



The Ambassador Volunteer Project

Annual Report 2021

(August 2019- March 2021)



Working together to support the development of the Parent Carer Forum Devon

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Project aim:

To build a network of volunteer ambassadors for parents and carers of children with SEND who will act as points of contact in a school, group or local area to collect and disseminate information for DiAS and the Parent Carer Forum in Devon.

Intended outcomes:

- Increase awareness of DiAS and the Parent Carer Forum Devon
- Create a mechanism for connection
- Increase reach
- Gather feedback
- Share information

Project activity:

- Recruit ambassadors
- Create and deliver ambassador training
- Develop resources
- Provide ambassador support
- Build communication mechanisms
- Deliver information events

Examples of Volunteers:



Parent carers of children with special educational needs and disabilities



Volunteers affiliated with organisations supporting parent carers



Professionals leading therapeutic services to support parent carers and their children



Parent volunteers supporting families in school based support groups



Individuals with lived experience wanting to give back to other parent carers



Professionals working with parents and carers

Examples of parent carer SEND support networks:

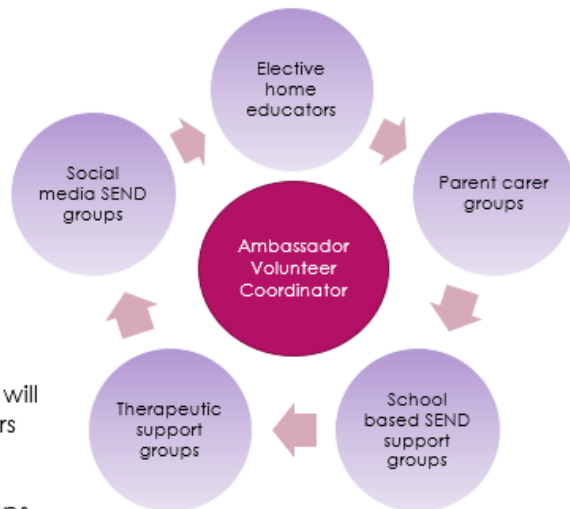
- Social media SEND groups
- Parent carer groups
- School based SEND parent carer groups
- Therapeutic support groups
- Elective home educators

How Connection and Feedback was planned into the project:

Connection

The Ambassador Volunteer Coordinator will **connect** with Volunteers and provide:

- Signposting
- Information workshops
- Guidance
- Advice

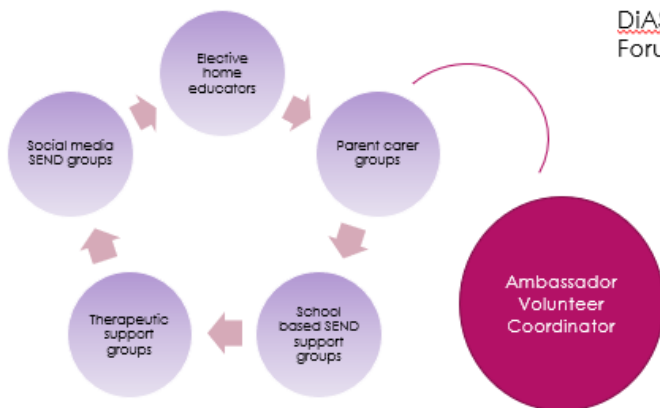


Ambassador volunteers connected to groups and networks will **feedback** through the Ambassador Volunteer Coordinator.

Parent carers feedback:
Themes
Challenges
Support needs
Trends

Feedback

The Ambassador Volunteer Coordinator will feedback to **DiAS** and the Parent Carer Forum Devon.



Themes
Challenges
Support needs
Trends



Impact:

Intended Outcomes	Activity	Evidence
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of DiAS and the Parent Carer Forum Devon • Create a mechanism for connection • Increase reach • Gather feedback • Share information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written agreement with partner organisation • Recruitment of Service Ambassador Coordinator • Training programme designed • Programme promoted in areas Number of Service Ambassadors recruited and trained • Number of referrals to service from Service Ambassador input • Parent/ carer focused training delivered • Number of referrals to service from Service Ambassador input • Case study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Full AV training package, publicity, induction, and supervision plans created. • 10 Visits to parent carer support groups/ schools. • 43 prospective volunteers trained. • 20 active volunteers • 6000+ families reached within Ambassador volunteer network (estimate based on half volunteer feedback). • 30 social media groups connected (many closed groups) • 13 parent career support groups directly connected. • 6 AV's linking into schools to develop new groups (pre-covid) • Connection to interested organisations e.g. Exeter Community Initiatives, Parent progression team, Children's Centres, Devon Carers. • 8 parent information SEND sessions delivered, 79 attendees. • Evidence of increased PCFD connect through project communication. • Communication through: Signpost Plus (SNIPPETS), Early Help newsletters, DiAS newsletters, early Years and Childcare newsletters, Babcock EHE team and SENDCO support, SEND newsletter. • Mechanisms for connection with PCFD and Volunteers formulated. • Active feedback from Volunteers to DiAS during lockdown to inform information production and training session development.

Appendix 1:

Project Case Study

<https://devonias.org.uk/about-us/the-ambassador-volunteer-project/>

DiAS and the **Parent Carer Forum Devon (PCFD)** worked in co-production to build a network of volunteer ambassadors for parents and carers of children with SEND. The Ambassador Volunteer (AV) project aims to connect parents within their own communities and more widely into a support network across Devon. AV's are based in their own communities across the county functioning as a link in their area to the wider Devon network ensuring parents are informed and know how to access advice and support. AV's are parent carers of children with SEND and some are professionals and support staff who work with them. What they all have in common is they are at the right place and time to offer peer support to others. They all have a desire to help families on their SEND journey and all understand what life is like with a child with special educational needs.

The context

Devon has a large geographical area with hidden vulnerabilities including rural deprivation, difficult access to services and lack of support for families with SEND, leading to social isolation for families. The latest SEND Ofsted report highlighted the need to listen to the voices of the families of children with SEND and ensure services utilised the messages fed back from families across a broad geographical reach, that also reflected the diversity of both the SEND needs of the children and young people and the families in Devon. Engagement with the Parent Carer Forum Devon was highlighted within the written statement of action for the local authority.

The issue that was identified

Families highlighted to our IAS service they felt isolated without the knowledge and skills to support their child, they wanted to know more about SEN support in school and how to get help from social care, health and education. Some families wanted to connect with other people who had similar experience of living with SEND in Devon and others felt they wanted to be able to share their experiences so that other families would not experience the same challenges they had faced. In some areas parent carer support groups existed and offered support but these were not connected or linked across Devon. DiAS knew that across the wide geographical area many families did not know about the free IAS services, they also did not know about the Parent Carer Forum or understand the function of the forum. The PCFD and DiAS listened to families and developed a new participation project, the Ambassador Volunteer project.

Intended project outcomes:

- Improved service awareness and reach for DiAS
- Embedding a joint participation initiative between DiAS and the Parent Carer Forum Devon.
- Increase in reach of SEN support information training offer to isolated and rural areas.
- Gather feedback from parent carers to inform service development and future IASS training offer.
- Create a mechanism for connection for parent support networks across Devon offering peer support.

How external funding was utilised

The funding was used to recruit a Volunteer coordinator who designed and developed the recruitment, training and publicity package for the project volunteers and provided ongoing support and guidance for the volunteers through monthly team meetings and supervision. Parent carers were recruited onto the project during face to face meetings at parent carer support groups, school meetings and through professional introductions and networking. A range of established parent support groups with different areas of focus indicated the desire for closer connections with both DiAS, the forum or indeed both. These groups included, elective home educator group, autism and adhd support groups, and a mental health support group. Some parent carers connected wanting to develop SEND parent carer support group in partnership with their school, some focused on virtual support groups or connecting into their social media groups. August 2019 to March 2020 we worked face to face attending meetings across Devon focusing on areas of isolation, delivering support sessions and live volunteer induction training. In March 2020 with COVID lockdown restrictions we felt the viability of the project would be impacted due to the inability to attend support groups and schools. However, after we made a move to virtual sessions, we found the AV's stayed connected and the project gained momentum. Induction training, connecting with the AV's and support groups moved to a virtual format, which

involved training the volunteers in new medium. Some gained confidence from this and went on to deliver their support groups virtually, What's App groups were utilised to aid in peer to peer support for the AV's and in building connection with PCFD.

In 2020 we delivered demystifying SEND IAS information sessions for parents virtually in response to the feedback we were hearing through the AV's. The sessions are aimed at parents beginning their SEND journey. Helping parents to understand how they can access information and which services may be available for them, highlighting the graduated response and the terminology around SEND. The sessions aimed to explain processes, give tips for engagement and signpost to information and services through the Devon SEND Local offer.

The impact of the work and how the service/service users have benefitted

Ambassador Volunteers: We have trained 43 prospective volunteers in 6 face to face sessions and 3 virtual online sessions. There are currently 20 active volunteers across Devon and over 40 interested in training in 2021. The current volunteers have a reach of over 6000 people in their own networks connecting parents into a much wider network of support. AV's support parent carers in school settings face to face and then virtually during lockdown. Adapting as circumstances demanded. By supporting the volunteers, groups were able to keep running which provided routes for keeping families in touch with fast paced COVID related changes and the AV's were able to feed into the development of DiAS COVID information. The creative approach of virtual connections ensured a wider reach area and the ability for connection with AV's more often as travel was not a constraint. We have been able to connect and share good practice across other IASS services, leading to a replicated model elsewhere in the South West. Connections have been made with voluntary and community sector services for parent carers, Children's Centres and other Early Help teams, enabling services to support their clients and in addition cascading DiAS information and creating awareness of the PCFD.

Demystifying SEND Parent information events: We delivered 8 sessions, 79 attendees all sessions were delivered virtually due to COVID restrictions. Attendees also came from outside the county. We understand the sessions have been replicated by other IAS services, a clear indication that the format, information, and resources used were of benefit to a much larger audience.

Ambassador Volunteers-the difference the project made for me.

"The supervision meetings have been really helpful for gaining advice and support within the role. Receiving information to pass on through our networks has been greatly appreciated by many parent carers."

"We couldn't offer the support to additional needs parent/carers effectively without the intervention of this project."

"The project has been vital as a parent myself with children who have additional needs that information and support are key to helping everyone on their own journey. As I believe that the more informed, I am the more empowered I have felt."

Ambassador Volunteers- the difference we made for parents:

"Supporting a mother who has concerns about her child having SEND who was too nervous to approach her teacher, she has now approached the teacher and begun engaging with school to put support in place for the child - it feels good. I don't want any child to have to miss out in education due to lack of support."

"Parent/Carers often thank me for giving the hope, which makes me feel overwhelmed and validated as a human being! Sharing what I have learnt makes me feel useful to others."

Appendix 2:

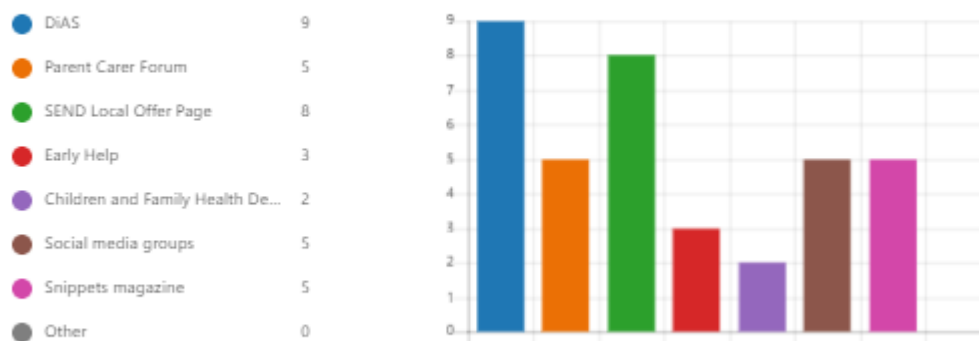
Impact of project

In October 2020 we created a word form to collect impact statements and evidence of the reach of the project.

- 10 Ambassador Volunteers responded. A summary can be found [here](#).
- 6000 (approximately) families are connected throughout Devon in the Ambassador Volunteer Network.
- 30 (approximately) social media groups (many closed groups) are also connected.
- 13 parent carer support groups directly linked through the network.

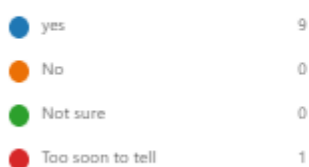
Wider impact of information sharing:

10. If you have signposted to support or other information - which ones?

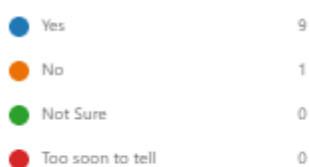


Impact for Volunteers:

12. As an Ambassador Volunteer I feel like I am now part of a larger network.



13. As an Ambassador Volunteer I feel I have learnt new skills/ information to support me in life/ my volunteering role/ my work.



Ambassador Volunteers said:

"I have had thanks from parents and carers as well as them also cascading the information I have shared with them. I'm working with xxx primary to promote Dias and the Senco is putting my information on the information that she gives to parents."

"I support many on a weekly basis. It's important for us to stick together, and knowing that we are not alone in our every day struggles is important."

"She has made time to listen and offers supervision meetings as required. She has also connected me with useful contacts on my journey."

"The supervision meetings have been really helpful for gaining advice and support within the role. Receiving information to pass on through our networks has been greatly appreciated by many parent carers."

"I think the networking side of things is going to be really beneficial. Last month I realised that there were two other groups trying to highlight the problem of children with no school placement, which is something I have been working on too. "

Parents supported by Ambassador Volunteers said:

"The information that has been coming out answered all the questions she had flying around in her head".

"Parents have often fed back how they feel less overwhelmed".

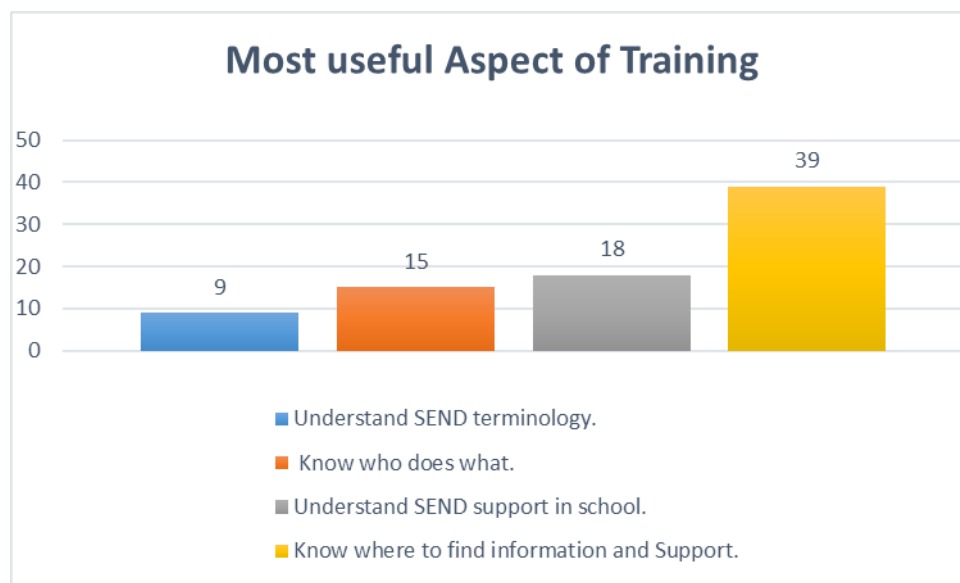
"I feel more confident when speaking to my child's teacher about my concerns now".

"Increased awareness about what is going on in the area. Know more about trainings. Increase awareness of forum."

"I've had some feedback from parents to say thanks and that they are now a bit more informed also with meetings they are less stressful. "

Appendix 3:

Full training analysis: Demystifying SEND sessions November 2020-January 2021



Comments on the most useful aspect of the training:

“Advice on the best places to go for extra information. We've been sent a lot of information and it's hard to work out what's most important and the best resource for us at the moment. Also, we were worried about what could be done whilst we have to wait for our son's autism assessment because it could be more than 18 months so it was reassuring to know that there is support in the meantime.”

“Explanation of SEND process, particularly plan, do review. Also, the levels of support available through education, health and social care (universal through to specialist).”

“Learning that diagnosis is not necessary with regards to producing a plan and it being reinforced that it is more about understanding the needs of the child as being really important!”

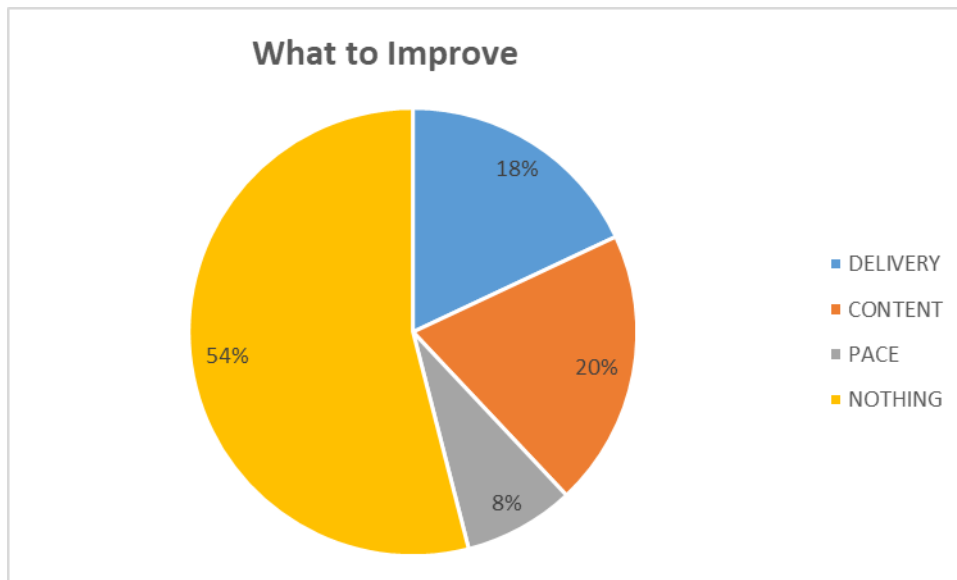
“It was really useful to understand some of the jargon and processes, professionals can assume you know how it all works!”

“Seeing the breadth of support and information available”

“Finding out what is on offer in Devon and how to access it.”

“Awareness of the vast amount of advice that is available.”

“Understanding what I should expect from the school.”



Comments on improvements to the training:

The comments in this section were quite varied and somewhat contradictory so it is difficult to see common threads. The comments around **pace** varied from too long and also not enough time..... contradictory feedback based on personal preference perhaps and limited by delivery format. The comments around **delivery** were based upon IT issues, breakout small groups and more time to ask questions time. The comments around **content** were based around possibly more case studies and longer Q&A time.

“Just continue to ask questions along the way like you did to make sure you're covering what they audience needs.”

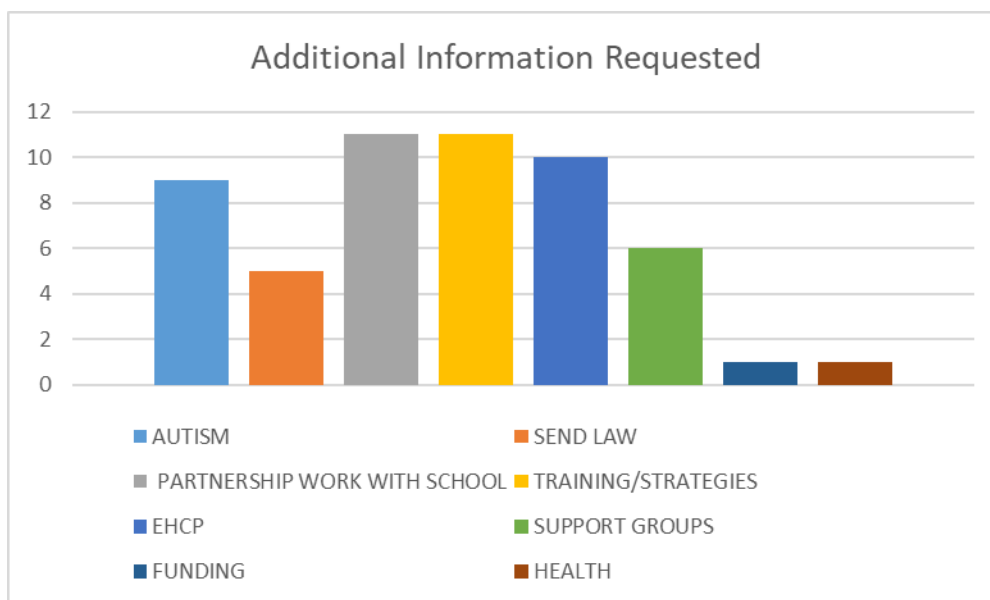
“Nothing the presenters and IT was excellent.”

“Many parents worry particularly about behaviour issues, as highlighted in the meeting. Perhaps a mention of behaviour support.”

“I personally would have liked a face to face meet to have personal experiences, of course I appreciate that this was not possible!”

“Maybe discuss post 16 education and if there is additional support available for ‘catch up’ I would personally like to know more about EHCPs and how to ensure it is appropriate for my child’s needs.”

“Keep doing what you are doing. Thank you, this is what we need as parents. “



Comments on additional information requested:

“Guidance on the EHCP; is it needed? What makes it necessary? Where to go from there? If I’m looking at other school options; what do I look out for, what questions should I ask to make sure they will accommodate my son’s needs?”

“Support to help me with technique to manage my daughter's needs and how to access help/support.”

“I would like information on activities that are available in our local area for our 12 year to access. I have looked, however most appear to be available to those with a diagnosis which she currently does not have.”

“Education and support for children that are capable of mainstream education but not keeping up with the year group curriculum. What happens to them if they don’t qualify for special education but also don’t fit into mainstream? What are the options?”

“I would like more information regarding the training course provided by Babcock that should be offered to parents when they have an ASD diagnosis.”

“Could I have information regarding TAF meetings and what is acceptable for me as a parent to ask during these meetings? I'm not sure what to expect or what to ask? I'm currently awaiting a date for my first TAF meeting.”

Summary:

There was a great deal of interest in this course from professionals who work supporting parents. A recording will be added to a version of the slides to be made widely available.

Following the session several documents were sent to attendees.

These included:

- A copy of the slides for the session.
- A document with a link to all the websites discussed in the session.
- The DiAS Jargon buster.

“Taking it back to basics. I wish I had this information when my child first had school based plan put in place - this was never explained properly by the school and we found ourselves not understanding the implications or what we could expect from the school in terms of support for our daughter. Some basic information leaflets or something would have made the world of difference or even signposting to DIAS.”

“Given me the where with all to feel I can now ask questions and if I am unsure of the answers have confidence to ask again and for more details.”

,” What has been the most useful aspect of the Demystifying SEND session?”. Parents said: *“Knowing that just because you are at the start of a very long pathway to an assessment, that you're not alone and there's resources available to whatever part of the journey you're on.”*

“Really good to understand the difference between health/social/mental and educational needs assessment.”

“Understanding the graduated response & the websites to go to for more information/support.”

The sessions supported parents to feel empowered one parent said: *“This has given me the where with all to feel I can now ask questions and if I am unsure of the answers have confidence to ask again for more details.”*

Appendix 4:

Lockdown

Ambassador Volunteer Celebrations

Paula in Exeter is working in partnership with her SENDCO in school and cascades all our information, fingers crossed we can get a school group running post COVID!

Georgia in East Devon; “We try and feature your DIAS info in our Mill Water facebook posts and newsletters to parents. The WAVE project has been quieter this year, with the restrictions mean lesson sessions being run, but this should pick up in the spring and there's now a very active WAVE project 'hub' in Sidmouth, run through Jurassic Paddle. Guy who runs JP is very good.”

Hannah in West Devon. A huge congratulations she has started a new job in a local school! She also cascades information out to her support networks in Holsworthy.

Daisy in East Devon continues to share throughout her social media networks for the elective home educators in Devon and feedbacks thoughts and views regularly!

Jane in Exeter is working in partnership with her SENDCO in school and has gone through many changes offering a virtual offer during COVID. Jane and her SENDCO are working together with the parents in their school to ensure that the group evolves to meet the needs of their families.

Amanda Jayne - is based in Coombe Martin, she is an international animal communicator and natural horsemanship instructor and autism specialist. She has loads of lived experience. She is also a trustee for NDAF. You can find out more here at [The Natural Approach Limited](#)

Suzy in North Devon has done so much since training as an AV. She has been cascading information through her local primary school and now works online as a mentor and maths tutor!

Vicky in North Devon is linked into a couple of support groups and is really passionate about disabled access into services and attractions and is planning on moving her ideas on, post lockdown!

Leah in East Devon has continued to juggle being a mum and running two groups supporting children with disabilities through physical activity alongside volunteering in two leading parental support organisations!
[additional needs support group](#)

Sarah-Lou in Honiton.

Sarah Lou has developed the Parental Minds CiC and taken it to new levels in Honiton I have added attachments to your email with full details about their work supporting families with mental health (😊) Hopefully she will be able to share some really exciting news in January!



parentplus@parentalminds.org.uk

Kate, Jo & Hannah in EXETER.

“Things are going really well with the group, we have met with our new Headteacher a few times and are now going to have our own website page, email address and newsletter section so we can make sure we get information on Dias stuff out and also advertise the support group. We have formed a steering group, made up of those who have done the AV training or who will do it next time. We have made plans to run face to face and online next term depending on Covid. We will have our own regular meeting room and time so parents can drop in. The group is currently consulting with school on play equipment, which we have suggested could be multipurpose and used by TAs supporting children i.e. during sensory breaks or to support regulation. We are also implementing a sensory walk around school, where there will be various things to do such as jump and touch this shape; push against these handprints etc etc. We also have some good news we applied for the Devon CC Covid funding (which you circulated info about) and it was successful. So, we have £480 to spend on re-launching the group. The funds are being held by Exeter Connect (a part of Exeter Community Initiatives) and exist to help support small informal community groups. “



Tracey in North Devon. Supporting families in their area throughout lockdown. Successfully supporting other parents and applying for funding to help with running her support group.

sidebysidebarnstaple@outlook.com

<https://www.facebook.com/sidebysidetawandtorridge/posts/2612652168839009>

Heather in Okehampton. Supporting families face to face and virtually. Full details of the services for parent carers in the Okehampton and hamlets can be found through this link.



<https://www.communitylinks-sw.co.uk/support-services/>

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