**Volunteer to be happy**

I love my Kindle, I read every night, a few pages before my eyelids start to get heavy and I fall asleep. I like real stories and I'm currently reading Lion: A Long Way Home, the book behind the Oscar nominated film of the same title. Recently my partner started reading a book called **10 Keys to Happier Living** by Vanessa King, a book about maximizing positive feelings through our own actions. Not something I'd usually read but I was intrigued and flicked through the contents page. I was immediately drawn to Chapter 1 ‘Giving’, which talks about how increasing the happiness of those around us does us good. Giving connects us to others, creating stronger communities and helping to build a happier society for everyone. And it's not all about money - we can also give our time, ideas and our energy.

This really resonated with me as in my spare time, when I'm not busy with my day job, I am a trustee for **Home-Start** in **Harwich**.  Having worked in a variety of roles supporting children and their families including as an early years teacher, when I was approached to become involved it was an easy decision and I said yes! I already knew of the value of the work that **Home-Start** has been undertaking in Harwich for over 20 years.

I am sure we can all think of times when have been in need of a friend; an empathetic ear or just an extra pair of hands. For the majority of us this is readily available through our own support networks but for some unfortunately this is not the case. This is where **Home-Start** and their team of able volunteers can help. Families struggling with a range of issues from bereavement to isolation and physical health problems, receive the support of a volunteer who will spend around 2 hours a week in a family’s home supporting them in the ways they need.

As a new trustee I was keen to find out about the day to day role of the volunteers who freely give of their time and energy to help families who are facing challenges.

One volunteer explained how she is currently supporting a family in a number of ways. These include taking the family to the **Home-Start** group that runs weekly at St Nicholas Hall in Harwich and then taking another child to school. As a volunteer she offers both friendship and practical support. Often it is just ‘an extra pair of hands’ that is required – perhaps holding a baby while the washing is hung out.

It can seem a bit daunting when you consider a volunteering role but all those I spoke with were keen to stress that you really can fit the support you offer around your own commitments. Those I spoke to were currently supporting one family which was a time commitment of 2-3 hours per week.

What came through loud and clear was that the main attributes needed are to be a ***good listener***, be ***non-judgmental*** and to ***understand*** that bringing up a family is not an easy task. While some of the volunteers I spoke with had a professional background working with families, this is absolutely not necessary. Others explained how the skills and experiences they have gained bringing up their own families can be passed on to benefit others.

The volunteers I spoke with were all keen to express how well supported they are by **Home-Start**. All the volunteers receive a comprehensive induction and preparation training before they meet their first family. Ongoing support is also offered and regular training opportunities are on offer for those that are interested e.g. courses that aim to raise awareness of stress and depression.

**What are the benefits for you?**

Well these are very much as the book I referred to described but I will tell you in the words of the volunteers I spoke to. One volunteer explained how getting involved keeps her active and how she enjoys the contact with people and the benefits this brings. For others volunteering has helped them to build up a network in their own area and gain valuable experience of working with families at the same time. A common theme was the rewards gained from seeing families make progress and in some instances move onto become volunteers themselves.

Through these conversations I have got a sense of the real enthusiasm and passion that these volunteers have for their role and how just a little regular support can make a huge difference to a family and prevent a situation from becoming worse.

Giving to others doesn't have to cost money and it can be as little or as much time as you can spare but I guarantee you the rewards will be incredible.

As one volunteer so succinctly summed it up…’I love every minute’

If you would like to find out more about becoming a Home-Start volunteer please contact info@homestartharwich.org.uk or call 01255556230

Further information can also be found at [www.home-start.org.uk](http://www.home-start.org.uk)

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