

## Wavemaker Spotlight:

### Celia Webster

Challenge Group founder &  
Wave co-founder

When Celia Webster found herself struggling to find ways for her young daughter with learning disabilities to interact with other children, she desperately hoped that someone would start a group where her child would find acceptance. She had tried going to mainstream playgroups but found them too painful. Her daughter's learning disability and behavioural issues made it hard to integrate and the experience left Celia feeling more alone and depressed. She appealed to her GP and health visitors for guidance, but no one knew of any groups specifically for children like hers.

All parents of young children know what it feels like to be exhausted, but the added challenges of raising a child with additional needs and trying to connect with others left Celia with little energy to seriously consider starting something on her own. 'I resisted doing it myself,' she admits. For two years, the idea stirred in the back of her mind, while her and her daughter's feelings of isolation only increased.

Celia looks to her faith when she recounts the developments that followed. 'I would have dreams about it and could feel God prompting me,' she says, but she still didn't think she had the wherewithal to do it. Then, she reached out to some friends from church who said they would join a group if she started one.

A woman who ran a playgroup and had a child with Down's syndrome agreed to go as well. Encouraged by this show of interest and support, Celia stepped into action.

## Getting Started

Finding a suitable space, putting together a team of helpers and getting the word out about the group were the top three challenges.

Celia felt it was important to make the group a free offering and after speaking with the vicar at her church, she managed to secure free use of a church hall. The church also took responsibility for safeguarding, DBS checks (the whole team needs one), health and safety, and risk assessments, which meant Celia could focus on the task of turning the playgroup from a concept into a reality.

To advertise the group, she contacted a number of health visitors and put up notices in GP surgeries, child development centres and libraries. Other ideas for getting the word out locally include hosting a coffee morning or contacting local schools.

When it came to assembling a team of volunteers, Celia knew from her own experience what parents of children with special needs were going through. She therefore wanted a team made up not of advice givers but of good listeners. A few friends filled this need in the early days and Celia was ready to get started.

The first Challenge Group met in November 2009 but Celia says it took a while to get established.

‘We only had one participant that first day,’ she remembers. In the second week, two or three people showed up. Gradually, more people heard about the group by word of mouth and attendance increased.

‘It often does take a few weeks to become known,’ Celia says.

The group now sees an average of about ten families at the weekly playgroup, but there are still weeks when only two or three are able to attend.

# Running a Wave Play Group (Challenge Group)

As the group began to grow, so did the need to expand the team. Grateful for the support of her friends at the start, Celia eventually needed to look further afield for volunteers.

A group of three elderly women joined the team, serving hot drinks and cakes to the parents and carers in attendance and providing a warm, grandmotherly presence. It was through their involvement that Celia first noticed the impact that mixing with children of different abilities had on those without learning disabilities, who were not used to mixing.

‘At first, they thought many of the children were being ‘naughty’. They didn’t realise that the issue lay with the child’s autism or learning disability. So being at Challenge Group really changed their perception.’ One of the original three helpers still volunteers with the group and has recruited another friend to the team as well.

In addition to the tea and cake servers, Celia found it was important to have some team members on hand to look after the families in attendance. Many attending were single parents or parents who didn’t have local or supportive relatives. Celia wanted to nurture them as well as the children – an element that was missing from other groups she herself had attended. She found physiotherapists and massage therapists who were willing to donate their time or work for a small fee, and she was careful to make sure the atmosphere remained warm and inviting, rather than clinical. A local florist began donating flowers each week, too, which brightened up the space.

While parents and carers allowed themselves a bit of TLC, Celia wanted to try to offer some one-to-one support for the children, including the siblings of those with additional needs. 'For the siblings,' Celia explains, 'it's really helpful for them to see other families in a situation similar to their own.'

Bonding between parent and child can be harder when a child has special needs, so the playgroup experience is especially important. Flexibility is key at Challenge Group sessions. Celia tries to have one helper for every two families attending, but this does depend on the needs of the children attending. If a child is being particularly difficult, don't be afraid to ask the parent or carer to help as well. If a child is having trouble mixing, and there are enough people on hand, try taking the child and parent outside for a little while and then try reintroducing them to the group.

A typical Challenge Group session lasts for an hour and a half, and Celia advises having a fixed time each week, as it helps ensure that people are more likely to turn up for the whole session rather than drift in and out. Children from birth to any age are welcome. Each session features activities such as freeplay, music, sensory treasure chests and Makaton. Have some toys available, but avoid educational ones, Celia says, as these can be stressful for parents and carers who are already deeply concerned about their child's development.



Celia emphasises that getting started doesn't require a huge budget – it can be done on a shoestring. Challenge Groups spends a small amount each week on refreshments (fruit, cakes, tea and coffee, etc) and their biggest expense is £30 per week for a massage therapist who provides parents and carers with 10-20 minutes of blissful escape.

If this all sounds like a lot to take on, Celia says, 'Don't let fear hold you back. Don't be afraid of making mistakes or asking for help. Some people might say no, but don't let it dishearten you.'

Having the support of the Wave community has been extremely helpful over the years. Everyone has something to offer, from expertise in certain areas ('I'm not a natural planner, for example,' Celia admits) to unique perspectives on navigating life with a child with learning disabilities. Celia says she feels very lucky to have had so much support and she is now actively mentoring those who want to start their own Wave-inspired groups.

# Changing Attitudes & Behaviours

Over the years, Celia has seen the relationship between parents and carers and their children develop through their time at Challenge Group, and she's witnessed volunteers become more understanding and tolerant of those with special needs. She's found that people are often quite willing to get involved in community groups – and they enjoy it.

When starting Challenge Group, Celia says, 'All I wanted was to make people feel very welcome. I wanted them to feel more positive at the end of the session than when they arrived, and to feel part of a support network.'

For a long time, Celia says she thought she was doing it for others but she gradually realised how much she was gaining personally from the experience. Wave helped her to cross a divide and meet people she never would have come into contact with.

'Wave has a heart of expectation. Everyone's got something to offer and everyone is fully accepting,' she says. 'It knocks down a lot of barriers.' Her daughter enjoyed Challenge Group so much that she attended even when she was much older and Celia herself found it to be one of the very few places where she felt completely relaxed.

Starting Challenge Group and Wave was a life changer for her. 'I've made lifelong friends through Wave and found so much mutual support and understanding,' she says. To anyone thinking about starting out on a similar journey, Celia has only encouragement. 'Just do it,' she says. 'You won't regret it.'