

Engaging parents in community based relationship support

Hartlepool's experience of a community
volunteer project for supporting parental
relationships, told in pictures.

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Foreword & Acknowledgements

Research tells us that children who are exposed to frequent, intense and poorly resolved parental conflict can experience mental health issues, poorer educational attainment and employment chances later in life¹. In 2015 the Healthy Relationships Partnership formed with the aim of changing the way we do things in Hartlepool to better support parents to have positive parental relationships and thus improve the life chances of children.

The Partnership set out to understand parents' perceptions of the impact of parental distress on children and how, if this issue was present for them, they would seek help and support. Community research was therefore carried out with local parents². One of the recommendations of this research was that we should test out ways of providing community-based support in response to feedback that parents wanted to speak to somebody who wasn't part of a specialist service, in venues they may normally visit in the community.

The Partnership were interested in exploring what we could do to **both**:

Increase parents' awareness of the need to attend to the quality of their relationship and where necessary seek help

AND

Increase the capacity within the community of people who weren't part of services but volunteers who were trained to have a helpful conversation and where necessary signpost to other services.

The purpose of this evaluation is to share the stories of some of the volunteers and staff involved in enabling one model of community based support to be available in Hartlepool and to bring together our learning around what worked and what didn't.

Our Partnership would like to thank...

The volunteers and staff who kindly agreed to share their experiences with this evaluation in the hope that our collective learning can be useful to others

All volunteers who have generously given their time over the last 5 years and who have worked so hard to support healthy relationships in Hartlepool

The local organisations who hosted our volunteers and supported our community work

And finally our funders; Comic Relief, The Big Lottery Fund and Esmee Fairburn Foundation

Katie Cramphorn
Research & Development Lead
Healthy Relationships Partnership



Context and Visualising the Journey

Hartlepool has trialled two models of community based relationship support. This report will look at the first model, referred to as Model A.

The Role and Recruitment Process:

Volunteers were recruited to become 'Relationship Champions', a role eventually renamed 'Volunteer Relationship Advisors'. Recruitment took place through online promotion, through network contacts and promotion to existing volunteers of Changing Futures North East (the lead organisation in the Healthy Relationships Partnership).

It was expected that volunteer responsibility would be:

- Working with individuals, agencies and organisations in Hartlepool to raise awareness about the importance of healthy parental relationships and tackling the stigma associated with help-seeking
- Acting as a resource for parents and professionals to talk about relationships and signpost them to sources of help and support
- Being available for helpful conversations about couple and parental relationships in community settings

Training:

In addition to safeguarding training volunteers received 12 to 16 hours of induction training over four sessions. The training aimed to develop a range of skills and competencies and covered; research evidence around the impact of parental conflict on children and on adult physical and mental health, active listening and sign posting to relationship support.

Placement and Ongoing Support:

The VRAs were hosted by community venues offering a variety of services to families and their identification was largely opportunistic. During the trial we were keen to work in partnership with organisations who had shown interest in becoming part of the HRP Family Relationship Network (FRN). The FRN would be recognised as a community venue that was 'relationally aware'. For example, had completed training, were displaying healthy relationships promotional material etc. Volunteers were placed in the community venues and had regular sessions (weekly/fortnightly) in venues to provide information and advice about strengthening relationships and reducing parental conflict. The way this looked varied from venue to venue. For example, in the library volunteers tended to have a promotional presence, standing and offering out leaflets about relationship support services and initiating conversations with those passing through. In other venues with a more fixed community group volunteers attempted to build relationships by working alongside them in their activities, such as craft groups, so they could then offer relationship advice as and when needed.

Volunteers took part in regular group supervision, facilitated by the HRP team, to reflect on their experiences and to unpick challenges and concerns. The team also carried out check-ins with volunteers over text and phone calls. Volunteers had access to ongoing training and development opportunities including 'How to Argue Better' training (raising awareness of the impact of inter-parental conflict and giving the tools to resolve it) and Mental Health First Aid.

Evaluating our Journey

In depth interviews with four volunteers who completed training and spent some time offering relationship signposting and support in the community and three staff members who were responsible for the coordination and oversight of the project have informed this evaluation.

The full report is available at www.hrphartlepool.co.uk. This report takes a more in depth look at staff and volunteer feedback about their experience as well as their suggestions and recommendations for engaging parents in relationship support moving forward.

The illustrations within this report are based on participants answers to the question:

“If you could put your experience into a picture, what would that picture look like?”

The responses were:

Getting people on the dancefloor (Page 5)

A bumpy journey (Page 6)

A distant community (Page 7)

A bus journey with no map (Page 8)

Banging your head against a cultural brick wall (Page 9)

A pick ‘n’ mix (Page 10)

An army of sheep gathering learning (Page 11)

Community support for parental relationships is like...



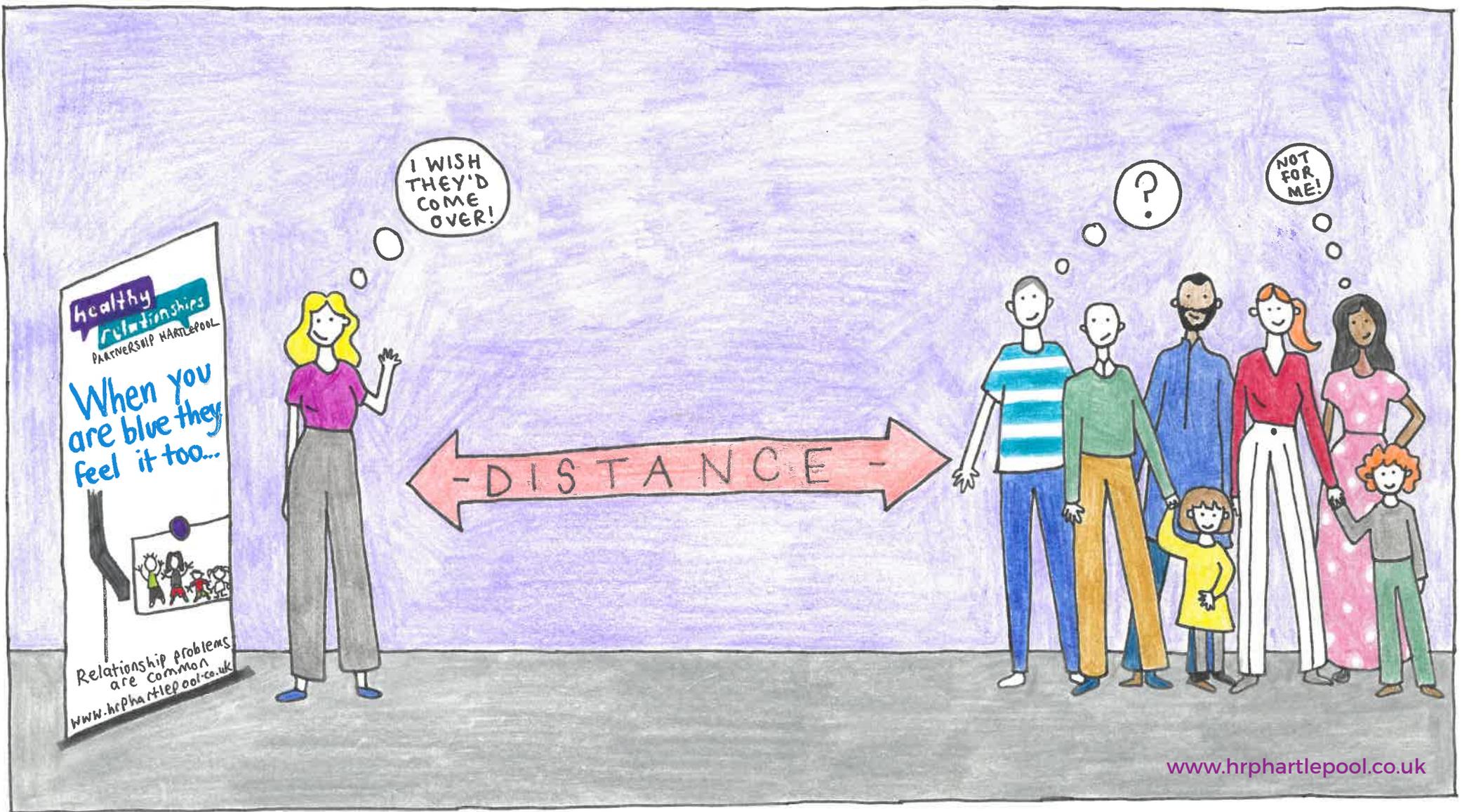
Volunteer: "I think I would do it as the party. You know you can have your highs and lows in a party. Somebody might be throwing up! [laughs] Somebody might be holding their hair. I think it would maybe be engaging them on the dance floor and there would maybe just be one person and that somebody gets another person up. Then when them two start dancing other people will come in and start dancing on the dance floor then the party starts."

Community support for parental relationships is like...



Staff: "Maybe like a bright sunshine, but then maybe the road leading to maybe some rain, black clouds. I think it just feels as though we had all these intentions, and then we all put lots and lots of effort into it and we adapted so much and we tried our best with everything, and it was difficult kind of not to feel the negative sense of it all at the end of it. Do you know what I mean? It was very difficult, with lots of bumps in the road. We all wanted it to work, and then you try to fix something that probably couldn't be fixed in hindsight, but at the time you kind of—"We'll try this and we'll try this". It was a lot of frustration."

Community support for parental relationships is like...



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Volunteer: "I'd draw the people at distance. I'd be somewhere, people would be at a distance. It's not a barrier, it's just distance. I think sometimes it was just hesitation like they're in the distance, they look, then they think, then they look again and you try to draw them in. Then they back off. They engage to a certain extent and then it's always like, their friend or somebody they know. They're friendly. But there's still that distance."

Community support for parental relationships is like...



Staff: "It's definitely a vehicle. I think there's definitely been a vehicle that stop-starts and changes the direction and having to reorientate to a map. This vehicle, and I see this like maybe, an old fashioned '50s bus really- because it's not souped up or anything. It's old fashioned community values in a way, but we're having to negotiate around the community, and we don't really have a route map to have to do that. It's definitely been a voyage of discovery in a battered old bus. You're trying to change the wheel on a moving bus when you've already tried to attract people in the bus. They're kind of like, "I'm not even sure where this is going." You're trying to create something or make something keep moving but at the same time we couldn't just do it in an abstract way."

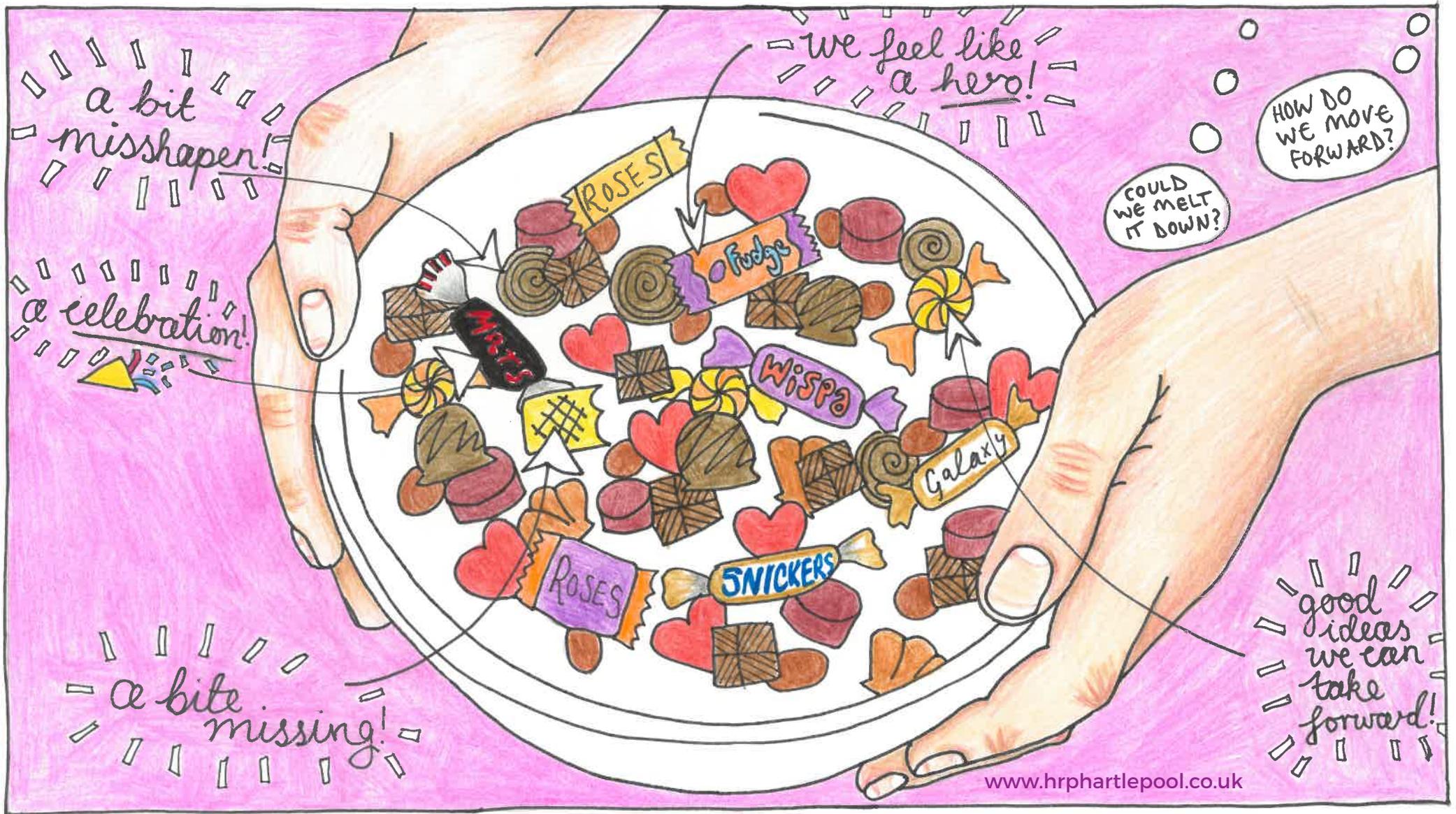
Community support for parental relationships is like...



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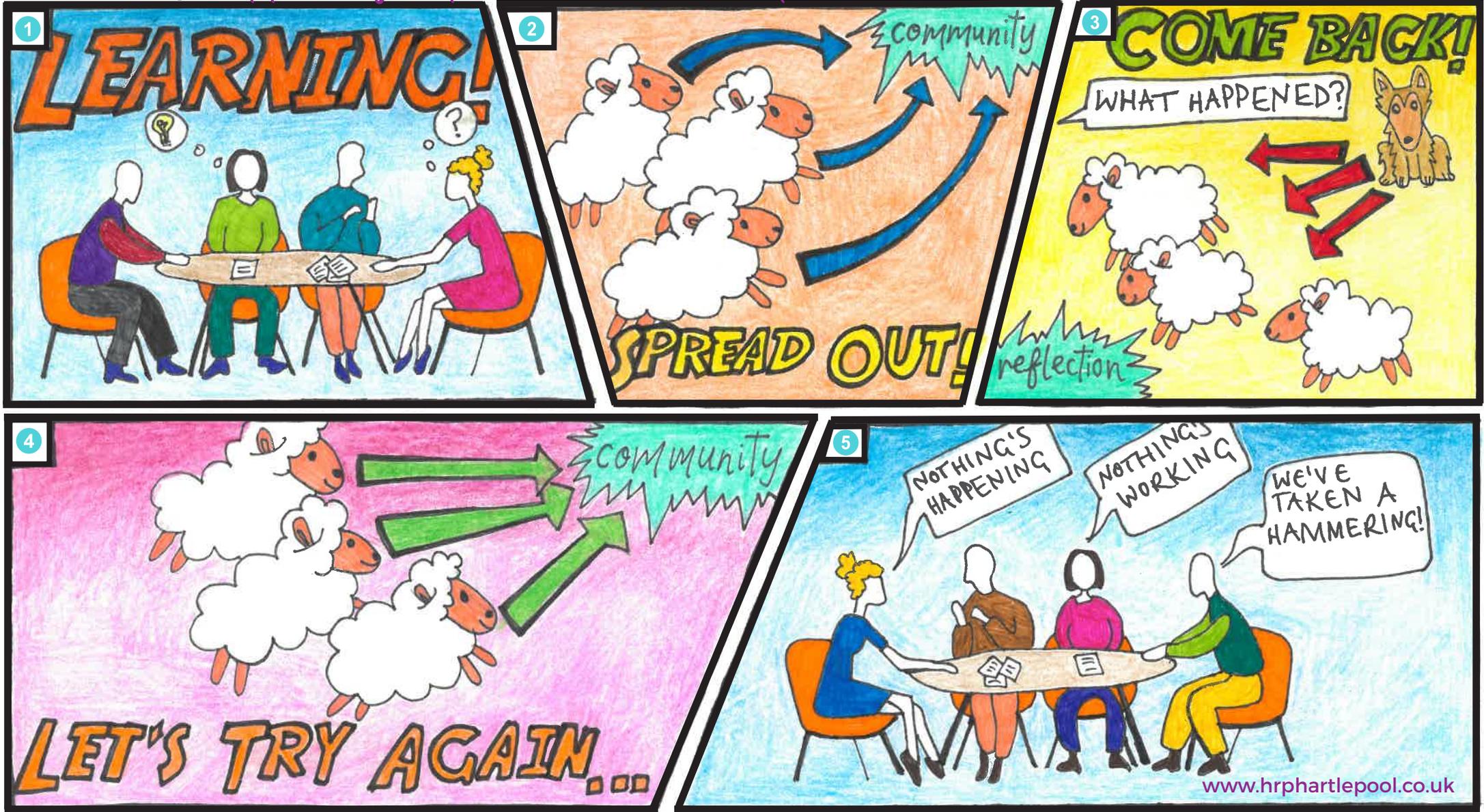
Volunteer: "Somebody banging their head against the wall. I think that sums it up for me really, just the frustration of not being able to get people to talk...knowing the difference it could make to the children. Even just lower level stuff like just Mum and Dad's niggling at each other has an effect on the children. Them not being consistent like one being the good cop, one the bad cop. The children play them off against each other and just as I said frustration, banging my head against the wall sometimes."

Community support for parental relationships is like...



Staff: "We were going to the sweet shop to choose some chocolate, we didn't really know what we wanted. We decided we'd have a bit of this and a bit of that so we felt a bit pick and mixy. You had a few shiny ones that were a little bit different. You were thinking, "I could take this forward." We were all the way through holding this bowl with all these different sweets in, some of them were getting a bit banged and misshapen. You just felt that you were constantly holding this bowl that really nobody was too sure why. A few Celebrations because we've had few bright moments, I've been a bit of a hero here. But then those celebrations have gone out of that bowl, so you're then coming back and thinking, "What do I do next?" Do those chocolates need to be changed into something else? Melted down."

Community support for parental relationships is like...



Volunteer: "I'd do it in cartoon form. You'd have the volunteer sit down in the classroom first. Then they all go out, so you get a big flock of them going out into the wild. Now and then they come back in and you send the dog in to herd them in and "What happened?" Then they go back out. Yes, you could do it like that like sheep. We went out and then got a little bit of a hammering to begin and its was like, "Nothing's happening". I didn't get hammered at all because I was doing what I like doing. [But for some people] they will have been a bit edgy and a bit ahh."

References

1. Department for Work and Pensions (2019). Reducing Parental Conflict: A digital discovery. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/reducing-parental-conflict-a-digital-discovery>
2. Cramphorn, K (2018). Parents' views on relationship support in Hartlepool. Retrieved from <http://hrphartlepool.co.uk/2018/02/07/parents-views-relationship-support-hartlepool/>

**Full report available at www.hrphartlepool.co.uk
or for further details about the contents of this report
contact:**

**Katie Cramphorn, Research and Development Lead
katie.cramphorn@hrphartlepool.co.uk
Twitter: @katiecramphorn**

