

PRESS RELEASE
For immediate release

Action for Children Northern Ireland's Emma O'Neill is 'thinking' big

Think Family is a pilot project that works with families and young people affected by mental health issues in Northern Ireland. This new project puts the focus on providing tailored support to everyone in the family who is affected by a relative's condition, including children as young as six.

Here Action for Children Northern Ireland's Emma O'Neill tells us about how she is working with the South Eastern Trust to deliver the project and help children and young people affected by family mental health issues to cope.

I joined Action for Children Northern Ireland in 2009 as a young carers support worker. My main responsibility was to support to children and young people who had significant caring roles. This was provided through the means of short break care, one-to-one support, group programmes and by linking in with schools and doctors.

I really enjoy helping vulnerable children, young people and families to build happy, healthy lives and working for the charity, which has 26 services across Northern Ireland. I am particularly excited about my new role, working for Action for Children Northern Ireland in partnership with the South Eastern Trust to deliver a unique pilot programme called Think Family.

Think Family is an early intervention project which aims to provide support to everyone in a family who is affected by a relative's mental health condition. Historically mental health services have focused on the patient, rather than everyone in the family who is affected by the issue. We want to work with all family members to help them lead fulfilling lives in what can be very challenging circumstances.

I will be working with in the Down area, with the South Eastern Trust and local mental health teams, addiction specialists, and family intervention teams, to support all family members who are affected by a mental health issue - not just those who are the 'patient'. My focus is on helping children and young people; this can include children as young as six.

"In this role I will be working alongside the family intervention teams looking at the relationship between parenting and mental health and its impact on every member of the family. This can assist with the family conversation where everyone's needs are considered and how these needs interlink.

I think there is often a 'head in the sand' mentality where children are kept out of the loop when it comes to family members who are suffering from mental health issues. People automatically think they are protecting the young person by not involving them or even acknowledging the situation. However, it is now clear that children in these situations are very aware that there is a difference in their home – but they can't put their finger on it

I worked with Alison, a 12-year-old who thought her mum was dying in bed with a terminal illness. The reality was that her mum was diagnosed with depression and on bad days she just couldn't get out of bed. Alison stopped bringing her friends back to the house because of her mum's condition and appearance, and was highly distracted in school - stressed and anxious when she should have been concentrating on her studies. Alison was living in a state of panic because she thought she was going to come home to find her mother dead.

Action for Children Northern Ireland empowered Alison to deal with this difficult situation by giving her accurate and helpful information about her mum's depression, explained in an appropriate

way. One interesting piece of work we did was to create a scrap book of what mum was like on a good day and a bad day. Over time it was really uplifting to see how the colours changed from black and white to lots of colours – this was her way of reflecting her mum’s good and bad day’s through her own colour choices and pictures. when. This was as a result of Alison developing coping skills and talking about the issue with her mum – and in turn this gave them a stronger bond.

My goal is to work alongside health practitioners to offer additional support to children and young people whose parents or siblings may have a diagnosis, building on their awareness of the condition and making sure that they feel safe, secure and able to cope. Action for Children Northern Ireland has been doing this for years, and I am pleased that we have teamed up with the South Eastern Trust to deliver the Think Family project – meaning we can reach more children and families.

This is a really challenging and rewarding position. I can already see the difference Think Family can potentially make on ground level – and also the large scope that there is for future development in this approach. It’s about including the whole family and recognising everyone’s needs so that we can spot problems early on and prevent them from escalating to crises.

Ends

For further information please call Paul Martin on 02890 460500 or email paul.martin@actionforchildren.org.uk

About Action for Children

Action for Children works directly with more than 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers each year. We help transform the lives of thousands of children and young people each year and we’ve been doing so for 145 years. With 26 services in Northern Ireland, we are in communities where you live and work.

For more information, visit actionforchildren.org.uk or follow us on Twitter @actnforchildren.