

Autumn 2024

Spurgeons 

Together

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Thank you for all you do in support of children and families!

"Investing in family is the single greatest investment you can make..."

Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner

From Spurgeons CEO

Parenting and family support is a key theme in this edition of **Together**. As I know from personal experience, bringing up children can be rewarding, but it is no easy task! In fact, I feel it's got harder, as we explain on the facing page.

Mel, the mum featured in our enclosed appeal, has had a particularly tough time. She survived domestic abuse and is raising four children alone - two of them have special needs. Family life was chaotic and exhausting and the statutory support she had wasn't appropriate.

Fortunately, she came to us, and it gave her the breakthroughs she so desperately needed (see page 4).

Not all parents face such difficult circumstances, but we believe that if they are encouraged to learn more about bringing up children and how to deal with challenges sooner, fewer problems will arise and ultimately children will be happier.

As the Children's Commissioner says, investing in family is the single greatest investment you can make.

With your continued support, we can help more parents give their children the best possible start to life.



Ian Soars
Chief Executive,
Spurgeons Children's
Charity

P.S Please do give to our appeal if you can, so we can help more families in urgent need of help.

Pray with us

Heavenly Father, thank you for the wonderful privilege of parenthood. We pray for all mums and dads as they seek to undertake that role well, so that their children can live happy, healthy lives. We pray in particular for those parents who face complex challenges in giving their children a good start in life. Inspire us to do all we can to support them with the resources you have blessed us with. Amen.

If you'd like to receive our prayer news and pray regularly for children and families in need, please email prayernews@spurgeons.org.

 **Autumn appeal:** 
Donate today so that we can help even more families



To make your gift, scan the QR code, or go online at spurgeons.org/lifeline, or phone **01933 417059** (Monday-Friday 9am-4pm)

Thank you for your kindness!

Parenting pressures in 2024

Parenting has always had its challenges, but some are particular to our times. Here are three key issues affecting today's parents:

1 The legacy of the pandemic

It's said that it takes a village to raise a child. But during Covid 19 pandemic lockdowns, informal baby and toddler groups closed and contact with wider family was limited. That isolation meant that new parents had no vital peer-to-peer parenting support and babies and toddlers fell behind on social, speech and language development.

So, it's no surprise that now there is a huge rise in the number of children with behavioural and mental health issues, and also special educational needs (SEN)¹. However, under-resourced statutory services and schools cannot cope, and waiting lists for diagnosis and support are the longest they have ever been. Meanwhile, parents are having to try and support their children as best they can, and it's a daunting task.

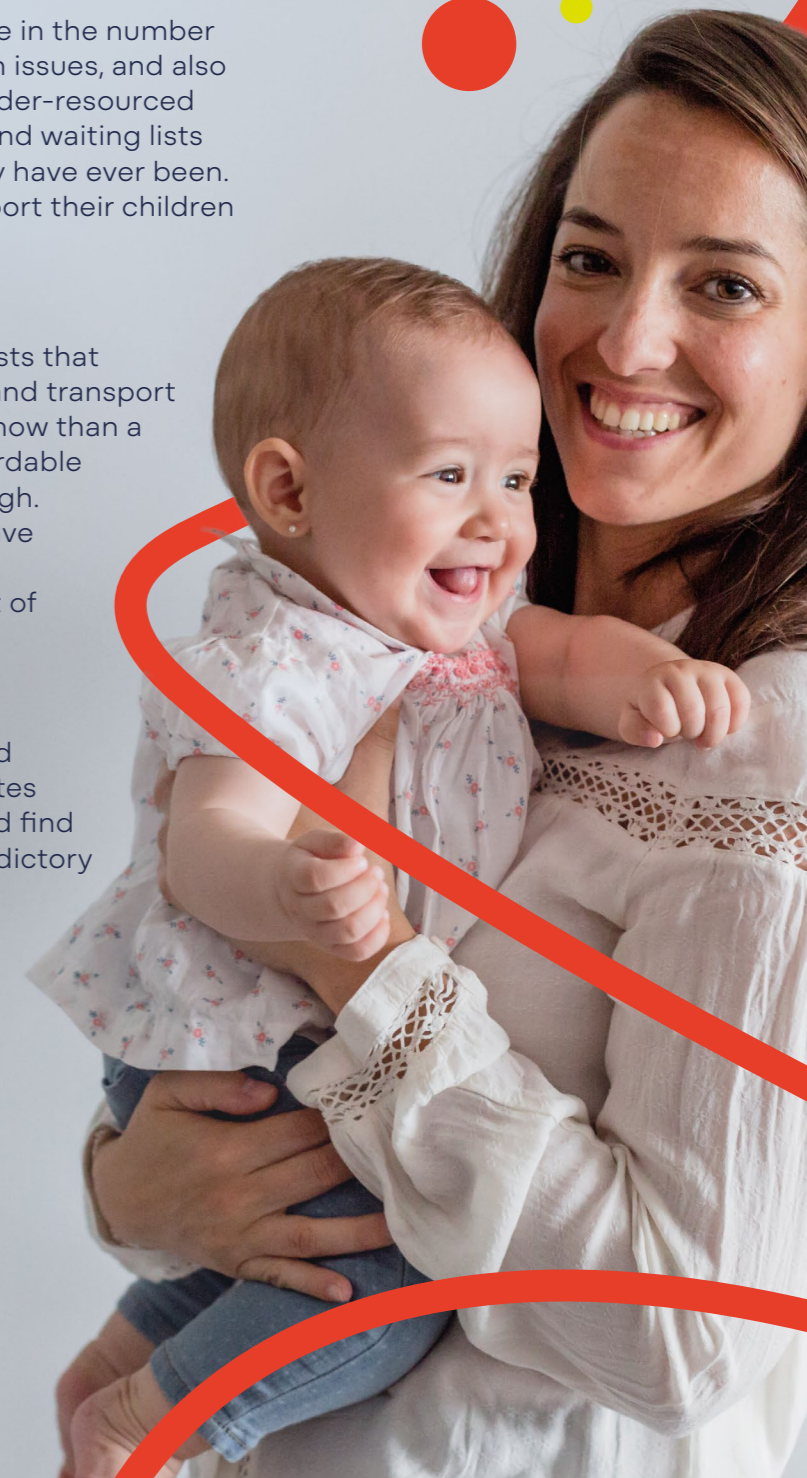
2 The cost of living crisis

Many parents are struggling with spiralling costs that have made even the basics like food, utilities and transport unaffordable. Owning a home costs far more now than a generation ago, and there's a shortage of affordable rental properties which is pushing rents sky high. Most parents work, but wages and benefits have yet to rise in line with inflation. Unsurprisingly, the strain is greatest for single parents - 2 out of 3 are in more debt than a year ago.

3 The internet

For both parents and children, the online world has its pros and cons. Social media and websites can be a convenient way to form networks and find out information. But the advice can be contradictory and confusing, and it's increasingly difficult to identify trustworthy sources. Meanwhile, children can be exposed to potentially damaging content and put at risk through inadequately supervised or restricted social media.

The good news is that Spurgeons offers an unparalleled range of support to enable parents to give their children the very best start in life. Read on to find out more.



Mel's story: "Your help has been a lifeline"

Mel, a mother of four, endured years of domestic abuse before her husband finally left. Instead of finding peace, the family was plunged into chaos.

'Suddenly, the source of coercive control was gone,' Mel recalls. 'For the kids, it was like taking the lid off a pressure cooker—they rebelled, argued constantly, and wouldn't listen to me at all.' Her oldest daughter, Kasey, had frequent meltdowns and was excluded from secondary school 22 times over two years. Ellie, her third daughter, had sensory issues, and the ongoing tensions affected the other two children as well.

Meanwhile, Mel was working three jobs to make ends meet and trying to recover after years of abuse. She felt anxious, unable to concentrate, and overwhelmed amidst the constant shouting and arguing at home. 'I was exhausted,' she says, 'and there was no end in sight.'

Statutory services sent Mel on parenting courses, but she found them unhelpful. 'I felt I was being blamed, which really knocked my confidence. I was at rock bottom—nobody was listening to me,' she shares.

Fortunately, Mel eventually found support through Spurgeons, where she began weekly sessions with Family Support Worker Leonie.

Spurgeons provided Mel with the practical, compassionate help she so needed

'Leonie was positive and kind,' Mel recalls. 'She was like a friend. She listened, understood, and stood by me. She believed in me until I believed in myself again—she'd say, "You can do this!"'

By this time, Kasey was being homeschooled by a specialist organisation, but she still had periodic meltdowns. Leonie helped Mel identify that these episodes coincided with the change in routine at the start and end of school terms. With school and health support, Mel began to explore whether Kasey and Ellie may have traits of ADHD—something she hadn't previously considered. 'It explained so much,' she says.

Leonie helped Mel understand what ADHD was and how it affected her children's behaviour. 'Each week, Leonie would ask me what had gone well and what hadn't, then offer practical suggestions on how to prevent situations from escalating,' explains Mel. 'I tried her ideas, and to my relief they worked. Home life is still a bit of a battleground but with Leonie's help and guidance I can manage it so much better now. And Ellie's finally due to get a formal diagnosis next week.'



More about our Family Support Service

Nicola Baldwin, Spurgeons Parent Support Engagement Lead, shares more about this service which helped Mel.

Family Support offer parents a listening ear, sympathetic advice and practical solutions tailored to that family's needs. The skills and tools parents gain help them longer term too, because they provide a framework they can use for situations that might arise in future.

When you're in the midst of the situation as a parent, often you just can't see the wood for the trees, whereas someone external to it, can. Even just talking about the challenges with someone else can help you see things more clearly and give you more confidence in parenting.

We provide this service for free to those on low incomes, so appreciate all your support.

"Each week, Leonie would ask me what had gone well and what hadn't, then offer practical suggestions on how to prevent situations from escalating."

A Calmer Family Life

After just ten sessions, Mel had the confidence, tools, and skills to manage her complex parenting situation and her home much calmer. 'We can actually sit and eat a meal together in peace,' Mel says. The family even managed a holiday with friends without any issues. Kasey has completed her schooling and is starting an apprenticeship.

'Parenting can still be tiring,' Mel admits, 'but I've learned not to worry about things that might not happen. I know how to stay calm and prevent tensions from flaring. If the kids have an issue I can't deal with immediately, I explain and say, "Let's park it, and we'll come back to it when I have time." And that really works.'

'The help from Spurgeons and Leonie has been amazing—it's been a lifeline, and I'm so grateful to everyone involved.'

Leonie works as part of our online Family Hub, which helps parents anywhere across the country. We also have Family Support workers based at Family Hubs in physical locations who see parents face to face.



Autumn appeal:

Make a gift and help another family like Mel's



To make your gift, scan the QR code, or go online at spurgeons.org/lifeline, or phone **01933 417059** (Monday–Friday 9am–4pm)

Thank you for your kindness!

Recipe for a happy family

UK children are the unhappiest in Europe², and 500 a day are being referred to CAHMS for mental health issues. Ian Soars explains why, if we want children to be happy and well adjusted, we need to do more to support their parents.

It's a fact that many parents today are ill-equipped to spot and manage their children's problems at an early stage. But I'm not blaming parents – it's more a sign of the times. They are coping with a wider, more complex range of family-related challenges than previous generations, and the pace of societal change means that new ones are emerging all the time. And once you do spot a problem, it's often escalated to the point that you can't deal with it yourself.

The good news is that Spurgeons has a great track record of helping families who have hit crisis point. Our Family Support team gets alongside them and, with great compassion and expert knowledge, helps those parents get themselves and their children back on an even keel.

One amazing outcome of this is that the emotional health of both parents and children improves significantly, and the child begins to thrive. We have the evidence to prove it! (See the panel.)

So just think of the impact, if we could encourage and equip every mum and dad to learn to parent really well and to spot and deal with problems early! Many family crises would not arise in the first place. Children and parents would be happier. And don't we all want a happy home life?

We already offer an extensive range of parenting resources and courses covering a wide range of topics. But we're working on an exciting plan that will make it easier for parents across the country to access in-person support, through working with churches and community groups. More in the next magazine!

“So just think of the impact, if we could encourage and equip every mum and dad to learn to parent really well and to spot and deal with problems early!”

Family Support impact

(Sept 23-Aug 24)

The average family needs just over 6-8 sessions (8-10 hours) and improved:

Parenting confidence by **85%**

Parents' emotional health by **78%**

Children's behaviour by **74%**

Children's emotional health by **54%**



Managing parental burnout

If you are, or you know, a parent that's exhausted and frustrated, here are some ideas to help:

- 1. Prioritise self-care** – it's not a luxury, it's a necessity! It's hard to care for your kids when you're burned out. Carve out regular time for yourself to read, take a bath, or go for a walk. Look for a time each day to savour a moment of peace, even if it's just enjoying a cup of tea while the kids play!
- 2. Reflect on your parenting successes.** Did you console your child when they were upset? Get them to school on time? You're keeping your child loved and cared for, so focus on these successes rather than any perceived failures.
- 3. Delegate tasks.** Make regular to-do lists and ensure everyone in the household helps out, even the kids. Teaching children to help with chores fosters responsibility and reduces your load.

4. Limit social media exposure – the constant 'noise' can add to stress without you even realising it. Plus, the temptation to compare yourself to influencers can erode your confidence!

5. Don't be afraid to ask for help – lots of parents feel like you, so if you're struggling, talk to your GP or our Family Support Team (see below).



Our resources, courses and services for parents

Whatever parenting problems you're facing - toilet training, temper tantrums, trauma – we're here to help. Access our digital resources, courses and services by scanning the QR code. For help with specific questions, email us at parenting@spurgeons.org.



Parenting hacks: Regular emails to help you through the challenges of family life.

Dad.info: Europe's biggest website for dads, with advice and peer-to-peer forums with professional input.

Parenting after separation course: A short online course to help you transform your child's experience of co-parenting.

Real Parenting: 4-week course (available for community partners to deliver in-person through family hubs) helping you to parent well and giving you the opportunity to connect with other local parents for support.

Family Support Service: For parents needing extra support (1-to-1 in Kent, Surrey and Sussex, or online).

Help with children with additional needs: Links to advice and courses for parents of children with autism (in-person in Kent, Surrey and Sussex, or online).

Counselling: Our qualified counsellors currently provide individual child counselling in schools, community settings, in our own centres and online.

Mental health support: A range of professionally informed tips, handbooks, templates and guides to support family wellbeing on a variety of topics, including self-harm, disordered eating and intrusive thoughts.

Help for families affected by imprisonment



Your support enables us to offer counselling to dads in prison and homework clubs for them and their children at HMP Winchester, helping to keep family bonds strong.

Scan the QR code to learn more about our prisons work

Homework Club brings families together

At HMP Winchester, Spurgeons staff and volunteers offer a monthly homework club to fathers in prison and their children to help them build a strong relationship.

Vicky Baird, Spurgeons Prison Family Services Manager, explains, 'Some dads have had a role in their child's education prior to imprisonment, others have not. Homework club gives dads in custody the opportunity to actively participate in their child's learning and appreciate the value this has in maintaining those vital parent-child bonds. The child gets to feel supported and loved by their dad, which is so very important!

'We work with the child's school to set appropriate homework - for example, it can't be computer based because of the strict security rules that are necessary in a prison.

'We also provide a large collection of educational games which can make learning fun for the whole family when they visit.'



"We also provide a large collection of educational games which can make learning fun for the whole family when they visit."

Ten-year-old Blossom's dad is in prison, but they get to do Homework Club together. Blossom says, "My teacher gave me some homework, and then I came to the prison, went in a different room. I get to see him (her dad) so I still stay in contact. The way it helps is just connection really."

Blossom's dad says: "We just sit and do her homework together, as if you would at home. She actually teaches me how to spell! It makes me feel like I know my daughter."



Blossom is an amazing little girl – scan the QR code to watch her story!



A day in the life of: Charlie Wright, Spurgeons Prisons Counsellor

Charlie, once a fabricating welder, later found his true vocation as a counsellor to dads in prison. He explains what he does and why he loves it.

'If a prisoner faces family struggles, he's offered counselling, but it's his choice to take up that offer. So, if he's sitting in front of me, it's because he wants to change, and I consider it a privilege to support him on that journey.

'I'll start by asking what he'd like to talk about. Initially, prisoners might find it difficult to open up, so our conversations can be quite general. But as trust builds, they start to share things they've kept hidden for a long time.

'It's incredibly rewarding to see their progress. For instance, Tony's* daughter Rhianna* had cut off all contact. Through our sessions he came to realise that she didn't want the material gifts he'd been giving her – she wanted his love, his time and for him to listen to her.

'He began writing to Rhianna weekly, but she didn't reply. He'd call home, and she wouldn't speak to him. But he persisted – and eventually she came to the phone. She said she'd read all his messages, and Tony was delighted. Their relationship has been improving ever since.

'When a client is due for release, they're often worried about reintegrating into family life, or about returning to the habits and relationships that led them to prison. Re-entering society after prison is challenging, so I encourage clients to reach out after release for further support. Setbacks are normal—what matters is moving forward. There's no time limit for support; one client, released eight years ago, still contacts me occasionally for a coffee and chat. Sometimes, that's all they need.'



Prisons Week – A week of prayer

13th-19th October 2024

Spurgeons invites you to pray with us during this annual week of prayer, for which we help create resources.

This year, our prayers reflect Jesus' compassion for the young man in Mark 10 v 21 – "Jesus looked at him and loved him". We stand alongside and with offenders and victims of crime, their families and friends, and those working in the criminal justice system.

- **Pray** using the enclosed leaflet (or download a copy at prisonsweek.org).
- **Watch and share the inspiring film** on the prisonsweek.org website.
- **Identify what practical help you or your church could give** to those for whom you are praying.

PRISONS WEEK

Early years and family support

Spurgeons operates contracts in partnership with local government in three regions – scan the QR codes to find out more about each.

Over the summer, we and partner organisations have been providing children and families with a range of fun activities, and ensuring they know what support and services they can access to make family life a little easier. Here's a few examples:



Family Centres Elmbridge

Surrey HAF Club4 Summer 2024 Holiday Play Scheme:

165 children enjoyed summer holiday activities including sports, arts and crafts and handling animals, plus SEND children had a cinema trip!



Family Hub Wiltshire Council

Devizes Community Meet: Local families enjoyed sports and carnival arts workshops in local community spaces, and got to make new friends and supportive connections.

Fun with stories: Children under 5 and their parents took part in a range of activities based on stories. We also offered Book Start, helping 0-5s explore stories and rhymes in fun and creative ways. There were various other courses and sessions to help parents with their children's health, wellbeing and development and their own skills and confidence in parenting.



Birmingham Children's Centres and Family Hubs

Our newest family hub opened in July. It's a one-stop shop where families in Erdington with children aged 0-19 (or up to 25 with SEND) can access wraparound support. That easy access is key given that families here face a range of issues including poverty, housing problems, domestic abuse and mental health challenges.

'Places like this can just bring communities together,' says Sarah at Safe Sleep Project, one of the partners in our hub. 'At the end of the day it takes a community to raise a child. I think that's something we need to instil into parent's minds - that you don't have to do it alone.'



Hannah's story: "They actually want to help!"

When a young mum-to-be and her family were made homeless, she was so grateful to Spurgeons Family Support Worker Regine for help with her toddler and newborn. Hannah tells her story.

'We never thought we'd ever be homeless. We've had 15 years of renting. We both work, and it's just through a chain of events that we ended up in this situation. The council housed me, my husband, my two-year-old – I was about five months pregnant – in emergency accommodation – a double hotel room. We weren't even allowed a toaster.

'Only a few days later, I got a phone call from Regine, introducing herself and asking to meet. She came to the hotel so we didn't have to go anywhere. The first thing she said was, "How can I help your situation? What do you need from us? I'll get you a bottle warmer. Do you need some nappies? I'm going to get you some nappies. Do you want some toys? Do you want some books?" And they actually want to help. They don't want to take my children. They're not judging me. They do want to help. It was the difference between coping and not coping.'

With Regine's help, Hannah and her family have moved into a flat of their own – we wish them well!



Sign up to our emails

and get 'hot off the press' updates and additional helpful tips – scan the QR code, then complete the form at the bottom of the web page.

Spurgeons Old Scholars and Fegans Old Boys

Have you discovered the Heritage section of our website yet?

- Enjoy reading vivid recollections from Spurgeons Old Scholars and Fegans Old Boys
- Watch an amazing collection of videos harking back to those earlier days
- Discover more about our founders Charles Spurgeon and James Fegan, who had so much in common



Our grateful thanks to all the former residents of our Children's Homes for helping to develop this wonderful material and keep our heritage very much alive!

Scan the QR code or visit spurgeons.org/heritage



Spurgeons - Together with Families

Families of all shapes and sizes face the challenges of trying to balance relationships, work, money, childcare and parenting, education, mental health. It's a lot – sometimes too much!

But we're always there to turn to, in good times and bad. Inspired by our Christian faith and our founder Charles Spurgeon, we bring hope and help, making family life better. Our Family Hubs, located in children and family centres, schools, churches, prisons, provide a welcoming one-stop place where families can access wraparound support. We can do this. Together.

We provide children and families with:

- Family support
- Parenting advice and support
- Early years health and wellbeing
- Domestic abuse care and recovery
- Counselling
- Preschools with onsite early support in areas of intense need

Connect with us online for more stories!



spurgeons.org



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