



A Better Start case study



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Survivor Mums Companion



A Better Start

A Better Start is funded by the Big Lottery Fund using National Lottery funding. It is a ten-year programme focused on developing and testing new approaches to promoting Early Childhood Development (ECD). The A Better Start partnerships have developed locally tailored strategies to promote ECD, focusing on three key child development outcomes: diet and nutrition, social and emotional development, and speech, language and communication

The Survivor Mums' Companion aims to address the specific needs of pregnant women who have a history of childhood trauma and are experiencing trauma-specific symptoms. It is a theory-based, psycho-educational self-help programme. The Survivor Mums' Companion is being delivered in the Better Start area of Blackpool.

A Better Start early childhood development outcome the service aims to improve is **social and emotional development**.



What are the key aims of the service?

The Survivor Mums' Companion aims to raise awareness of, and improve the management of trauma symptoms in pregnancy, during birth and the early weeks of parenting. This includes:

- improving emotion regulation (calming intense emotions, reducing anger expression and managing dissociative tendencies);
- improving interpersonal reactivity (managing interpersonal care and interpersonal relationships with midwives, family and friends);

learning new skills to manage trauma-related symptoms (intrusive re-experiencing, arousal reactions, intrusive thoughts and avoidance reactions).

Who is the service for?

The service is for women in their second trimester of pregnancy who have a history of child maltreatment or abuse, and who identify as experiencing trauma-specific symptoms.

What is the evidence base for the service?

The Survivor Mums' Companion was developed at the University of Michigan by Professor Julia Seng and Dr Mickey Sperlich, and has undergone initial pilot trials both in the US and Australia.

Results from a pilot study of the Survivor Mums' Companion in the US showed small to moderate improvements in anger expression, interpersonal reactivity and PTSD symptom management from pre to post intervention scores.

Seng, J.S., Sperlich, M., Rowe, H., Cameron, H., Harries, A., Rauch, S.A.M., & Bell, A.A. (2011). The Survivor Mom's Companion: Open pilot of a posttraumatic stress specific psychoeducation program for pregnant survivors of childhood maltreatment and sexual trauma. *International Journal of Childbirth*, 1, 2, 111-121.

The Australian study found small to moderate non-significant improvements in rating of labour experience, postnatal mental health and mother-infant bonding, and significant improvements in the perception of the quality of care received in labour and lower dissociation in labour.

Rowe, H., Sperlich, M., Cameron, H., & Seng, J. (2014) A quasi-experimental outcomes analysis of a Psychoeducation intervention for pregnant women with abuse-related post-traumatic stress. *Journal of Obstetric, Gynecologic and Neonatal Nursing*. 43, 3, 282-293.

To date no research has considered long-term outcomes of participating in the Survivor Mums' Companion on both mother and child.

How is the service run?

Women self-identify for this service using materials provided by their Baby Steps¹ worker, which supports them to recognise their feelings and know that help is available.

The complete Survivor Mums' Companion programme consists of four core and six supplementary self-study modules each containing two components. Women initially work independently, reading case studies and undertaking a number of third-person style exercises. They then complete one module and associated workbook per week. After each module, there is a 30 minute tutoring session with a trained practitioner which can take place over the phone or in person. Following an assessment by the practitioner of pregnancy-specific wellbeing, women then select the aspects of the module they most want to focus on in the session. The aims of the session are to clarify learning, reinforce skills and provide emotional support.

During the session, ratings of Subjective Units of Distress/Disturbance and PTSD symptom scores are recorded. These are used to inform choices regarding subsequent session plans and whether a further referral is needed. After the session, women can self-assess their learning using the checklist at the end of each module.

Core content of the service

The Survivor Mums' Companion consists of four core and six supplementary modules:

The first four modules are 'core' and provide an overview of how trauma and PTSD affect pregnancy and early motherhood:

1. Introduction to trauma and childbearing
2. Posttraumatic Stress Reactions & PTSD
3. Soothing intensive emotions
4. Improving interpersonal connecting

The six supplementary modules provide information on perinatal topics, reinforcing the previous skills with additional practice:

5. Meeting your needs during and after pregnancy
6. Preparing for labour and birth
7. Families of origin & social support
8. Worries about parenting

¹ Link to Baby Steps case study

9. Postpartum needs
10. Attachment and posttraumatic growth.

The modules have been redesigned by Blackpool Better Start in conjunction with the programme developers to reduce the required literacy levels and to ensure the content is reflective of the UK healthcare context.

How is the service being evaluated?

As Survivor Mums Companion has not been previously trialled in the UK, a pilot study with a small number of women (n=15) was designed to test the suitability of the programme. The formative evaluation of this pilot is using semi-structured, face to face interviews to gain an understanding of how women in Blackpool perceive the Survivor Mums Companion. The interviews focus on five main areas:

- the accessibility of the referral pathway for women to participate in Survivor Mums Companion;
- the feasibility and appropriateness of the introductory ‘fitting room’ style assessment leaflet as a part of the fully informed consent process;
- assessing the new presentation of the Survivor Mums Companion module materials which have been altered to suit the UK context;
- perceptions of the tutors, the frequency of contact, level of communication, desired support and potential barriers to participation; and
- the volume of measures and ease/time taken to complete them will be considered.

The evaluation will also include semi-structured face to face interviews with tutors, covering similar topics to the interviews with women. A small focus group with Baby Steps practitioners will assess the ease and suitability of the referral pathway.

Further information

<https://www.blackpoolbetterstart.org.uk/news/survivor-mums-companion/>

Blackpool Better Start

“It has been good to realise that I’m not on my own feeling and behaving the way I do, and that there’s a reason for it”. **Mother, Blackpool**

“Working with the manual has been helpful to keep the parent focussed and in the way that each session builds on the previous and continues the learning.”

Practitioner, Blackpool

“The parents I have worked with have appreciated the opportunity to talk to someone who doesn’t need to know all their history and just accepts them where they are now.” **Practitioner, Blackpool**



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For more information about A Better Start
abetterstart@biglotteryfund.org.uk
#abetterstart