



Working for the well-being of couples and their families

**A study of the provision of training and resource materials to support community family workers in responding to couple relationship difficulties**

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## **CONTENTS**

### **Executive summary**

#### **1.0 Introduction**

#### **2.0 Background**

2.1 Working with families

2.2 Home-Start

#### **3.0 Project description**

3.1 Preparation work

3.2 The training

3.3 The training participants

3.4 Evaluation

3.4.1 Pre-training questionnaires

3.4.2 Post-training questionnaires

3.4.3 Follow-up interviews

#### **4.0 Findings**

4.1 The course participants

4.2 Expectations and needs from the training

4.3 The parents supported by Home-Start

4.3.1 Issues arising with parents

4.3.2 Offering help

4.3.3 Difficulties

4.4 Skills, knowledge and confidence

4.4.1 Communication skills

4.4.2 Knowledge and understanding

4.4.3 Confidence

4.5 The course

4.5.1 General impressions

4.5.2 Relevance

4.5.3 Content

4.5.4 Course tutors

4.5.5 Interaction

4.5.6 Course materials

- 4.6 The cartoon pictures
  - 4.6.1 Using the cartoon pictures
  - 4.6.2 Difficulties
  - 4.6.3 Future developments
- 4.7 Putting it into practice
  - 4.7.1 Changes to practice
  - 4.7.2 Difficulties
  - 4.7.3 Cascading
  - 4.7.4 Use with ethnic minorities
- 4.8 Further training
  - 4.8.1 Skills day
  - 4.8.2 Accreditation
  - 4.8.3 Other applications
- 4.9 Study limitations
- 5.0 Conclusions**
- 6.0 References**
- 7.0 Acknowledgements**
- 8.0 Appendices**
  - Appendix 1: Overview of the training
  - Appendix 2: Pre-training questionnaire
  - Appendix 3: Post-training questionnaire
  - Appendix 4: Follow-up interviews topic guide

## **Executive summary**

### **Project outline**

This project involved the administration and evaluation of pilot training for Home-Start family group workers to support them in their role of helping couples who may be experiencing relationship difficulties.

The training was adapted from a previously evaluated trial training course with community mothers and aimed to:

1. increase understanding of family dynamics;
2. enhance listening skills;
3. increase confidence in dealing with relationship issues; and
4. provide cartoon resources to aid the participants in their work with parents.

Thirteen Home-Start workers from the London region and seven workers from the Eastern region took part in the two-day training. Feedback about the course was obtained from pre- and post-training questionnaires (90% response rate) and from follow-up interviews nine months after the training (80% participation).

Consultants to the project from Home-Start also advised on the training and provided some feedback on use of the resources.

### **Key findings**

**Meeting needs:** The course attendees were looking to support parents more effectively by building on their core communication and information providing roles within a limited intervention time. The practical nature and content of the course was found to address these concerns and succeeded in increasing the confidence and determination of the trainees to address parents' relationship issues.

**Building relevant skills:** By addressing and expanding on core skills such as active listening, time management and understanding of family and relationship dynamics, the course was able to further equip the trainees for confronting and working through relationship issues.

**Exchanging practice:** The open and comfortable atmosphere of the course was especially valued by the trainees. It was also productive in enabling participants to share ideas and experiences and to engage fully with the key messages and practical tasks.

**Resource materials:** Course materials such as the cartoon picture kit assisted in the conveying of practical ideas during training and provided participants with a novel approach to helping and supporting parents. Following the training, some reservations persisted concerning the most appropriate ways of utilising the cartoon pictures. However, new ways for using the resources were identified and many trainees were still making plans at the time of the follow-up.

**Beyond the training:** Following the training, some of the course methods and content was cascaded to others through the sharing of resources and adding to the existing induction course for volunteers. The spontaneous passing on of skills and knowledge suggested the high relevance of training and support for community family workers in their roles of working with parents' relationship issues.

## **1.0 Introduction**

The present study aimed to pilot a training course for Home-Start community family support workers and to examine how the training affected their work.

One Plus One has produced a range of training courses and resources to help support people working with couples and families. Building on previous training modules and evaluations (Corney, 1998; Reynolds, 2001), a new pilot course was developed for people working to support families.

The course aimed to enhance the skills, knowledge and confidence of community family workers and to provide them with resources to enable them to deal with relationship problems and provide support to parents. The main components of the course included: the changes and stages in relationships; the impact of children; common problems and couple conflict; family diversity including minority ethnic and other groups; and working with cartoon picture materials.

Home-Start is a national initiative providing trained volunteers to help any parent, with at least one child under five who is finding it hard to cope.

### Project objectives

The main objectives of the pilot evaluation project were:

- to administer the pilot training module for Home-Start family group workers;
- to explore the views and experiences of the participants in the training;
- to determine the areas of possible impact of the training;
- to inform and revise the production and dissemination of a final training module for family group workers.

### Structure of the report

This report provides a brief background to the development of the training and the Home-Start organisation. The participants in the training and the areas in which they work are also described. Details of the administration and findings of the present evaluation project are then reported followed by the implications for the development and conduct of the training.

## **2.0 Background**

This section provides background information on the work of community family support workers, the Home-Start organisation and the rationale for the pilot study.

### **2.1 Working with families**

All couple relationships will experience difficulties of some degree during their course. However, common life-cycle changes can mark particular points of potential stress. For example, the transition to parenthood and the early years of family life can be a time of particular strain as each person must adjust to new family roles (Cowan and Cowan, 1992).

How couples interact with each other can have a strong influence on children's development, parent-child relationships and the parents themselves (Reynolds, 2001). In particular, the management of disagreements, conflict and family change can have important implications on how the family and individuals function (Cummings and Davies, 1994).

Pressures from outside the couple relationship, such as social or personal situations, financial or employment difficulties, can add increased pressure on the partner relationship as well as other family relations (Starling and Martin, 1992). Disadvantaged families may therefore be at increased risk of experiencing family stresses and potential breakdown.

There are various parent support schemes across the UK, such as Home-Start, providing assistance to young families, especially those in disadvantaged or difficult circumstances. Although the main focus may be on practical and emotional support, partner relationships may also be an important factor in how well families cope. A project examining the impact of five Home-Start schemes found that 76% of families reported relationship difficulties (Frost et al, 1996). Couple issues were also often exacerbated by additional worries such as financial problems, poor health and large families.

Although difficulties in couple relationships are common, few people seek any kind of formal help or support (NOP, 1997). Family support workers can provide an invaluable source of assistance and information to disadvantaged or vulnerable families. However, they may not receive dedicated training or information in addressing couple relationship issues and subsequently may not have the experience or skills necessary to deal with them confidently and effectively.

Seeking formal help for relationship issues is relatively uncommon. However, health professionals and others who come into routine contact with parents are frequently turned to when parents are concerned about their relationships (Ayles & Reynolds). By equipping and supporting workers who are in these roles, they may be better able to respond to these situations and to support parents who are seeking help in this way.

Evaluations of One Plus One Brief Encounters training with Health Visitors have found that a time-limited intervention model and skills training had a beneficial impact on their practice (Corney, 1998; Reynolds et al, 2002). Training participants felt more confident and able to ask about relationship issues and offer help to their clients.

A recent One Plus One training course for community mothers aimed to assist them in providing relationship support to the parents they visit (Reynolds, 2002). The course enabled the community mothers to identify and respond more confidently to relationship distress by improving their listening skills and knowledge and understanding of relationship difficulties. This helped the parents visited through emotional support and relief, normalising many difficulties and identifying actions to overcome some of the experienced problems.

Initial discussions with Home-Start representatives suggested that their community family workers might benefit from a similar programme.

## **2.2 Home-Start**

Established in 1973, Home-Start is a national initiative with more than 300 schemes across the UK, divided into 11 regions. Each scheme is a registered charity, managed by a local committee of volunteers but adhering to national guidelines.

Regular support and practical assistance is offered to any parent with at least one child under five who is under stress in order to help prevent family crisis and breakdown. Typical difficulties include loneliness, ill health, disability, bereavement, multiple births, post-natal illness, isolation and relationship difficulties. Help and support is provided by regular home visits through listening, sharing problems and concerns and practical support. Family groups are also offered which may differ in style, including parent education, family drop-in, cooking, massage and reflexology or parent and toddler groups.

All volunteers complete a preparation course covering the Home-Start approach, ethical issues, information about family resources and key issues such as child protection and domestic violence. Further informal training is also provided and volunteers meet and discuss their own parenting experiences.

The organisation currently supports more than 21,000 families and 48,000 children each year with a free and confidential service provided by more than 7,000 volunteers.

### **3.0 Project description**

The sections below provide details of the implemented training package and the conduct and appraisal of the training course. The evaluation of the training involved administering questionnaires before and immediately after the training and interviewing the training participants at a follow-up point nine months after the training.

#### **3.1 Preparation work**

Consultation workshops with Home-Start group facilitators and their local managers were held prior to the training. These meetings were used to: explore experiences of working practice; determine how the training and any information or resources might help to support the work of Home-Start; and discuss the relevance of the cartoon materials and any possible changes or new pictures. The workshops included representatives from the London region schemes in Barnet, Brent, Enfield, Harrow, Islington and Kingston and from the Eastern region schemes in Basildon, Breckland, East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, Mid-Suffolk, Norwich and Swaffham.

#### **3.2 The training**

The training for Home-Start workers was developed from a trial training course with community mothers (Reynolds, 2001). Feedback from this project evaluation assisted in the revision of the training. Consultation workshops with representatives from Home-Start were also used to explore experiences of dealing with family and parenting problems and the kind of information and resources that would be potentially helpful.

The course was devised to help family support workers by enhancing their skills, knowledge and confidence and by providing cartoon resources to discuss with parents. The course runs for two full days and aims to:

- increase understanding of family development and diversity;
- help workers understand the impact of partnership on parents and how people parent;
- increase understanding and develop ideas for dealing with family conflict;
- explore the impact of a new baby on families and particularly step-families;
- enhance listening skills and confidence in responding to relationships problems; and
- enable workers to use cartoon resources that summarise research based evidence in a fun and accessible format.

A summary of the training programme can be seen in Appendix I.

### **3.3 The training participants**

Two groups of Home-Start family workers completed the training. Workers from the London region of Home-Start completed the two days of training on 15<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2002. Workers from the Eastern region completed the training on 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> April 2002.

Twenty-five Home-Start workers were invited to participate in the training from the London and Eastern regions. Thirteen workers from the London region and seven from the Eastern region participated in the training.

The London region included members from the following schemes: Barnet, Brent, Ealing, Hillingdon, Kingston, Newham, Sutton, Stevenage, Croydon, Enfield and Southwark. The Eastern region included members from the following schemes: Breckland, East Cambridgeshire, Fenland, Kings Lynn and District, Mid-Suffolk, Norwich and Swaffham.

Participants were recruited through the regional consultants for the London and Eastern regions.

### **3.4 Evaluation**

#### **3.4.1 Pre-training questionnaires**

A pre-training questionnaire was devised in collaboration with the developers of the training course (see Appendix 2).

Participants were asked about their role within Home-Start, their skills and confidence, the kinds of relationship problems the parents they work with may experience and how they deal with them, their current knowledge about relationship issues and their expectations about the training.

#### **3.4.2 Post-training questionnaires**

A questionnaire to be completed immediately following the training was devised in collaboration with the designers of the training (see Appendix 3).

Participants were asked about the design of the course, how it may have helped them in their work, the most and least successful parts of the course, how they might put the training into practice and the cartoon picture kit.

#### **3.4.3 Follow-up interviews**

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted nine months following the training (see Appendix 4 for the topic guide). The interviews aimed to obtain more detailed feedback about the course and how it affected the subsequent work of the training participants once the full training materials had been disseminated and respondents had had sufficient time to use them.

The interviews took the place of originally planned focus groups which were not practical due to logistical difficulties and time constraints. Trainees were also contacted again shortly after the follow-up to determine whether there had been any further changes in practice following the prompting of the previous contact and to talk to participants who had previously not been available. Follow-up interviews were also conducted with the

original consultation group involved in the project to obtain feedback on the picture kit resources and possible future applications.

## **4.0 Findings**

Twelve of the 13 participants from the London region completed pre-training questionnaires and 11 completed post-training questionnaires. Of the 7 participants from the Eastern region, 6 completed pre-training questionnaires and all 7 returned post-training questionnaires. This yielded an overall response rate of 90% for both pre- and post-training questionnaires. Ten of the London region participants (77%) and six of the Eastern region participants (86%) took part in a follow-up interview. Two of the London region and one of the Eastern region participants had left Home-Start at the time of the follow-up.

Quotations from participants are indexed in the text as: LQ – London participant, Questionnaire response; LI – London participant, interview response; EQ – East Anglia participant, Questionnaire response; EI – East Anglia participant, Interview response.

### **4.1 The course participants**

Participants had been involved with Home-Start for between 2 weeks and 5 years; the average was 20 months for the London group and 13 months for the Eastern group. Involvement ranged from 3 to 35 hours per week, with an average of 19 hours for the London group and 12 hours for the Eastern group. Most of the training participants were involved with family groups; some supervised or co-ordinated volunteers.

### **4.2 Expectations and needs from the training**

All Home-Start workers receive an in-house induction preparation course. A small number of respondents had also received other training including counselling, child protection, child care, group facilitation, listening skills and risk assessment.

Participants were asked why they wanted to attend the training, what their expectations were and what they wanted to achieve from attending. The responses mainly concerned a desire to increase their knowledge, resource information and understanding and to use this to better support the parents they work with.

*“Giving advice and guidance, responding appropriately and in a helpful manner (over and above just listening).” (LQ)*

*“Most of the families I am working with are experiencing relationship problems so I hope this training course will help me to help them.” (EQ)*

The training participants identified a broad range of skills that they would most like to improve. The most commonly identified were communication, guidance or advice, group facilitation, listening skills and time management. Other suggestions concerned confidence, conflict, cultural perspectives and understanding.

*“To enable me to understand relationships better and hopefully be of more practical help to my families.” (EQ)*

*“I would like to give people more time but because of the nature of the job it is difficult.” (LQ)*

Participants also wanted to be able to discuss issues and share ideas and to be able to pass on information and understanding to others who had not attended the training.

### **4.3 The parents supported by Home-Start**

Most of the respondents thought that it was very appropriate for them to discuss relationship problems with parents (83% gave a rating of 4 or 5 out of 5). The following sections give details of the kinds of relationship issues that arise, what help is offered and the kinds of difficulties that are experienced.

#### **4.3.1 Issues arising with parents**

Respondents readily identified many different kinds of couple relationship issues that parents talked about. The most common of these were violence or abuse, finances, lack of communication, parenting issues, lack of support and unreasonable expectations.

A number of issues were reported to be particularly relevant for the areas the respondents worked in. Those most frequently mentioned included financial issues (e.g. debt, low income and housing), isolation, depression, domestic violence or abuse, single parent families and young parents. The majority of respondents (77%) believed that difficulties between couples/parents affected the way they parent their children 'very much'.

Many of the relationship issues identified in the questionnaire responses were also raised in the project consultation meetings. Clientele who were difficult to deal with were often experiencing issues concerning poverty, housing, depression, drug and substance abuse, large and extended families, mixed marriages, bereavement, stepfamilies, literacy, disabilities, domestic violence, racism, sexual, emotional or physical abuse, homelessness, single parents, multiple births or refugees. Poverty and isolation in rural areas can also create a minority group with special needs concerning isolation, transport, money and confidentiality.

#### **4.3.2 Offering help**

The trainees were fairly divided over whether they would offer help to a parent who presented relationship difficulties. Forty-one percent gave a rating suggesting that they would be unlikely or unsure about offering help and 59% a rating that they would be more likely to offer assistance. This would suggest some concerns about becoming involved with parents' relationship issues and some of the potential difficulties suggested are highlighted in the following section.

By far the most common kinds of help offered were listening and providing information. Other suggestions included informing parents about other services (usually counselling), making a referral, introducing parents to a group or telling them where they may be able to find more information and empathising or offering more time.

*"Listening helps people off load. Sometimes that's all it takes. If needed I would try to help them seek professional help." (EQ)*

*"I hope I would listen fully in the first place and be able to find contact details for someone or an organisation more able to help than myself - with their permission." (EQ)*

Although many of the respondents were aware of Relate (61%), few other relationship support services were consistently identified. Other services mentioned included Well Care, New Pin, Samaritans, MIND and other local counselling, support, parenting, mediation and mental health services.

### 4.3.3 Difficulties

The main anxieties participants had in discussing relationship problems with parents were concerns about providing the wrong information or advice, being biased by voicing their own opinions, being seen as siding with one partner, getting too involved, having no or a detrimental effect, not understanding properly and seeming judgemental.

*“That I may try to suggest possible solutions to problems that I do not have enough knowledge about.” (EQ)*

*“[That I] may leave them feeling worse than when I arrived.” (LQ)*

*“That my own agenda or issues might get in the way; that my desire to help might translate into practical advice inappropriate to their needs.” (LQ)*

Additional issues that participants identified as having particular difficulties with were violence or abuse, cultural differences, understanding parents, meeting clients' expectations and offering support or information.

*“I am often concerned that they expect me to make it all better.” (LQ)*

## 4.4 Skills, knowledge and confidence

### 4.4.1 Communication skills

The course participants were generally quite confident in their communication skills prior to the training. The average ratings on a scale of 1 (not at all confident) to 5 (very confident) were 4.1 for listening, 3.6 for giving information and 3.1 for offering guidance. No-one rated themselves as less than 3 for listening or giving information. Participants appeared to have least confidence in offering guidance, for which 4 participants rated themselves as 2 or less and no-one rated themselves a 5.

Following the training, two-thirds of participants reported that the training had enhanced their listening skills; 4 were not sure while only 1 person reported that it had not. The trainees felt that they had most benefited from increasing their awareness, trying to distinguish content from feelings, using the active listening model to identify the most salient details and not feeling obliged to look for solutions.

### 4.4.2 Knowledge and understanding

There were mixed results with how well informed participants felt about couple issues prior to the training. On a scale of 1 (not at all informed) to 5 (very informed), 50% gave a rating of 2 or 3 and 50% rated themselves 4 or 5, with an average rating of 3.5.

Prior to the training, the participants requested mostly general information concerning couple relationships. The most common areas that respondents wanted to know more about were relationship dynamics, organisations that deal with relationship problems and how to help or support couples. Other areas of interest included parenting and children, helplines, financial stresses and responsibility.

*“I'm not sure that I could restrict myself to any one issue - more information on the whole would certainly be of benefit.” (EQ)*

Following the training, 94% of respondents reported that the course had enhanced their understanding of couples and families; only 1 person was not sure. Most of the

participants also found that the course had provided them with useful information to be able to share with parents. The most commonly cited content as being particularly helpful was the guide to relationship problems, the concept of patterns in relationships and understanding families and relationships.

*“To sit down for me and think about people and relationships and things like that was very good training for us so that when we do go out, we’ve got that knowledge and more of an understanding.” (LI)*

#### 4.4.3 Confidence

Just over half of the respondents (53%) felt confident in discussing relationship problems with parents prior to the course; just over a third gave a neutral rating and two respondents rated themselves as not confident.

Following the training, over three-quarters of the respondents felt that the course had increased their confidence in dealing with couple issues; 4 respondents were unsure.

*“Since the course I have found when I visit families to assess the need I am a lot more confident in my approach when talking about relationships. I have more understanding. A mum said 'I feel better already' and could I come back for another chat!” (LQ)*

### 4.5 The course

Respondents were asked about various aspects of the course including its relevance, content, design, materials and delivery.

#### 4.5.1 General impressions

Ninety-four per cent of the respondents found the course to be useful overall and 89% indicated that they would recommend the course to others. Many of the participants noted that they had enjoyed the training sessions and that the logical approach and creative ideas had made the material easy to engage with.

*“It was a very good training. I went away buzzing because I had learnt a lot.” (LI)*

*“It was one of the most enjoyable training sessions I’ve been to.” (EI)*

#### 4.5.2 Relevance

The training participants found the course to be highly relevant to their work in Home-Start. In particular, the training was said to be very practical and “down-to-earth”, with attainable and relevant outcomes.

*“I thought it was pitched very well for our organisation and what we do.” (LI)*

*“It was very very good and I thought it was very relevant for Home-Start workers as well.” (LI)*

Participants were also highly stimulated by the course (two-thirds gave a maximum rating for stimulation of interest). Most of the respondents also found the level at which the course was pitched to be about right and that it met with their expectations.

*“I found this course directly relevant to the work I do. Parents talk to us about their relationships all the time.” (LQ)*

### 4.5.3 Content

The most helpful parts of the course were felt to be the cartoon pictures (44% of respondents), the relationship stages (39%) and hearing from colleagues (33%). Other areas highlighted included conflict, discussion, role play and statistics.

*"I felt that each part of this course was invaluable as the discussion which followed and the learning issues were insightful." (LQ)*

Few respondents identified any aspects of the course that were unhelpful or unsuccessful; a third of respondents explicitly stated that none of the course was not helpful.

*"For me it was all useful - if not immediately with my family groups then the personal insights were all very helpful." (LQ)*

*"I don't think I could say that any part was unhelpful or unsuccessful, otherwise I would be implying I already know it all. There is always room for growth in knowledge and experience." (EQ)*

Almost all of the respondents found the length of the sessions to be about right. More time and attention spent on practical skills (e.g. listening, role-playing and cartoon use) were the most frequently suggested additions. Nearly a quarter would have preferred more time for discussion and a half would have liked more time for skills practice.

*"Perhaps more time to practice with cartoons and each other 'listening' and discussing relationship difficulties." (LQ)*

*"Whilst I feel happy about the overall time and content, I think that more time on the practical side of things like role playing may have been useful." (EQ)*

Other areas highlighted for possible additional coverage included domestic violence, child protection and child welfare, mental health, postnatal depression, step-families, same sex couples, mixed race couples and managing people with more difficult problems.

Very few respondents identified any topics that they would have preferred to spend less time and attention on. The only suggestions were less time covering the impact of children on a relationship (as many participants were already parents themselves) and the possible difficulties involved with being politically correct and not stereotyping.

*"I felt the course was extremely well balanced and covered a lot in the time we had!" (LQ)*

*"I don't think there could have been a reasonable shortening of time without reducing important content." (EQ)*

### 4.5.4 Course tutors

The delivery of the course was found to create a comfortable, entertaining and relaxed atmosphere, especially for the more difficult tasks such as role play. The course tutors were valued for their ability to maintain interest, pull the group together and encourage involvement.

*"The facilitators were lovely people and made people feel at ease and comfortable." (EQ)*

*"I thought the training was very interesting and well presented." (LQ)*

Eighty-three percent of the respondents thought that the course tutors encouraged participation and helped them to learn.

*"I learnt a lot and I liked the way it was delivered as well; the style of it. There was lots of information but there was also lots of opportunities to try things out." (LI)*

*"I would like to thank the course leaders for not using 'jargon' and not treating us like idiots, it helped me to get a little more confidence in what I already felt - so I didn't feel in above my head." (EQ)*

#### **4.5.5 Interaction**

One of the most valued aspects of the training sessions was being able to share ideas within the group, particularly as there was so much common ground between the work of the different trainees. As participants found the atmosphere to be relaxed and open, this facilitated the exchange and discussion of experiences and perspectives on similar situations and topics.

*"It was so comfortable that you felt you could express what you wanted to say whenever you wanted to say it." (EI)*

*"It was useful to see how diverse the issues are and everybody brought something new to the situations." (LQ)*

*"The discussion parts of the course were very helpful because you heard how other people deal with certain problems." (EQ)*

#### **4.5.6 Course materials**

Almost all of the respondents found the handouts and amount of material covered to be about right. The course materials were valued for being compact, concise and well presented.

Participants valued the resource pack as materials that could be utilised after the course by anyone in the Home-Start team. The training materials were valued as documents that could be consulted when a particular issue arose rather than being referred to on a regular basis. Several trainees had used the course materials to pass on information to colleagues; particularly the information and statistics sections.

### **4.6 The cartoon pictures**

The participants responded positively to the cartoon pictures as a training aid. In particular, they could identify with these materials, found them novel, relevant, memorable and amusing, a useful aid to discussion and could see how they might be normalising and a useful way of depersonalising issues.

#### **4.6.1 Using the cartoon pictures**

Following the training, there were some differences in use of the cartoons. Sixty-one per cent of respondents felt confident about using the cartoon pictures; 28% gave a neutral response and only one person did not feel confident in using them.

*"I felt quite inspired to go away and use the materials." (EI)*

*"It gave you some tools and I think that if you've got the tools to work on a job you feel more confident doing it." (LI)*

The respondents who had used the cartoon pictures found that they helped to stimulate a discussion and start conversations, helped in engaging parents whose first language was not English and assisted in the training of volunteers.

*“I thought they were a really good starting point potentially for talking with people and to start discussions about relationships.” (LI)*

Around half of the respondents (56%) were unsure about how they would use the cartoon pictures in their parent groups. Twenty-eight per cent thought that they would be able to use the cartoon pictures and only two people thought that they would not be able to use them.

Of those who had not yet used the cartoons, the majority were positive about them in principle and many were looking for appropriate situations in which to use them. The most frequently suggested ways in which the cartoon pictures might be used in the future were as aids to discussion, to generate interest, for group work on specific topics, for smaller family groups, for simple rather than complex or ongoing relationship issues, where the parents are known more closely by the worker or where people are stuck in a particular way of thinking. Others suggested that they might be more likely to be used in new groups where easy lines of communication had not yet been established.

*“I think I might try to set up a 'Talking Point' area in the group with different materials relating to one issue at a time - like a 'story sack for adults'.” (EQ)*

*“Many families are experiencing debt, depression, these cartoons would help to open up discussion and help them to face their fears.” (EQ)*

#### 4.6.2 Difficulties

Some of the trainees had apprehensions about using the cartoons following the course and a few had used them in group situations with mixed success. A few of these trainees found that their groups were more suited to offering general support rather than dealing with particular relationship issues, for example, as different parents have different priorities and it may be difficult to talk privately.

One of the main concerns mentioned by trainees about using the cartoons in practice concerned the anticipated reactions of parents. For example, that the parents may not relate to or engage with them, find them patronising or be defensive or that they were too invasive for vulnerable or distressed people. Several respondents suggested that they would need to establish a relationship with parents first before they felt comfortable introducing them to the cartoons.

*“The desire to use them too soon - before really getting to know the families first and gain their trust necessary for them to feel able to let you in on their lives.” (EQ)*

*“Some parents may not have the insight to understand underlying suggestions of the cartoons or they may stimulate already fragile feelings.” (LQ)*

A further area of potential difficulty concerned resources, such as having the time to use the cartoons, having additional staff available or having funding to run particular groups and an appropriate setting or group situation.

*“Finding ones that all members of the group can relate to.” (LQ)*

The project consultation group suggested that one of the problems the cartoon kit faces is to express issues for the wider ranges of ethnic and minority groups (including

travellers, isolated and rural groups) while not marginalising or stigmatising other parents in the groups.

A few difficulties were also highlighted in using the accompanying CD-ROM to the course which contained all of the cartoon picture variations in a printable format. The main problems centred around available terminals, individual computer skills and printing hard copies of the cartoons.

#### 4.6.3 Future developments

A number of the respondents had used or were planning to use the cartoon resources in additional ways to those directly presented in the course. This included using them as a discussion stimulant for various parenting support and education groups and as an aid to training Home-Start volunteers.

Possibilities for further expanding the use of the cartoons included using display posters as general discussion triggers, having them more casually available for people to look at and respond to and using existing cartoons with blank boxes to allow people to complete the story themselves. However, some trainees thought that they would require additional planning, time, funding and facilities before they would be able to use the cartoons in these additional ways.

Some of the participants were prompted into revisiting the cartoon materials as a result of the follow-up interviews. As the cartoon picture kit is a novel resource, there may be some time needed to adapt to its use in practice. Any future developments will be monitored by the One Plus One training team.

### 4.7 Putting it into practice

#### 4.7.1 Changes to practice

Most of the respondents thought that the training would help them when working in groups with parents (72% gave a response of 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much)).

*“This course enhanced my knowledge and skills. It also gave tools to use. I just need to practice now to gain confidence.” (LQ)*

The training was thought to have made the participants more aware of and to have changed their approach to dealing with parents’ relationship issues. The time-limited approach was thought to be particularly valuable. Some of the respondents noted that they did not usually have many opportunities to reflect on their work in practice.

*“It makes me think. When I’m approaching them I’m thinking more of where they’re coming from.” (EI)*

The main ways in which the respondents thought that the training would help them were in starting a discussion about relationships, having a better understanding of relationships and difficulties, having greater confidence and determination to talk about relationships issues, being more sensitive, being more in control of an interaction, having increased awareness of the relevant issues, being able to listen and engage more and using cartoons to trigger or focus conversations.

*"I can now identify key areas in relationships that may lead to problems and hopefully use listening skills wisely." (LQ)*

*"I know that I will listen more carefully in case there is an underlying problem that is hard for the parents to just 'blurt' out and I feel better equipped to listen and help them to help themselves." (EQ)*

Respondents varied in their appraisal of how often they would be able to use the training in practice, suggesting that although it did not form the main basis of their work, the skills and knowledge gained could still be engaged on a regular basis. Many of the participants considered that the training had assisted them in a broad way, strengthening their general skills and understanding which were then applied in many different work situations and personal areas.

*"I think if you can relate it to yourself it also helps to be able to put that over to other people". (EI)*

*"Given the opportunity to think about doing things in a different way whether it was using cartoons or it was a way of speaking to people." (EI)*

#### 4.7.2 Difficulties

The greatest difficulties anticipated in putting the training into practice concerned parents' reactions and willingness to engage, practical considerations (such as time, venue and childcare for parents) and some concerns about aspects of their own skills.

*"I'm confident in using the cartoons and I don't have any concerns about them, it is just a case of finding a suitable venue and appropriate care for children during sessions." (EQ)*

#### 4.7.3 Cascading

Many of the trainees had spontaneously been involved in passing on some of the skills and resources they had gained from the course to other Home-Start colleagues. For example, incorporating the ideas and materials of the training into an induction course for new volunteers, promoting discussion between colleagues and presenting information to other team members.

#### 4.7.4 Use with ethnic minorities

The trainees were slightly uncertain about how appropriate what they had learnt in the course would be for parents from all ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds, reflecting their differing concerns and working environments. Forty-four per cent were unsure, although nearly a quarter thought that the training would be very appropriate. However, some respondents explained that they do not currently work with any ethnic minority groups.

*"As long as I am sensitive to their problem and respectful of their culture I don't see any problems." (LQ)*

The main difficulty anticipated in using the training with different ethnic groups was language barriers. Other potential problems raised included literacy, cultural differences and confidence.

*"Some of our mums are extremely shy - getting them to talk will be difficult but I think the cartoons will be a great stepping stone." (LQ)*

*“A very valuable resource especially talking to clients who have reading or literacy problems or whose verbal English is not good.” (Consultant, Interview)*

## **4.8 Further training**

Most of the respondents (72%) indicated that they would like further training; only two respondents indicated that they did not want any additional training.

### **4.8.1 Skills day**

An additional skills day in both the Eastern and London regions took place approximately three months following the main training. The skills day was not part of the original project plan and the course was made available to others from the Home-Start organisation in addition to the trainees from the two-day course.

The training covered listening skills with practice and the Brief Intervention model. Fourteen people attended the Eastern region skills day and eight people attended the London day. No formal evaluation of the training took place, but some informal feedback was obtained from participants directly following the course and in the follow-up interviews.

Participants in the skills day found the course to be very relevant and valued the opportunity to reflect on their own practice. The training was commended for being practical and concise and the Brief Intervention model was well received. The course was thought to have increased their confidence and improved their techniques, in particular: setting boundaries; separating content from feelings; reflecting back; and focusing on the most relevant information.

Participants from the first course found the additional day to be a useful revisiting of the skills covered in the original training.

*“You take listening for granted and I think having it broken up and analysed certainly makes you think more when you’re working.” (EI)*

*“Extremely relevant and very useful. I have valued the experience and will use what I have learned.” (LQ)*

### **4.8.2 Accreditation**

Just over half of the course participants would have liked the present training to be accredited in some way; a third were unsure and only two did not want the course to be accredited. Respondents were unsure about which organisation they would like to accredit the course; One Plus One, OCN, NVQ and a counselling organisation were suggested.

### **4.8.3 Other applications**

The course content and materials were thought to have possible applications outside of the original training objectives. The course was considered to be relevant to other organisations and professionals working closely with parents such as Sure Start and Health Visitors as well as providing useful resource material for information and presentations.

#### **4.9 Study limitations**

As the overall number of training participants was small the findings should not be considered as representative of any greater population. For the same reason, only a descriptive use of the results was applicable and no statistical inferences could be drawn regarding the utility of the training. However, a rich amount of information was obtained at various points during the study which was invaluable in understanding how the course and materials affected those involved in the training and how it may impact upon their and others' work.

## **5.0 Conclusions**

### Meeting needs

Although the participants in the Home-Start pilot course had a variety of background experience and previous training, most were very aware of being exposed to parents' relationship issues and associated difficulties. The training participants were sometimes unsure what action to take and had some anxieties about how they should proceed. The main needs of the group centred around gaining understanding and information about relationship issues and how to support parents experiencing any difficulties.

The present training was found to be highly relevant to the participants' needs, with practical learning and outcomes. The course was found to improve the participants' communication skills and understanding of couples and families. This general enhancement also gave trainees more confidence and determination in tackling relationship issues which could also be applied in other aspects of their work.

### Turning training into practice

The training was thought to have made the participants more aware of and to have changed their approach to dealing with parents' relationship issues. More specifically, the active listening and brief intervention models were found to be particularly useful and relevant to their work, enabling them to engage more assuredly with parents raising issues concerning their relationships.

The course participants responded well to the use of cartoon pictures as a training aid in explaining family issues and techniques for exploring relationship issues. They were thought to be particularly useful for starting general discussions and engaging people whose first language is not English.

Although the trainees were positive about the effect on their practice overall, there remained some apprehensions about confronting relationship issues. For example, there had been varied success in use of the cartoon pictures with parents and there were some unresolved issues about appropriate contexts for using them. The main sources of concern were parents' reactions (e.g. being defensive or distressed) and practical concerns (e.g. time, setting and staffing). At the time of the follow-up, many of the training participants were still planning ways in which they could circumvent these difficulties as well as considering different possibilities for using the cartoon pictures in the future.

### Beyond the training

The course was highly valued for generating a comfortable, engaging atmosphere suitable for the exchange of ideas and offering time away from the usual working environment to reflect on practice. Many of the trainees took their experiences on the course beyond the remit of the training. For example, incorporating the ideas and materials into volunteer induction courses, using the cartoon pictures in parenting support and education groups and cascading ideas to other colleagues within Home-Start.

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## **7.0 Acknowledgements**

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## 8.0 Appendices

### Appendix I: Overview of the training

#### Day I Romance to Reality

- Welcome
- Introduction (aims, ground rules)
- Icebreaker (name game)
- Objectives:
  - Family diversity overall picture – local scene
  - Introduce cartoon material as discussion triggers
  - To provide a research based overview of marriage
  - Effect of breakdown and on children
  - Lone and step family issues to practise listening skills
- Input:
  - Contemporary families – statistics and useful things to know and understand and the local scene
  - Overview - expectations, romance to reality, roller coaster
  - Monkey and bear (singles, step-families) to demonstrate the changes after initial attraction and also to show ‘marrying a problem’
  - Stages
  - Group discussion
- Links to practice
- Short break
- Impact of a baby
- Icebreaker
- Input:
  - Statistics on marital satisfaction
  - Factors relevant to postnatal depression
  - Effect on children
  - Lone mothers – men leaving
- Links to practice
- Cartoons:
  - Sex after baby
  - Will it always be like this?
  - Postnatal depression
  - The pregnancy
  - The birth
  - (Early and later) post-natal period
- For women
  - Physical and emotional changes
- For men
  - Physical and emotional changes
- Plenary (feedback and discussion)
- Short break
- Listening skills:
  - Introduction
  - Demonstration
  - Skills practice
- Lunch
- Stepfamilies and lone parents:
  - Statistics
  - Cartoons and discussion
- Link to practice
- Role play
- Short break
- Plenary (feedback and reflection)
- Process and evaluate

## Day 2 Partners and Parents: Things have Changed

- Welcome back and Introduction
- Icebreaker
- Objectives:
  - How to use cartoons - using cartoons to help couples adapt to the expected changes in the development of their relationship
  - Partnership v parenting
  - Impact of baby - the physical changes women may experience during pregnancy and after birth, reflect on the emotional changes that men and women may experience and couple's resumption of sexual intimacy
  - Conflict
  - Skills practice with cartoons - practise using cartoons to respond to couples experiencing difficulty in their sexual lives
- Impact of couple relationship on parenting
- Group work and cartoons:
  - Partners and parents
  - How to bring up baby
  - Everyone needs
- Triangles:
  - Working together
- Link to practice
- Conflict
- Plenary
- Attachment Link
- Stages of relationship breakdown
  - Protest and anger
  - Cling and seek
  - Despair and depression
  - Detachment and separation
- Plenary
- Short break
- Not in front of the children
- Types of conflict:
  - Destructive conflict – particularly detrimental to children's well-being
  - Constructive conflict – children may learn from observing resolution
  - Productive conflict – children may also learn from this style
- Link to practice
- Short break
- Domestic violence
- Plenary discussion
- Gather up
- Understanding physical aggression:
  - Common issues
  - How you can help
- Conflict patterns and gender differences
- Group work – cartoons:
  - Cartoon 11: Some people find conflict difficult to handle
  - Cartoon 12: Bottling things up
  - Cartoon 13: There must be a better way
  - Impact on children
- Summary gender differences
- Lunch
- Using cartoons:
  - Video and demo
  - Small group discussion
  - Listening and demo
  - Brainstorm the basic skills of listening
  - Skills demonstration and practice
  - Role play using real or issues discussed role-play scenario
- Process and ending

## **Appendix 2: Pre-training questionnaire**

### **Introduction**

Many couples experience difficulties in their relationships, especially in times of stress or change (e.g. after the birth of a child).

Research from Home-Start has shown that clients sometimes talk to you about problems they are having in their relationships.

We are interested in finding out more about your views and experience before you start the training course for Home-Start Helpers offered by One Plus One.

---

***Please tick the appropriate box or write in the space provided.***

### **About You**

1. What is your current role in Home-Start? (e.g. do you run groups, work in a local project, work with volunteers, etc.) .....  
.....  
.....
2. How long have you worked for Home-Start? .....
3. On average, how many hours per week do you work for Home-Start? .....
4. What training have you had for your work? .....  
.....  
.....
5. What skills would you most like to improve? .....  
.....  
.....

### **General skills and confidence**

6. How confident are you in the following communication skills:

(a) Listening

*Not at all confident*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very confident*

(b) Giving information

*Not at all confident*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very confident*

(c) Offering guidance

*Not at all confident*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very confident*

### **Parents' relationship problems with their partners**

*You must work with all sorts of relationship problems. We are particularly interested in those between couples.*

7. What kinds of couple relationship problems do parents talk to you about? .....

.....

.....

.....

8. How confident do you feel about discussing couple relationship problems with the parents you see?

*Not at all confident*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very confident*

9. What particular issues do you have difficulty dealing with? .....

.....

.....

.....

10. What anxieties do you have about discussing relationships with parents?  
(e.g. you might get out of your depth) .....

.....

.....

.....

11. In your opinion, how appropriate is it for you to discuss relationship problems with parents?

*Not at all appropriate*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very appropriate*

12. How likely are you to offer help to a parent if they talk about their relationship difficulties with you?

*Not at all likely*    1     2     3     4     5     *Extremely likely*

13. What kind of help would you offer? (e.g. listening, providing information, recommending books, explaining how other people deal with problems) .....

.....

.....

.....

14. What relationship support services are you aware of in your area? .....

.....

.....

.....

### **Issues for parents and families**

15. How much do you think that difficulties between couples/parents affect the way they parent their children?

*Not at all*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very much*

16. How well informed do you feel about couples' relationships and what can go wrong for them?

Not at all    1     2     3     4     5     Very well

17. What would you like to know more about? .....

.....

.....

18. What issues are particularly relevant for the area that you work in? .....

.....

.....

**The training**

19. Why did you want to attend the training? .....

.....

.....

20. What are your expectations about the training? .....

.....

.....

21. What do you hope to achieve from attending the training? .....

.....

.....

**Any other comments**

22. If there is anything else you would like to add, please do so. ....

.....

.....

.....

---

*We would be grateful if you could also tell us your date of birth. This will allow us to match this questionnaire with one that you complete at the end of the course.*

23. Date of birth: ...../...../.....

**Thank you very much. Please send your completed form to:**

Research Team, One Plus One, The Wells,  
7-15 Rosebery Avenue, London, EC1R 4SP

## **Appendix 3: Post-training questionnaire**

### **Introduction**

The One Plus One research team are keen to hear your opinions of the course following your attendance at the training. This will help us to evaluate whether the course is meeting its aims and how it can be improved.

---

***Please tick the appropriate box or write in the space provided.***

### **The design of the course**

1. How would you rate the following elements of the course?

	<b>Too long</b>	<b>About right</b>			<b>Too short</b>
(a) <i>Length of the sessions</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(b) <i>Time available for discussion</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>Too much</b>	<b>About right</b>			<b>Too little</b>
(c) <i>Amount of material covered</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(d) <i>Handouts</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(e) <i>Skills practice</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
	<b>Too high</b>	<b>About right</b>			<b>Too low</b>
(f) <i>Level at which course pitched</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>

2. In my opinion, the tutor...

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>		<b>Not sure</b>		<b>Strongly agree</b>	
(a) <i>...encouraged participation</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>
(b) <i>...helped me to learn</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>	6 <input type="checkbox"/>

**Your reactions to the course**

3. How much do you agree with the following statements?

*In my opinion, the course...*

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>		<b>Not sure</b>		<b>Strongly agree</b>
(a) <i>..was relevant to my work</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(b) <i>..stimulated my interest</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(c) <i>..was useful overall</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(d) <i>..met with my expectations</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(e) <i>..enhanced my understanding of couples and families</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(f) <i>..enhanced my listening skills</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(g) <i>..gave me useful information to share with parents</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(h) <i>..increased my confidence in dealing with couple issues</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>

**Topics covered**

4. Which parts of the course were particularly helpful and why? .....

.....

.....

.....

5. Which parts of the course stood out as unsuccessful / unhelpful and why? ....

.....

.....

.....

6. Which of the topics covered should have had *more* time and attention? .....

.....

.....

.....

7. Which of the topics covered should have had *less* time and attention? .....

.....

.....

.....

**Putting it into practice**

8. How much do you think the training will help you when working with parents in your groups?

*Not at all*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very much*

In what ways do you think the training will help? .....

.....

.....

What difficulties do you think you might have putting the training into practice?

.....

.....

.....

9. How often will you be able to use the training in your own work?

*Not at all*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very much*

10. How appropriate do you think that what you learnt in the course will be for parents from all ethnic groups and cultural backgrounds?

*Not at all appropriate*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very appropriate*

What difficulties might you have using the training with different ethnic groups? .....

.....

.....

.....

**The cartoon pictures**

11. How confident do you feel about using the cartoon pictures in your parent groups?

*Not at all confident*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very confident*

12. How much do you think you will be able to use the cartoon pictures in your groups?

*Not at all*    1     2     3     4     5     *Very much*

In what ways do you think you might use the cartoon pictures? .....

.....

.....

What difficulties do you think you might have using the cartoon pictures? ....

.....

.....

.....

**About the training**

13. Would you like the training to be accredited?

Yes  No  Don't know

What organisation would you like to accredit the training? .....

.....

.....

14. How much do you agree with the following statements?

	<b>Strongly disagree</b>		<b>Not sure</b>		<b>Strongly agree</b>
(a) <i>I would like further training</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>
(b) <i>I would recommend this course</i>	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>	5 <input type="checkbox"/>

**Any other comments**

15. If there is anything else you would like to add, please do so. ....

.....

.....

.....

.....

---

We would be grateful if you could also tell us your date of birth. This will allow us to match this questionnaire with the one that you completed at the start of the course.

Date of birth: ...../...../.....

***Thank you very much. Please hand your completed form to your course tutor or send it to:***

*Research Team, One Plus One, The Wells,  
7-15 Rosebery Avenue, London, EC1R 4SP*

## **Appendix 4: Follow-up interviews topic guide**

### **Introduction and purpose**

We are very interested in your views on the training and how you think it might affect your work at Home-Start. Receiving information from course participants will enable us to evaluate whether the course is achieving its aims and whether any improvements can be made.

### **General**

#### **Impressions**

- General impressions of course 3 months after
- What stands out? What do you remember in particular?

#### **Colleagues**

- Have you discussed the course with your colleagues?

#### **Most helpful**

- What were the most helpful aspects of the course?
- Why?

#### **Least helpful**

- What were the least helpful aspects of the course?
- Why?

#### **Specific areas**

- Were there any areas that you think should have covered that weren't?
- Were there any areas that you think should have covered in more detail?

### **Information**

#### **Amount**

- Did you get all the information that you needed?
- Was there anything else you would have liked to know about?

#### **Specifics**

- Which information was most useful?
- Which information was less useful?

#### **Passing on**

- Have you passed any information on to others? (e.g. colleagues, friends, parents)

### **Using the training**

#### **Changes to practice**

- Has the training affected the way you work?
- In what ways?
- Have you had any difficulties in using the training?

- Examples**
- Have you talked to any parents about relationships?
  - How did it go?
  - Any difficulties?
- Any other issues**
- Anything that the training did not prepare you for?
  - Any particular issues that you still have difficulties with?
- Cartoon pictures**
- Use**
- Have you used them?
  - How often?
  - What sort of situations have you used them? (e.g. individuals/groups)
  - When are they most useful?
- Technique**
- How have you introduced them?
  - Any difficulties in using them?
  - Clients' reactions to them
  - Given any copies to parents?
- Specific cartoons**  
(use reference)
- Which ones have you used?
  - Which ones most useful?
  - Which ones are not so useful?
  - Cartoons without words?
  - Storyline cartoons?
  - Made posters?
- Barriers to use**
- What has stopped you from using them?
  - How might this be overcome?
- Other issues**
- Black and white vs colour
  - Use with ethnic minorities
- Future**
- Will you use them in the future?
    - If yes, in what ways?
    - If no, why not?
  - Any improvements to training in their use?

## **Other course resources**

- CD-ROM**
- What did you think of having the pictures on a CD-ROM?
  - Have you looked at it since the training?
  - Any difficulties accessing it?
  - Any difficulties printing from it?
- User guide**
- What did you think of the user guide?
  - What did you think of the:
    - skills section?
    - picture write-ups?
- Handouts**
- What did you think of the handouts?
  - Have you looked at them since the training?
- Briefing notes**
- What did you think of the briefing notes?
  - Have you looked at them since the training?
- Other**
- Any other resources that you would have liked?

## **The skills day**

- Impressions**
- Did you attend the one day skills training?
  - Did it help? In what ways?

## **End**

Thank you for your time.

Any other comments?