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For many parents, the idea of finding the right babysitter can present mixed emotions. On the one hand, the idea of a day or evening out without the children can seem exciting, yet on the other hand, the idea of leaving them in the hands of someone you don't know can be a very unnerving thought.

For parents of a severely disabled child, however, finding the right babysitting services can be even more difficult. Complex medical or behavioural needs mean that sitters with the right skills are harder to find, and parents who arguably need a break the most find it the hardest to arrange. That's where Flexicare comes in.

Flexicare (Oxford and Abingdon) is a small, Oxfordshire based charity and has been operating for 35 years. Flexicare provides a free babysitting service for families with a disabled child within a specified catchment area. It was founded by Sue Kenrick who said, "The aim was never to change the world, but to make that one week, perhaps that one day, a little bit easier for that one family".

The charity has a small core staff and a team of volunteers who are trained to care for children with disabilities. This simple service can be life changing for families. Just knowing that there is someone else who can care for their child means that parents can accept invitations if they wish, can give individual attention to a sibling for a precious few hours, or can attend their own medical appointments.

Volunteers support families by babysitting and taking children out. The service is flexible around each family's needs but usually families have two to three sits per month, which allows parents to dedicate time to themselves, to their other children, to rest or attend appointments.

The families supported by Flexicare speak about the importance of the charity's work. A parent says, "they offer a unique service that no-one else does. The volunteers are extremely professional. There can be families who have no other services to access. They do an amazing job." Another parent adds, "Flexicare will look after my son or they will take my daughters out. They will even take all three out. They will even come swimming with me. What they provide for me has been invaluable."

Flexicare is always looking for volunteer babysitters to continue providing this support to families. Volunteers can come from a variety of backgrounds; some have been nurses or special education teachers, some have had disabled children or grandchildren of their own, others don't have any obviously relevant past experience but they do have a healthy dose of common sense and a desire to be of help. Whatever experience a volunteer brings with them, Flexicare enhances it with regular training, and we then carefully match up families and volunteers to ensure that sitters and families are equally confident that the children will be very well looked after.

Naomi is a volunteer for Flexicare. She said " I was a Flexicare child and now I volunteer. It is easy to fit in and it really makes a difference to the families".

This article was developed in partnership with the Volunteer Centre at OCVA. If you would like a feature about your **community group, charity or social enterprise** in the Voluntary Voice section of the Oxford Times please email: vol@ocva.org.uk