

Alternatives

External Evaluation

We Are Family Project

“It’s really, really family”

FINAL REPORT

Research conducted by Anne Crisp for



Community Involvement Unit

March – May 2011

CONTENTS

Section	Page
Background to We Are Family	3
External evaluation	6
Parents' perspective	7
Children's perspective	23
Staff/volunteers' perspective	27
Outside groups and professionals' perspective	32
Key themes/outcomes	35
Thoughts for the future	36
Appendices	37



1. BACKGROUND TO THE WE ARE FAMILY PROJECT

1.1. History

- 1.1.1. The We Are Family project was set up in 2005 by Alternatives Crisis Pregnancy Centre, running since 1994. Alternatives provided counselling support to three pregnant young women with no family support or recourse to public funds, who chose to keep their babies. They decided to start a group to support them and at the first meeting in September 2005 the mums decided to call it 'We Are Family'. Alternatives agreed to provide emotional and practical support, life skills and parenting skills, building on the mums' enthusiasm to support and learn from each other. The project was initially staffed by a psychiatrist, the director of Alternatives (a qualified counsellor), a peer worker who had been a teenage mum herself, supported previously by Alternatives, and a crèche helper.
- 1.1.2. The group met in a relaxed environment in a local church, developing a format for meetings which continues today (see activities). Numbers have grown steadily, from 3 mums and 3 children in 2005 to a weekly average of 15 mums and 18+ children in first quarter of 2011, with a total of 32 mums on the register and 30+ children as at May 2011.

1.2. Activities

- 1.2.1. The core of the We Are Family project is the Monday group that runs every week during term time from 11am – 1pm. This provides education and support in a therapeutic environment. Food is provided and participants begin by sharing who and how they are before the children go to the crèche and the parents focus on adult life or parenting issues through a workshop delivered by staff with occasional input from specialists. Sometimes different activities are introduced, such as craft. At the end of the group parents receive a practical gift (usually baby wipes). Adult and child birthdays are celebrated and at least two outings organised each year – to Beechgrove in the country and to the beach at Minnis Bay, Kent.
- 1.2.2. During the summer holidays the group visits the park each Monday instead, so that older children can be included. Alternatives aim to respond to the needs of the families they work with and in 2010 two new groups emerged through the We Are Family project. Occasionally dads attend and a new group emerged called '4dads', run by four dads for the dads, many of whom were absent at that time from their family home. In addition parents serious about wanting to improve their parenting skills attend a Practical Parenting Group on Thursdays.
- 1.2.3. Alternatives seeks to provide a holistic service and in partnership with other local agencies they have been able to deliver a significant package of support to particularly vulnerable families who would otherwise slip through the net due to their lack of recourse to public funding. They have worked closely with First Fruit and Just Homes and with their support have been able to provide accommodation, a support programme and training opportunities. Since April 2011 they have a second house with a shop to support and accommodate mums. In addition to partnerships with agencies, two staff members have a history of having mums and children live with them in their own homes and at their own cost because there have been no other alternatives.

1.3. Staffing

- 1.3.1. We Are Family is staffed by a psychiatrist, a qualified counsellor, a professional parenting educator, a qualified crèche worker and three crèche support workers (one a volunteer). The parenting educator manages the project, and with a team of two part-time support workers, provides practical help and support to families during the week through home visits and accompanying parents to court and solicitors etc. More recently a family outreach worker was added to the team, funded separately to work three days a week and also providing support to families.
- 1.3.2. Alternatives have employed some of the mums once they secure their leave to remain, to assist in the crèche, and on their Education and Training Team.

1.4. Funding

- 1.4.1. The pilot project that became We Are Family was funded initially by the Local Network Fund for two years. After that a number of funders supported it with one-year grants before they secured three-year funding from City Bridge Trust and the Drapers' Company at the very end of 2007, and then three-year funding from the Big Lottery

Reaching Communities programme starting in June 2008. As the project grew they found one-off grants for extra crèche workers from Zurich Cares and Westfield Community Grants and most recently Help a London Child. Funding for the summer programme came from a small grant from Newham's Integrated Youth Support Services. Alternatives also employed a part-time Family Support Worker, funded for three years (tapered) by the Lloyds TSB Foundation. The pilot project for absent dads began in 2010 and is funded for two years by small grants from the Wates Foundation, Woodward Charitable Trust, the Souter Charitable Trust and Transform Newham. Alternatives are applying again to the Big Lottery Fund Reaching Communities programme for three-year funding for what they are calling 'We Are Family Plus' – the project that We Are Family has grown into.

2. EXTERNAL EVALUATION

2.1. How the Evaluation Came About

- 2.1.1. In March 2011 Alternatives approached Aston-Mansfield Community Involvement Unit (CIU) to ask for help with an evaluation of their We Are Family (WAF) project. The evaluation was needed to provide an external perspective that complemented their internal monitoring and evaluation processes and to look for evidence of impact that could help them secure ongoing funding for the project.
- 2.1.2. Alternatives had a small budget available and after some discussion CIU agreed to match this in kind with hours of a community development worker's time paid through the 'Advance to Deliver' programme. In order to make this useful to other community groups Alternatives and the CIU worker agreed to keep notes of the process. This is being written up into a guide for VCS groups on how to evaluate the impact of projects on a shoestring budget.
- 2.1.3. The CIU worker has evaluation experience and has worked in a family support setting so was well placed to do this work. The evaluation took around 8 days of the evaluator's time plus around two days of WAF staff time.
- 2.1.4. An initial meeting and several phone conversations and email exchanges led to an agreement that all stakeholders should be included in the evaluation, including some children. Two senior WAF staff linked with the evaluator who checked key decisions with them, including drafts of interview questions and questionnaires. The data collection method for each group was discussed and chosen to maximise the effectiveness of the evaluation. The aim was to work in partnership so that the evaluation responded to the needs of the project but was sufficiently independent to provide the objective perspective required.

2.2. Scope of Evaluation

- 2.2.1. The evaluation has successfully included all stakeholder groups, using a broad range of methodologies, with high response rates especially with parents and staff. See table below for details.

Table 1: Evaluation Coverage

Stakeholder Group	Total in group	Methodology	No. of participants	% of total
Parents	30	Face to face interviews	6	
		Face to face interviews and questionnaires	9	
		Phone interviews	6	
		Questionnaires only	6	
			27	90%
Staff/volunteers	11	Questionnaire	10	91%
Outside groups	12	Online survey	7	58%
Children	46	Play	3	7%

- 2.2.2. What follows is a series of evaluation outcomes from the perspectives of each stakeholder group. The limited time available has restricted the amount of analysis possible which means that responses are simply grouped by common themes and illustrated by quotes.
- 2.2.3. Quotes are shown in italics and given “*double speechmarks*” where verbatim from taped interviews or questionnaires and ‘*single speechmarks*’ when taken from notes of phone or un-taped face to face interviews.

3. PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

3.1. Methodology

- 3.1.1. A total of 21 parents were interviewed – 15 mums face to face and six dads by phone. An additional six parents completed a questionnaire, making 27 parents participating in the evaluation - 90% of the total (30) parents using the project regularly at the time of the evaluation. The focus of interviews with dads was the 4dads project. Some of the mums and dads came from the same family. Parents participating in the evaluation represented 18 families of the 22 using the project regularly at the time (82%).
- 3.1.2. Parents were asked about the difference the WAF project had made (if any) to themselves personally and as parents.
- 3.1.3. Face to face interviews were structured and brief, lasting 10-15 minutes each. They took place at Forrest House in one of the counselling rooms. Staff had organised an appointment system, children were looked after by staff elsewhere in the building and parents received a small gift for attending. The approach taken was informal. The evaluator’s experience of working with vulnerable families was helpful because occasionally a mum became upset during the interview and it was important to handle this sensitively. The evaluator informed the WAF link worker about two parents she was concerned about in case follow-up was needed.
- 3.1.4. Before each interview the parent was reminded of the purpose of the evaluation and told that what they said would be included in a report but that no-one would know who said what. They were told if they did not want to answer a question that was fine. Interviews were recorded through notes taken at the time and written up immediately afterwards. Parents were asked if their interview could be recorded using a digital recorder – nine agreed to this and these recordings were all transcribed before analysis.
- 3.1.5. Parents interviewed face to face were asked to complete a follow-up questionnaire and nine did so (60%). These questionnaires were complementary to the interview questions and were returned to the evaluator in sealed envelopes. Parents were asked to provide their name on the questionnaire in order to match them with their interview. The nine parents not available for interview were asked to complete a different questionnaire and six did so (67%). This means in total 27 parents

participated in the evaluation out of a total of 30 in contact with the project at the time of the evaluation.

3.1.6. The evaluator was given a list of contact details for seven dads participating in the 4dads project. She called each one to ask if they would be willing to take part in the evaluation through a 10-15 minute phone interview. All except one agreed to take part. The same interview questions were used as for face to face interviews but the focus was on the 4dads project. Notes were taken during the interview and written up immediately.

3.1.7. All versions of the report shown to staff for their input had names of participants removed.

3.2. Findings

3.2.1. Impact on parenting

3.2.1.1. With very few exceptions, parents reported that their contact with WAF had a positive impact on them as parents. Often this impact had been considerable, occasionally even life changing.

“We learn how to be a family, how to be a loving family, because when I was growing up I didn’t have a loving family.”

‘Before WAF I worried about my children’s emotional life. Now I try to spend more time with them, I’m close to them. It’s good to be reminded about what’s important.’

“When I look at my life today I feel yes I have achieved something, I feel very happy within me because I’ve got a family now you see – I’ve got my husband and I’ve got my daughters. So it’s really changed my life.”

3.2.1.2. Some parents talked about learning useful parenting skills and techniques:

“The stuff that I do at WAF when I go home I do it with my children as well and I find it really helpful.”

‘They teach me about inner skills, dealing with stress. It helps me be a tremendous parent – I would shout when they were crying and now I don’t. I’m not edgy or screaming. I’m a single mum. It’s not easy but knowing others are going through something similar means I don’t feel alone.’

“It has helped me bringing up my child as well because each week we go we discuss different topics – sometimes other people share their experience in terms of bringing up children – some things I’ve learned from them which I’ve used with my daughter.”

‘They teach you a lot about taking care of your kids – give you ideas and techniques.’

‘I can confidently say that in my own life in terms of raising my children I’ve learned parenting skills through the courses I’ve attended that have helped me address areas when children present challenging behaviours – it has worked.’

3.2.1.3. More important to parents than skills and strategies was the impact on their confidence and attitude to being a parent:

'It's brought me strength, encouraged me a lot. I have got more courage – I feel stronger as a parent.'

"Now is happy to be mum."

"It's helped me move forward quite quickly as a parent, it's helped me stabilise and move forward quite quickly."

"What I say to the children - discipline, techniques, using praise. I have more confidence in what I say."

'It's helped me a lot as a parent – like last time we talked about how to deal with stress – we've learned so many things. We've learned about how to be with our children, and the difference between men and women – it helps me to understand them.'

'As a parent it's made a lot of difference – although the realities remain it helps you to cope with them. We do exercises, we talk, we think about things differently. Sometimes when you're stressed you can't think – the kids look to you as an adult – we learn how to do that.'

3.2.1.4. Interviewed parents who also completed questionnaires were given a list of statements about the difference WAF had made to them as a parent and asked to tick any that were true for them. Most statements were positive but a couple of neutral or negative statements were deliberately included. One parent did not complete this question – the other eight all ticked 'I have learned new ways to deal with my children's behaviour'. Seven also ticked the following positive statements:

- I feel more confident about being a parent
- I enjoy my children more
- I know more now about what help is there for me and my family
- I am more likely to get help if I need it

3.2.2. Impact on Self

3.2.2.1. Although parents were asked to comment separately on the impact on themselves and as parents, this is an artificial divide and some parents talked about the links between the two:

"By going here I've accumulated a wealth of knowledge, progressing within myself, being a better mother."

'It has changed me. I didn't have patience at all. Now I don't fight, I'm not so angry. It has helped me and my children. I can tell them what I really need here.'

3.2.2.2. Only one parent felt their contact with the project had not impacted on them personally:

'It's not really changed me as a person.'

3.2.2.3. A very common theme among other participants was feeling stronger and more confident:

"Now I feel confident in myself."

'I'm going through a lot – it makes me feel confident in myself. I need it, coming here – I don't do nothing otherwise. My first visit made me feel really good.'

"I'm a bit stronger, or confident. If you've got a problem you talk about it. I feel more confident about the future."

"Before I used to be very quiet in a group. Now I can join in group discussions – I think it's just building my confidence and self esteem. Before I used to let things stress me out but now I don't let nothing stress me."

"It's made me a stronger person, made me believe in myself."

"The Monday group gives me emotional support. The talks strengthen and empower me as a person. I've learned to become a stronger person, more confident, I'm in a better position now. We support each other – there's a closeness here – like a ready made family."

"Some of the things, when I go there and I adapt it to my life, I find it 100 times easier to deal with my life."

"I have issues with my confidence and I'm learning to become more confident."

3.2.2.4. Another common theme was feeling less alone, more connected:

'I behave differently around people, learning how to deal with stress and with your past – they teach you to deal with it. We learn in groups – 'who to let into your castle.' I was more isolated and lonely before. I'm new to the area – now I have others around me, I'm more positive. They're there to help.'

3.2.2.5. For some, the project was a reason and a route to escape being alone at home with their children:

"Before I used to stay indoors. It's pulled me out of my shell a little bit. I think my confidence is growing, I'm learning to be more assertive, I'm socialising more, my social circle has grown."

"I don't know where I'd be if I didn't attend this group. I don't know what path I'd have been on – it's made me feel a better person. When I had my first daughter I was very depressed because I was stuck in the house. Now I've got somewhere to go where they do different groups. It makes you look forward to doing something else or learning something else."

3.2.2.6. For two parents newly arrived in the UK their contact with the project had helped them improve their English:

"I feel better about me – they are all my friends – of course not too close but we are family – I know people's names but some I forgot but some I remember because they always say 'my name is' when we come."

'I look back at photos – I used to be quiet and let things happen. Now I said to myself I want to change, change life for my children. Every Monday we talk about things that help me. I was trying to hide things – we drew pictures and that helped me to share. After one year here I learn more English than the other four years in this country. I've made friends too.'

3.2.2.7. A sense of belonging, of being with others in similar situations was also key:

"I learn from the group, I learn from the other mothers, from their life experiences, we share our stories and sometimes you're going through something and you think you're the only one going through it and you hear someone with a similar story or even a worse story and you just get encouraged if that person pulled themselves out of what they went through... "

'I feel I belong here.'

3.2.2.8. Knowing there were people to talk to and provide support was clearly very important, especially to those previously isolated and without other support networks:

"I was someone who didn't like going out, joining groups or making friends with others, I found it hard, but now I find it easy to discuss with other people, if I have a problem to tell them, if I have any concern with my partner, if things are going wrong or with my children, I have somebody that I call."

"Knowing that I have this body of people working there, and I can always count on them, always rely on them."

"If I've got any troubles or worries I know they're there to help me. Having people there it makes a big difference. I know if I've got a problem it's just good to share and they can help me."

"At the moment I don't have nobody – no family or friends really, but coming to the group ...has made me understand I've got people to stand by me and make me a stronger mum..."

3.2.2.9. This theme of belonging and connectedness came through strongly with the men interviewed as well:

'As a person – we are human beings – sometimes I need to find that calmness and inner peace. It helps me to find this – sometimes we lose it. Other people can give me strength – how to get out of that pit.'

'We've grown into a group of men who share – that brick wall has been broken. It's helped with friendships and positive attitudes to life. We realise we're not alone – we're encouraged to see the light at the end of the tunnel.'

'You're on your own as a parent – I'm in a network of support now. 'I feel I'm not alone.' I struggle to develop male relationships – we've managed to develop some real honesty. I feel I'm working together. I feel less isolated, I'm connected to people other than my family.'

'When you live in isolation you feel in a certain way. Contact with others helps you see the bigger picture.'

3.2.2.10. Some people talked about how the project had helped them learn how to manage difficult feelings:

"I've learned about being assertive and the difference between passive and aggressive and that's really helped me not to be too aggressive. It teaches me that I can."

"I'm a lot calmer – I used to get angry a lot."

'Initially I didn't want to talk, I was always angry. I've learned a lot, have more patience now and it's easier to talk to people. They've helped me to understand how to be with people.'

3.2.2.11. Linked to this is an improved self awareness – an understanding of themselves that is both compassionate and helpful:

'I kind of buckle up – they help me to express myself. You build a wall around you when you're hurt. I'm looking around and beginning to understand what's happening inside me.'

3.2.2.12. The project has broadened horizons, through visits to new places:

"Without the trips I would never get to see the seaside or never go to the country."

"They took me and the children to a farm last year and the seaside. Without them it would have been difficult because the baby was a baby and it would have been hard."

And through the regular Monday group that gets people out of their homes and exploring new territory with others:

"I look forward for Mondays – it's like I get away – I look forward to going. It's the only thing I have to look forward to."

3.2.2.13. Some people said the project had ignited or encouraged a desire to move on or to help others:

'They spot potential in people here. We support each other – there are opportunities to grow and help meet each others' needs. Personally if it wasn't for WAF I don't know how I would have coped for the last 8 months. I try not to miss a Monday 'it's your time'. This project challenges you to change. It's a chance to open ourselves up and be more confident – I can see changes in others. Now I want to study – do health and social care, help others like me, especially people with English as a second language.'

"I can help other people. I've introduced 2 people to the group because I knew their situation. I've shared my experience with other people and other people have shared their experience with me, what they went through, what their children and partners are doing. We all discuss it. And maybe it hasn't happened to me yet but when it comes I remember this happened and this is how she dealt with it. It's really very important."

'They believe in me.'

3.2.2.14. Interviewed parents who also completed a questionnaire were asked about the difference WAF had made to them as a person. They selected the following positive statements as true for them:

- I feel more confident about myself (8/9)
- I am more hopeful about my future (8/9)
- I feel more able to cope when things go wrong (8/9)
- I am more confident about getting the support I need (7/9)
- I have made friends that I see outside the club (6/9)

3.2.2.15. Only one parent indicated that the project had not impacted on them personally, although they did tick 'I have made friends that I see outside the club'.

3.2.2.16. These parents were asked to compare how hopeful they felt about their own future before they joined WAF with how hopeful they were now. 7/9 parents indicated a positive change in their hopefulness about themselves and in 3 cases this was a significant change from 'no hope at all' to 'very hopeful'. One indicated no change and one again gave no baseline but said they were very hopeful now.

3.2.3. Impact on children

3.2.3.1. Interviewed parents were not asked specifically about the impact on their children, but one mentioned this anyway:

"It helps my children play with other children, and going to the crèche, learning to play without their mum being there and their confidence has grown through mixing with other kids."

3.2.3.2. Parents completing questionnaires were asked to compare how hopeful they felt about their children's future before they joined WAF with how hopeful they were now. 5/9 parents indicated a positive change in their level of hopefulness, 3 indicated no change and one gave no baseline but said they were very hopeful now.

3.2.4. Why Parents Had Come to the Project

3.2.4.1. Although not specifically asked about this, some parents described their reasons for joining WAF. Very often it had happened by word of mouth – someone they knew suggested they come:

"This is the first organisation that I knew about. Someone I know knows X (a volunteer) and she said come along. I wanted to be invited to somewhere – it's nice knowing there's somewhere to go."

3.2.4.2. People's initial experience of WAF was usually very positive:

"I can remember feeling very welcomed. Every week they make me feel welcome. Very loving. It was easy to come here – they always hug me, make me a hot drink – it's really lovely. It's the only place, it's a great place."

"I was nervous and I was more quiet but they got me out of that. As soon as we get there we sit down and everyone says who they are and how they've been. I got to know people after about 3 months – I was pregnant at the time – everyone else had kids but I had a belly"

"... little bit shy, I just quiet in that room. I said 'this is X' not too much talking, just listening then we go home. I feel because many mum over there, maybe some like me ... just thinking because I don't know, I don't understand what they saying but my heart say maybe okay because many mum here maybe I will be mum after because many mum here with baby they will help me because I don't know if true or not they will help me, I just thinking nice, not nice, thinking yes or not. First time not sure but next time I know and until now I'm happy with them."

"I met X (worker) – I think from the moment I met X I felt changes. After I'd spoken to her I felt changes."

'The first time I went I felt comfortable there – people talked about themselves so I began to talk about myself.'

3.2.4.3. Not everyone found it comfortable or was able to trust immediately:

'I came because I met X (worker) socially. When I first came I thought they might have wanted something from me. After about a month I started to believe it was okay.'

One parent had been unhappy about her first arrival in the group. She had come with someone which may have affected the response of other mums. She had not raised her concerns and had returned to the project despite this experience:

"It wasn't welcoming – the staff were welcoming when I first came in the room but the other mums they wasn't really interested, probably 'cos of shyness and stuff like that."

3.2.4.4. Although not specifically asked about the aims of the project, most parents talked about the fact that it provided help and support. Some were very clear that this was why they came, especially those who described finding the project at a point of desperation:

'Someone working at school noticed how stressed and angry I was and told me about WAF. Also someone who was here as a parent saw me upset at school and told me. I was in tears, really, really sad, really frustrated. I was in hell. I was on my own with two children. They offered me tea, sat me down, calmed me down. They were really welcoming and friendly. They gave me baby food – both of us were welcome here.'

3.2.4.5. Several parents said they did not initially come seeking help:

'I didn't need help – I came because a friend told me about WAF – I came because I wasn't doing anything.'

'I didn't realise I needed help. If something happened in the family I didn't share.'

One mum who had received significant support through WAF said she would not have come if she had seen it as a place for people with problems:

"I didn't know I was coming here for help and support - my friend was coming and she said it was good. If I'd thought it was a place for people with problems I wouldn't have come. If somebody had said 'oh come to get help,' I wouldn't have come. I am struggling but my struggles are different. I don't see myself as being any different – we are just women – we have a lot of similarities but I'm saying if I'd known initially that this was what the group was about I would think I don't fit. I think we're all women with one cause really, if you look at the bigger picture – we need help. Some people might need financial help some people just need somewhere where they can go and talk, people they can confide in. We get some of that help from each other."

3.2.4.6. This raises important questions about how WAF portrays itself. It appears that for some parents the project would have felt far less accessible if the support focus had been more obvious. It may be that it is important both to the accessibility and the dynamics of the project that it does not target only very vulnerable families but enables a mix of people who come for different reasons.

3.2.4.7. Interviewed parents who also completed questionnaires were given a list of 12 project activities and asked to tick those that had been most important or helpful to them. Most (6/9) ticked eight or more options, suggesting that the holistic nature of this project is very important to the parents that use it. Everyone ticked the regular Monday group and having people to listen or talk things through with. No-one ticked 'finding support from social workers' and numbers were also lower for trips and outings, help with appointments, receiving financial support and 'going with you to get extra help or advice'. Not all parents will need the same things of course, and this question did not ascertain whether a parent had experienced each aspect of the project before asking if it was important to them. Time restraints did not allow cross-referencing between parents' engagement with project activities and their responses to this question. Nevertheless it is clear that parents particularly appreciate the Monday group and the individual and practical support.

3.2.5. Parents' Contact with Other Agencies

3.2.5.1. Interviewed parents were asked if they had tried other agencies before contacting WAF – for most WAF was their first experience of contact with a support organisation, but a minority of parents had been elsewhere - mother and baby groups, Social Services, Sure Start, a refugee support organisation. In a couple of cases they had been involved elsewhere as volunteers. These parents were asked whether WAF was different in any way from other agencies. In every case they said it was – sometimes just because the provision was different:

"It's a bit different here – there's more activities – a wider range of things going on."

"They look at a wider range of things here – like family planning."

3.2.5.2. More often the difference was to do with the way the project staff related with them. One mum gave a distressing account of her treatment by Social Services:

"I called the Social Services people ... when my little one was one month old... it became difficult, we were not able to pay our rent so the landlord was chucking us out so I called the Social Services people if they could help. They told me there is nothing they can do, to be frankly, the person was very rude to me, very rude... she told me if I think I can't take care of my children any more then they should come for the children. I told her I just need help but she was really rude. Later another lady from Social Services called me and said they can't help me, their hands are tied, but I should call this organisation to find out if there is anything they can do."

3.2.5.3. This parent was also referred to a refugee support organisation where she felt supported until she missed a couple of sessions:

"I went there one day and they said because I've not been able to come for two weeks or so they've cancelled my name from the list. So I told them because we've moved and it was difficult getting money for the bus but they said they'd given my place to another person. Because I knew WAF were there it didn't bring me down because I knew they would not cancel my name off, they knew what I'm going through so they won't do that to me."

3.2.5.4. This mother's confidence in the continuing support from WAF was significant to her, and a similar confidence was reflected by other parents:

'They treat you well here – you're not judged or looked at funny. They're reliable – you can trust them. It didn't take long for me to realise it was real. People here have been through a lot. I've only been 2 or 3 times but I feel I belong already. I feel comfortable – it's a mixed group – people from all different backgrounds – I like that.'

"They treat you different here – they don't judge me or talk down at me – they talk to me with respect, you understand? The other ones they were more concerned about your age. Here they don't judge my age, it's just me – if they can do things for me they'll offer it – it's totally different from the rest. They treat everyone as individuals. What they've offered me is more than enough, more than what I expected. The fact that even though my parents don't want me.... Me thinking I've got them, I've actually got a bigger family, you understand? So that gives me strength just knowing there's people out there that care. [cries] I've never actually sat down and thought about it like this They're great."

3.2.5.5. When WAF was the first agency they had contacted, parents were asked why. They all said it was because they did not know where to go:

"I didn't know I could get help."

"I didn't realise there were places you can go to for help."

'I went nowhere else for help – I didn't know there was a group like that. If it wasn't there I don't know what I'd do.'

'I didn't know where to go. I was crying at school – they talked about putting my child in care. School was helpful but X (WAF mum) saw me crying – she told me about WAF and introduced me here.'

'When I had my baby I was alone – there'd been domestic violence. I had no family. I cried when I came – my baby was in hospital. These strangers were really there for me, I didn't feel alone.'

3.2.5.6. There appear to be key referrers in community settings: several parents had been referred by the Appleby Health Centre and a local primary school. A more extensive network of referring agencies or individuals would undoubtedly increase the chances of parents accessing the project more often and before reaching crisis point. Does the project have the capacity to respond if more parents found them more quickly? Do they want to be a service for parents in crisis or is the mix important?

3.2.6. How the Project Works with Parents

3.2.6.1. It was clear from parents that the way the project works with them matters enormously: how they work is probably more important than what they provide. A number of themes were evident in relation to WAF ethos or approach:

3.2.6.2. *Sense of Family/Belonging*

3.2.6.2.1. A word that came up again and again was 'family'. It seems this project is well named – many of the parents spoke quite movingly of the sense of family they had found – from staff and volunteers and from each other:

"It's really, really family."

"Here it's like a family group, it's like people open up and they say things that just hit you right at home and you say oh I'm not alone because others are going through this and you can learn from other people. You can have a backbone to lean on – I've learned a lot here."

"The WAF club has been the family I never had, they have supported me in so many ways, I am so grateful to have them in my life and my child's."

'The leaders care for us.'

'I never knew people cared like this.'

'It's a programme for everybody – men and women with problems. A problem in a home is everybody's problem. We share with people in the group – we learn how to deal with them better. When you're aware of a problem you can deal with it – people can say what's really going on for them in the group. We're here as a group – we're like a family – we share the burden. It's good, man.'

'I know I'm not alone.'

3.2.6.3. *Qualities and Commitment of Staff and Volunteers*

3.2.6.3.1. Parents often commented on the commitment of project staff and volunteers – there was a feeling that this was much more than a job for them, that they regularly went the extra mile, and genuinely cared about the families they supported:

'They have time for me. They have time.'

'I met X (worker) and she visited me the next day – the day after they gave me money for my family and clothes for my children. These people are rare – I was very surprised. They've encouraged, given advice, visited us in hospital. It's changed our life. I haven't needed to go elsewhere – they give you everything you need. They do so much more – far more. They even celebrated my little one's birthday – I wasn't expecting this – I was shocked. They have provided toys and clothes. I'm not allowed to work so I can't provide for my family – they're helping me to do that. They give me encouragement. I go to the fathers' programme – we play golf – we do things together. They help you learn how to look after your children. It's difficult in this country to get encouragement: 'you can do this'.'

'It is a job but they go beyond their jobs and they think of you.'

"If I miss out a week or two they phone me to say how have I been... I think that's what's builded me up a bit more, I think they're actually seeing how I am rather than because I haven't been they're not going to bother with me. That's another thing that makes me want to come."

'It's more personal – I have a support worker who visits me at home. We have close relationships with the staff. It's genuine, not just a job, they really care.'

3.2.6.4. Not Judging / Feeling Safe

- 3.2.6.4.1. Another common theme was the non-judgmental, accepting approach that contrasted with parents' experience elsewhere and contributed to their feeling of safety within the project:

"It has really changed my opinion about so many things because they've been really, really supportive and they are not judgemental, so it's giving me another insight into being able to open up to them. You know sometimes you feel if I open up to this person they might take advantage of me or they might start judging me, it's not like that. I feel safe here."

"(Is there anywhere else you can show how you really are?) No. (This is it?) Yes."

'I feel safe here – people don't judge me.'

"The most basic is the fact they don't judge – when I was pregnant people used to look at me – but they gave me confidence and helped me get through those times, it was stressful time and they were there to boost me up."

'It makes me feel like they care – I feel relaxed here, they talk to me.'

3.2.6.5. Responding to Need / Working Flexibly

- 3.2.6.5.1. Alternatives is an organisation that has evolved in direct response to locally identified needs. The WAF project is part of this evolution because it began as a small scale response to the unmet needs of three young pregnant women, and is still growing and changing. A number of dads commented on this – possibly they were more aware of the roots of their project because it had started more recently, or maybe this was a subject they had discussed – whatever the case it came up a number of times:

'WAF is a small unit so it's more focused. WAF is dynamic and flexible. The creation of the dad's group is evidence of that – they notice what's needed and respond.'

'I think sporting activities for dads is good because it helps them open up and reflect on their family situation. Maybe it helps them relax and open up – tennis, bowling, badminton – while they're engaged in another activity they relax and talk.'

'With other places it's about targets, numbers, how many people you get through the process. People are cases - no-one bothers to check if the actions taken make a difference to their lives - it's names in a file. Here it's about love – people genuinely seeing the need in other people's lives and meeting it. WAF is great, not just for the parents, also for the children. It sets a standard for the children. There's something great about giving, not judging – I see children of all colours and ethnicities playing together, eating from the same plate. When Cameron says the multi-cultural society is not working he is wrong. It's benefiting a whole lot of people, my family included.'

'It's flexible – it's not we want to sign you up for a particular course or anything. It's relationship building with people. You can choose to come or not. It's relaxed and open. With other groups I felt an obligation – here it's about meeting people's needs – we're here to be more of a family. For a lot of people it's difficult – if you haven't got a family WAF make a big difference.'

3.2.6.5.2. Although only a few parents specifically commented on the flexible nature of the project's provision many were directly benefiting from this approach. A number of parents talked of receiving support with accommodation. This happens through the social enterprise First Fruit, which in the last two years has developed a new charity called Just Homes with the aim to specifically support the neediest families from within the WAF group. This significant development was a direct response to the need identified through the WAF project that families with no recourse to public funds and with no home were unable to access appropriate support with accommodation in the borough. Alternatives worked in partnership with First Fruit to begin to meet this need.

3.2.6.6. *Faith in Action*

3.2.6.6.1. During the evaluation some participants from all the adult stakeholder groups made it clear that their involvement in the project was closely linked to their Christian faith. For some staff their faith was the driving force, the reason behind the project and their commitment to it. Some parents recognised this and felt it was an important part of the way the project worked. The evaluator asked the Director of Alternatives to clarify the organisation's stance on faith. She said:

"Alternatives started out of St Andrews Church and maintains a Christian ethos but it is never exclusive. It has always worked with all people from any faiths or no faith. Similarly people from all faiths and/or no faith can be part of the staff team."

3.2.6.6.2. Again it was the dads who commented most on this aspect of the project's ethos:

'People assist without seeking praise or being under pressure – purely out of the heart. It's about love because of the Christian background – receiving God's love and giving it freely.'

'It comes from the Christian perspective – we believe everyone's part of our family. God accepts all as one – we have an obligation to support each other. Extending that Christian community to people outside.'

3.2.6.7. *Signposting/Linking to Other Support*

3.2.6.7.1. Interviewed parents were asked if they had been put in touch with other sources of support through WAF. Some parents felt they received everything they needed from WAF:

'Everything I needed I get from here.'

3.2.6.7.2. Where they cannot meet needs themselves Alternatives have developed links with other organisations, signposting parents or building contact in as part of their programme. Along with having no home, some parents had no money for food, or for clothes, toys or baby equipment, so Alternatives sourced places to be able to provide these too, hence links with the Food Bank, as well as with a community in Ashted who donate birthday and Christmas presents and second hand toys and Beechgrove Community who invite the group for a day in the country each year. Usually over 50 go by coach to Beechgrove, Nonington Kent. WAF is also supported with presents donated by Community Links.

3.2.6.8. A significant number of the women in the WAF group have been abused sexually or physically and they have been linked with Survivors Together, which now has several from the WAF group attending regularly. Most had been put in touch with at least one other source of support – the Food Bank and Survivors Together (a support group for adults who had been sexually abused) were the most common.

3.2.6.9. *How Could WAF Improve?*

3.2.6.9.1. Interviewed parents were asked if there was anything the project could change to improve its services. Seven of the 15 mums said they would change nothing.

3.2.6.9.2. Three had suggestions about trips:

- provide more trips
- trips that include the whole family in the 6 weeks holiday
- some with children and some without – maybe go bowling or something?

3.2.6.9.3. Suggestions linked to the Monday group focused on increasing the time by 30 minutes or an hour...

“sometimes we have to cut things short”

... and reducing lateness:

“It’s only for 2 hours – but some people come in late – it interferes, you have to repeat yourself. I was sitting next to the door and it was the bell ringing and mothers coming in with their babies at all times. You’re supposed to be here for 11 but some people arrived at 12.30. I never said anything, it was something I just kept inside.”

3.2.6.9.4. The mum who had not felt welcome at her first meeting suggested getting the other mums to be a bit more welcoming to new people.

3.2.6.9.5. Two mums suggested improvements with the crèche:

“More facilities for the kids – in the crèche – they have two mats for newborns but babies that crawl have to crawl where people are walking.”

“Different toys – not lego because they put the small bits in their mouth. Like cuddly teddy bears, bean bags so they can sit on the floor not on the carpet, baby mats cos little ones are on the floor and no-one takes off their shoes. Maybe a corner where they can have a quiet carpet time. Do singing time – sing songs with them, nursery rhymes – I don’t know if they do that. Not painting and stuff – that gets messy! A welcoming or goodbye song would be good.”

3.2.6.9.6. One suggested more courses:

“I was asking for part-time courses – like computer courses – a bit of them telling us where else we can do them and them doing a bit more courses here. Short courses like computing or make-up or pampering...”

3.2.6.9.7. Finally several dads wanted the 4Dads group to be better publicised:

‘We need to let other people to know about it – there’s people at home who are dying with their problems – they don’t know how to be with women or their children. We need to publicise it more.’

3.3. CASE STUDY – ONE PARENT’S STORY

“I had no money, even pampers for the children, food, clothes, it was difficult. When I called them, the exact day that I called they came to my place and they gave me things for the children. They really changed my life... they’ve really helped me and my family, they’ve given us a place to live, they’ve been a pillar in our life because without them I wouldn’t have known what to do. So when I called I explained everything to them and they didn’t even take a day. They just told me in 30 minutes they will be at my house. I didn’t believe it. The Social Services people, the words they said to me, I was really down, so I was thinking are these people really coming or is it just a joke or something that they said to me? Then I saw my phone ringing and when I went outside I saw lots of stuff and that brought my spirit back to me. I nearly felt like dying because seeing my children, it was around 12 and they didn’t eat anything in the morning, the older one was crying, I knew she wanted something to eat. So when they came and they brought these things... they brought me pampers, baby milk for the little one because she was not getting breast milk because I was not getting any food to eat. And they brought some food for the other one, some clothing, toys.”

“Also the wonderful thing that I don’t think I will be able to forget is when my daughter was 2 years old they made a birthday cake for her and also they gave her some presents, some things I would never have done for her because I don’t have the money to do so. When they did that it came as a surprise to me and I was really happy. It’s massive. Sometimes I sit down and I think, I just wonder how, how they do this. They are very good, they are helping people. When you have children or even if you don’t, and you get into a tight corner and you don’t have somebody. Even the words... it’s not the things that they give you but the words of encouragement and how they draw you closer to themselves, it makes you feel like you are part of them and they are part of you. They give you hope to live again. They are really touching people’s lives. For my life they’ve really turned it around, turned my life around. They listen to what we need. If they don’t have they tell you.”

“How they deal with you is different. They came to my place first and then later they sent somebody to my house to do some paperwork, asking questions. Sometimes when someone’s in that situation you have to bring them out from that situation before... if there’s other things you can do. And that is what they did. If they had come and said let’s fill this form in... but they helped me out before we had to fill anything in. I really feel at home – I feel like I’m being loved by people around me.”

4. CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

4.1. Methodology & Planning

4.1.1. It was important to include children in the evaluation since they are the ultimate beneficiaries of the project but there were a number of factors that made this fairly challenging:

- WAF targets parents of young children, so most were under five
- children's direct experience of WAF is limited to crèche, summer meetings in the local park and outings
- children were therefore not involved in any WAF activity during the evaluation period

4.1.2. After considerable discussion we agreed to organise a fun, interactive activity with a few of the older children, led by an experienced play worker from Aston-Mansfield. The evaluator spoke to the play work co-ordinator and after agreement in principle to work together, we arranged a joint visit to the centre to see the space and find out more about the children who might be involved. We decided to organise an after school activity, led by the play worker and supported by the evaluator, where children were encouraged to talk about WAF whilst engaged in fun activities. The large garden at Forrest House was the venue, with the pod/summer house as back-up if it rained.

4.1.3. Activities were carefully designed to introduce the children to the new adults, then bring them together as a more focused group. The planned programme was:

- Treasure hunt for bags of sweets hidden around the garden (an ice breaker)
- Icing and decorating cakes and biscuits (focused activity where discussion might be possible)
- Discussion around large photos of the children taking part in WAF outings

4.1.4. Two families agreed to take part – one with a five year old and one with a seven year old and five year old. The plan was to use a digital recorder to record conversations, backed up by brief notes and photos.

4.2. What Actually Happened

4.2.1. On the day of the evaluation the family with two children dropped out and two new families were found by staff at short notice, both with four year olds. This meant the age range was lower than anticipated, which had a significant impact on the session. Other complicating factors were that the group was joined by a friend of one of the children, who had never been to WAF, and the one year old sibling of another. Both affected the dynamics of the group but we did our best to include everyone.

4.2.2. Parents were encouraged to sit in the garden, near enough to help the children feel safe but not to influence what was said. The Alternatives Director was there to welcome the families and be available if needed but was not in the garden during the evaluation. The children taking part in the evaluation (and their mums) all knew each other.



Photo: Children's Evaluation in Progress

4.2.3. Luckily the weather was fine. We waited until all three families had arrived and the children quickly lost any shyness and joined in the treasure hunt. This proved to be an effective icebreaker and they were reluctant to finish. The cake decorating session was messy and enjoyable and the play worker was able to steer conversation fairly naturally towards WAF several times. The photos of the children taking part in WAF outings were brought out after the cakes were finished and hands had been washed. There was a brief exchange where the children were excited to see themselves and talked a little about their memories of the outings. They were, however, far more interested in playing football in the garden, so when this became clear we ended the evaluation and allowed them to play before they went home.

4.2.4. The session was successful in that the children had a great time and were able to share a little of their experience about WAF. Given the complicating factors of age and additional children, and the distractions of a large garden with football, this was not a bad outcome.

4.3. Findings

4.3.1. The children all said they liked coming to WAF. It is likely that at least some of the time they were referring to being there that afternoon, because even the child who had never been before said she enjoyed it, and because the activities they referred to were those they were doing with us at the time. Children's voices in italics:

Do you like coming here? Is it good here? *"Yes" (all)*

What do you do here? *"We have chocolate and do cakes."*
Do you make cakes when you're here? *"Yes."*
You do? *"No."*

What do you do here? Do you play here? *"Yes."*
What do you play? *"Games. I like games."*
What's the best thing about coming here? *"Playing football!"*

"I'm making a happy face. I have a happy face at school." Do you have a happy face when you're here? Have you got a happy face now? *"Yes."* [Smiles] That's an excellent happy face!

There was a spontaneous exchange about the children loving being here, but again it was possible they were referring to the present activity:

"I love being here!" You love being here? How much do you love being here? This much? [arms spread wide]
[Children copy, arms stretched as wide as they would go] *"This much!"*
That much? That's quite a lot!

They started using numbers to say how much they liked it, competing with each other to find bigger numbers:

"One thousand and nine."
"One thousand and ten."
"One hundred million loves to come here."

Looking at the photos of them taking part in WAF activities:

Who's this?
"That's me! Riding on a horse!"

"That's me. That's me!"

Where was that?
"I was, I went to the beach."

Did you have a good time?
"Yeah."

What did you do there?
"I played with my friends."

Did you get wet?
"No."

No? I can see you in the water.

"Yeah." [laughs]

- 4.3.2. Although the time with the children did not produce a great quantity of spoken material, it was clear that they were happy in that environment. The mums sitting in the garden spent the time chatting and looking after each others' children and there was a real sense of relaxed, family-like occupying of a space that was theirs.

5. STAFF AND VOLUNTEERS PERSPECTIVE

5.1. Methodology

5.1.1. Questionnaires were distributed to the seven paid staff and four volunteers working with WAF at the time of the evaluation. Ten were returned completed, in sealed envelopes.

5.1.2. Seven respondents were regular paid staff and two sessional. Only one was a volunteer (sessional). Job titles included WAF Director, support workers and crèche and outreach workers. Four had been part of WAF for over five years, four for 6 - 12 months and the others for 1-2 and 3-4 years.

5.2. Findings

5.2.1. Staff and volunteers were asked to indicate which WAF activities they were involved in:

Table 2: Involvement of Participating Staff in WAF Activities

Weekly group meetings	7
Individual support for parents	7
Sessions on broader life issues (e.g. anger management, relationship skills etc)	6
Trips and outings	5
Parenting courses	4
Other: providing accommodation; helping people move; supporting in court; case conferences; counselling; being present at 'giving birth' time; looking after siblings while mum in hospital; 4dads; crèche	4

5.2.2. Most were involved with the regular group and individual support for parents. Five had been involved in four or more different activities.

5.2.3. Respondents were asked which of the activities provided by We Are Family they considered to be most important to the families they work with. One did not complete this question.

Table 3: Views on Importance of WAF Activities to Families

Individual support for parents	9
Weekly group meetings	8
Trips and outings	7
Parenting courses	7
Sessions on broader life issues (e.g. anger management, relationship skills etc)	6
Other: feeling they belong somewhere; counselling; 4dads sporting events; crèche for the children; building relationships and friendships; motivating, building up.	5

5.2.4. All those completing this question felt the individual support for parents was the most important aspect of the project for the families, closely followed by the weekly meetings. The staff perspective on the importance of activities was similar to the parents' perspective apart from trips and outings which staff appeared to view as more important than parents.

5.2.5. Eight staff had worked with parents or families in another organisation before WAF. Asked to describe any differences between their previous experience and We Are Family two said the experience was broadly similar:

"The experiences are similar to WAF in that the parents needed support in the community and also the children mixed with each other and played together well although they were from different cultures and backgrounds with varying disabilities."

5.2.6. The four who described differences focused on the approach of WAF. Common themes were being holistic, relational and flexible:

"With WAF it is a holistic approach, and any needs they are struggling with, we will endeavour to support them with, or refer to an appropriate person."

"WAF provides ongoing and relational support that is ongoing and long term rather than running a course that runs 6-10 weeks and then not seeing parents again. WAF is holistic in its approach ie helps people through life from wherever they are at - and aims to build up and encourage them as unique individuals as well as parents."

"WAF is small in size. This makes WAF focused. WAF is also dynamic and flexible. The formation of 4Dads exemplifies the dynamism and flexibility of WAF."

"The difference with the other groups or organisations I worked for they were more programmed based not relational like how WAF are, and in the other groups there was no continued contact but just getting an end product be it a certificate in doing craft etc. With WAF you work with the parent's needs and interest rather than providing a service."

5.2.7. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had directly observed any of the following changes in families during their contact with We Are Family and responses in terms of observed outcomes were very positive:

Table 4: Observed Changes in Families

	I have seen this happen	I have not seen this happen	I am not in a position to have seen this happen
Improved confidence or self-esteem of parents	9		1
Friendships made	9		
Children more settled	9		
Parents taking ownership of the group (e.g. helping with refreshments, clearing away)	9		
Improved parenting skills	8		1
More engagement with agencies/activities outside of WAF	8		2
Life improvements (e.g. moving onto studies or work)	8		1

5.2.8. Asked about their awareness of any values, principles or beliefs behind WAF's approach, two did not answer. The remaining eight described ways of working that closely matched those identified by parents:

5.2.8.1. *Genuinely Caring*

"Genuine care, support, love, encouragement, empowering people, helping all parents to become better parents and people, therefore producing happy secure families."

"I have only been involved for a few weeks but I have noticed the good interaction between the staff and volunteers and the parents and the happy and relaxed atmosphere which I think shows that the parents are really valued and cared about."

5.2.8.2. *Being Holistic / Focusing on a Range of Issues*

"I look at the staff and volunteers contact with parents as having a holistic approach that looks at every person in a unique way no matter their background or race, and look at issues together and working through things in a team or individually."

"A real sense of family but also highly practical engagement in real life issues and legal problems."

5.2.8.3. *Being Non-Judgemental*

"I would think that adopting a non-judgemental approach when meeting parents would be an important principle of WAF workers and volunteers. Also I believe that equal opportunities to all irrespective of their gender, age, race, disability is a core value of WAF."

5.2.8.4. Other

“A Christian approach enhances the values, principles and beliefs behind Alternatives’ work.”

“Parenthood is hard sometimes and we all need support at some point and they give that support. These mothers have a lot going on in their lives, any support will do to forget the hardships. Parenting skills lead to better children. Empower the mothers in their relationships, teaching them better ways of dealing with partners. Solving conflicts the better way. How to make the most of any situation.”

5.2.9. How WAF Makes Itself Accessible

5.2.9.1. Asked how We Are Family enables people to engage who might not usually access help through other agencies, seven responded. A number of themes emerged:

5.2.9.1.1. Some focused on how parents hear about the project:

“Through the attendees of WAF bringing their friends and family, and through recommendations and referrals.”

Generally people find us either via the centre or via social workers/midwives or other clients.

“The core of Alternatives work is through women in crisis pregnancy. We have built up connections with Social Services, maternity services, Connexions and community groups who often refer people to us. Having an equipment bank is also a first point of reference for many – eg social worker or nurse refer client for baby clothes etc – they learn about the group WAF and come from there.”

5.2.9.1.2. Some felt it was the relational, non-judgemental approach that mattered:

“Unconditional acceptance and a desire to work with people whatever their circumstances. We work with each one as best we can.

“Most of the mums have no access to public funds, childcare, support, no immigration status but the WAF group does not look for their visa or residence status but looks at the individuals as they come in, helps them with their issues, makes them feel welcome and will do all they can to help them get access where possible. All people are welcome whatever race, colour, disability, gender (fathers) or sexuality. All kinds of people are welcome to the group.

5.2.9.1.3. Others focused on the holistic nature of the provision:

Often [the parents] need immigration/paperwork issues support, and we will endeavour to always work legally with all, and endeavour to be fair to all.”

They have housed mothers who are homeless, trained and given purpose through volunteering work, helped with rent payment, children’s clothes etc.”

“By building up social enterprises like setting up houses for people with no access to public funds, assisting them until they get sorted out, enabling people in this situation to gain self esteem by letting put something back into the community by doing volunteer work and when their status get sorted out they would have learnt back to work skills, how to manage good house keeping skills, this is only part of what Alternatives do.”

5.2.9.1.4. Finally one respondent talked of the links made with other individuals and organisations in order to maximise the support available:

“WAF work with individuals who are philanthropist and private organisations who provide support that is needed.”

5.2.9.2. Any other comments

“Amazed how the numbers grew, and the changes we have seen. There is clearly a great need for this kind of group.”

“Alternatives is fulfilling an important role; has established a gap in the market (so to speak) where vulnerable young pregnant mothers and mothers with children can come and feel welcomed and have their needs met.”

“Having been in WAF for 5 years I deeply believe in the work being done and its relevance at all levels of life.”

“I was one of the first mums to attend the WAF group. We chose the name and what we would like to gain from the group. We had issues with parenting, relationships, accessibility, confidence and needed support. We came away with flying colours and some of the mums have graduated from university, managed to get their status sorted, go into education, find employment and have the best children you could ask for, behaviour wise.”

“As a paid staff with dyslexia problems I am very grateful to Alternatives to give me a chance and particular in my struggles with written work and presentation the staff have worked with me and shown understanding and encouragement in getting me through my hurdles of disabilities which I find people with disabilities like mine other places of employment that I have been to in the past have not taken the time to have the patience and understanding to allow me to work at my own pace.”

6. OUTSIDE GROUPS AND PROFESSIONALS

6.1. Methodology

- 6.1.1. An online survey was created using the Survey Monkey tool and distributed to 12 people representing individual professionals or community groups working with WAF. Seven surveys were completed after two email chases.

6.2. Findings

- 6.2.1. Three respondents had been in contact with the We Are Family project since it began – more than five years – and two for 4 – 5 years. The other two were relatively new to the project – between 1 and 3 years. Most had fairly frequent contact: three were in touch every week, one most weeks and two most months. Only one had infrequent contact – a few times a year or less.
- 6.2.2. The nature of people’s involvement with the project varied. Most represented other agencies or groups having close links with WAF staff/volunteers and families, such as Just Homes and Survivors Together. Several belonged to the church where the Monday group meets and where some of the staff and parents are members.
- 6.2.3. Respondents had good knowledge about the range of activities WAF provides. Given a list of the five main activities all said they were aware of every one, apart from one person not aware of opportunities to learn about broader life issues. Two suggested other activities not specifically listed: educational services and extensive support and signposting.
- 6.2.4. Asked whether they were aware of other agencies locally that provide a similar service, four said they were sure WAF provides a service that is unique locally and two said they were not sure if there are similar services locally. One did not respond to this question.
- 6.2.5. Asked which of the main WAF activities they considered most important to the families worked with, the weekly group meetings (6), individual support (5) and opportunities to learn about parenting (5) were highest on the list. Only two people ticked opportunities to learn about broader life issues and no-one ticked trips and outings. One person commented that:

‘I think the whole is what counts and that the individual parts don’t make sense without the whole package.’

- 6.2.6. Respondents were asked whether they thought the WAF project had a positive impact on a list of areas. In each case they could choose ‘yes’, ‘no’ or ‘don’t know’. In every case every respondent ticked ‘yes’:

- Parents’ confidence
- Parents’ self esteem
- Parenting skills
- Parents’ ability to access the support they need

6.2.7. Six respondents had referred or signposted someone to WAF. Asked about their experience of these referrals, and invited to provide their own brief descriptions, all six responded positively:

“Always positive.”

“Good where it has been taken up.”

“Excellent, helpful, efficient, very professional.”

“Efficient, supportive, nurturing, rapid service.”

“Good.”

“Responsive, committed, accessible.”

6.2.8. The same six people had also accepted referrals from WAF. This time they were asked to tick adjectives from a list to describe their experience of receiving a referral. Again all responses were positive:

Appropriate	6
(Inappropriate 0)	
Well supported	5
(Inadequately supported 0)	
Efficient	3
(Inefficient 0)	

6.2.9. Everyone thought the project was accessible. Five said it was ‘easy’ for people to access for the first time and two ‘very easy’. Asked how they thought the project makes itself accessible only four responded, but there was a technical problem with this question on the survey which may have affected the response rate. Most talked about effective publicity – word of mouth and good contact with referring agencies. One mentioned the open door policy for the Monday group and another the fact that parents can access the team by phone and that parents are met by staff before they attend the group. The timing of the support group fits with the lives of parents and incentives are given to encourage attendance. Communication with parents is key – staff work hard to keep in touch and are aware of the need for additional support when English is not a parent’s first language.

6.2.10. Six respondents chose to make additional comments, all of them positive and supportive:

“From our point of view, WAF is a credible agency that manages to sustain the difficult art of being professional, accountable and robust in its policies and procedures while being personal, approachable and not bureaucratic. We can and do refer women to its services and are aware that there is a men’s project within it we could refer to, too. We have worked in effective partnership with WAF to support a number of women who face considerable difficulties and may even be at risk of losing their children.”

"A pleasure to work with We are Family and Alternatives as a whole. Not only provide support to clients but also provide support to staff. They have a sound knowledge base and will go the extra mile for clients especially vulnerable clients. They put the needs of the child first whilst recognising the importance of having healthy parents."

"Keep going – well done!"

"They are a great team to work with."

6.2.11. One had suggestions to increase outreach and publicity but was aware that the team may not be able to respond to an influx of families:

"They're doing a brilliant job. If they don't already advertise through GPs and maternity units they should. Also get workers into these places and get alongside other services like NAADV. They might be doing this already, or they might not have time to take on more mums."

6.2.12. Finally, one respondent was aware of the dangers of becoming overstretched and the possible future impact of this:

"There is always the danger that there is more work than time to do it in or funds to do it with or even people to go round so the team is constantly stretched to the limit. This will affect the quality of the service in the long run however the vision is inspirational and the team motivated to a high degree. We are pleased to work with them."

7. KEY THEMES/OUTCOMES

- 7.1. This evaluation provides evidence of significant, widespread positive impact on the confidence and capacity of parents accessing the WAF project, and on their self confidence, self esteem, self awareness, emotional wellbeing, resilience and hope.
- 7.2. WAF is about responding to need. The project does this by being flexible and dynamic and continuously evolving. This 'can do' approach is important both as a way of ensuring needs are effectively met and as a positive, hopeful model for the families involved in the project.
- 7.3. The project offers holistic provision, deliberately focusing on the emotional, practical, educational, social and spiritual needs of families. Alternatives is well networked as an organisation, aware of local provision and of gaps, actively building links with others and creating new services to meet unmet needs. This enhances their ability to meet the needs of families thoroughly and effectively.
- 7.4. The way WAF works with families is extremely important. The project is experienced by parents as being inclusive, non-judgemental and reliable, offering a safety that enables vulnerable parents to learn to trust, to become more open and to receive the support they need. The project fosters a sense of belonging, of being part of a family, building connections between people and reducing isolation. Relationships between staff, volunteers and parents are central to the success of their work. Parents describe the importance of these relationships as experiencing genuine care and commitment from staff. It is likely that the encouragement, care and consistency of staff provide important 'parental' role models, enabling parents to develop new ways of being with others and with their own families.
- 7.5. The project is accessible to those who discover it, engaging 'hard to reach' families, some on the edge of survival. Parents often arrive through contact with others – signposted or invited by someone they happen to meet who is part of WAF or knows it well. This works well for those who happen upon a link person, but will miss many more who do not. Some parents had arrived at crisis point when it would have been far better for their families to have engaged earlier.
- 7.6. WAF identifies and builds on the potential of the parents who get involved. There were a number of examples of parents moving on through the project through volunteering, training or paid work.

8. THOUGHTS FOR THE FUTURE

- 8.1. It will be important for the project to stay small enough to feel family-like but big enough to respond to need. There is a potential clash between increasing outreach/accessibility and maintaining quality/effectiveness. Much of the success of the project rests on the commitment and skills of the staff team and supporting very vulnerable families is emotionally and physically demanding. Those making decisions about future growth and development will need to make careful choices to ensure sustainability.
- 8.2. As the project develops thought also needs to be given to its focus. For some parents the project would have felt far less accessible if the support focus had been more obvious. It may be that it is important both to the accessibility and the dynamics of the project that it does not target only very vulnerable families but enables a mix of people who come for different reasons.
- 8.3. Sustainability and consistency are essential to a project working with vulnerable, otherwise un-supported people. Project managers should consider different ways to protect the future of the project such as:
 - Seeking long term grants or other sources of income that enables flexibility and continuity.
 - Enabling parents to support each other more – as their circumstances change and they become stronger themselves, parents can be helped to move on and to support others through befriending, buddying or volunteering.
- 8.4. There is a danger of dependence with projects that are so successful at meeting needs holistically. Although there is evidence of parents being encouraged to move on through volunteering or into paid work within Alternatives it may be helpful to explore progression routes outside the organisation, strengthening links with training providers or volunteer/job brokerage schemes etc.
- 8.5. The way WAF works with families is extremely important. The non-judgemental approach, enabling a feeling of trust and safety, responding directly to need – are key to facilitating the sense of belonging and connectedness that is central to the therapeutic impact of the project. The project has evolved around and depends upon the qualities, beliefs and commitment of the founding staff. It might be useful to capture the WAF ethos in writing and develop strategies to ensure this is passed on systematically and effectively through induction and training to all future staff and volunteers.

APPENDICES: INTERVIEW SCHEDULES AND QUESTIONNAIRES

INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

INTRO:

Finding out if the WAF club makes a difference to the families that use it.

What you tell me will be used in a report to help staff get funding for the club and make sure it's working as well as it can.

No-one will know who said what.

This will only take 10-15 minutes but if you feel you'd like to say more at the end I'll talk to you about how you can do that.

Okay to record?

1. Do you think your contact with the WAF club has made a difference to you:

- as a parent (how you feel about or deal with your children)
- as a person (how you feel about yourself/your life)

If yes, tell me how:

2. Before you came to WAF had you been to other places for help or support?

If no:

- Why not?
- What was different about WAF? What made it possible for you to become part of this project?

If yes:

- Where?
- What was that like?
- Was WAF different in any way?

3. Has your contact with the WAF club helped you get support from other people or places?

If yes, examples:

4. Is there anything else you'd like to say about your experience with WAF?

Thank you. Happy to end here or more to say? If more, offer questionnaire or phone interview.

If questionnaire, provide with Freepost envelope, deadline 16th March.

If interview, take number, check out good times to call.

WE ARE FAMILY

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS INTERVIEWED

Thank you for agreeing to complete this questionnaire. Please answer as many questions as you can then return the questionnaire in the envelope. If you'd like to complete the questionnaire at home please ask for a Freepost envelope.

1. Please tick the things you have done with the We Are Family club that have been the most important or helpful to you.

Regular Monday groups

Trips and outings

Help with appointments

Having people to listen and talk things through

Getting information or advice (eg. housing, legal, studying)

Writing letters or making phone calls on your behalf

Going with you to get extra help or advice

Putting you in touch with other people or organisations

Receiving clothes and equipment

Receiving financial support

Making friends

Finding support from social workers

Tell us more if you want to:

2. Thinking about the difference the We Are Family club has made to you as a parent, please tick any of these that are true for you:

I have learned new ways to deal with my children's behaviour

I feel more confident about being a parent

I feel the same about being parent as I did before

I enjoy my children more

I know more now about what help is there for me and my family

I do not know how to get the help I need

I am more likely to get help if I need it

Tell us more if you want to:

3. Thinking about the difference the We Are Family club has made to you as a person, please tick any of these that are true for you:

I feel more confident about myself

I am more hopeful about my future

I feel the same about myself as I did before

I feel more able to cope when things go wrong

I am more confident about getting the support I need

I have made friends that I see outside the club

The club has made no difference to me as a person

Tell us more if you want to:

--

4. How hopeful were you about *your children's future* before you joined the We Are Family club? Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

5. How hopeful are you about *your children's future* now? Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

6. How hopeful were you about *your own future* before you joined?

Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

7. How hopeful are you about *your own future* now?

Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

8. Do you think there is anything the We Are Family club does particularly well?

If so, please tell us about it:

--

9. If there is anything else you'd like to say about the We Are Family club please write it here:

Please give your name – this will be used to match you with your interview questions. It will not be used in the report.

Name:

THANK YOU

WE ARE FAMILY QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS NOT INTERVIEWED

Alternatives wants to find out how their We Are Family club makes a difference to the families that use it.

What you say will be used in a report to help get more funding for the club and to make sure it's working as well as it can. No-one will know who said what.

Please answer as many questions as you can and return the questionnaire in the envelope.

1. Has the We Are Family club made a difference to you as a parent?

Yes No Don't know

If you ticked 'yes' please say more:

2. How hopeful were you about **your children's future** before you joined the We Are Family club? Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

3. How hopeful are you about **your children's future** now? Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

4. Has the We Are Family club made a difference to you as a person?

Yes No Don't know

If you ticked 'yes' please say more:

5. How hopeful were you about **your own future** before you joined?
Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

6. How hopeful are you about **your own future** now?
Please circle a number below:

1	2	3	4	5
No hope at all	A little hopeful	Don't know	Fairly hopeful	Very hopeful

7. Before you came to the We Are Family club had you been anywhere else for help or support?
Yes No

If you ticked 'yes' please say where you had been before and if the We Are Family club was different from this:

If you ticked 'no' please say why:

I didn't need help before

I needed help but didn't know where to get it

I tried other places but they didn't work for me

Some other reason – please write this below:

8. Please tick any of these that are true for you:

I get support for myself from the We Are Family club

I get support for my children from the We Are Family club

The club has helped me get support from other places or people

I know more now about what help is there for me and my family

The club has made no difference to me

I am more confident about getting the support I need

I have made friends that I see outside the club

I feel more supported since joining the We Are Family club

9. If there is anything else you'd like to say about the We Are Family club please write it here:

Please give your name – this will be used to find out what contact you have had and the ages of your children. It will not be used in the report.

Name:

THANK YOU

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WE ARE FAMILY STAFF & VOLUNTEERS

Alternatives have commissioned an external evaluation of their 'We Are Family' project. As part of this evaluation we are gathering the views of staff and volunteers.

Please take 10 minutes to complete this simple questionnaire - the results will be used to shape future provision and help secure ongoing funding. A list of participants will be included in the evaluation report but no-one will know who said what. Although it is part of Alternatives it is important to respond specifically about the We Are Family club.

1. What is your role with We Are Family?

- paid staff – regular
- paid staff – sessional / occasional
- volunteer – regular
- volunteer - sessional / occasional

2. What is your job title?

3. How long have you worked with We Are Family?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months – 1 year
- 1 – 2 years
- 2 – 3 years
- 3 – 4 years
- 4 – 5 years
- more than 5 years

4. Which of the following have you helped to provide through We Are Family?

- Weekly group meetings
- Parenting courses
- Sessions on broader life issues (e.g. anger management, relationship skills etc)
- Trips and outings
- Individual support for parents
- Other (please say what:.....)

5. Which of the activities provided by We Are Family do you think is most important to the families you work with? Please tick as many as you think.

- Weekly group meetings
- Parenting courses
- Sessions on broader life issues (e.g. anger management, relationship skills etc)
- Trips and outings
- Individual support for parents
- Other (please say what:.....)

6. Have you worked with parents or families in another organisation before WAF?

- Yes
- No

If yes:

Please describe any differences between your previous experience and We Are Family:

7. Please indicate whether you have directly observed any of the following changes in families during their contact with We Are Family:

	I have seen this happen	I have not seen this happen	I am not in a position to have seen this happen
Improved confidence or self-esteem of parents			
Improved parenting skills			
More engagement with agencies/activities outside of WAF			
Friendships made			
Children more settled			
Life improvements (e.g. moving onto studies or work)			
Parents taking ownership of the group (e.g. helping with refreshments, clearing away)			

8. Contact with parents suggests the way staff and volunteers work with them matters enormously. If you are aware of any values, principles or beliefs behind the project's approach please describe them here:

9. It seems that We Are Family is a project that enables people to engage with it who might not usually access help through other agencies. Do you have any thoughts on how the project achieves this level of accessibility?

10. If there is anything else you'd like add please do so here:

Please return your completed questionnaire in a sealed envelope to Philippa at Alternatives by Thursday April 7th.

Information received through these questionnaires will be treated anonymously – the report will include comments but will not identify which staff and volunteers responded or who said what.

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO COMPLETE THIS

We Are Family Evaluation

1. Welcome

Alternatives have commissioned an external evaluation of their 'We Are Family' project. You have been listed as someone who has worked alongside this project.

Please take 10 minutes to complete this simple online survey - the results will be used to shape future provision and help secure ongoing funding. A list of participants will be included in the evaluation report but no-one will know who said what.

2. Your contact with We Are Family

1. How long have you been in contact with the We Are Family project?

less than 6 months

6 months - 1 year

1 - 2 years

2 - 3 years

4 - 5 years

more than 5 years

2. Please indicate the frequency of your contact with We Are Family:

a few times a year or less

some contact most months

some contact most weeks

contact every week

3. Please describe the nature of your involvement with We Are Family.

3. We Are Family - Focus

We Are Family Evaluation

1. Which of the following We Are Family activities are you aware of?

- weekly group meetings
- opportunities to learn about parenting
- opportunities to learn about broader life issues
- trips and outings
- individual support

Other (please specify)

2. Are you aware of other agencies locally that provide a similar service to We Are Family?

- Yes I know there are similar services locally
- I am not sure if there are similar services locally
- No I am sure We Are Family provides a service that is unique locally

3. Which of the activities provided by We Are Family do you think is most important to the families they work with?

- weekly group meetings
- opportunities to learn about parenting
- opportunities to learn about broader life issues
- trips and outings
- individual support

Other (please specify)

4. We Are Family - Impact

1. In your opinion do you think the We Are Family project has a positive impact on

	yes	no	don't know
parents' confidence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
parents' self-esteem	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
parenting skills	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
parents' ability to access the support they need	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. Please provide more information about the impact of We Are Family if you can

5

6

We Are Family Evaluation

5. Referrals and Accessibility

1. Have you referred or signposted anyone to We Are Family?

Yes

No

6.

1. What was your experience of these referrals? Please describe, using single words rather than sentences if you prefer (eg. efficient, slow)

2. Have you accepted any referrals from We Are Family?

Yes

No

7.

1. How would you describe your experience of receiving a referral from We Are Family?

- appropriate
- inappropriate
- efficient
- inefficient
- well supported
- inadequately supported

2. How easy do you think the project is for people to access for the first time?

the project is extremely easy for people to access

the project is easy for people to access

the project is not very easy for people to access

8.

1. How does the project make itself accessible?

We Are Family Evaluation

9. Other Comments

1. If you would like to say anything else about We Are Family please do so here

	5
	6