

Parent to Champion



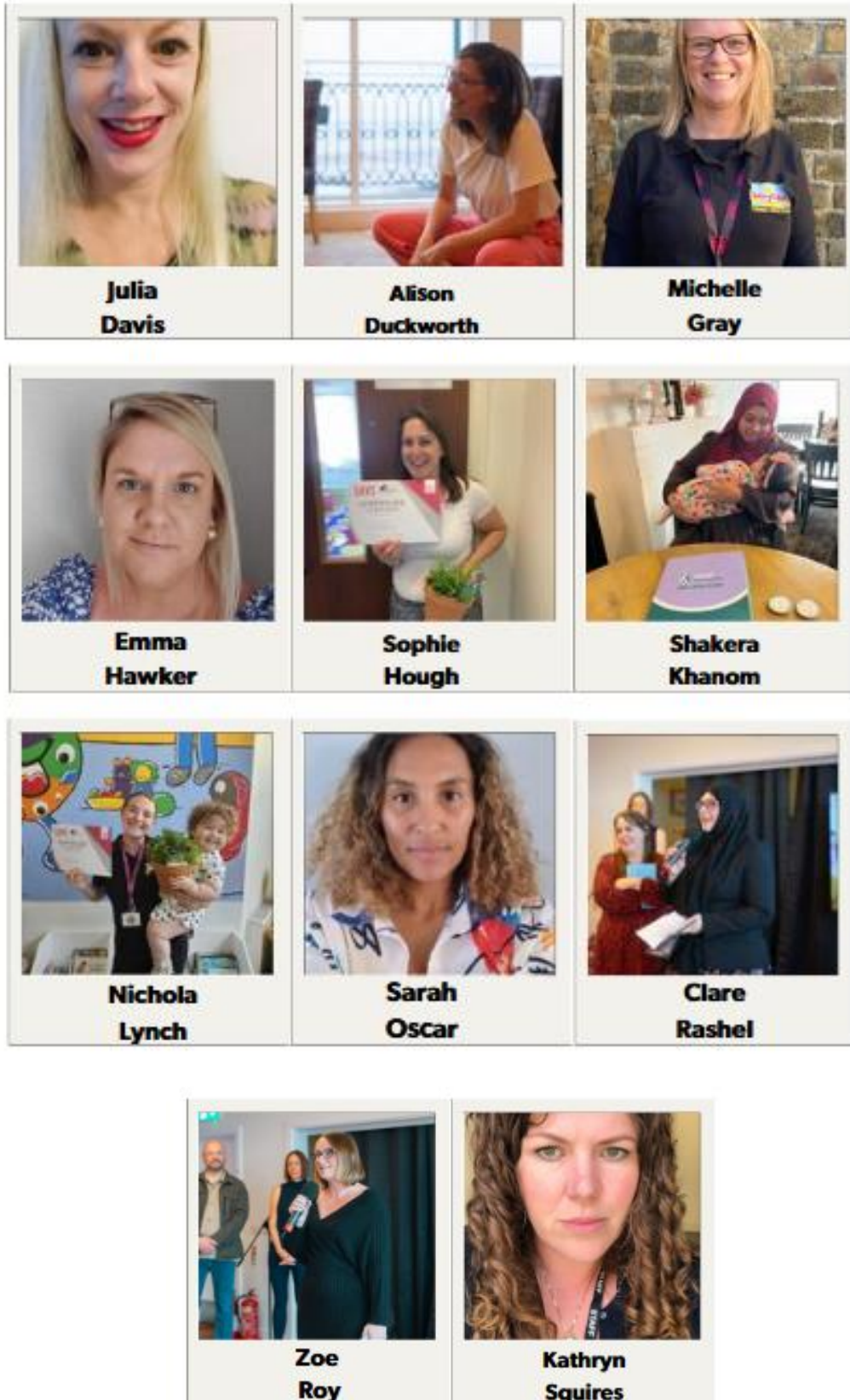
Empowering Voices and Exploring the Impact of A Better Start Southend



Scan here for our
Parent to Champion
Youtube video and
audio reel!



Authors and contributors



Acknowledgements

I would like to thank every single person who has been a part of my journey as a parent champion. Thank you for providing learning experiences, days out, gifts, laughs, memories, support, guidance, tea, biscuits, a safe warm space and most of all, thank you for helping me survive what was one of the hardest phases of my life. My first born daughter & I really struggled with separation anxiety. The Creche Team supported us and helped us through every step of the way with complete understanding & patience. Both of my children love the crèche team & feel safe with them all. Thank you for making it possible! I have come out the other end feeling empowered, confident, enabled and ready for the next phase of my life with my family. There really is not one “thanks” to give. Instead, a whole “thank-you” to the entire ABSS; my community and village.

Nichola Lynch

I am very grateful and proud of my Parent Champion journey, and of the opportunities it has created for me. I would like to thank all the parents I have worked with over the years, your passion, knowledge and energy has been my inspiration. Thank you to my family who have understood what it has meant to me to be involved in the ABSS Programme as a Parent Champion. Thank you to SAVS for seeing potential in my skills and knowledge to continue to support the ABSS programme as part of the Engagement Team.

Michelle Gray

I am incredibly grateful for my journey as a Parent Champion. What began with feeling voiceless has transformed into a rewarding roller coaster ride of growth and opportunity. From contributing to the design of the A Better Start Southend mascot to illustrating the Pip and Me book, I've not only discovered my potential but also pursued my own career goals. I want to express my deepest thanks to everyone who has been a part of this experience – for your support, laughter, guidance, and warmth. You've given me more than just opportunities; you've given me the strength to move forward with confidence, ready for the next chapter of my life with my family. I am proud of the community we've built together, and I couldn't have done it without you all. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Julia Davis

Words cannot express the gratitude that I have for the family and friends I have made from being a part of this project. If you were to ask me 3 years ago, would you like to be a Parent Champion? I probably would have laughed and said no, but for every meeting, every event, every festival, my voice and my existence felt the most superior then I ever thought it would as a parent. I want to thank The Engagement Team, Mikki, the Crèche Team and my fellow Parent Champions. You all are the true meaning of ABSS because you really did give me a better start in parenthood, so I will forever be grateful.

Sophie Hough

Thank you ABSS for the opportunity to be part of something which will help future organisations support positive impacts for families. The Crèche Team supported my child to feel confident in being left even though he has extra needs. They also supported me when he couldn't handle staying in the creche and even though it took time for him to settle, he has a special bond with most of the team and now enjoys his time there.

Clare Rashed

I would like to thank ABSS for teaching me I have a voice. I would like to thank the Engagement Team for all their support. Without my journey through ABSS I would not be able to see broken systems and start to use my voice to try to get things fixed. I am now setting up 'Dinky Dino's' Support for children who have Irlen Syndrome and/or dyslexia and for their families, siblings to feel supported too. I would also like to thank other Parent Champions for taking the time to change lives of under 4's in Southend.

To Michelle, thanks for the biscuits, coffee and chats.

Thank you so much SAVS.

Zoe Roy

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to the SAVS Engagement Team, and especially to Michelle Gray, for her pivotal role in guiding and supporting the successful completion of this research paper. Through her consistent communication with the Parent Champions, Michelle ensured we always felt heard and valued. The environment she fostered was one of openness, where we were able to work without any pressure to commit, creating a truly positive and collaborative experience.

Parent Champion Research Group

The Crèche Team has been an absolute unmatched service. We will always be grateful for the wonderful support they have offered us and our families over the years, making it possible to be a Parent Champion. We wouldn't have been able to attend even a fraction of what we have, without them. For some, they were the first people we would leave our babies/children with outside of family, making an instrumental difference in how prepared we would all feel about the transition to nursery and/or returning to work. They have provided a safe, welcoming, trusting experience. They gave valuable reassurance, taught our children (and us at times), and helped us to feel confident that our children were safe and well cared for, which made a huge difference in how engaged we were with ABSS.

Thank you, Crèche Team!

Parent Champion Research Group

Mikki has been an exceptional leader and a constant source of support for all of us. She has skilfully guided us through every stage of this research project, from start to finish. Mikki has always embraced us for who we are, without judgment, and has consistently valued our contributions, regardless of the time and effort we were able to commit. Thank you, Mikki, for offering us the opportunity to participate in this research alongside our fellow Parent Champions. Your leadership and encouragement have made this experience truly meaningful.

Parent Champion Research Group

Table of contents

Introduction.....	6
Background.....	7
Methodology.....	10
Results and discussion.....	15
Conclusion.....	19
References.....	21

Introduction

The following research story focuses on a core group of Parent Champions and our journeys both individually and as a collective. This comes naturally at the end of a 10-year programme with A Better Start Southend (ABSS), of which seven years has been spent working with Parent Champions, 108 in total. Using a Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework, this research seeks to highlight the experiences of eleven Parent Champions, both past and present, drawing on our collective insights to better understand how our roles have empowered us and contributed to positive change in our local wards and Southend communities.

The aims of this project were to:

- Explore the impact of A Better Start Southend (ABSS) on Parent Champions.
- Evaluate the impact of Parent Champions on the local community.
- Facilitate reflection on the Parent Champion journey with ABSS.
- Empower Parent Champions through active engagement in the research process.

Background



Who Are the Parent Champions?

Parent Champions are individuals of who possess a deep-seated desire to make a meaningful difference in our communities, although we may not have realised this at the start of our journeys. We come from areas of Southend where families have been identified as most in need of additional support, but we are united by a shared passion for positive change. Parent Champions are those who were selected over the six identified wards as demonstrated in Figure 1.0:

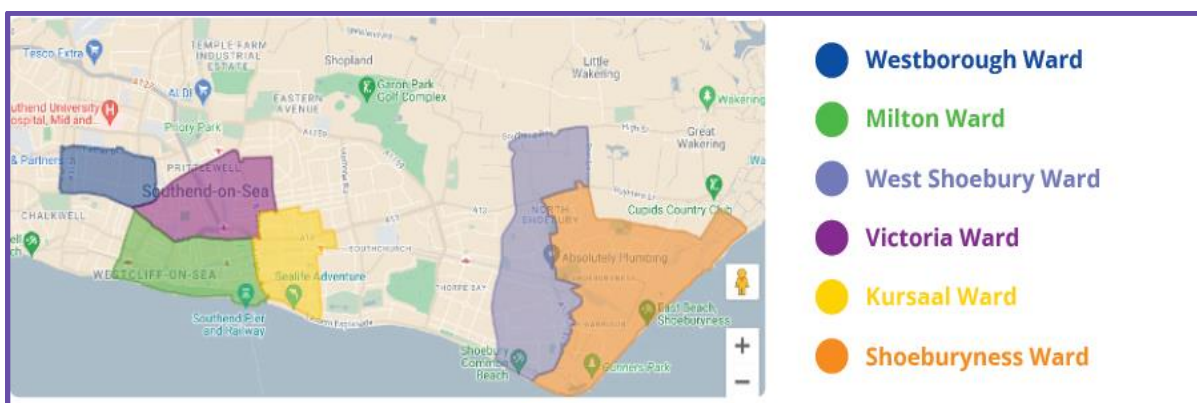


Figure 1.0 - A Better Start Southend ward map.

We could be described as 'experts by experience,' as we are willing to share our personal stories with professionals to help shape and improve services. We have played a crucial role in the ABSS programme, which focuses on early intervention and supporting families with children aged 0-4 years in the local area. Whilst these labels capture certain aspects of the role, they do not fully define what Parent Champions represent.

Why Was the Role Created?

The Parent Champion role was created to empower parents from ABSS communities to take an active role in shaping the services that directly impact their lives, and the lives of their children. By offering training and support, the programme aimed to foster a sense of community and collaboration, where parents could connect with each other, share experiences, and contribute to the development of services that would improve their local area. The intention was not only to provide a platform for parents to voice their concerns but also to help build confidence, strengthen community ties, and create a lasting impact for future generations.

The recruitment process for a Parent Champion may look slightly different depending on which parent you would have had that conversation with, and which positive space it happened in. However, all would likely say that it was an informed opportunity that was presented to them by a member of the Engagement Team from SAVS. An opportunity to have a voice within the ABSS programme; to be part of conversations that identified what might be missing from our local communities. We would be offered a chance to be part of conversations that shaped new projects and ultimately, make a difference to the under 4's living in ABSS wards. How could we, as parents, resist such an opportunity? And this is where our journey would begin.

What is the Purpose of a Parent Champion?

To us, Parent Champions represent more than just a role or a statistic. We are catalysts for change, fostering trust and connection in our communities. Over the years, parents have come together to build lasting and supportive relationships within our neighbourhoods. These bonds go beyond formal interactions, creating a sense of belonging and solidarity, seen in simple gestures. We feel strongly that our collective efforts have helped establish an invisible community safety net that provides support and encouragement. Through the work of the Parent Champions, the ABSS programme has given parents the confidence to believe in their ability to make a difference: "I can make my mark!" "I can have a say!" This sense of empowerment extends beyond the work we do in our communities; it becomes part of our personal lives, influencing how we raise our children. In turn, they receive the same message that they too can make a difference, speak up, and be heard.

In essence, being a Parent Champion is more than just a role; we feel that we are a living testament to the power of community, shared experience, and the collective drive to create positive change.

Methodology

Whilst this section has brought together the work of Parent Champions, it has predominantly been written by me, Michelle Gray. I am fortunate enough to have been connected to the programme since the Parent Champion programme began and later moved on to becoming the ABSS Engagement Team Project Lead, making my position within this research unique. I can empathise and understand the Parent Champion's journeys and therefore, acted as the bridge between both Parent Champions and ABSS whilst participating in this project with equal power.

We should first start with understanding what Participatory Action Research (PAR) is, and to us, this means a research method which involves people who are connected by a shared experience and/or activity. We have collectively taken part in conversations, recordings, discussions, drawings and writing about the chosen research subject which in this instance, is about our journeys and the impact we have made. With this in mind, it is important to note that the PAR framework sat comfortably with us as a group due to the mutual respect and understanding we have for one another. Our relationship as a collective has been built upon pillars of trust and empathy, therefore recognising each other's capacity and possessing equal power throughout this process.

In our case we are talking about a small group of 11 Parent Champions who had an opportunity to capture their journey through the ABSS programme. We were able to reflect on how we have impacted the programme and the impact it has had on us. Our individual stories have been brought together by collating shared themes and understanding about why we chose to become a Parent Champion, and the community it created for both us and our children.

Recruiting for this research project did mean approaching our current pool of Parent Champions first, the opportunity that was presented to them: "Would you be interested in capturing their Parent Champion Journey?" With some saying yes, then began the conversation of how. As a former Parent Champion, I also had a story to tell and it was at this point I reached out to former Parent Champions to see if they would like to capture their journey too. All 11 Parent Champions that participated in this project covered the Parent Champion time span from January 2017 to March 2025, and represented all six ABSS wards, as shown in Figure 2.0:

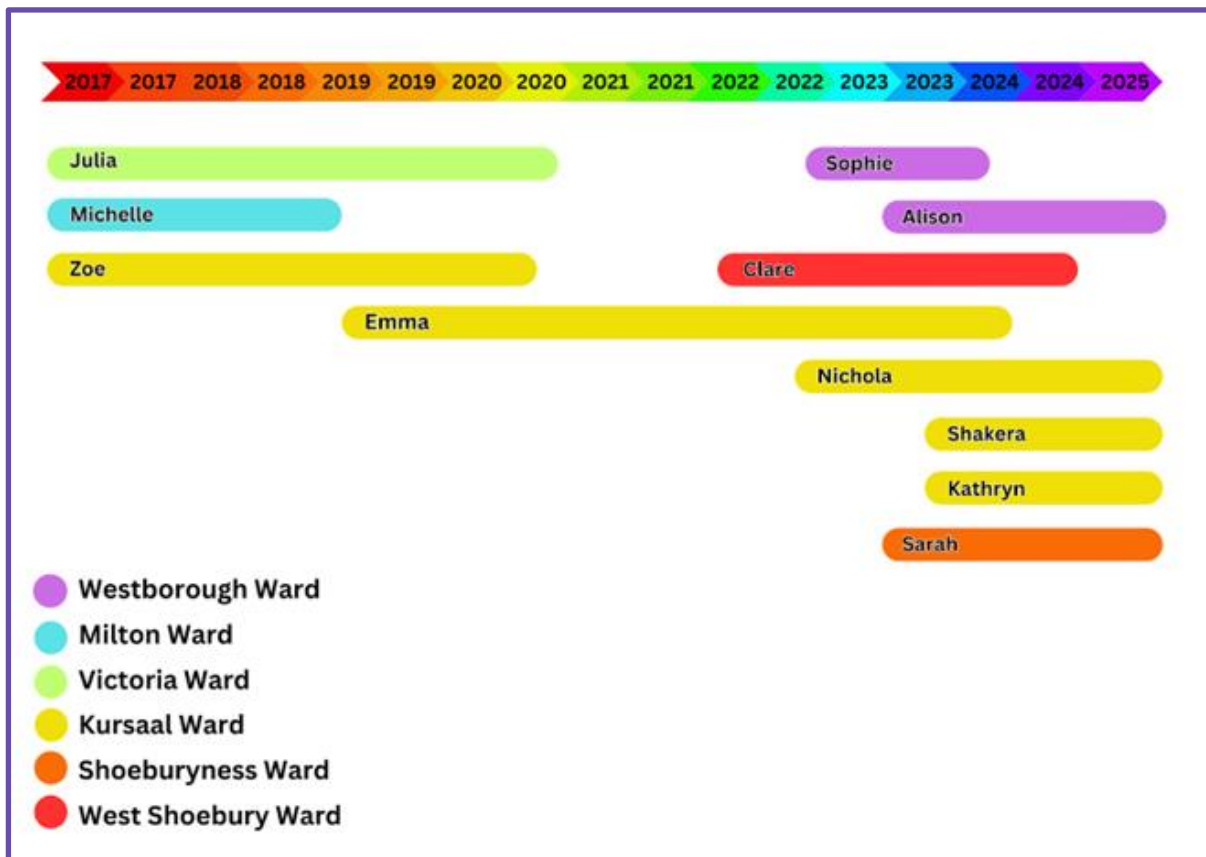


Figure 2.0 - Ward location and length of time as Parent Champion

At this point I would like to mention our researcher, facilitator, guide and mentor Mikki Barrett (ABSS). Mikki's role in this piece of research was to encourage and support this group of parents. Allowing us the time and space to move through the different research stages, explaining and exploring tasks and deadlines, step by step.

What a daunting task this could pose, we now had to agree as a group on the method we would use to capture our journeys. Our initial thought was that this could be done via a podcast and although quite appealing, we soon realised that this would be a tricky thing to deliver and not as flexible as we needed it to be. We settled upon creating an individual storybook, an A3 sketch pad would become the creative platform we would all use. The great thing about this method was that we all had timelines that showed our journeys, how we had been involved and how many hours we had volunteered. We had all approached them in different ways, highlighting the elements that were important to us as individuals, the projects we worked on and the memories and friendships we had made.

For this stage to work, we discussed accessibility and capacity, which for some of these parents would mean coming into a space together and to be supported by the Creche team so they could work on their books in creative sessions. Knowing how these opportunities can create a natural flowing and rich conversation, it was also felt that transcribing these

conversations could also form part of this research, and at a later date would be thematically analysed.

It is important to note that not all parents attended every session. From the 28th July – 10th October, parents from the research group had an opportunity to attend eight sessions, each lasting two hours to create their storybooks.

In July, Parent Champions had an opportunity to work with artist Tori Woolley to creatively explore what it has meant to be a Parent Champion. Tori used these discussions and drawings to create a poster that captured this. This poster went through some feedback with parents and went on to be created for display at the ABSS Alumni Event as seen in Figure 3.0. This workshop helped to kick start parents' thoughts about their own Parent Champion journey.



Figure 3.0 - Parents voices poster created by Parent Champions and Tori Woolley.

Following this, on a sunny August afternoon, we took our session to the local green space, where we walked and talked, thinking outside the box about how we could use photos on this walk that could represent us and our journey in some way. The children enjoyed being outside with their parents and it was here we identified that the Parent Champions also had a voice that could be captured too!

Once we had created our storybooks, we were able to record an audio reel as an opportunity for Parent Champions to talk about what they had created and reflect on the pieces of work that had meant the most to them. This important element allowed parents to verbalise their thoughts and became a very powerful and moving piece of work. There is nothing like hearing real people speak meaningfully about the things they do, and how it has impacted them and created new opportunities. This piece of audio was then edited together and played as a backdrop to the research exhibition at the ABSS Parent Champion Alumni Event in October 2024, and can be heard on our video showing Parent Champion's experiences through photographs via the QR code on the second page of this report.

In our final stages, we looked at Labov's Structural Model and Narrative Thematic Analysis. Although Mikki spent a session exploring Labov's Structural Model (Patterson, 2017), with one or two parents going through this process of self-analysis, others felt that method was not what they wanted to undertake. Mikki then introduced us to Riessman's Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 2007), and explained how this Narrative Thematic Analysis works in terms of what we were looking to present. This really captured our imagination and understanding for the work we had been doing and as a group over several weeks, we were able to work through the many transcripts we had recorded and that Mikki had now prepared for us.

As we began to understand the context of what had been captured, we discussed the three key themes identified by Riessman's Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 2007), that were now set before us; *Agency and Action*, *Emotional* and *Identity* as noted in Figure 4.0:



Figure 4.0 - Riessman's Narrative theory, key themes

Further to this, we thematically analysed the transcripts using the six-step process presented by Braun and Clarke (Braun and Clarke, 2021), to help us ensure that we had thoroughly analysed all quotes.

Collectively we worked through identifying what felt important in the transcripts and why, discussing which key theme it most related to and deciding if it needed a subtheme. Over time our subthemes grew, with some appearing under two key themes. Our spider web of analysis had grown by the time we completed this task!

Like all things that are done meaningfully, this analysis was not quite complete yet. As we started to bring this paper together, working through the sections, and discussing how to present the results, we were left with some points to discuss. In turn, this led us to thematically analysing the results twice as we felt it would be easier for someone to read, but also that it would be a more meaningful way to show what this research represented whilst ensuring that all processes were thorough.

Results and discussion

The results of all the collected data gives us an insight into what it means to be a Parent Champion, how it has served us throughout our journey, and individual lives. We were able to examine the impact ABSS had on us and the impact we have had on the wider community, by collecting rich data from a number of different sources:

- Audio reel which captured the voices of our journey
- Parent Champion poster co-produced with Tori Woolley
- Storybooks which were created individually to demonstrate the most impactful and significant elements to us throughout our time as Parent Champions
- Thematic analysis of creative sessions that took place whilst creating our storybooks, to understand our personal journeys and facilitate reflection

The initial making of our storybooks sparked conversations which were transcribed and thematically analysed. Comments and thoughts made during the organised local walk were also recorded and transcribed as we felt the open space not only inspired creativity, but provided us with a place to speak openly and freely. The results discussed below relate specifically to what we have deemed as the most significant aspects of the Parent Champion role, in light of our own agency and action, emotional feelings and identity.

When collating the results below we used Riessman's Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 2007) as we felt that the consolidated findings from all recorded sessions highlighted a rich tapestry of themes, and we wanted to tell a story. These centered on personal growth, identity, transformation, community engagement, and emotional wellbeing. Further to this, the most significant theme was *Agency and Action* which accounted for 40% of the results, and acted as a true reflection of the work Parent Champions had undertaken as shown in Figure 5.0:

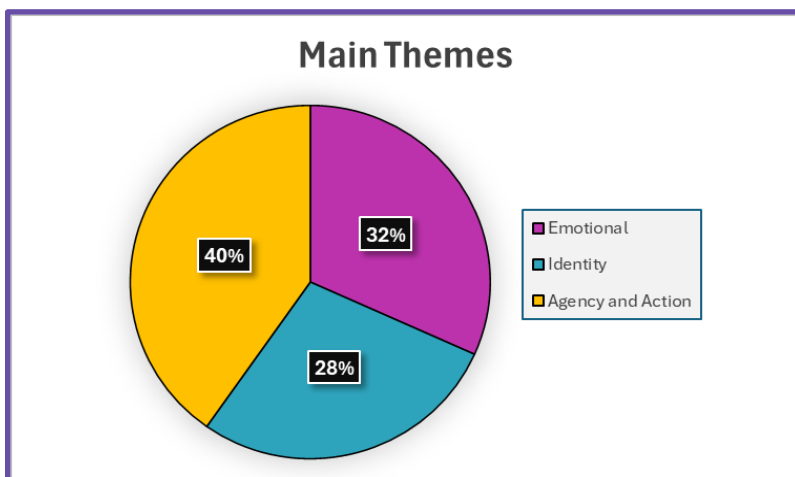


Figure 5.0 - Results for the main narrative themes

The remaining themes within the analysis show that *Emotional* and *Identity* are of similar percentages. We as Parent Champions feel that whilst there were more *Emotional* responses as opposed to *Identity*, each theme and code served equal importance. Following this, we shared reflections on our evolving sense of identity, including a desire for connection, belonging, and purpose beyond motherhood. This was often realised through our involvement in the Parent Champion network, and can be heard throughout our audio reel, empowering us to become active participants in this collective research project.

During this analysis, we discussed and created subthemes that we felt best suited each identified quote. Within these discussions, we found that there were two subthemes that we felt could not be separated into just one main theme. These were 'Parent Champion reflections' and 'Community' which both fell in the categories of *Emotional* and *Identity*. These subthemes became difficult to place in just one key theme due to their personal nature, the fact that both 'Parent Champion Reflections' and 'Community' are placed at the heart of our involvement within the ABSS programme, and reflect our values and identity as a group. These quotes are demonstrated in Figure 6.0, and represent our feelings of how our discussions have been personal (*Emotional*), and definitive of who we are as Parent Champions (*Identity*), and how they have promoted our own agency (*Agency and Action*):



Figure 6.0 - Quotes from Parent Champion reflections and Community

Although 'Parent Champion reflections' fell in both *Emotional* and *Identity*, accounting for 27% of all responses that were thematically analysed, this did not sit within the significant overall theme of *Agency and Action*. Upon reflection, we feel that this is because it captures the essence of creating our storybooks and audio reel, and although 'Parent Champion Reflections' was placed in two main themes, we feel that these segments of speech have promoted our personal agency and action, aligning with our discussion on how all themes present with equal importance, and assisting in facilitating our overall reflections as Parent Champions.

In continuation, the key theme of *Agency and Action* showed that the subtheme of 'Positive Spaces' was the most significant, with responses relating to a longing for self-expression and recognition, while also valuing the supportive relationships formed through the network of Parent Champions. Therefore, these spaces were not just physical, but also personal ones that allowed us to have positive interactions with people we now value too. An example of this can be our mention of particular people such as the City Family Creche team, Sarah Richer, the Community Hub manager, and the Engagement team at SAVS throughout our discussions:

"I think Rachael did our very last welcome to Parent Champion session where she spoke about what was available within the ABS to Parent Champions. And I think at the end I got Rachael to one side and I said 'Rachael, I actually, I think I might have some form of anxiety, and I think I need help. Can you help me?', where she then referred me to the perinatal Mental Health."

The Community Hub was the space where we all connected, made friends, and completed projects together. These spaces gave us opportunities to show our true selves, who we are as Parent Champions and gave us the potential to give back to the community. Additionally, these spaces were not limited to just ABSS but also extended to areas within the local community. Overall, we feel that this theme was not just defined by the physical space represented, but equally defined by the people present, and the opportunities that arose from them which effectively, will stay with us beyond the ABSS programme. These factors also helped us to recognise the impact we had on the local community, particularly with attending governance meetings, or helping to shape certain aspects of projects in places such as the Community Hub. Therefore, this theme fully represents spaces that have

enabled other parents to have a sense of belonging and community, demonstrating our impact on a larger scale. With this in mind, Figure 7.0 presents all subthemes that were constructed, demonstrating a holistic view on the impact of the ABSS programme on Parent Champions as a collective and how we have impacted the community:

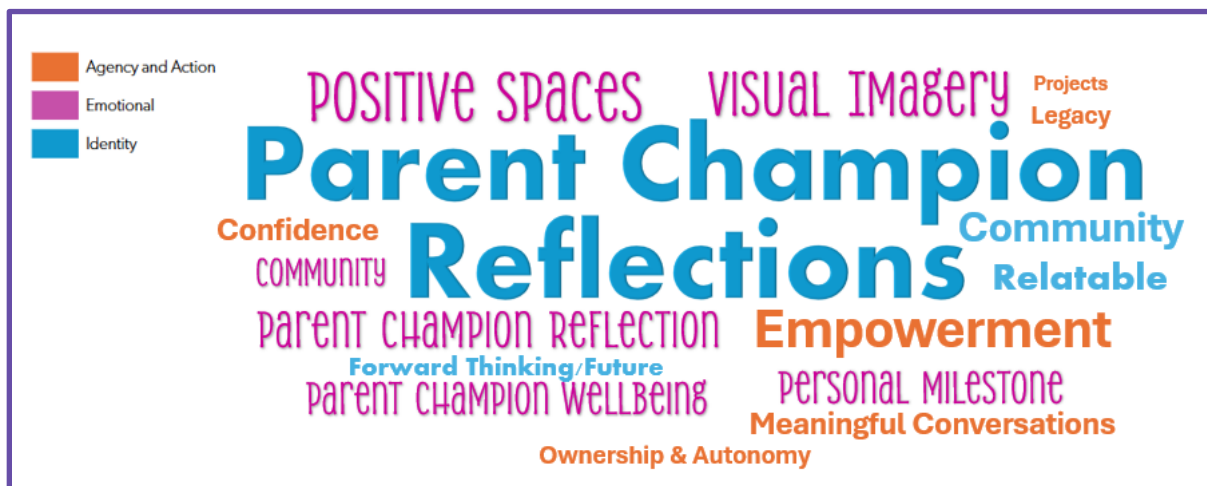


Figure 7.0 - Word cloud representing all subthemes

Finally, the ‘Personal Milestones’ subtheme accounted for 18% of the overall key theme of *Emotional* and although this was not the most significant, we felt it was crucial to define and discuss this further. This theme represented aspects such as overcoming isolation, emotional exhaustion, and the challenges of transitioning between roles (e.g., from work to parenthood), and were pivotal throughout our journeys. Reflecting further, it can be noted that without reaching specific personal milestones, our levels of vulnerability could have been increased, and our confidence not in the same place as it is of presence. The ability to reflect on such personal milestones such as attending university, or having the confidence to speak in front of others, has made us realise our sense of purpose and in turn, the challenges we have overcome both mentally and physically. Overall, the theme of ‘Personal Milestones’ represents our strength and resilience and without these factors, we as Parent Champions would not be where we are today.

In summary, this discussion underscores the profound connection between personal development, emotional resilience, and community involvement, with the Parent Champion experience serving as a catalyst for both individual and collective empowerment. Whilst *Agency and Action* stands as the most significant key theme within this discussion, we feel that each theme is inseparable and that one could not be without the other. Each has served as equal importance in shaping and telling our story with prioritising the quality of each theme over the quantity of responses presented.

Conclusion

The PAR report presented, created a variety of opportunities for us as Parent Champions, to share our reflections and promote our voices within the wider community. Although the overarching themes of *Agency and Action*, *Emotion* and *Identity* were socially constructed as the dominant threads tying this subject matter together, it is the former that has proved to be the most common driver behind our experiences. When reflecting on this report's description on the purpose of Parent Champions, this is perhaps not surprising. If the aim of the Parent Champion initiative was to empower parents to take steps to make a positive impact on their community, it follows that the activities and support facilitated by the SAVS Engagement Team and others would have been designed to help us achieve this goal, and would therefore be apparent in our reflections as we looked back on these experiences and interactions.

Themes of *Emotion* and *Identity* are relatively evenly distributed in our experiences, and while these appear less frequently, they are closely connected to the theme of *Agency and Action* and simultaneously remain as their own distinct themes. This could almost be considered as a progression in the experience of Parent Champions. We often began our recollections describing how we felt at a particular juncture (*Emotion*) and the impact of this emotion on how we saw ourselves (*Identity*), before going on to explain how this motivated some form of change or enterprise (*Action and Agency*). Therefore, *Emotion* and *Identity* can be seen as the foundation upon which *Agency and Action* were able to flourish.

This piece has, in itself, been a continuation of this progression. The process has enabled considerable reflection for everyone involved, as it required that we review and revisit the breadth of our engagement. It has created an opportunity to contemplate the significance of these events on our personal journeys, which we've then been able to channel into a piece which will join the portfolio of ABS's legacy.

In addition, this project is based on the experiences of individuals, which although all unique, share relatable commonalities. It is a powerful testament to the success of the Parent Champion opportunity, embodied in the lives of the contributors to this piece, and the wider network of parents in Southend. Parent Champions have learnt about their community through activities and programmes, celebrated successes through festivals and events, and driven improvement through governance and co-production, helping us reflect on the impact we as a group have had on the wider community. Further to this, we feel strongly that the ABSS programme has benefited us in more ways than one. Noted with the most significant

theme of *Agency and Action*, these benefits go beyond the ABSS programme and will stay with us and our future generations.

We would urge any organisations who were considering introducing a Parent Champion programme or undertaking PAR to seriously contemplate doing so. Its' value could have an immeasurable impact on participants to recognise their abilities, empower others, and produce positive outcomes far beyond that is expected. There is some advice we would offer, such as expecting that the journey might look and feel a little chaotic at times, but that doesn't mean it is not working. Additionally, take the time to build the relationships and understand the dynamics of those involved, as it will be worth it in the long run. Finally, never underestimate the impact it can have on someone to understand that their words have power, value and meaning.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report, we hope you've found some meaningful reflections in our experiences.

References

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2021) *Thematic analysis: a practical guide*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Patterson, W. (2017) 'Doing narrative research', *Sage Research Methods*. London: Sage Publications Ltd, pp. 1-26.

Riessman, C. K. (2007) *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.