

Developing a parent-led hot drinks pledge Caia Park, Wrexham

“The doll incident was so shocking. We had a lot of babies the same size as the doll and we saw how far the dye travelled over the dolls body. Our parent groups felt they wanted no half measures. They wanted no more hot drinks where children were playing.”

Jo Dodd is the co-ordinator of family support groups run at Gwenfro Community House on the Caia Park Estate in Wrexham, Wales. Her groups are just some of the family groups on the estate which have implemented a parent-led pledge to protect children from hot drink scalds.

The Caia Park estate has a population of about 12,500. Many of the families who live there are young parents with children under the age of five. In 2009 a dedicated health team was set up to improve health outcomes for the estate – and preventing child accidents was high on the agenda. When the Unintentional Injuries Group, Wrexham approached team leader, Liz Painter to find out if the project could host some child safety training she was very enthusiastic.

“We know that under 5s are so prone to accidents, particularly in an area like this, where there are lots of social pressures around housing, low incomes and problems like drugs and alcohol.” Liz explains.

Liz was able to identify some funding and commissioned a two-day training from Karen McFarlane, from Children in Wales. This was

delivered to staff working with young families, from the many organisations working on the estate. Health visitors, social workers, housing officers, and staff from voluntary and statutory organisations took part.

Liz says that the training was extremely successful and it was clear that there was a need to 'cascade' key elements of it to other workers and groups on the estate. Many participants had been affected by the 'scalds' demonstration – where dye was poured over a baby doll, to show how far liquid can travel on a small body. This was identified as a key message to share as widely as possible, with the aim of persuading all family groups on the estate to take steps to ban hot drinks in areas where children were present.

“This is a challenging place to work but there’s a real commitment to tackling issues through genuine partnerships. We knew we couldn’t impose a policy on groups – so we had to inspire them to find their own solutions.” Liz explains

Together with colleagues from organisations such as Flying Start, The Family Support Health Visiting Service and the Caia Park and Hightown Early Years Forum, plans were created to 'cascade' down the training. Liz worked closely with colleagues, such as Pat Kearsley, Development Worker for the Early Years Forum, which is a voluntary sector organisation. Liz and Pat developed a training pack which they used to start delivering key safety messages to these groups.

Pat’s remit is to support play groups and toddler groups and her voluntary organisation also employs a support worker who runs many of the family groups on the estate. Pat is also very experienced in identifying the need for and developing bids for funding streams. She takes a very hands-on approach to safety issues by buying small items of equipment to give away free to families wherever possible. She also understands the importance of passing on child safety messages to

parents and children in fun and impactful ways such as organising 'activity days' to the zoo and 'Elf and Safety' treasure hunts.

"It's no good preaching safety messages to families round here. We have to be subtle about delivering messages in ways that they can accept. Which is why the doll demonstration worked so well." Pat explains.

Cathy Davies is a family support worker at the Gwenfro Hut Family Support Group. Cathy says: "We did wonder if families might make a bit of a fuss if we suggested the idea of banning hot drinks, especially as we have a group on a Thursday morning that we call a 'Coffee Morning', and we know how much parents welcome the chance to sit down, put their feet up and have a cup of tea. But because of the way Liz showed us the doll and pictures of children who'd been scalded, all the parents agreed that we had to do something to keep our children safe."

"When Liz came and showed us we were gobsmacked by how much damage a cup of tea could cause." says mum, Sarah Davies. "So we all agreed we needed to keep them away from children. And now at home I tell my friend you can have your hot drinks – but in the kitchen, you can't have them in the front room where my son is playing."

At the Gwenfro Hut parents like Sarah agreed that they wanted to restrict hot drinks to the kitchen area only – and parents take it in turns to have a hot drink there, while other parents keep an eye on their children. The kitchen was already 'fenced' off from the rest of the building with a waist-high barrier and had a robust safety gate, so this worked well as a solution. This solution is only one of many that individual family groups have developed across the estate.

At Gwenfro Community House the kitchen area was considered too small to be of much use for hot drinks, but parents who saw the doll/dye demonstration were equally adamant that there should be no more hot drinks in areas where children play.

“We’ve had a shelter put outside, so you can go and have a hot drink there. I don’t think we ever enjoyed a drink in the rooms anyway, cos this is like a real house and they’re quite small and someone was always saying ‘watch out for that child’” explains mum, Christina, who attends one of the groups at the Community House. “Now it’s nice to go out for a bit of a break... have a hot drink and get away for a few minutes.”

“Yes, we realised it was an accident just waiting to happen,” says mum and volunteer, Lynda Haycock. “Everybody has signed up to the pledge and we all keep it.”

The ‘pledge’ was developed by Liz and Pat to help groups explain the hot drinks ‘policy’ to new members. They recognised that it was important to help groups explain the approach to new parents, in a way that wouldn’t seem unfriendly or dictatorial. So Liz designed a colourful poster that reads ‘We Pledge... to protect our children from the risk of scalding by having our hot drinks in a safe place away from the children. Please sign below if you agree to our pledge and want to keep our children safe in this group.’

Jo Dodd, coordinator of family support groups at Gwenfro Community says that nobody has taken offence at the idea of not being allowed to have hot drinks in the house. “Our parents were clear that they wanted no half measures. It’s been really successful because the parents came up with the solution and they are very aware about making sure it works.”

And to demonstrate how strongly parents have taken ownership of the pledge, Jo casually strolls into the play area with a mug of cold water in her hands. Immediately a chorus of mums point out to her that she shouldn’t bring a hot drink into this area.