

SPEAK

Picture the scene. On one side there are Xbox gamers and iPad players, on the other high in the air above an Olympic sized trampoline someone laughs with delight while onlookers cheer. Around the edges mums and dads, grandparents and friends may be having a drink whilst sharing their news, a funny story perhaps, or marvelling at the latest developments in the world in general and their lives in particular.

It is Sunday. A Sunday in Huyton, and this is Family Time.

Roughly 10 years ago, a group of proactive parents took the initiative to create a very particular kind of time and space. In their experience there were a range of services for parents and carers of disabled children but these had a tendency to centre on providing activities for the children and respite for others. What these parents wanted was a time and space to come together with all the children and enjoy one another's company.

It took a while but now Family Time is just one of a number of high quality initiatives run by SPEAK, a Registered Charity and Company Limited by Guarantee that is 100% parent/carer led and managed. Here are some highlights:

- There are between 350 and 400 families registered as members at any one time
- Every Sunday 30-45 children have fun at Family Time
- In six years the Christmas Party has grown so much that it now runs twice each December attracting around 200 people each night
- SPEAK operates the Knowsley Parent Carer Forum with a strong relationship with the Council and under an annual grant from the Department for Education

But SPEAK isn't about facts or figures: SPEAK is about living.

About five years ago, the parents who founded the original group stepped back as their children were growing up and becoming adults.

Enter Michelle, Jacqueline, Nikki and Tammy.

"Family Time changed my families' life" she will tell you "and because it meant so much to us, I had to help to carry it forward" and Michele has done so much more than 'help'. Together with a close knit group of fellow volunteers, Michele has grown SPEAK significantly. Families hear about SPEAK from hand delivered newsletters, via Facebook and word of mouth but also are referred by educational psychologists, specialist staff in local schools, even health professionals at Alder Hey Children's Hospital.

SPEAK is at a size and stage of development where continuing to operate purely on volunteers is unlikely to be sustainable. No one wants to turn families away but with limited capacity what is the alternative? Those children who have been coming for 5-10 years are maturing into young people with some major choices to make: both they and their families are ready to progress socially but with limited capacity what can SPEAK do?

Making the transition from wholly volunteer organised to employing staff is a step which creates demands for more than simply money. SPEAK highly values empathy and equal treatment of all individuals: sustaining that culture for the future will be key. KCVS will do what it can to equip Michele and her colleagues with constructive skills, knowledge and connections for the road ahead. What could you do?

One final thing: if you are contemplating popping in on Family Time for a quick Xbox session be warned it's no walk in the park you'll encounter some pretty inspiring players!