



# Armbands in deep water

## **A summary of research into Home-Start's home-visiting volunteers**

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Funded by Nationwide Foundation  
Published to mark 2005 Year of the Volunteer

“She was the armbands in deep water. She was very reassuring emotionally and would sit and talk to me if I wanted to talk. And she gave me what I call hands-free time.”

**A mum from Home-Start Sutton Coldfield, England talking about her Home-Start volunteer.**

Home-Start is a voluntary organisation. It has been since the very beginning in 1973.

The organisation is firmly based on the ethic of choice. Volunteers choose to work with Home-Start, for as long as they wish. The families themselves have the genuine choice about whether or not they wish to accept a Home-Start volunteer into their home.

Volunteers share their humanity and their knowledge, as an informal source of information, until the parents are coping and even enjoying life again. They lend their strengths, until a family finds its own.

Since the first Volunteer Preparation Course in 1994 Home-Start has trained 40,000 volunteers to visit and support families in their own homes.

Each year from 2001 to 2005, the home-visiting volunteer numbers in Home-Start have increased by nearly 10%.

**“How humble I feel to be allowed to do this knowing that they do not feel threatened by me – because I am a parent giving another parent a helping hand and am doing this because they want me to be there.”**

Carmel, a volunteer from Home-Start Antrim, Northern Ireland



# “It was nice to do something for someone for nothing”

The words of a past Home-Start volunteer sound so simple... and so obvious.

But volunteering with Home-Start – be it ‘on the front line’ as a home visitor or behind the scenes as a scheme trustee – can be anything but simple, and the volunteers’ motives anything but obvious.

In Home-Start we have a very clear sense of what makes a volunteer tick. Maggie Rowlands, Home-Start’s Director of Training says: “It’s being very clear about what we do, being thorough about how we train people, and what we can offer them.”

Volunteers come to Home-Start because we link into what they have to offer:

- **‘I’ve been there and I know what it’s like. I wouldn’t have survived, myself without the help of my sister/mum/ Home-Start volunteer’.**
- **‘I’ve got space in my life, I want to do something worthwhile.’**
- **‘It’ll look good on my CV,’** ...which is fine. It’s sometimes the first rung on the ladder of a whole new life.

But we wanted to discover not just volunteers’ motives for wanting to join us, but also their needs in the ever-changing, ever-challenging and ever-complex world of the family today. That’s why we commissioned an in-depth study into the hows and whys of volunteering for Home-Start.

“Since I found out about Home-Start everything has changed. It’s amazing that **just one person** can wake you up and say ‘you can do this’. I can and I’ve done it.”

A mum from Home-Start  
Cymorth Ceredigion, Wales

“The best thing about Mandy is that she gave me the kind of **help and support** that I know my family would give me if they were close.”

A mum from Home-Start Edinburgh South Central, Scotland.

The study, *Home-Visiting Volunteers, Past and Present*, surveyed 500 former and 1,000 current Home-Start volunteers who had experience of helping families both across the United Kingdom and abroad through the charity’s British Forces work in Germany and Cyprus.

As might be expected from such a comprehensive and far-reaching study, the results were wide-ranging. But one factor shone through for both the past and present volunteers – nearly all of them approved of their experiences with Home-Start.

An amazing 97 per cent of former volunteers had taken real positives from their time with us. Their comments ranged from the purely altruistic:

**“Giving your time is so worthwhile – there’s more to life than money.”**

To the rather more calculated:

**“I believe I gained as much from being a volunteer as ‘my’ family.”**

To the mutual benefits that Home-Start’s work can offer:

**“As I supported families, I grew from being a victim of domestic violence to someone in control of her life. I’m still in contact with my first family – I’m so proud of her and of me!”**

Of the current volunteers, 98 per cent were enthusiastic about the work they did:

**“Roller coaster of experience – I’ve gained as much as I’ve given”**

**“I’m continually amazed at what I learn, especially about myself”**

**“Makes you realise how lucky you are”**

On the face of it at least, our volunteers are getting serious satisfaction and fulfilment from the work they are doing.

Or, as Maggie Rowlands puts it:

**“It’s an excellent example of how the individuals and the training come together and have benefits far wider than anyone outside the voluntary sector would expect.”**

Then again, if volunteers weren’t enjoying such benefits, we (and they) wouldn’t be providing the service that has defined us as an organisation since we were founded.

So we start from a positive – our work is valued and our volunteers find value.

But no organisation, however necessary and however laudable, can expect such success to continue if it stands still – the world, after all, never stops turning and family life has perhaps changed and evolved more dramatically in the last 20 years than in the previous 20 centuries.

So to find new solutions to ever-changing challenges, we wanted to understand not only why people volunteered for Home-Start, but also who they were, how long they stayed with us, what they gained from their time and training with us, why they eventually decided to leave and what they moved on to do.

And what did we discover? Well,

- that investment matters – by giving volunteers a clear role, excellent training and good support you get even more back in terms of quality and long term commitment.
- that volunteering works really well when organisations are, like Home-Start, able to recognise the individual skills, experience and goals of their volunteers.
- that volunteers feel most valued when their time is used in a way which makes a real difference to someone else’s life.
- that volunteers bring enthusiasm and commitment to their work. For Home-Start this makes our relationship with families and the work of our schemes more effective.
- and that volunteering leaves a legacy – in our case for the families and children, but also for the volunteers who take forward so much from their experience.

“What works for families is the genuine and spontaneous friendship offered by volunteers which if too closely analysed could, rather like the roots of a plant taken from the soil, wither and die.”

**Professor Brian Waller,  
Chief Executive Home-Start,  
1998-2004**

# Age and gender

## Age

The average age of the ‘typical’ volunteer is not surprising when you consider the skills, parenting experience and spare time required to work for Home-Start. Of the 1,000 current volunteers surveyed, 61.9 per cent were aged 46 or above, and 33.9 per cent of those were over 55. The other main age groups – running from 26 to 45 years old – were also very well represented, making up 37.2 per cent of the overall figure. As an aside, a decidedly coy 0.2 per cent of those surveyed decided against revealing their age at all!

## Gender

Again, it is perhaps unsurprising that 96 per cent of volunteers surveyed were women. But society is changing and the make-up of a family’s primary carer is slowly changing with it. Home-Start is aware of this, according to Sue Everitt, Director Policy, Planning and Practice:

**“I think it’s a real challenge for Home-Start. If you look at the number of stay at home fathers, there are undoubtedly more today than 25 years ago. But we couldn’t say that there has been the same proportional increase in male volunteers.**

**“It’s an area we do need to consider, but in some respects it’s the person, their skills and experiences, that you are looking to match to a family rather than their gender.”**

# Length of service

The majority of volunteers – 46.5 per cent – stay with Home-Start between one and five years, while just over a tenth of all those surveyed had up to ten years' service with us. These figures are especially impressive as the statistics do not take into account the fact that, due to a rapid recent expansion, many volunteers are involved with new Home-Start schemes that have been running for a relatively short space of time.

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“The support offered by Home-Start is invaluable as it is offered in a way that is so acceptable; not by a professional who professes to know all the answers but by a volunteer, **another parent who can empathise.**”

**Cherie Booth, QC, Patron Home-Start Islington**

# The benefits of volunteering

“Home-Start is voluntary **work on your own terms.**

It’s good to be yourself and still know you are helping out a family.”

**Sandra, early volunteer.**

For 69.4 per cent of current volunteers, Home-Start was not their first volunteering experience, with more than half having offered to help out with school activities and many more volunteering at local churches, youth work schemes and charity shops.

So why did they volunteer with Home-Start? 18.7 per cent wanted to use the skills they had developed and share the experience they had gained. A further 16 per cent simply wanted to help others, 13.1 per cent wanted to do something worthwhile or give something back and 11.3 per cent wanted to work with children. 10.8 per cent had had personal experience of needing support, but only 1.8 per cent of volunteers had previously been supported by Home-Start.

Nearly all the reasons given were altruistic ones, but 5.4 per cent ‘needed something for me’ and 4 per cent wanted to gain experience for work or college.

And did they find volunteering beneficial? A resounding yes!

Nearly 70 per cent claimed it gave them a sense of purpose, 61.3 per cent benefited from meeting new people, 60.9 per cent felt valued and 58.2 per cent felt volunteering helped them learn more about life. Just over a quarter found volunteering looked great on their CV, 41 per cent said their confidence had increased and 30.7 per cent had their self-esteem boosted.

# Training and support

The Home-Start Preparation Course left 92 per cent of volunteers feeling fully prepared and 97.7 per cent felt fully supported by the organisation.

On-going training and support was judged to be very useful by 51.4 per cent of these current volunteers and quite useful by a further 25.4 per cent.

Perhaps the clearest indication of the success of our Preparation Course came from the extremes – 20 people wanted the course to be longer, four said it was too long. Six wanted more speakers, two wanted less. Everyone in the middle, presumably, was happy enough with their lot! Although a sizeable group of 88 people said that nothing could fully prepare you for Home-Start volunteering, they still thought the course did this as well as it could.

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“The most important resources we have are well trained and committed ... volunteers. I spent years in Childline working with volunteers. I know how valuable they are. I know what skills they bring. And we professionals have had some of that thing rubbed out of us that they bring,  
**that enthusiasm,  
that light, that care.”**

**Baroness Valerie Howarth of Breckland OBE. First and founding chief executive of Childline, speaking at Home-Start's 2005 Convention.**

# Our volunteers' goals

33.1 per cent of volunteers came into Home-Start with future goals.

Of these:

- 51.9 per cent wanted to broaden their experiences
- 44.1 per cent wanted to gain experience for a future career
- 38.4 per cent were looking for personal development
- 21 per cent wanted to become more involved with Home-Start

Will they achieve these goals? Some will, some won't.

But the overwhelming sense of satisfaction and purpose – and sometimes even life-changing moments – that our volunteers have experienced since joining Home-Start shines through even the driest of the statistics in our study.

And such feelings are best described by the volunteers themselves:

**“Every budding professional should have voluntary experience – it has certainly enhanced my career”**

**“It has been, and continues to be, a positive influence within my life, both personally and professionally”**

**“Home-Start made me realise how hard life can be at times – and how greatly a little support can help. It recognises the struggle that some people face every day where others tend to concentrate on major issues. It's the little things that count”**

**“I'm proud to tell people that I worked for Home-Start”**

# The future's bright

To allow volunteers to continue to be proud of home-visiting for us, we realise that we must maintain our quality of service with training, recognition and even accreditation of the volunteers' work – all things that are invisible to the outside world, even to the families we support. But they are key to the success of our work now and in the future.

And that's just what we are doing through:

- Our highly regarded Quality Assurance system: which has been redesigned, modernised, and relaunched in 2005. The system's 16 new standards relate not only to our direct support for families, but to every aspect of Home-Start's work that underpins our support for families. Everything from governance, planning, equal opportunities, and managing staff and volunteers to confidentiality, monitoring our support for families and promoting children's welfare will be subject to the high standards to which everyone in Home-Start aspires.
- A new volunteers preparation course, also launched in 2005. Since Home-Start's Volunteer Preparation Course Guide was first used by schemes back in 1994 more than 40,000 volunteers have been trained to support families. Ten years on we have incorporated a decade of collective wisdom in our newly revamped course and are confident it will see us through to the year 2014.
- Moving towards formal accreditation of the volunteers' training. From September 2005 a pilot group of schemes will test a new form of accreditation. Volunteers who want to get formal recognition for their training and new skills will be able to use a newly set up link with the Open College Network. From 2006 this choice will be available across the whole of the UK.

"I have found  
**a lifelong  
friend** in my  
volunteer, my  
husband has a  
happier wife and my  
children have a  
contented mother."

**A mum from Home-Start  
Newry, Northern Ireland.**

Home-Start is a shining example of an organisation where not only do the volunteers 'do' the work, the fact that they are volunteers is what makes the charity work. We have more than 11,000 home-visiting volunteers, each rooted in their local community and supporting local families. And our constant reflection on how the organisation can support their work, and our ability to be flexible and adjust to our volunteers' needs is what we think makes them so effective.

We must embrace modern techniques and still retain our original aims. Never losing sight of the essence of Home-Start: the simple offer of friendship from one parent to another, that makes it so special. The offer of help in a family's home that makes it unique. And what our families are most grateful for is that it is the parents who get the attention of the volunteer, and their whole families that thrive as a result.

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"I believe that the great strength of voluntary action is your capacity for the individual, the unique rather than the impersonal or standardised approach. And voluntary action, while often conducted through national organisations, is characteristically, local; volunteers and local community workers working on the ground, at the coal face, at the heart of communities, far better positioned than ever a government official could be, both to see a problem and to define effective action.

**It's about being there."**

**Gordon Brown, Chancellor of the Exchequer,  
speaking at National Council for Voluntary Organisation's  
Annual Conference in 2004.**

# When a child tells you he loves you

*Philippa, a volunteer. Home-Start North Down*

I chose to give up my career in 1990 on the birth of my first child. Subsequently I spent eleven years as a full time parent to three children. I largely enjoyed this time. As any parent knows, caring for children is extremely rewarding, but it can also be very demanding, often lonely and at times downright boring!

Eventually, as my children grew older, I became aware that parenting on its own was not enough to make me feel completely fulfilled as a person. I felt it was time to put some feelers out into the 'real' world, but I lacked the experience and the confidence to apply for employment. I wanted to do something that would not only be useful to others, but also help me regain my self-confidence and feel valuable as a member of society.

Home-Start appealed to me more than other organisations because it is a charity devoted to the family. I felt I had a great deal of experience in this and therefore something to offer.

I have no female relatives living in this country and in the past I have suffered from post-natal depression. There were times, particularly when my two older

children were smaller, that I longed for both practical and emotional support. I felt that if I could be of help to just one other person in a similar position then it was well worth doing.

It was with some trepidation that I attended the Home-Start volunteer training course. I immediately felt at ease as, under the guidelines of our Home-Start co-ordinator, we bounced ideas of one another and questioned our values and attitudes. At the end of the nine week course, I not only felt ready to support my first family, but I had also made some good friends.

When I met my first family, I quickly warmed to both the mother and the children. Naomi, our Home-Start Organiser, appears to have an uncanny knack of matching the right volunteer with the right family. Although I was initially there to give practical help, it soon became apparent that the mother needed emotional support as well.

It took some months for her to talk about this, but when she finally did, it really felt like a breakthrough. Not only the mother and I became friends, but also as our youngest children are similar in age, so did our families.

*continued...*

I visited this family for two and a half years before they felt they no longer needed a Home-Start volunteer. We plan to keep in touch. Naomi has just recently placed me with my second family.

As a Home-Start volunteer, I never feel isolated. I feel as though I am part of a team and know that if I encounter any difficulties I can contact my Home-Start Organiser at any time for support. There are also monthly support meetings where we have the opportunity to meet with other volunteers and receive regular training. I have found being a volunteer for Home-Start an extremely positive experience.

The most obvious reward is the sense of helping people. Being a volunteer can occasionally be emotionally draining, but there are also poignant moments; for example when a child in your Home-Start family tells you he loves you, or the mother says she doesn't know how she would manage without you, it feels wonderful. It is a privilege to have the opportunity to build a relationship with a family and watch that relationship develop, and although there can be a feeling of sadness when you leave a family who no longer need you, the sense of achievement is second to none.

Another plus point has been the social aspect of Home-Start. I have thoroughly enjoyed meeting other volunteers and making friends. I have also gained enormously from the training course such as 'First Aid for Children' and 'The Importance of Play'. These have been valuable to me not only in my role as Home-Start volunteer, but also in my role as parent.

On a more personal level, Home-Start was something of a springboard for me. My experience as a volunteer has helped me to feel as though I do have something to offer to society and has given me the self-confidence I needed to take another step and complete a computer course. This in turn increased my confidence to the extent that I felt able to seek employment, something that would have been unthinkable to me four years ago! I believe that the excellent training I received from Home-Start helped me to achieve this goal and I now work as a part-time Community Care Worker for a local charity. This allows me to feel fulfilled and at the same time continue to be at home for my children and carry on as a volunteer for Home-Start.

*Written for the Changing Lives in Northern Ireland book, launched in Belfast on 26 May 2005.*



Since Home-Start began 32 years ago volunteers, who are parents themselves, have helped more than 250,000 families and 500,000 children in the UK and with British Forces in Germany and Cyprus.

As we publish this report in 2005, Home-Start is the leading family support charity in the UK. It recruits and trains volunteers to support parents with children under five years old. In 2003/4 we supported 29,588 families and 63,917 children across the UK. More than 11,000 of our volunteers visited families in their own homes.

For your nearest Home-Start scheme, to volunteer, or to donate, phone free on **08000 68 63 68** or log on to **<http://www.home-start.org.uk>**.



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