



Befriending in PRISM

What were the key messages?

Befriending in PRISM was about finding ways to increase the chances that women with young babies would make friends:

- through ‘places’ for meeting
- through activities offering the opportunity to meet people
- through a facilitator (eg maternal and child health nurse)
- through other community groups providing mutual or reciprocal linkages.

Befriending was ...

- **not** about a different way of setting up groups (though some groups happened)
- **not** about preventing child abuse
- **not** about better parenting
- **not** a ‘volunteer’ scheme
- **not** about education or counselling
- **not** aiming to target ‘high-risk’ women
- **not** about training mothers or other community members as helpers.

Befriending in PRISM was conceived as something for all recent mothers. It was a universal strategy consistent with the view that *all* mothers need support and friendship. Befriending promoted time out for mothers and the importance of mothers looking after their own health and well-being. Connecting mothers so they could enjoy something (an activity, time, relaxation) together was thus central to the notion of befriending in PRISM.

Befriending – a complex, evolving strategy

The concept of a befriending scheme included in the original funding application for PRISM underwent considerable modification during the course of PRISM. It became clear quite early in the project that a range of different ‘schemes’ or opportunities was likely to be necessary to meet women’s different needs and the different ways in which friendships might form and be maintained.

We all need friends. Friendships develop for all sorts of reasons. Chance often plays a big role. Friendships cannot be readily ‘engineered’ by others, which is perhaps why befriending was one of the most challenging strategies to implement in PRISM. So the idea of initiating, facilitating or promoting a variety of small-scale, largely informal befriending opportunities emerged. This revised concept of befriending also involved acknowledging that the value of two women meeting in a maternal and child health centre waiting room and going for a walk together might be greater than fifty women coming to a session with a guest speaker and all going home again afterwards without meeting anyone. The latter may however, feel more ‘successful’ to the program initiator.

Befriending was the strategy that had also raised most initial concern about feasibility amongst maternal and child health nurses and other members of Steering Committees – though there was almost universal agreement about the need to break down isolation amongst recent mothers. In the first year of PRISM, befriending initiatives developed slowly as Steering

Committees, Maternal and Child Health Nurses, Community Development Officers (CDOs) and the research team grappled with how universal, rather than targeted, opportunities for befriending could most appropriately be provided in each area. Local mothers were consulted, both through steering committees, specially organised meetings with mothers, and via small local surveys. Ideas were tried out; some appeared to work and others did not!

By midway into the second year of PRISM implementation, befriending had become highly valued by community stakeholders as a key element of the project. The findings of the Communities' Feedback Survey conducted in July 2000, demonstrated that provision of 'increased opportunities for mothers to meet and do things they enjoy with other mothers' was agreed by 90% of respondents to have been achieved in their area, and over 80% of mothers and maternal and child health nurses surveyed thought it was important that such befriending opportunities for mothers be maintained.

Knowing whether this range of initiatives resulted in supportive friendships for women poses a number of difficulties. First many befriending initiatives did not involve large numbers of women and as noted above, this may initially feel less 'successful' than a well-attended health promotion event. Yet clearly this is not what befriending was about. Second, befriending opportunities are just that, opportunities. Friendships born via befriending initiatives may or may not have become known to those who provided the opportunities for women to meet. A café that offers a coffee time for mothers with babies to meet may find that some weeks no-one comes; or that different women come every week; or some come once, but never return. Whether the provision of this opportunity for women to meet is really successful in enhancing recent mothers' social networks is not a question that can be answered by counting the numbers of women who attend or how often they do so.

In PRISM we wanted to find out if befriending opportunities provided in the intervention areas made a difference to women's friendships and sense of connectedness. This is being assessed in the evaluation by questions relating to friendships and social contacts included in the health outcomes' survey mailed to all women giving birth in both intervention and comparison areas over an eighteen-month period. As these findings become available during 2003, they will be summarised on the PRISM website.

PRISM befriending opportunities: what happened?

As will have become obvious, befriending in PRISM developed not as a single entity, but a range of strategies. Invariably, lots of ideas were discussed by Steering Committees. Some were implemented and maintained. Lots of sharing of ideas between areas occurred. Some strategies took off in some areas and not in others. Befriending initiatives were facilitated by a whole range of people and organisations, including: PRISM community development officers, maternal and child health nurses, staff in community houses, libraries, community health services and local businesses such as cafes, cinemas and leisure centres.

Below, descriptions of the types of befriending opportunities provided for recent mothers are outlined, and this is followed by a collection of materials illustrating how some of these were implemented and promoted in the eight PRISM intervention communities during the project.

‘Mothers walking together’ - ‘Pram walks’ - ‘Walk and talk’ - ‘Mothers on the Move’

Setting up regular times and places to meet for mothers to take part in informal walks together, in twos and threes, (or sometimes larger trains of mothers and prams!) became a popular befriending strategy in several areas. Walks were often facilitated by a local mother/contact person, started at the maternal and child health centre, neighbourhood house or community health centre, and often finished with a cuppa together. When it rained, sometimes the cuppa became the focus!

PRISM Cafés

In conjunction with the PRISM voucher scheme in most areas, local cafes and bakeries also offered a special time each week when they invited mothers (and their babies, prams and toys) to join other mothers to meet and talk over morning or afternoon tea. These times were advertised in the PRISM locality guides given to all mothers after they had their baby, and in the local PRISM newsletters for mothers.

Mothers’ drop-in times

Advertised times for mothers to ‘drop-in’ for a chat and coffee occurred in a variety of locations: at MCH Centres, neighbourhood houses, churches, community health centres and specialised parenting centres. Often these worked best initially when someone was there to facilitate by getting the kettle on, or talk with the first person to arrive.

Maternal and child health nurses’ one-to-one befriending initiatives

Putting mothers in touch with other mothers on a one-to-one basis is something maternal and child health nurses have done for many years: sometimes it might be mothers who live in the same street, but have never met; perhaps for mothers with similar language backgrounds who might find it hard to meet people if their English skills are poor; at other times nurses have facilitated mothers meeting if they both have a child with a similar health problem or disability; or if they have just moved to the areas and are feeling lonely. All these things also happened in PRISM areas, though perhaps these one-to-one offers of befriending occurred with a heightened sense of the potential value of putting mothers in touch with each other as a universal strategy, rather than one targeted to mothers seen as ‘in need’. Some maternal and child health nurses took the initiative to schedule mothers’ appointment times one after the other, or to organise a time with two mothers to meet at the Centre.

‘Babes in Arms’ – ‘Cry baby’-‘Nursery time’ – baby friendly cinema sessions

At the time PRISM commenced in local communities in 1999, a small number of metropolitan cinemas had initiated film sessions during the day, designed for mothers (and fathers) who wanted to get out and see a film with their babies in tow. In fact none of the PRISM intervention areas had such sessions occurring locally at the start of PRISM, so the idea of encouraging the local cinema to initiate them as a befriending strategy for mothers as part of PRISM was eagerly taken up by CDOs. Cinemas sometimes also offered mothers a free voucher to attend a ‘babes-in-arms’ session via the PRISM voucher scheme.

Mothers' picnics - beach club - outings

In a number of PRISM communities the idea of mothers getting together to enjoy local physical attractions – the beach, a local park or reserve, a local historical attraction or the town lake – gave rise to mothers' picnics, barbecues, a 'beach club' and outings for mothers and babies. These were very informal affairs, sometimes occurring on a regular basis, once a week or once a month, and sometimes as special events or outings. Outdoor activities being rather weather dependent, some of these were definitely strategies for the milder months!

Mothers' Expos – Mothers' 'pampering' days - Workshops for mothers

In tune with PRISM messages about mothers being supported to care for their own health and to have time out to do enjoyable things for themselves, as well as have opportunities to meet others, several areas organised Mothers' Expos or 'pampering' days, where women were invited to come along and find out about local services, enjoy a massage, or take part in a relaxation workshop or other activities. Babies were welcomed and childcare was also usually available, depending on mothers' wishes.

Encouragement of joint PRISM voucher use: something enjoyable with another mother

One way in which maternal and child health nurses promoted opportunities for mothers to get to know one another was by promoting 'joint' voucher use. That is, nurses might suggest to mothers in a first time mothers' group that they use one of their PRISM vouchers together –go to a babes-in-arms cinema session; do a discounted aqua class at the local swimming pool with another member or members of the group, or use their PRISM café vouchers.

Library mother and baby sessions and mothers reading together

Libraries are often places full of mothers and children. Some local libraries started to offer not just children's story times, but also scheduled mother and baby sessions with songs and nursery rhymes for the babies and a time to chat over a cup of tea afterwards for the mothers. Other sessions involved talks on topics like: relaxation for mothers or myths about parenting. In one PRISM area promoting mothers reading together was seen as a potential befriending strategy, with the idea of establishing book groups for interested mothers.

Sporting and physical activities for mothers

A whole range of befriending opportunities developed around sporting and physical activities designed specifically to meet mothers' needs in relation to caring for babies and small children. These included: social tennis for mothers, mums' skate mornings, postnatal exercise classes, indoor bowling, swimming and aqua classes for mothers and babies and tae boxing.

Mothers' home mentor scheme

Mostly, formal befriending schemes were not established in PRISM. In one rural area however, the development of a Home mentor program for mothers was explored with the local community health service, building on a model developed previously for people with psychiatric disabilities. The idea was to train volunteers to provide recognition, a listening ear

and nurturing practical support to local mothers experiencing difficulties. The model for the program was developed and funding sought for a program co-ordinator, with the program getting underway in 2001.

Internet and computer training for mothers

Something that was popular in one rural community was internet training for mothers: mothers online. Getting together for the local training meant meeting other mothers and then networking and chatting online proved positive for mothers in areas 'out of town'. Another area organised computer training for mothers involved in production of the local mothers' newsletter.

Mothers' involvement in PRISM and advocacy for mothers

Involvement of recent mothers in all local PRISM steering committees and working groups was an important befriending strategy in itself, something that involved mothers frequently commented on during the project. Coming together to work on PRISM newsletters, to facilitate activities for other mothers or to lobby council for fenced playgrounds and baby change facilities, meant friendships grew in the process. Active mothers' advocacy groups - 'Mothers in Action' also formed in some areas:

PRISM befriending strategies: local examples from the smorgasbord of opportunities for mothers

The following pages also illustrate – via local newsletter items, flyers and press coverage – just some of the variety of befriending initiatives that took place in the eight PRISM intervention areas in 1999 and 2000.