

PSYCHOLOGICAL SUPPORT SERVICE FOR MEMBERS

BACKGROUND

Since 2011, Dr. Deirdre O'Neill has been providing a part-time psychological support service to Heart Children Ireland members. Dr. O'Neill is a clinical psychologist with many years of experience in paediatrics. She previously worked on the cardiology team at Our Lady's Children's Hospital in Dublin. The aim of the service is to provide psychological support for Heart Children Ireland members, specifically in relation to cardiac-related matters. The psychology service is free for members, as it is funded by the organisation. To date, many members have accessed the service.

FAMILY MEETINGS

Family meetings are arranged where one or more family members request to meet Deirdre. There are many different reasons why members seek appointments. However, the two most common reasons for families to request an appointment have been:

1) Parental concern/distress

Examples: Parental worry, low mood, distress and/or relationship difficulties associated with the child's cardiac diagnosis, treatment or prognosis.

2) Issues relating to the impact of the cardiac condition on the child/family

Examples: Coping with cardiac-related child anxieties or family disruptions, waiting for medical/surgical decisions, dealing with health restrictions, communicating about health matters and balancing the needs of all the family.

Although most family meetings take place in Dublin, Deirdre has also met families when she has travelled around country for other Heart Children events such as conferences and information days.

PARENTING COURSES

These courses consist of 4 sessions of 1 ½ hours. The atmosphere is relaxed and the scones are tasty! The aim is to explore key child development ideas, parenting strategies and practical approaches that may be helpful when:

- a) communicating with the child about his/her cardiac condition
- b) preparing the child to deal with responses from others in relation to the condition.

Managing the related concerns of the extended family and the impact of the condition on them is also considered. Parents have been very generous in contributing to the discussions at the meetings, in terms of sharing personal experiences, supporting each other and identifying helpful resources.

In practical terms, the groups are set-up to facilitate parents' particular circumstances in each region. For example, a group in Carlow took place on a week night over 4 weeks, a group in Kerry took place over two Saturdays with 2 sessions on each day while groups in Dublin have taken place on weekday mornings.

INFORMATION / FAMILY SUPPORT DAYS

A number of day events are held around the country each year to give members the opportunity to meet other members in their region while also meeting the Heart Children Ireland CEO, board members and the psychologist. To date the team have held these events in 15 counties. As well as speaking on a relevant topic and responding to questions at the discussion time, Deirdre has also met families both informally, as well as more formally in family meetings, on these days.

SCHOOL VISITS

Dr. O'Neill has visited a number of schools on behalf of members, and at the invitation of school principals and the families. Having previously worked as a full-time lecturer in Trinity College Dublin in the School of Education, Dr. O'Neill has a particular awareness of the issues that can arise for students and teachers around the impact of health-related matters in schools. Her role, where there is a specific need, is to provide support for the young person, his/her peers and/or the school staff, as appropriate, around the psychological aspects of living with a cardiac condition, be they social, emotional or learning related.

OTHER SUPPORTS

Dr. O'Neill provides a range of other services for the organisation. For example, she presents talks at the annual conferences, support at coffee mornings and the annual bereavement service as well as contributing to submissions made by the organisation on matters such as health policy issues.

OTHER MATTERS TO MENTION

- Deirdre is open to facilitating parenting courses around the country where there is enough interest. If you think that there might be enough interest from members in your area, contact Deirdre directly to discuss the matter further.
- From time to time, details about groups, information days etc will be posted on the Heart Children Ireland Facebook page. Remember that you can access this page even if you do not have your own Facebook account. (Please note that it is not appropriate for Deirdre to respond to members via Facebook.)
- In relation to non-cardiac related psychological concerns, please be aware that your GP can refer you/ your child to the appropriate, local mental health service. In relation to educational assessments, it is suggested that you discuss the matter with the child's teacher/ school psychologist.
- Members are most welcome to contact Deirdre with relevant queries or to request an appointment. Her contact details are as follows:
Dr. Deirdre O'Neill, 085 2739772 or irishpsychologyservice@gmail.com.