

IMPROVING HEALTH LITERACY IN PREGNANT WOMEN FROM EAST LONDON: A CO-PRODUCTION PROJECT

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What is Health Literacy?

It is the ability to access, understand and use information to make informed decisions about health.

Why is it Important?

A higher level of health literacy has a direct link to better health outcomes. Being able to speak the language of a country directly affects your ability to navigate the health system.

What about Pregnancy?

A pregnant woman's health behaviours have a huge impact on the outcomes for them and the developing fetus

Lower health literacy levels in pregnancy have been shown to:

- Increase risk of caesarean birth
- Increase rate of small for gestational age babies
- Lower APGAR scores at 5 minutes of life
- Reduce uptake of vaccinations

Why does speaking English matter in Pregnancy?

- MMBRACE states that 30% of maternal deaths between 2020-2022 were women who were born outside of the UK, and 4% of maternal deaths were women who couldn't speak English.
- A language barrier contributes to poor access, understanding and engagement with the health system

Why East London?

- Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of child poverty in the UK, and is the most deprived borough in London
- 19% of adults in Tower Hamlets cannot speak English and are Bengali/ Sylheti speakers from Bangladesh
- Due to the high levels of non-English speakers and a poor level of health literacy, pregnant women have poorer health outcomes and worse experiences of pregnancy

Our Project

We developed a six week Health Literacy education programme for non-English speaking pregnant women in East London.

This was designed and co-produced with Bengali women, ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) teachers, community researchers, community organisations, visualisers, clinical researchers and medical practitioners.



Each week was delivered in English by Bengali-speaking ESOL teachers, with support from health professionals and a Bengali-speaking community researcher.

The course focused on teaching women about pregnancy while also supporting them to build basic English language skills.

Women made new friends, grew in confidence, were more able to navigate unfamiliar settings, and had their travel costs reimbursed.

'Coming to the course was the best decision...I will carry all the information for life.'

'Now I know all things about pregnancy and I'm feeling more confident about being pregnant.'

'Before I used to be scared with health professionals...But now I am more confident to communicate with them.'

'I made so many friends here and we share a strong bond.'

Key Successes

- We had an exceptionally high attendance and retention rate – 18 women started the course, 14 attended the final session, and average weekly attendance was 84%.
- We coproduced a 'pregnancy handbook' for women to take away which was very well received – women reported 'revising' English phrases and anatomy diagrams at home with their families
- Women formed strong social bonds and reported increased confidence navigating maternity services and communicating with health professionals.

Next Steps

- We plan to expand this health literacy programme locally and nationally
- Our focus is on supporting pregnant women from a wide range of linguistic backgrounds
- The goal is to make health literacy courses for pregnant women part of standard maternity care across the UK

Thank You

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