



not too hard to reach

developing a tool to reach the most disadvantaged families

The most disadvantaged families – those who face the greatest difficulties – are often the very families who find it hardest to get the support they need. Reaching and involving those who are the most disadvantaged and vulnerable is the most vital, and also the most challenging, task facing all programmes to improve the wellbeing of children and families.

Many services are created for disadvantaged families. Nevertheless, these families often struggle on their own to overcome the effects of poverty and social exclusion because service-providers find it so hard to reach them.

Disadvantaged families are likely to:

- feel isolated, unsafe and discriminated against
- suffer from poor physical or emotional health
- have low educational attainment
- have had discouraging experiences of statutory services
- live in poverty, with very limited financial resources, poor housing and restricted access to transport.

Such families find it harder to approach support services or to make use of the services that are on offer because:

- they find the attitudes of the professional staff in the services off-putting and patronising
- they think that services are not relevant to their needs
- they are ashamed of being in need or fearful of being judged as unable to cope
- they are worried about possible interference in their lives, about their control being undermined, or about their privacy being invaded
- they are fully preoccupied and overwhelmed by their difficulties and don't have the freedom of mind to look for sources of support.

To be effective in reaching very disadvantaged families, services need to develop outreach tools that can overcome all these difficulties.

The experience of the doorstep library shows that individuals and families often labelled as 'hard to reach' can become involved in services, and benefit from them, if the approach is sensitive to their needs. It's a question of choosing a good tool and using it well. Other agencies and service providers can develop equally successful tools to reach the most disadvantaged and excluded families in their own area if they use the keys identified by the doorstep library.



the doorstep library

ATD Fourth World developed a pilot doorstep library on a housing estate in Southwark, south London, with the support of Sure Start Brunswick. This estate houses a community with the reputation of being hard to reach. The doorstep library actively involved around 80 children and their families, proving to be a very positive way to engage with disadvantaged families.

The first step, in July 2004, was to set up an outdoor library running once a week for two hours. Blankets were spread out on the green area in front of a block of flats, with books and simple activities, such as colouring or musical instruments. The doorstep library team (workers and volunteers) knocked on all the doors in the building and invited parents and children to join the library. Some of the more outgoing families – those who were less excluded – had the confidence to join in the activities. Other families saw the library taking place and, bit by bit, became familiar with it.

After six months, the doorstep library started to take books around the flats, offering to read to the children or to lend some books. People were always free to say no. The first week five families borrowed books, a month later it was 13 families, at the end of the second month 27 families were joining in. After a year, 43 families had borrowed books and children from 25

families had taken part in home reading sessions.

Nearly a year after it started, the doorstep library organised a six-day summer festival on the estate, gathering ideas from each family and giving support to parents and neighbours in preparing and running activities. Each day between 40 and 70 children and 20 to 30 parents took part. Meeting each other in a setting outside the daily irritations and frustrations that come from living so close together, parents and children were able to build positive relationships with their neighbours and to experience a sense of common achievement and pride.

A year and half into the project, the doorstep library team has been able to develop a relationship with more than 50 families living on the estate. Through regular weekly contact, parents have gained the confidence to share their difficulties and strengths and the doorstep library team has helped some of them to make use of local services. The doorstep library has provided a unique opportunity for local professionals to get to know the families who find it harder to approach support services and enabled those workers to begin to understand the reality of the people for whom services have been created.



learning from the doorstep library

take a proactive approach

After suffering years of exclusion – often for several generations – the families who are most in need of support often lack the confidence to go along to a service in response to a notice displayed on a board or a written invitation.

The doorstep library started by running an outdoor library, but found it hard to reach the children and parents who were experiencing the greatest isolation in this way. By knocking on people's doors and visiting them in their own home, the doorstep library succeeded in meeting those who would never have the confidence to join a community event. This very proactive approach included complete respect for families' own day-to-day rhythm – sometimes ready to welcome the doorstep library, sometimes not; sometimes wanting to meet just outside the home, sometimes inside – allowing families to do whatever felt most comfortable for them at any time.

To be effective, outreach tools need to combine a proactive approach with a willingness to adapt to how people feel from week to week. Families should not be expected to fit in with a model the service provider has decided on in advance.

make it unthreatening

People who have been hurt by past experiences may be fearful of services and can find it hard to accept any demands the service makes of them.

The doorstep library does not ask families to sign up to anything or to make any kind of commitment in order to borrow a book or take part in the activities.

I find it very difficult to be a mum on my own. In my country you are never on your own, you have your mum around, your aunts, your friends. It is very tiring to be always on your own – and boring ... you don't have anyone to discuss with, it is always you thinking about everything. You are the only people, apart from my husband, I talk to.

Mother of a two year old

Families do not have to give their name or register – they are free to accept, ignore or reject the doorstep library on their own terms at each session.

Parents who borrowed books were stressed when books were damaged or lost during the week and might have stopped welcoming the doorstep library. By repairing the books, protecting them better and choosing not to make any remark about damaged or lost books, the doorstep library encouraged families to keep on borrowing books and helped the children to look after them better and the parents to feel more confident.

To be effective, outreach tools and services should review their routine administrative processes, particularly those elements that make the services threatening for vulnerable families. Think twice: do people really need to give their name and address when they first use a service or to sign in when they arrive?

do not look for problems

Very disadvantaged families are often viewed in terms of their needs or problems, rather than their aspirations and capacities.

The doorstep library was carefully designed knowing that parents, whatever their background, generally welcome the offer of good quality books for their children. It addressed the universal desire of all parents for their children to be happy and to succeed. In the context of the doorstep library, failure is not at an issue: when books are offered to very young children there are no words to learn, no tests to pass.

The doorstep library builds on people's strengths. It is open to everybody living in the area, irrespective of their personal situation. Books or conversation are offered without having to answer questions; they are not offered to families because they have problems.

Families should not have to justify their need for services. To be effective, outreach tools and services should not start by asking families about their problems. People should be free to share what they want of their lives, when they feel ready.

allow time for trust to develop

It takes a very long time to gain the trust of the most disadvantaged families. People's lives can be desperately isolating, their self-confidence battered by hard experiences, and this can make them afraid to trust other people.

A doorstep library is a slow-moving project that allows a natural relationship to develop between parents and workers at the parents' own pace. They will say – maybe many times – that they are not interested. Sometimes they will open the door, sometimes not; one week they will take a book, the next week not. Without imposing on anyone, by continuing to knock on their door the doorstep library allows vulnerable families to say 'yes' when they are ready.

To be effective, outreach tools, services and – above all – their funders must be prepared to make a long-term commitment. They must recognise and accept that they may not be able to show concrete evidence of success within a few months.

give priority to the hardest to reach

A service designed to bring in the greatest numbers will be used by families who are the easiest to reach; those who are most in need of support will be left behind.

The most isolated and excluded families take the longest to feel comfortable with the doorstep library. By going back each week, and not giving up on those who do not accept the service the first few times it is offered, the most vulnerable families have the opportunity to accept the doorstep library on their own terms, once they have been reassured that the volunteers and workers genuinely care for them.

To be effective, outreach tools must give priority to those who are the hardest to reach rather than aiming for the highest numbers.



My life is so busy that I never stop ... Your visit makes me think, 'Yes, I am going to sit down with my children and read some books!' But then I feel bad about not doing the laundry. But then you visit again and I think again 'Yes, I am going to sit down with my children and read some books!'

A mother of three children



I read books to a four-year-old girl in her own home every week for a year. For the first few months she jumped up and down every few pages; now she sits for an hour and a half with her favourite books. Only after six months of mutual trust and respect did the mother ask for support with an eviction threat. Since then, I have helped her to deal with her debts, claim benefits and find financial assistance. Most of all, I have supported her in accessing Key services for herself and her family. The doorstep library always was, and continues to be, our main link.

Doorstep library project worker



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address the family's agenda

Very disadvantaged families have often had the experience of services deciding on their behalf what their priorities should be – assessing their needs but not taking into account their own agenda.

The doorstep library chose to start by getting to know the families. Book lending offers an opportunity for at least a short conversation. Conversations that start with books gradually lead on to other topics and more personal, conversations.

Parents set the pace of the relationship and take the initiative in sharing information or in asking for support with specific issues – addressing their own agenda, rather than the agenda of any particular service. As issues emerge, services can be offered or created so that families can gradually access much-needed support, or even shape services according to their needs.

To be effective, outreach tools and services need to address what a family wants – being led by them – not just provide what providers think a family needs. Services must be prepared to be shaped by what families ask for.

create a positive experience for the community

Disadvantaged communities are often targets of professional 'help'. Services and professionals may organise events or carry out surveys, but people have learned not to trust newcomers who enter the community without permission and may make decisions for it.

The doorstep library worked hard to gain the trust of the whole community. In the beginning it was a real challenge to enter through the different security doors in order to knock on the doors of the flats. The team started by gaining the trust of the more confident members of the community who admitted the doorstep library into the building as a way of showing support for the project. This gave the doorstep library legitimacy in the eyes of their more vulnerable neighbours and helped the team to meet new families.

The doorstep library visits every family living in the building. Because it is open to all, and is seen as offering something positive to the community, there is no stigma attached to taking part.

Creating a community experience means that the most vulnerable families can gain strength by being accepted and joining in with activities along with a whole range of other people. Learning from the experiences of diverse groups of people gives strength to services and to the community as a whole.

To be effective, outreach tools must find the means to involve the whole community.

Finally ...

One year and a half into the project, the doorstep library has proved to be a successful tool for reaching very disadvantaged and excluded families. It has supported children and families in accessing services. Above all, it has enabled a trusting relationship to grow between the doorstep library, other local services and the community – particularly its most disadvantaged members – and has allowed a mutual exchange of knowledge to take place. Relevant services can now be created with the community and existing services can be shaped according to the knowledge, strengths, concerns and needs of the people who will use them.



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