

For parents caring for a poorly child Christmas can be yet another thing to worry about. CHRISTINE FLEMING reports on one charity's efforts to support these families through the festive period – and all year round

Easing the burden for families

With Christmas fast approaching many parents will find themselves worrying about finding the perfect present for their children and making sure they stock up on enough food to feed a small army.

But for some parents the stresses associated with the run up to the festive season will be even more intense, as it adds to the daily strain they already face looking after an ill child.

According to the Association for Children's Palliative Care, there are an estimated 25,000 families across the UK caring for a child who has been diagnosed with a potentially terminal illness.

For these families Christmas may simply mean another time of year when already stretched financial budgets are pushed to the limit.

Kew-based charity React helps families who are looking after ill children at home, and are on low incomes and reliant on support benefits because one or both parents are unable to work as they are caring for their child.

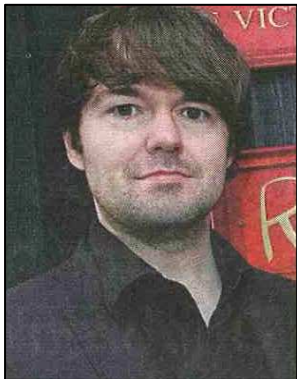
React provides essential items these families could otherwise not afford by responding to specific requests for help that have been endorsed by medical professionals.

React's Project Development Manager David Barnett, 33, said the charity had helped provide a range of items in the past.

He said: "It costs about three times more to bring up a potentially terminally ill child than a healthy one."

"In the past we have provided specialist car seats and tricycles, oxygen equipment, and sensory play equipment."

David said the charity's work



Easing the burden: Project Development Manager David Barnett Deadlinepix RT53957

was also about being there for families, as he had seen how coping with a sick child affected families in many different ways during his seven years at the charity.

He said: "Families cope in different ways, [it can be] very difficult emotionally and physically."

"It can be a huge strain and a lot of people give up other parts of their lives as their child is ill."

"Some people are very polite and others get very upset and angry but they are all coping in very difficult conditions."

The main aim of React, which was founded in 1989 and officially registered as a charity in 1990, is to improve the quality of life for children with potentially life-limiting illnesses, by providing financially disadvantaged families with the specialist care, and equipment, they need.

They can also help parents with travel funds for hospital visits and provide respite in one of their eight static holiday caravans.



Happy to help: Trust officer Rachel Wheeler, Charlotte Skilling and family liaison officer Alex Robins Deadlinepix RT53957

Born out of founder Irving Young's compassion for terminally ill children, React tries to help make life a little bit easier for families.

Irving writes on the charity's website: "There seemed to be little or no support for families caring for children who were literally 'born to die'."

"Often, families who are financially disadvantaged are unable to afford the necessary care and equipment and yet it is important we allow them to keep their dignity and not make them feel uncomfortable about seeking help."

Working with medical professionals involved in the field of paediatrics, the charity responds to identified needs supplying equipment like

specialist wheelchairs, beds, and mobility aids, as well as everyday items like washing machines and tumble dryers.

Family liaison officer Alex Robins, 26, said the number of people applying for React's help was growing each year and the charity was grateful for all the local support they received.

He said: "At the moment we respond to 135 applications a month and by the end of October we had had 1,355 applications this year."

"We award money straight away so families get the support they need straight away, but the bad thing is this means if we don't have any more money coming in we may not be able to help immediately."

"We have many volunteers

who are locally based and have a ladies committee and prominent members of the Richmond community who get friends together and host events. "Mostly the local area are supporting us in that way which is great."

"The most important thing is we're helping the children."

"It can be surprising how big a difference even a small item can make to a family and a child's life."

□ To find out how you can help React, go to reactcharity.org or call 020 8940 2575.

Has React helped you? Comment on this story online at rttimes.co.uk



Grateful: Katie Stapelhurst and her daughter Millie Deadlinepix RT53985

We couldn't have done it without React

Katie Stapelhurst, 22, said React was incredibly supportive when they helped her two years ago.

Katie, who gave up work to look after her daughter Millie, found herself in difficulty when she had to travel across the country, and live at Birmingham Hospital for several weeks, while her daughter waited for a lifesaving liver and intestine transplant.

React stepped in to help Katie, of Fulmer Close, Hampton, when she contacted them asking for help with the additional costs that came from looking after her sick child in hospital. She said: "We were in Birmingham

children's hospital and one of the social workers came round and told us about React. I found out we actually lived very close to the charity [when we were at home in Hampton] so I sent an application form and got some money from them."

"Millie had been in hospital long term so I just needed help for living costs really as I was out of work at the time and only had a tiny amount of money coming in."

Millie, who is now three, had been transferred from London to Birmingham so she could have a lifesaving transplant operation to replace her liver and intestines.

Her organs progressively deteriorated since she was born with gastroschisis, a genetic birth defect that meant her stomach developed on the outside of her body.

Luckily, Millie reached the top of the transplant list before she got too ill and she was able to undergo the essential operation.

Katie said: "Millie is doing really well now [and] our lives are getting back on track."

"I would recommend React, they really helped, [and] they've even called a couple of times since just to see how Millie is getting on."