

## TALES OF A HOMESTART VOLUNTEER

Having once sworn never to do something for nothing ( I am Yorkshire lass!!), I found myself with time to spare when the empty nest syndrome kicked in.

I discovered "Home-start" via the internet although vaguely remembered seeing an advert in the cafe of the local swimming pool as well. After an open coffee morning whetted my appetite for more, I was invited to attend a training course which spread over several months.

As I had taught for some years in a former life, I felt pretty confident although other members were more reticent about voicing opinions and thoughts during meetings. However, due to the skill of the two co-ordinators who made everyone feel at ease, by the end of the course it seemed difficult to get a word in edgeways during discussion sessions. The topics were channelled towards the work we would be doing with the families. They were informative as well as thought provoking. It also gave us the chance to meet new people and form friendships. The lunches and the limitless supplies of tea and biscuits weren't bad either!

After a celebratory lunch and armed with a certificate, I waited to be matched with a family. How scary was that? How the co-ordinators do it I'll never know but I can honestly say that out of the families I've had the privilege to visit, not one has been ill matched.

The support we give differs with each family. There is a preliminary visit with a co-ordinator and we are given a confidential resume of the family's problems and ways in which we can help. The parental considerations are also taken into account. It can be as simple as helping a mum cope with twins during an everyday shopping trip.

We are not thrown in the deep end at the start. The co-ordinators have an uncanny knack of knowing what our skills are and where our strengths lie, so they can match us accordingly. They are always at the end of a phone to support us if a problem occurs - I'm sure the office administrator knows it's me when the phone rings at the end of my visit...I've put Home-start number on Friends and Family!

A few weeks into the visiting, there is a review meeting, where volunteer and co-ordinator discuss the progress of the visits, whether certain strategies are working or where improvements can be made. As volunteers, we can signpost our families to other agencies who may be able to give more specific assistance. It is important that volunteers and families feel comfortable with each other. At any time, for whatever reason, if either party wishes to end the visits, an amicable solution is found after discussions with the co-ordinator. The volunteers can also take 'rests' if for example personal circumstances change, preventing them from giving the necessary time to Home-start.

My circle of friends and acquaintances has increased along with my social life and I find that I am not as judgmental as I once was. My listening skills have definitely improved, although my husband isn't certain about that! It's good to see a family cope better at the end of the time spent with them. Mind you, I have turned up on the door step and been unable to gain access. I have learnt not to take this personally and hope it's not because they've seen who's there, more that they've simply forgotten I was due to visit. And the down side? Remember, the time we give is voluntary and although it's difficult to say "no" at times, it's quite acceptable with all concerned to do so.

Being a volunteer is a two-way process. The benefits I have gained during my time with the charity are many. It feels wonderful to be valued and to be seen to be valued. I have given many hours during my time with the charity, however Home-Start gave me back so much more in terms of friendship, knowledge and self-esteem.

