 6–9 months later. Typically, TP1 was near the point when befriendees started receiving support and, for befrienders, TP1 occurred as soon as possible after their first engagement a one-to-one befriendees or after one of the one-to-one sessions.

2.3. Sampling, inclusion criteria, and recruitment

Purposive sampling of befrienders and befriendees was undertaken to achieve maximum variation in terms of geography (across four geographical settings) and the nature of service (one-to-one/group). Any parent providing or receiving support from the scheme was eligible to participate unless a member of Scope staff identified they should not be approached due, for example, to particular home circumstances. Three discrete recruitment methods were used. Befrienders gave a scheme co-ordinator permission for their contact details to be passed to the research team. Befriendees (1:1) were sent information packs by a designated administrator, and with their permission their contact details were passed to the researchers. Befriendees (group) were informed about the study by a coordinator and, with their permission, their names were passed to the researchers.

2.4. Methods

The study used a mix of qualitative (interview) and quantitative methods (validated and non-validated tools) to generate data with the minimum time-burden and disruption to the lives of the participants.

2.4.1. Interviews

Audio-recorded interviews were undertaken with befrienders and befriendees (1:1 and group) via individual semi-structured telephone interviews. The TP1 interviews with befriendees focused on what prompted them to engage with the scheme, their expectations and initial experiences and at TP2 the focus was on their experiences of the support (hurdles and benefits) and whether it matched their expectations. The interviews with befrienders focused on their expectations and experiences of providing support, any challenges faced, and rewards gained with TP2 exploring any shifts or changes to their perspectives.

2.4.2. Surveys

Quantitative data were collected by telephone immediately prior to the interview being undertaken.

The Footsteps Tool was selected as it was developed by and widely used by Scope with the target population and has been used in other evaluations of Scope's services. This tool focuses on

parents' physical, emotional and social well-being. It comprises 10 statements using a six-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree); the scoring range is 0–60 with higher scores suggesting that individuals feel like they are coping well, feeling good, and feel connected to a supportive community.

The Resilience Scale (RS-14) is a validated tool [34] which aims to judge the degree of an individual's resilience; it uses affirmative language and is based on five characteristics of resilience: self-reliance, purpose, equanimity, perseverance and existential aloneness (authenticity). The tool has been used widely in research with parents and vulnerable groups and is simple to complete. It comprises 14 statements using a seven-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree); the scoring range is 14–98 and reflecting six categories (very low, low, low end, moderate, moderately high, high). Higher scores indicate higher levels of resilience.

2.4.3. Ethics approval

Ethics approval for the study was granted by Faculty of Health and Social Care Research Ethics Committee at Edge Hill University (CF 18).

2.5. Data analysis

In line with the concurrent mixed method design [32,35], the interviews and surveys were initially analysed as separate sources of evidence, these were then compared and contrasted during the process of data interpretation. The interviews were considered line-by-line, coded and interpretively analysed by all members of the research team using thematic analysis [36] and quotable quotes were identified in line with Appreciative Inquiry [33].

The questionnaire data were entered into SPSS (version 24). For those participants who took part at both time-points ($n = 32$), paired sample t tests were conducted to determine whether scores differed between TP1 and TP2 for parents in the scheme. Due to a modest sample size, data from befrienders, befriendees (1:1) and befriendees (group) were analysed as one group. In order to explore the relationship between the findings between the quantitative and qualitative data, an item-by-item analysis was conducted on both tools, to determine how and to what extent participants demonstrated and/or experienced change between the two time-points.

3. Findings

3.1. Demographics

We recruited 33 befriendees (12 engaging in 1:1 support and 21 via group support) and 33 befrienders. We aimed to collect interview and survey data at two time points but lost some parents to follow-up (e.g., unavailability, deemed to be in too difficult a situation, had left scheme). Twenty befriendees and 16 befrienders were interviewed and completed surveys at TP2, but only one befriender and three befrienders participated in the interview at TP2. Our analyses were focused on finding commonalities across groups and due to a modest sample size we did not conduct comparisons between geographical regions.

3.2. Quantitative findings

3.2.1. Footsteps Tool

The Footsteps Tool showed some improvement in the average scores between TP1 and TP2 (Table 1, Fig. 1). When analysed as one group (befrienders, befriendees 1:1 and befriendees group), the mean scores on the Footsteps Tool at TP1 and TP2 were statistically significant ($t = .208$ (24), $p = .048$).

Table 1

Average scores for Footsteps Tool (TP1 and TP2).

	Footsteps (TP1) (n = 66) Average score	Footsteps (TP2) (n = 32) Average score
All parents in the scheme	48 (n = 66)	51 (n = 32)
Befrienders	50 (n = 33)	51 (n = 13)
Befriendees (1:1)	45 (n = 12)	48 (n = 7)
Befriendees (Group)	49 (n = 21)	51 (n = 12)

When the individual items were considered for all the parents as one group, five of the 10 items showed significant change between TP1 and TP2, these were: Item 2, ($p = 0.009$); Item 5, ($p = 0.07$); Item 7, ($p = 0.001$); Item 8, ($p = 0.016$); and Item 10, ($p = 0.039$) (Table 2).

3.2.2. The Resilience Scale-14 (RS-14)

There was some improvement on the average scores between TP1 and TP2 on the RS-14 (Table 3, Fig. 1).

When analysed as one group, the mean scores on the Footsteps Tool at TP1 and TP2 were not statistically significant ($t = -1.65$ (24), $p = .11$).

When the individual items within the RS-14 were considered for befrienders, befriendees and the parent group as one group, four of the 14 items showed marginal significance for change between TP1 and TP2, these were: Item 2, ($p = 0.094$); Item 5, ($p = 0.068$); Item 6, ($p = 0.088$); and Item 7 ($p = 0.059$) (Table 4).

3.3. Qualitative findings

Two main themes – ‘A sense of positivity and hope’ and ‘Connection, belonging and sharing’ – were generated from the interpretation of the qualitative data and which also resonated with the findings from the surveys. The quotations used are drawn from all geographical locations and are representative of the diversity of parents' perspectives.

3.3.1. A sense of positivity and hope

Describing the time before they were referred to the service (pre TP1) many befriendees talked of a sense of desperation, the lack of suitable support, and the “minefield” of service provision. A sense of bleakness dominated these accounts, when parents recalled the “worst times”, and framed the future as something that was narrow and dark. One befriender reflected on how before she accessed the scheme, “my life was falling apart and I was on the verge of a breakdown” (TP1).

Parents reported that engaging in the scheme helped them to cope better with being a parent to a child with a disability or additional need and they gained a greater sense of equanimity. Knowing that help was available for them felt like “a weight [was] being lifted” (TP1). One befriender summed up her involvement in the group as “being positive . . . all I had before the group was negative”. However, this positivity took time to achieve and was often hard-won:

“I do not think I spoke for a few months, I just sat and cried and I sort of progressed over time to where I am today” (Befriender, Group, TP2)

Some befriendees, especially those with a young or newly diagnosed child, discovered that there was “light at the end of the tunnel” (TP1). A key message that parents gained from their engagement with the scheme was a sense of hope that life “can get better” (TP2); this was evident in the fact that befriendees talked about how their own and their children's lives were now “a lot happier” (TP2). Some befriendees discussed how the scheme had “lifted them” (TP2) and for those who attended a group there was a strong feeling that it was “like having your own little community who support each other” (TP2).

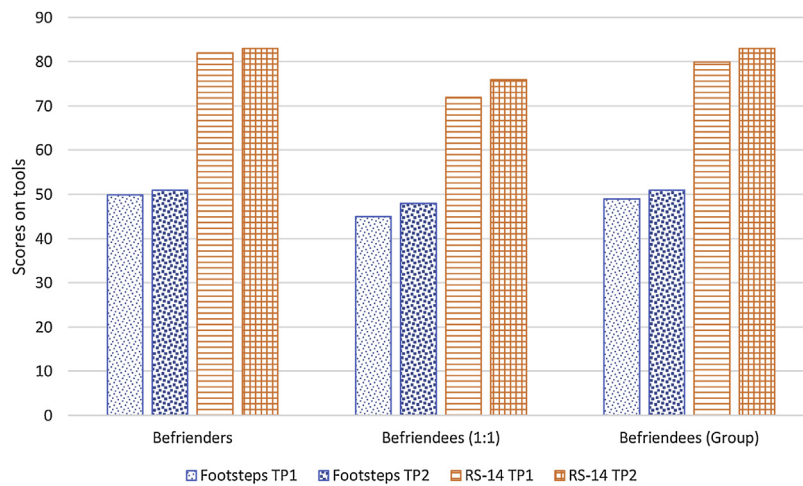


Fig. 1. Scores from Footsteps & RS-14 (TP1 & TP2).

Table 2
Scores for individual items - Footsteps Tool (TP1 and TP2).

Items	Time point 1 (n = 66)		Time point 2 (n = 32)		T Test
	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation	p
1. I can cope well with my everyday life	5.02	0.953	5.09	0.893	0.442
2. I'm feeling positive	4.83	1.158	5.19	0.780	0.009*
3. My quality of life is good	5.00	1.038	4.94	1.045	0.757
4. I feel confident	4.68	1.125	4.84	1.019	0.344
5. I can manage the challenge of caring for my child with additional need	5.15	0.881	5.22	0.706	0.07*
6. I feel part of a community	4.41	1.414	4.78	1.313	0.305
7. I know where to go for services & information	4.64	1.211	5.19	1.148	0.001*
8. I know about the financial support available to my family	4.42	1.436	5.13	1.070	0.016*
9. I work well with professionals who support us	5.45	0.706	5.41	0.798	0.712
10. I feel positive about the future	4.80	1.070	4.84	0.847	0.039*

* Significance reached.

Table 3
Scores for RS-14 (TP1 and TP2).

	RS-14 (TP1) (n = 66)		RS-14 (TP2) (n = 32)	
	Average score	Category	Average score	Category
All parents in the scheme	80 (n = 66)	Moderate	81 (n = 32)	Moderate
Befriendees (1:1)	72 (n = 12)	On the low end	76 (n = 7)	Moderate
Parent Group	80 (n = 21)	Moderate	83 (n = 12)	Moderately high
Befrienders	82 (n = 33)	Moderately high	83 (n = 13)	Moderately high

The positivity and sense of hope helped parents to persevere and ensure that their child's life was as fulfilled as possible and this bolstered parents' sense of self-reliance. Their positivity was reinforced through the scheme's focus on learning about and promoting self-esteem and coping strategies and developing the skills to negotiate the challenges of daily life. Befriendees' outlooks shifted from thinking negative 'what if' thoughts to living more in the present and appreciating the good times:

[The scheme is] about building your own self-esteem and how to relax and switch off and stop living in your mind and live in the moment . . . I try and live in the moment now . . . that helps a bit. (Befriendees, 1:1, TP2)

Part of this sense of positivity was engendered through the friendships and mutually reciprocal relationships which blossomed, with parents becoming aware of how they had things to offer other parents and/or their befriender and how "we can support each other" (TP2). Befrienders were strengthened by their

work explaining their work made their own "life seem a whole lot better and a lot more fruitful" (TP2). Much of this reward came through "giving something back" (TP1) and seeing the growth and transformation of the parents they worked with and being there to show them " . . . I've been there, and I'm still here and there is life at the end of the tunnel" (TP1).

3.3.2. Connection, belonging and sharing

One of the most positive benefits of engaging with the scheme was sense of connection engendered through sharing experiences with other parents who were "in the same boat" (TP1) in an atmosphere which was "welcoming and [where] no-one judges you" (TP1). This sense of connectedness helped parents to overcome the sense of social isolation as they realised they were not "the only person in the world with these issues" (TP2) and they could engage with "a new social circuit of parents of disabled children" (TP2). Within this social circuit, parents were able to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings and this helped to reduce the

Table 4

Scores for individual items – Resilience Scale (TP1 and TP2).

Items	Time point 1 (n = 66)		Time point 2 (n = 32)		T Test p
	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation	
1. I usually manage one way or another.	6.03	1.067	6.25	0.803	0.134
2. I feel proud that I have accomplished things in my life.	5.67	1.269	6.00	0.916	0.094*
3. I usually take things in stride.	5.23	1.213	5.41	1.160	0.662
4. I am friends with myself.	5.05	1.408	5.22	1.289	0.203
5. I feel that I can handle many things at a time.	5.38	1.120	5.56	1.045	0.068*
6. I am determined.	6.24	0.805	6.38	0.793	0.088*
7. I can get through difficult times because I've experienced difficulty before.	6.14	0.959	6.22	0.832	0.059*
8. I have self-discipline.	5.15	1.373	5.22	1.211	0.423
9. I keep interested in things.	5.44	1.314	5.53	1.107	0.773
10. I can usually find something to laugh about.	5.82	1.149	5.88	1.008	0.557
11. My belief in myself gets me through hard times.	5.32	1.166	5.28	1.301	0.198
12. In an emergency, I'm someone people can generally rely on.	6.15	1.011	6.16	0.808	0.586
13. My life has meaning.	6.33	0.883	6.44	0.716	0.677
14. When I'm in a difficult situation, I can usually find my way out of it.	5.76	0.978	5.81	0.780	0.231

* Marginal significance reached.

“size” of the challenges they were facing and the fear that they were “doing something wrong” (TP1). One father explained that:

“It is like a problem shared is a problem halved and the people there [group] understand what you are going through.” (Befriender, Group, TP1)

Befrienderes reported experiencing a sense of “massive relief” (TP1) in being able to “unload to people who understand” (TP2) and do not “judge” (TP1). This non-judgemental approach was fundamental as it allowed the befrienderes to open up; they felt reassured that there was “no situation too horrific to talk about” (TP2). Befrienderes connected with each other and with their befrienders because of a shared sense of belonging; they all had similar experiences and had all “been there” as parents/carers of a child with a disability or additional need and were “on the same wavelength” (TP2).

The befrienders acknowledged that even though they were able to offer support to parents in difficulty that they still faced challenges and needed support, explaining that “sometimes I feel like I'm drowning” (TP2) and “you take each day as it comes” (TP1). One befriender explained how her role had given her “confidence” and that:

“... it's so beneficial, it's better than going to the GP and them giving you medication ...” (Befriender, TP2)

The befrienderes and befrienders both shared a reluctance to “burden your family all the time” (TP1) not least because even close family could not understand their experiences. The importance of this lived and shared experience was seen as the “secret recipe that makes [things] work” (TP2) and it was woven through all the interactions, as one befriender emphasised:

“You've got to walk in someone else's shoes to understand and on the befriending we're all walking in similar shoes so it's easier to be empathetic.” (Befriender, TP1).

Having “similar shoes” rather than shoes that were an “exact fit” and knowing that they could never be “match[ed] completely right” (TP1) was usually sufficient to meet the needs of most befrienderes:

“... you've got that common thread, you can draw comparisons. They can't necessarily give advice but ... they can relate to your situation, that's probably the most valuable part of it.” (Befriender, 1:1, TP2)

Most parents were aware that whilst their journeys were similar, they were also in many ways unique. However, some befrienderes were disappointed when their match with their befriender was not perceived to be sufficiently good:

I needed a friend, a befriender and when I got one it didn't work. I've met the new befriender and she's really nice but I'd really like to be matched with a befriender who has a girl with autism who can understand on a deeper level (Befriender, 1:1, TP1).

Mostly, befrienderes and befrienders were able to learn “so much from other parents” in relation to new information and skills. This information was parent-orientated rather than defined by what professionals assumed parents needed; this was particularly evident within the groups:

“You learn things from each other, which is unique to these groups, you get lots of information from each other rather than relying on professionals.” (Befriender, Group, TP1).

Parents also learned that not-coping did not equal failure, that “bottling things up” (TP1) was not always helpful and turning to other people for suggestions could have beneficial outcomes:

“It's good when I am having a bad day and I have tried everything possible that you can go [to group] and someone will have an idea which can help.” (Befriender, Group, TP2).

Parents signposted each other to funding and services and were able to share information and this was done without needing to “put on a front”, as one mother explained:

“She'll [befriender] sit there while I'm sort of “Waaahhhhhh”; she understands, she's helped me to work things out and given me ideas and people to go to for information and support. (Befriender, 1:1, TP2).

Both befrienders and befrienderes talked of the wider changes that came about through their engagement with the scheme; these changes included having a wider “social circuit” (TP2), being more “knowledgeable” (TP2), and improving their “outlook” (TP2) on life.

4. Discussion

Most befrienderes accessed the scheme as a result of challenging circumstances and the emotional and/or psychosocial difficulties they were facing. As seen in other studies of parents with a disabled child or child with additional need, these circumstances varied in the intensity and the challenges faced [9,23] but common to all of the parents was a sense of isolation. This isolation was not just physical; it arose from a sense that the people they had existing connections with simply did not understand what they were experiencing. The parents' sense of disconnection with their usual support structures and networks and a degree of urgency in the need for support led them, via various referral routes, to the

scheme. The scheme offered the parents the opportunity to be part of a world which engendered a sense of belonging; a “*new social circuit of parents of disabled children*”. Belonging to the world [37] is based on an emotional sense of being recognised and understood [38] and for parents in this study, this sense of recognition and understanding was not readily available to them outside of the scheme. They struggled to make connections that mattered to them.

Social connectedness, a basic human need, reflects the sense of meaningful constructive connections and relationships with other people that extends beyond just being in or having the company of others [39,40]. In the context of parenthood, these connections are the links between the parent and other individuals and/or groups who generate opportunities for social support [21] and these relationships or affiliations are important for meaning-making in life [41] and belonging. Becoming a parent challenges social connectedness [21] and mothers risk becoming socially isolated [42]. This can be exacerbated when parenting a child with additional needs where meaning-making can be more challenging. Other studies reveal that a shared sense of belonging or shared social identity [22] is an essential component of peer support for parents of disabled children or children with additional need. The befriendeds and befrienders in this study talked about the connection and belonging they gained from being part of the scheme as being intrinsic to them feeling more positive and hopeful about the future. The quantitative data likewise confirmed the value of being socially connected and part of this community of parents who shared knowledge and expertise with one another. Over time, parents in the scheme reported feeling better informed as to where to go to for services, information and were better informed about the financial support available to them as a family.

The parents in this study regardless of whether they were befriendeds or befrienders (1:1 or group) traced their new sense of positivity and hope about their lives back to the feelings of connection and belonging that they experienced as a result of their engagement with the scheme. These new social relationships were valued as they established a sense of affiliation with people who shared similar circumstances and had similar experiences. The befriendeds and befrienders, as in other studies, talked of the benefits they gained through their widening social network [23]. Other work on social connectedness, albeit with adults with mental health problems, has shown that the bond within social connectedness is characterised by shared identities, feelings of closeness, feeling accepted, feeling socially involved and valuing the relationship [43]. These dimensions resonate strongly with those elements/factors that the parents in our study valued and talked of as being important to them. Although their engagement within the scheme did not necessarily change the adversities they faced, they found solace and strength through feelings of affiliation with other parents. Engagement was promoted through an open, authentic and welcoming ambiance and atmosphere; interpersonal ambiance has been described as being a major factor in supporting ongoing participation [44] in schemes such as this.

The feeling of affiliation strengthened as a result of being able to off-load to and share with other parents who were non-judgmental. This was transformative for many parents and personal growth, as seen in other schemes, was fostered [9]. The social support and established connections influenced parents' ability to cope and, over time, they developed a stronger sense of well-being and a more positive outlook for themselves and their child. The quantitative data likewise confirmed that parents engaged in the scheme felt more positive about the present and the future, and more determined and confident in their abilities to tackle challenging situations. Social support has been shown to moderate perceived stress and this in turn has the potential to moderate poor physical health [45] although other factors such as financial hardship can mitigate the impact of social support [46].

Although the befrienders continued to experience some challenges within their lives, they valued both their own sense of connectedness and realised that their volunteering helped support other parents to make connections and to find meaning and hope within their lives, as seen within other work on volunteering [47].

4.1. Limitations of the study

Due to concerns about their well-being and the wish not to add to parents' burden, the gatekeepers may have passed us the details of befriendeds who were in better circumstances or managing better than those who they chose not to pass on. This may explain why the results from the attendees at the parent group were not dramatically different to the befrienders' scores. Only 12 (1:1) befriendeds were referred for possible recruitment, these participants may not be reflective of a 'typical' befriended accessing the service. Emphasising our independence from the scheme, the appreciative focus and our open approach, aimed to reduce the potential of socially desirable responses.

5. Conclusion

Within this study although we noted some changes in resilience, our reflections lead us to believe that future research should consider focusing on exploring and measuring social connectedness. This befriending scheme had a positive effect on parents of disabled children or those with additional needs. Amongst many aspects which parents found positive, the main benefit was that the scheme helped parents to build social connections and feel safe and supported within a community of other parents who understood their lives.

Conflict of interest/Funding

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CRedit authorship contribution statement

Lucy Blake: Formal analysis, Investigation, Project administration, Writing - review & editing. **Lucy Bray:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - review & editing. **Bernie Carter:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Writing - original draft.

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