

The goal: A safe and rewarding life

Sue Woudstra helps run the NSPCC's Parents under Pressure programme in Ipswich, which aims to cut the number of babies and under fives harmed by parents with drug and alcohol problems. She told **Sheena Grant** what a typical day involves.

Working with parents struggling with addiction brings its share of dark days but Sue Woudstra lives for the good times: the days when she knows that her work has helped give a vulnerable child a better start in life.

On those days, there's no job that could give greater satisfaction.

Take, for instance, one young mum in her early 20s that Sue worked with.

"When I first met her she was living on her own and wasn't coping. Her ex-partner was coming out of prison and there was concern she would relapse if he was still using drugs," says Sue. "At that time she was on a methadone prescription but by the end of the 20-week Parents under Pressure programme had reduced her use to just 5ml, which is more of a psychological prop than anything. She had moved back home to live with her mother, to help protect her own child, and was facing the future as a parent with confidence

and starting to think about going back to further education.

"It is very satisfying when you get that result."

Sue, who has a background in youth and community work, admits the three years she has spent working on the Parents Under Pressure (PUP) programme have been a "real eye opener".

"Child safety is paramount and, of course, there are times when children do have to be removed, but in my experience all parents want to be good parents, even if they may not understand what that actually means," she says. "The programme is about engaging parents in a non-threatening way and looking at what strengths already exist so we can help them build parenting skills and develop safe, caring relationships with their babies."

A typical day for Sue begins at 6am with meditation.

"It's become part of my life since discovering the concept of Mindfulness through the PUP programme," she says. "I have completed an eight-week mindfulness course myself and it

helps my delivery of that aspect of the work, and also personally in dealing with life's ups and downs."

By 9am she is driving for up to an hour and a half to a client's house. Every parent on the programme is given a workbook with information on the 12 modules involved so an individual approach can be worked out. Each session begins with a discussion about where the parents are in the programme.

"If we are at the beginning I will tell parents the service is to support them to be the best parent that they can be," says Sue. "They are told that it is a 20-week programme that will focus on their strengths, goals and provide concrete evidence to social care of good enough parenting and a stable recovery from alcohol or drugs. We agree weekly visits and the parent signs a consent form."

"We talk about how parenting is the most important and rewarding job in the world and that every parent struggles at times. We discuss how the parent wants the best for their baby and if they did not

have this start in life themselves it can be tougher to provide it for your own child in an intuitive way, especially if they have coped with difficulties by using drugs or alcohol.

"I always carry a small video camera, so if mum and baby are interacting in a positive way, with consent I would capture it on film to show her later. This really boosts the confidence of a parent who is anxious about how they handle or manage a baby. It also gives me the chance to observe attunement between mum and baby and to feed back positively to mum.

"If we are working on parental values we will spend time looking at a family tree and noting any warm and positive relationships, as well as any difficult ones. We will also do a timeline of significant events to see what mum's own experience of being parented looked like. This is sometimes hard

for the parent as they begin to see that they did not have the love and care they needed as an infant. We could then explore what kind of parent they think they

are and want to be, what values they hold and how they will instil these values into their baby as it grows.

"As mindful parenting is a core component of PUP we may do some meditation to help mum quieten her mind of negative internal chatter and to be able to be present and focused with her baby. We usually end the session after two hours."

By 12.30pm Sue is usually driving back to the office to catch up on phone calls and emails before lunch.

In the afternoon she may attend progress meetings with parents and social workers,

or give a promotional presentation about PUP.

At 4.30pm she'll be trying to make sure her admin is up to date.

"This is a crucial part of my day as there is a lot of admin and it's important it's completed to safeguard the child," she says. "It also helps me round the day off and let go of any reflections that I may have on a particularly difficult situation. At 5pm I leave the office and often go to a running group, pilates, Spanish class or just relax at home."

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