

Music thru' play at Footsteps Nursery



Why did we feel it was important to implement Music thru' Play at Footsteps Nursery?

Footsteps Nursery had been successful in securing funding from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) for an eighteen month project which targets local authorities with the most disadvantaged areas.

Our Parents as Partners in Early Learning Project piloted an innovative approach to working with parents and children aged 0 to 5 years; increasing parents' understanding and involvement in their children's development by using music as a way of fostering a wide variety of developmental skills. The funding allowed the nursery to employ an early years music specialist who is trained in Kodaly Early Years Music Education. This particular approach to music is based on singing; by starting with singing at the earliest possible age our aim was to make singing a natural part of their everyday lives.

How we got started

The project started with parents being invited to meet with the early years music teacher who used the opportunity to share with them the developmental benefits of introducing singing and music making at an early age. The invitations to the session were colourful and informative; we made the decision to hand them to parents personally. Places were limited and we felt that this was an incentive for interested parents to come forward. We developed clear links between Music thru' Play at Footsteps Nursery and the EYFS six areas of learning; in particular, communication, language and literacy. We shared with parents the importance of children being able to recognise and explore beat as a pre-reading skill.

We felt the following points encouraged our parents to attend the sessions:

- When we use the term parent we are using 'shorthand'. The term refers to all the important adults in the child's life, (Whally, M. 1997) We made it quite clear to the parents that it need not be themselves attending with the child and indeed we had many different grandparents, aunties and friends joining in.
- Well thought out invitations outlining clear learning outcomes for the children.
- Personal invitations from staff gave parents a clear message, 'we really want you to join in.' They took time to link the benefits of the sessions to individual children, drawing on personal knowledge and observations.
- A familiar member of staff attended the sessions every week, creating a familiar relaxed atmosphere and a tool which enabled us to cascade the approach to other staff and embedded the approach into the day to day routine of the nursery.
- Parents received a copy of all the songs and rhymes used during each session in order for them to use them at home.
- A DVD of the session was also made available for parents and children to watch and sing along to at home.

What Happened

We had between twelve and eight families attend the sessions every week. Gabrielle, the music teacher, introduced a variety of carefully structured sessions which comprised of song and rhyme, stories, play and relaxation. She also introduced the children to live music; she plays like an angel, the children were truly mesmerised and inspired. Parents soon shed any inhibitions they had and were soon joining in the action songs and rhymes and sharing the children's delight in the stories which were creatively read and sung by Gabrielle. The member of staff attending the sessions was also inspired and this had a positive effect on the music sessions in nursery as children were encouraged to use well known songs and rhymes in order to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings.



Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners

Parents were very keen to spend time at the end of the session sharing valuable accounts of how activities in the previous session had impacted on their child.

'I often hear Lewis singing the songs from Music thru Play as he plays with his toys at home'

'Ally's ability to concentrate when she is playing with her little figures at home seems to be better; I also hear her singing to them.'

'Sophie sings as she skips when out on walks.'

'Out of all the toys in Early Learning Centre he wanted a recorder and would not leave until we bought him one, he is driving us mad!'

What we have learned

'Parents and professionals can help children separately or they can work together to the greater benefit of the children' (Athey, C 1990)

This project taught everyone involved that the basic principles of working in partnership with parents are based on respect, honesty and trust.

Individual, personal approaches work best. Parents and carers are very often nervous about joining a group situation for the first time.

Having the additional funding to employ a professional early years music teacher inspired parents, children and staff as well as ensuring that the sessions were delivered at a very high standard.

Most parents were keen to engage in conversations about their child's development. To make the project work the key member of staff supporting the sessions had to believe in what we were doing.

Challenges and Dilemmas

It was important to set ground rules; initially some parents would have been happy to sit on the periphery and chat while the music teacher and the member of staff interacted with the children.

Possibilities and Opportunities

Now the PPEL funding has come to an end we are keen to seek additional funding to continue the original project as well as building in extra funding to allow the music teacher

to work in nursery one morning per week to develop and extend opportunities for all children in nursery.



Outcomes

- **Parents** became more aware of the benefits of engaging in song and rhyme sessions with their children and the links to other areas of learning, in particular CLL.
- **Children** demonstrated deeper levels of engagement and concentration and became excited and enthusiastic about the sessions.
- **Practitioners** developed skills which enabled them to cascade the approach throughout the nursery.

2. 'What a load of rubbish!' Involving parents in heuristic play

Why did we feel 'the time was right' to involve parents in moving on from Treasure Baskets to Heuristic Play?

Following on from the notion of the Treasure Basket first pioneered by Elinor Goldschmied (1) we decided to investigate the implementation of Heuristic Play with six mobile babies, practitioners and parents from a city Day Nursery. We hoped this would be an excellent way of involving parents and give them an understanding of how heuristic play can support children's development.

How we got started and key issues to consider

- Acknowledging that babies are complex and challenging beings and they should be given as many opportunities as possible to develop
- Plan meetings for both parents and practitioners to share ideas and information
- Obtain a copy of Elinor Goldschmied's video 'Infants at Work' (3) and share with parents.
- Understand and explore the complete meaning of the word 'Heuristic' – discovery and sensory play.
- Support parents and practitioners to recognise the 'holistic' nature of development and learning by looking at the Early Years Foundation Stage document.
- Obtain parent's permission for the use of observations and photographs
- Give parents and practitioners a list of objects to collect for the sessions
- Storage of equipment when collected
- Health and Safety Issues.
- Practitioners to look at relevant observation sheets
- Discuss Schemas (4) in greater detail, as these observations would enable practitioners and parents to follow the babies' interests.

What Happened

We sent letters out to the parents explaining our objectives, together with consent letters for using observations and photographs in the nursery. Lists of objects to collect, and invitations to our first meeting together with other dates for sessions planned. Objects started coming in together with ideas for storing, bags were found and bought. The room for these sessions was chosen; it had to be in a quiet part of the nursery so that the babies were not distracted. Time for these sessions also had to be arranged, following the recommendations in Goldschmied's book, the babies had to be happy, fed and not tired.



Setting up indoors



Setting up outdoors

The parents started to watch their children playing at home with objects not conventional toys, and they started understanding the importance of discovery and exploration at this stage of the babies' development. The meetings on schemas and observations progressed very well, and our first session with the babies took place. This was an amazing session. The babies were excited and enthusiastic and performed exactly like the babies on the video, in fact better!! Observations and photographs were collected to be shown to the parents and practitioners who could not be present at the first session.

This Schema is called 'rotation'. (Manning, Morton and Thorp, 2001) describe this as enjoying spinning round, love anything round, love anything with wheels.



What we have learned

Parents were very willing to take part and support us in this project and we have realised that parents are interested in their babies' development and interests and we have formed an amazing two-way partnership. The parents were amazed at the babies' skills and were very proud when the babies' achievements and photographs were displayed on a special board in the entrance of the nursery for other family members to come and see. The practitioners have learned to observe the children using schemas and follow and record the babies' interests.

Challenges and Dilemmas

Be patient, projects like this take time to develop and become part of daily practice.

Possibilities and Opportunities

- All those involved agree that this project has too much value to end here. The long-term aim is to spread this practice to future parents of babies in our setting and also promote this good practice to other settings in our area.
- Heuristic Play is a simple idea but very effective
- This project was a good way of raising parents' self-confidence. It was highly inclusive.

Outcomes

- **Parents** had a deeper understanding of their baby's skills and so were able to support learning at home more effectively.
- **Children** were excited and enthused to engage in discovery and exploratory play.
- **Practitioners** have developed a more effective way of observing the babies and involving parents.

References

1. Goldschmied, E and Jackson, S (2004) *People Under Three, Young Children in Day Care, 2nd Edition, Routledge.*
2. Goldschmied, E (London 1987), *Infants at Work, (VIDEO), London, National Children's Bureau.*
3. Athey, C, (1990) *Extending Thought in Young Children, A Parent Teacher Partnership. London: Paul Chapman.*

3. Practitioners visiting children and their parents in the home

Why did we feel it was important to carry out Home Visits?

Even before the child has started at the setting, we feel it is important to form a partnership with parents and encourage them to be involved in their child's learning and development. Parental involvement in their child's education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement.

"The School and parents both have crucial roles to play." (1)

We are a Nursery School in an area of high deprivation and we found that parents often feel apprehensive about their child starting school, wondering what will be expected of them. Some parents can feel intimidated themselves especially if they have had a negative experience of school as a child. The key person and another staff member carry out a Home Visit before the child starts school.

The main aims of carrying out a Home Visit

- For practitioners to meet parents and their child in a familiar environment
- To begin building positive relationships, showing mutual respect and gaining trust
- To ease the transition from home to school by exchanging relevant information to help meet the needs and interests of the child
- To answer any questions and help allay any fears or concerns parent a may have

'It was a good opportunity to meet some of L's teachers that would be working with her within our own environment. This visit made us all feel at ease; it was useful to hear about things that she would be doing.'
Mum

What Happened

When we carry out a Home Visit, we take along a book of photographs showing the nursery facilities and some of the activities the child will be able to do in school. By showing the children these it often helps to 'break the ice' and put the child more at ease and encourages them to communicate with the practitioners. Sometimes the child is a little reluctant to talk and first nods, points at the photos or smiles, whilst others are happy to chat openly about what they might like to do, others feel more comfortable looking at the photos with their parent rather than the practitioner.

The school staff have a consistent approach to collecting information about each child.

During the Home Visit the practitioner takes along a questionnaire which they can complete with the parent which covers different aspects of the child's development.

This enables the parents to talk about any concerns they may have about their child and share their interests. We find it enables us to gain some understanding about how the parent perceives their child and if they anticipate any problems their child may have when settling into school. Parents sometimes see their child very differently from how she/ he is perceived by the practitioner. Therefore it is invaluable to build as full a picture as possible about the child before they start school and gain the views of the parents.

'It allowed my child to talk one to one with their 'key worker/s' and feel more confident when attending nursery because she was familiar with staff. Photographs and talking about what happens during a school day encouraged her to 'look forward' to starting nursery. She was excited to start and aware of the types of activities she could take part in.'
Mum

We find the Home Visit gives the practitioner a valuable insight into the child's home life, family relationships and practices, cultures and interests and the role they play within it. Children often share a favourite toy or are proud to show off younger siblings or the family pet. Seeing a child in his or her own environment enables the practitioner to have more meaningful conversations with the child, meet their individual needs and enhance their learning as they settle into school. We find that children often refer to the Home Visit when making early approaches to the practitioner at school, seeming to find reassurance and delight in their key person having been their guest on their home territory.

'The staff benefitted from asking questions about my son. This helped them to understand his needs and where he was in his learning development.'

Mum

'Didn't you come to my house and see my dogs'
Child



What we have learned

Building up a partnership with parents and sharing information before the child starts school is so valuable. It enables us to meet their individual needs and interests from the earliest opportunity whatever their gender, ethnicity, home language, special educational/ medical needs, disability or ability.

Things to consider

- The Home Visit should be pre-arranged with enough time allocated
- Always consider personal safety. For example have a mobile phone with you at all times, leave a record of where you are visiting with your colleagues and visit in pairs if possible
- Make sure you take something for the child to look at or play with
- Introduce yourself, be friendly, relaxed and sensitive when entering the home
- Be prepared to listen to parents and children carefully and follow up what they say and ask
- Following the visit, keep a short written record

Outcomes

- **Parents** exchange information with practitioners more readily when they are in the privacy of their own home within surroundings familiar to themselves.
- **Children** find the transition from home to school much smoother and they tend to settle more quickly.
- **Practitioners** are able to begin supporting the learning, development and specific individual needs of each child from the earliest opportunity.

References

1. The Impact of Parental Involvement in Children's Education – DCSF 2008)

4. Involving Parents in Assessment of children's learning

Why did we feel it was important to involve parents in the assessment process of their children?

St. Mary's Catholic Primary School is located in Kells, Whitehaven. It is a small primary school with 146 children on roll plus nursery. Our school is located in an area of high social and economic deprivation.

As we embraced the EYFS it was clear that a key feature of making our approach successful was to recognise and value the role of parents in their child's learning as their first educators from birth (DCSF).

What we hoped to achieve

We always chat to parents and children as they come into and leave school but as it's usually a quick exchange of information. We wanted to provide a more focused opportunity to create a dialogue where parents felt that they could pass on what they had noticed in how their child was progressing. We also hoped to include parents' views of their child in our assessment procedures and use their evidence to support their learning journey.

How we got started

The Early Years Foundation Stage staff collaborated and came up with the idea of a booklet which would provide parents with information of activities we were doing at school so that they could talk to their child about what they had been learning about:

- This would be sent home at the beginning of each topic with information linked to both adult directed activities and planned continuous provision.
- A space for parents to add photographs or notes on their child's responses or actions as a result of chatting to them about what they had done at school.
- The activities for the week would be displayed on the Parent's Notice Board so that parents knew which activity to refer to in their booklet.
- A space for parents to note any general information or interests their child was showing.
- The booklet would then be brought back and given to the child's Key Person at the end of the topic.

Consultation process

We wanted to find out what parents thought about this and so held a meeting to discuss our ideas. We explained the booklet and the parents were really enthusiastic to give it a go saying how they would look forward to getting a different response than "I don't know" when asking about their child's day at school! As part of a stay and play session we showed the parents their child's Learning Journey record with examples of photographs, annotated work and observations which we already had. This proved very useful as the parents used this as a point of reference to know what their observations would look like.

What Happened

As the parents got to grips with the booklet, some asked questions and some brought in their booklets as they went along for reassurance. At the end of the topic we got the majority of the booklets back with some really useful observations, notes and photographs of how the children had responded at home.

What we have learned

Parents have shown much more confidence in talking about what their child has learnt at school and now have the ability to ask specific questions to their child such as "Did you enjoy bathing the babies in the water tray today?" rather than "What did you do at school today?"

Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners



Extract from L's Dinosaur topic booklet, written by his Mum: 'L has been asking a lot of questions lately about the weather – "Why does it rain/snow?"' (evidence towards KUW 5) We decided to visit the library and see if we could find out using information books. While we were at the library L also looked at dinosaur information books. He found the contents page (without any coaxing from me), he told me this was the contents page and the numbers mean what page you will find different information on.' (evidence towards R8)

Links to assessment

The booklets have been a valuable source of information and evidence particularly for children who are quieter at school than at home. We have been able to use the information from parents alongside our own observations to both consolidate our knowledge about the children but also, and more importantly, providing us with evidence that we would not have otherwise had.

Challenges and Dilemmas

We had lots of parents asking "Is this OK?" and requests for confirmation that what they were doing was correct. However once they knew that they were on the right lines they even began supporting and giving each other ideas of how they had gathered evidence!

Possibilities and Opportunities

- To develop our "Stay and Play" sessions so that parents are actively involved in their children's learning at school and see how we make observations on their children.
- Some parents have told us they would like weekly booklets and others prefer to know about the topic all in one go and we hope to develop a choice for parents.
- Sending out booklets via email for parents to complete and return electronically.

Outcomes

- **Parents** felt more informed and involved in what their child was doing at school as the links between home and school became stronger.
- **Children** became involved in their own assessment as they shared their Learning Journey Records with their key person and their parents. They enjoyed seeing all their important people, from home and school, contribute to a record all about them!
- **Practitioners** were able to use the parent's knowledge of their child as part of their assessment to inform future planning thus meeting the needs of the children more effectively.

5. Using 'All About Me' booklets

Why did we feel it was important to use 'All about me' booklets to build positive relationships with the child and their families?

We are a private day nursery, registered for 37 children from 6 months to school age. The majority of parents work and some grandparents can play an active role in the care of their grandchildren. With the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage we wanted to build 'Positive Relationships' with the child and family, which were meaningful and successful.

We felt as practitioners we needed a better understanding of people who were important to the child giving us a holistic view of the family, recognising and valuing the contribution of parent's as the child's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's learning and development (1).

How we got started

- Introduced the 'All about me' booklets at a staff meeting, it was important that everyone contributed to this idea and that everyone's views were listened to and considered fairly.
- It had to be a visual record, bright and colourful that could be easily shared with the child and their 'Key Person' and most importantly could be used with the under 2's.
- The booklet needed to provide us with vital information that would assist in helping the child settle into nursery during the transitional period from home to nursery e.g. favourite toys, likes and dislikes as well as meal times and sleep times.
- A letter was sent to all parents/carers explaining the benefits of the 'All about me' booklets and how and why we wanted them to contribute.
- The costs were low as we were using materials we already had, white A4 paper, photocopying and laminating sheets.

What happened?

We had a fantastic response with parents/carers sending in completed sheets with photographs of family members, pets etc. Some chose to write the information rather than use photographs which was fine and others sent in lots of photographs which filled additional sheets!

We provided the front cover with the child's name, date of birth and a photograph. The individual sheets were laminated for durability and were hung at child height in the respective rooms; the Baby Room chose to place theirs in a large open wicker basket at floor level that was within reach of all babies. It was very important that they were easily accessible and not filed away on a shelf and never looked at again.

The timescale was approximately 6 weeks from start to finish; this was a huge task initially as we needed to target all the children who were attending nursery at that time. We have a system now in which the introductory letter and 'All about me' booklet is sent out to the parents when they register their child at the nursery.



An example of a photograph from one of the booklets.

Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners

'The 'All about me' booklets have really helped when settling a child into nursery; he is excited when he sees a photograph of his mum.'
Practitioner

'It is a great reminder of a child's interests.'
Practitioner

'Our child thoroughly enjoys looking at and talking about photographs at home; this I feel is due to the 'All about me' booklets.'
Parent

What we have learned

We have gained an insight into the child's 'world' and who is important to them and the make-up of the family unit, we are valuing the child and their family for who they are, this is invaluable in building relationships with children and their families. We also offer a home visit to families once they register their child at nursery, not all families are comfortable with practitioners coming into their home environment.

The 'All about me' booklets are giving us that valuable information. The children love to find their own booklets to share and talk about the photographs with their 'Key Person' helping them to feel happy and secure. On many occasions practitioners have observed children sharing their 'All about me' booklets with their peers, giving lots of opportunities for interaction with others helping to build friendships.

Challenges and Dilemmas

Keeping the 'All about me' booklets updated as the child progresses through nursery, this is important as the family unit may change e.g. arrival of a new baby. We need to encourage parents to bring in photographs that can be added to the booklets, keeping them right up to date, to maintain children's interests.

Possibilities and Opportunities

- Make individual photograph books following an interest of a child. Parents often share photographs with us of a visit to a wildlife park, autumn walk etc. these are laminated and hung at child height encouraging further communication.
- Parents visit nursery on a regular basis helping with outings, Christmas parties etc. we would look at photographing parents within the nursery environment.
- Topic related booklets could be put together with children actually using the nursery camera and taking photographs of their favourite activities within nursery.

Outcomes

- **Parents** felt valued and affirmed within the setting
- **Children** could share photographs of the family and their interests with peers and their key person providing re-assurance
- **Practitioners** gained a more holistic view of the child and family enabling them to support the children more effectively

References

1. D.C.S.F. The Early years Foundation Stage 2008



6. Developing 'Stay and Play'

Why did we feel it was important to involve parents in 'Stay and Play' sessions?

We are an independent nursery attached to a Children's Centre, which is set in a small pocket of socio economic deprivation within an affluent area and as such have a wide variety of parents/carers. We wanted to reach some parents who had limited involvement at the nursery and build up some shared thinking in relation to daily communication and what is appropriate 'play'.

'Children's behaviour and their development are not changed directly by social class or poverty. Children are affected by the attitudes, experiences and stresses that reach them through their parents, and other important adults in their lives'. (1)

By setting up 'stay and play' sessions we hoped to:

- Attract a mix of parents/carers and share the value of messy play for young children.
- Share the concept of play and the learning opportunities that this type of session could engage children in.
- We also hoped to attract other parents/carers from the local area to come into the setting and have fun with their children, to see the work the nursery did within the community.

Our ultimate aim was to allow adults and children to have fun together within a safe environment with knowledgeable practitioners leading the play through modelling and example.

How we got started

In the first instance we included a section on our questionnaires to parents/carers on whether they would like to be involved in 'stay and play' sessions to be run at weekends, to allow working parents/carers to attend. Of the questionnaires that were returned a majority thought this a good idea.

We held a staff meeting to discuss:

- Principles behind the 'stay and play' sessions and what we hoped to achieve. A theme for the session messy play was agreed.
- Staff who were willing to work 3 hours at the weekend.
- A date was set and the details put in the nursery newsletter; fliers given to each parent and notices put up on each door in nursery.
- Staff with contacts within the community put posters up on neighbourhood notice boards and in local shops. (See attached flier).

Due to the community/parenting links the setting was trying to develop, the Children's Centre offered to fund resources and refreshments and it was agreed to charge a small fee to support staffing costs. A member of the Children Centre staff opened up the community room on the morning of the session to serve refreshments to the families involved this helped to develop links with the Children Centre.

What happened?

We began the session at 10am, but staff came in at 9.30 to set up all the activities both indoors and outdoors. The session proved to be a hit as parents' inhibitions fell away and they began playing in the shaving foam and jelly, making models with the play dough etc. They seemed to be having as much fun as the children. The nursery staff modelled vocabulary, activities and questioning to enhance play and learning. They also allowed time for parents/carers to chat with others and develop new friendships and relationships. Staff obtained written permission to take photos to help promote future sessions and to create a display in the nursery.



Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners

'It's reassuring to see the staff interactions with the children, as you don't get a true picture when dropping off and picking them up. The staff on duty this morning were very pleasant and brilliant with the children'
Parent

'I had lots of fun thank you'
Child



'It has been great to get to know the parents better of the children I care for, with friendly chats in a relaxed fun environment, I have really enjoyed this morning'.
Practitioner

What we have learned

We have learned that if you are willing as a setting to put the time and effort into developing new ways of creating bonds and relationships with parents then both staff and families will reap the rewards. We have developed better relationships with these families on a professional and friendly basis. New children have begun to attend the setting as result of this session. Families aren't as anxious about leaving their child as they have seen first hand how caring and professional the staff are. Parents/carers have learnt how much fun messy play is and how much children learn and achieve whilst having fun

Challenges and Dilemmas

- Targeting specific families
- Changing parents/carers attitudes towards play
- Getting staff to give up their own family time

Possibilities and Opportunities

- For sessions to become more frequent and build up the numbers attending
- To allow parents to discuss any other needs they feel nursery could help with, in a relaxed situation, not rushing in to drop off and pick up children
- To try and obtain funding for other family partnership ideas such as behaviour management training



Outcomes

- **Parent's** had a greater understanding of how valuable 'play' is for a child's learning and development.
- **Children's** emotional well being and sense of security was enhanced by seeing the positive relationships developing between the important people in their lives.
- **Practitioners** got to know parents better and developed a greater understanding and respect of their important role in the children's lives.

References

1. Lindon J (2005) Understanding Child Development pg 248, Hodder Arnold, London

7. Involving Parents through 'Focus Weeks'

Why we felt it was important to extend our links with parents?

We are a nursery school welcoming children from a wide range of backgrounds. We develop strong links with parents to involve them in their children's learning and are aware that they possess a wealth of skills and knowledge which we seek to encourage them to share with our children through our themed 'focus weeks'. These weeks not only strengthen the relationships with parents and further develop their own child's well-being but also enable us to provide additional opportunities for all children.

How we got started

For several years we have organised a focus week during the summer term when we concentrate all activities and experiences on a theme. We use the skills and knowledge of staff, parents, family members and people from the community to provide as many opportunities as possible. We began many years ago by holding a music week and have continued with arts and crafts week, food week, textiles week and most recently an activity week. We planned the experiences to build across the week and incorporated all the talents we were offered. For example in our food week we focused on different types of food on different days and finished the week with a barbecue in the garden to which parents were invited.

Parents helping with the BBQ!



A parent painting henna designs

What happened?

The weeks have been very successful with much parental involvement and fun and enthusiasm amongst children. The parents have shared with the children a wide variety of experiences and skills such as felt making, cooking, photography and henna painting.

If appropriate we produced a display so all parents could see the exciting events of the week or they have linked with other projects, for example the textile project 'Wool is my Bread' or displays for the County Show.

Parents felting skills helped with this creation





Parent help with photography skills



Parent help with ceramic collage work.



*Mosaic patterns for an outside table
(cable drum)*

What we have learned

The weeks have strengthened our relationships with parents and provided a valuable opportunity to involve parents in the children's learning. With the various skills and talents we have been able to access we have provided many additional experiences for our children. Most importantly it has been a really enjoyable week for all!

Challenges and Dilemmas

- Parents need staff support while working with children.
- The week needs to be flexibly arranged to accommodate parents' commitments.

Possibilities and Opportunities

Until now we have decided on a theme and then asked for support from parents. We could ask parents for their ideas about the focus for the week.

Outcomes

Parents who become involved have a much stronger relationship with staff. They have increased understanding of the opportunities we provide for children, how we support learning and how children make connections and learn.

Children have had increased experiences and opportunities for learning due to the interests, skills and talents of parents. The well-being of children whose parents share their skills is very well supported.

Practitioners have learned from these opportunities and have new ideas and skills to support future learning. Our relationship with parents is strengthened and we can build on the parents increased understanding to continue their involvement in their child's learning in the future.



8. Case Study on the Dadzone Infant Joy Project

Why did we feel it was important to involve fathers and male carers?

Bram Longstaffe Nursery School opened in 1939, as Barrow Island Nursery. The nursery is in an area of significant social disadvantage with high unemployment.

In 2003 it expanded, offering care for children 3 months to 8 years and in April 2005 it was designated as a Children's Centre and now operates as a Children's Centre and Nursery School.

The centre is determined to involve parents and support families through its work and staff quickly try to develop relationships with families through strategies such as home visiting, shared learning groups and a variety of daily activities.

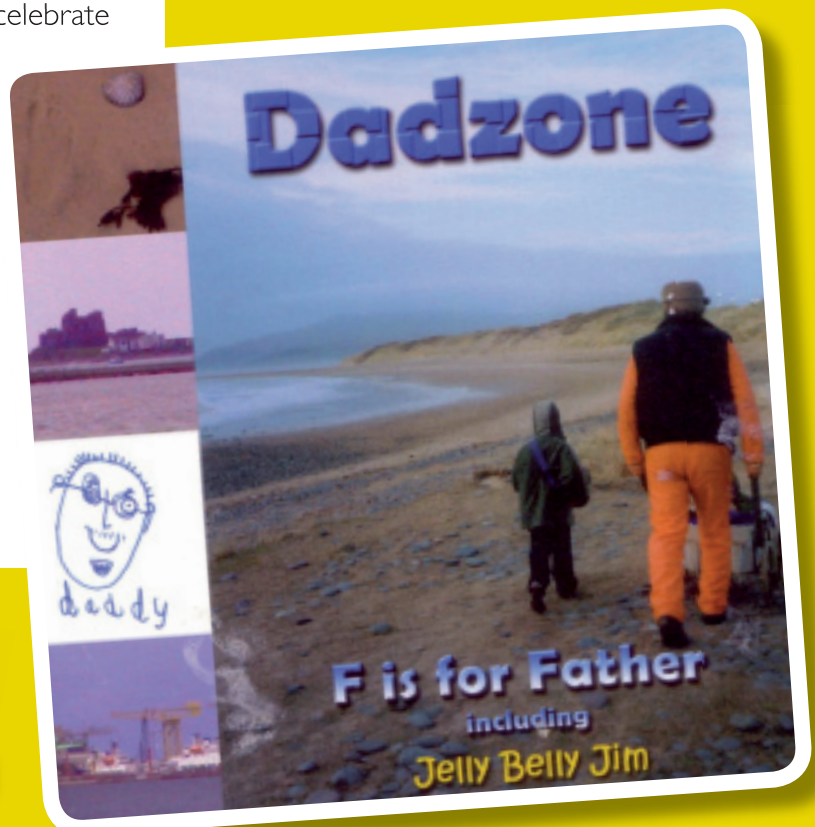
How we got started

- In 1999, under the Early Excellence programme extra funding became available which meant the existing roles of some staff could be made more flexible to create new opportunities to work with families.
- Male staff recognised the negative media portrayal of the father figure and wanted to offer an alternative through celebrating fatherhood. A 'Dadzone' could provide role models for children, teenagers and young male adults – a positive image.
- Research showed that children who grow up with strong father figures are less likely to get into crime, take drugs; grow up with mental health problems or struggle to form relationships.
- Staff considered what sort of activities would encourage male carers to become involved.

Dadzone

Dadzone Infant Joy project came about to celebrate fatherhood through the recording and distribution of a lullaby CD to new born babies in Barrow. Rehearsal sessions were offered to all male carers of whom the centre was aware. These were held "out of hours" in an attempt to give a greater number of men the opportunity to participate. Initially 14 men were involved. Under the guidance of a professional musician the CD was recorded in a local recording studio. Distribution organised through the health visitor packs to new born babies in Barrow.

The only way to get him to take part in anything would be if it involves music!
Comment from a mum regarding her husband



Comments from the involved males

'I thoroughly enjoyed the weekend and it was great that my son could be involved along the way'

'I was pleased to take the opportunity to meet other dads'

'...wouldn't have missed it'

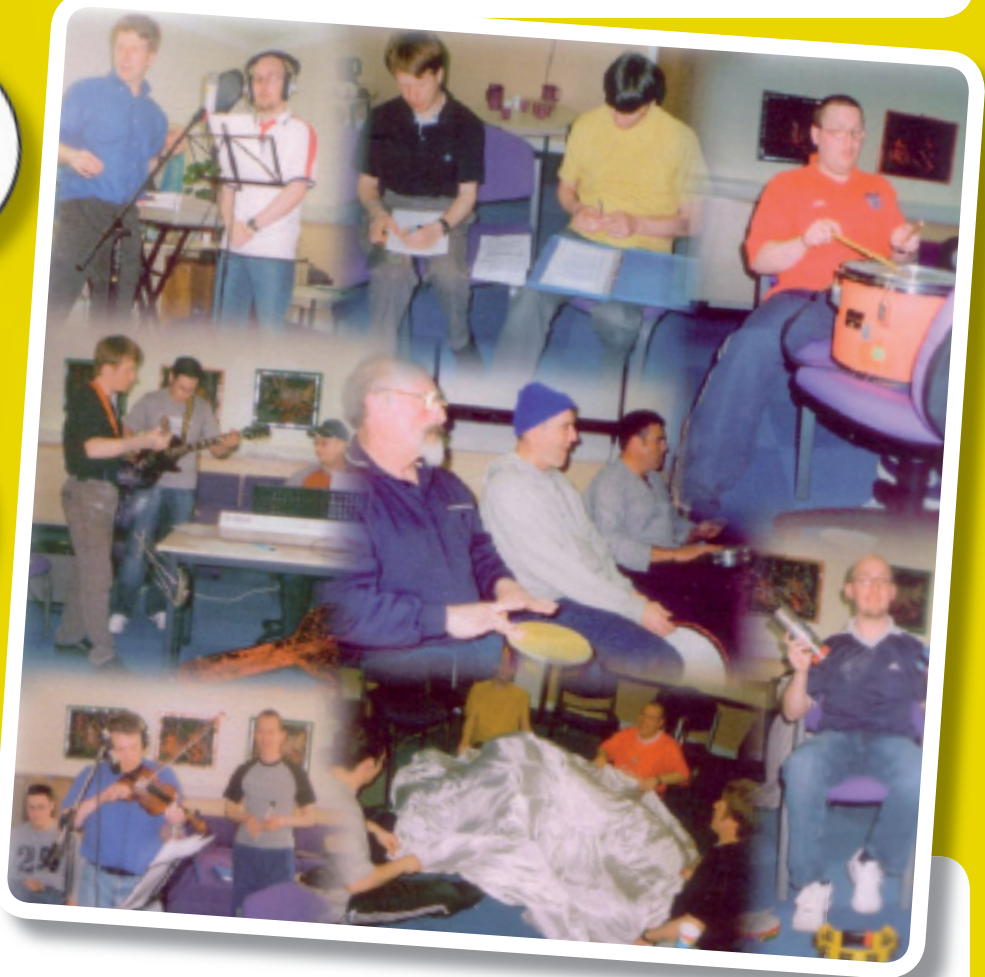
'My kids loved the idea that I was making a record – they think I'm a pop star'

'at the start of each newborn life we are all exactly the same. People are not born bad and to make sure we don't turn out bad in later life we need a good family to give us a sure start.'

Where next

This was perceived as a one off project but a small group of fathers approached staff to ask "what's next then?" The project grew and since then has maintained its informal and sociable support for fathers and male carers. More recent projects include:

- Song boxes to be loaned out to families (similar to story sacks).
- Performing live to support community events.
- Work with Age Concern and local schools to bridge the generation gap.
- Song writing, 'Reflections of Fatherhood' and children's songs 'Jelly Belly Jim'
- Raising money for Children in Need, through producing and selling a Christmas CD.
- Recording story tapes for the nursery and recording parents reading their children's favourite stories for the times they can't be there.
- Part funding training for fathers e.g. for the adults helping in physical education programme.



Outcomes

- **Male carers:** Are now engaging more regularly to work in partnership with practitioners to support their children's learning.
- **Children:** Have more opportunities for sustained engagement with their male carer within the centre.
- **Practitioners:** Attitudes have been influenced to actively seek to involve male carers in activities and opportunities within the centre resulting in an increase in the number of males involved in their children's learning.

Where do I find out more?

- www.fatherhoodinstitute.org
- www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/publications.aspx (With loads of great data about fathers.)

9. Speech and Language sessions for parents and children

Why did we feel it was important to develop our Language Sessions?

Over time, practitioner and parent observations had shown that increasing numbers of children needed additional support for their speech and language development. This had resulted in more referrals to the Speech and Language service and a speech therapist, made occasional visits to school. Following the initial assessment by the speech therapist parents requested additional support to assist them to help their children at home.

How we got started

Initially the Sure Start local programme began to offer some groups in our setting to support the parents and children. These were called Chatterbox sessions, they provided activities and ideas to parents on a weekly basis.

Alongside this support two members of the Nursery team were offered training in the Elklan Language programme.

Nursery staff were keen to be involved in facilitating the groups as they had an established relationship with the children and their families. They wanted to follow up the activities and support in the usual nursery sessions. The parents also thought this was a good idea. It was decided that nursery staff would run the sessions implementing the training and advice from the speech and language team.

What Happened

Funding to release staff needed to be found so initially we looked to the Children's Centre for support and more recently we have accessed Extended Services funding.

A Teacher is funded for half a day per week during term time.

Initially a general language session is provided which is based around parents sharing language with and listening to children. It provides ideas for parents and child to try at home.

Following this initial session, sessions are more targeted and aimed at children with specific difficulties. The staff still use the support of the Speech and Language Team and take advice from therapists seconded to the Children's Centre they also make referrals to the teams.

The ongoing programme of groups runs throughout the year they are called 'Natterjacks' and 'Sounds Fun'.



Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners

'We've had fun making time to do activities we had never thought of before....The information sheets we took home were really useful.'
Parent

'The course has taught me the importance of listening to Henry.'
Parent

'I liked the messy bits.'
Child

'All of the activities helped me to stand back from my Grandson and allow him to take more of a lead in play and conversation.'
Grandparent.



What we have learned

- Children and Parents were more confident around staff they were familiar with
- Staff were able to plan sessions around children's interests as they knew them so well (In keeping with best EYFS practice)
- Staff training and cascading of ideas meant good practice in the development of language could be reinforced in the classroom on a daily basis
- Follow up more targeted support was easier to manage

Challenges and Dilemmas

- Accessing funding
- Multi agency working

Possibilities and Opportunities

- Transferring parents interest to other activities
- Using strategies in classroom situation
- Working in partnership with Children's Centre

Outcomes

- **Children's** language skills improved
- **Parents** could support their children's language development in a more informed way
- **Practitioners** using strategies they had learned in training to support children with communication difficulties within the setting

10. Involving all families by using Learning Stories

Why did we feel it was important to use “Learning Stories” to involve all families?

We are a primary school in an area of considerable social deprivation. Whilst research tells us that parental involvement in children’s education from an early age has a significant effect on educational achievement (1), we found that many parents were reluctant to come into school. We hoped that by documenting children’s learning in a way that was accessible and meaningful to the parents, we would create a collaborative atmosphere of shared learning.

How we got started

Key Issues:

- There was a shared belief and commitment to the importance and value of documentation.
- We wanted the “Learning Stories” to be a celebration of each child’s individual achievements.
- Staff went on training about documenting children’s learning.
- We asked the Parent Fundraising Group to support us in buying digital cameras.
- We decided to write our “Learning Stories” in a simple, easy to read way, avoiding educational jargon.
- We felt it was important to personalise the documentation with expressions of practitioners’ feelings towards the children’s achievements.
- We agreed to hold informal open afternoons for families to come in to share the children’s “Learning Stories”.

What Happened

We helped the children write personal invitations to their families. This individual approach was the breakthrough! Parents responded well and started to come in on the open afternoons. It was a joy to share their children’s successes with them. The children talked excitedly about their stories, parents fed off this enthusiasm and it was a privilege to listen to the really positive dialogues taking place between parents and children. The open afternoons soon progressed to be a regular weekly feature. There was a comfortable, informal atmosphere and staff asked parents about what their children had been doing at home. Staff supported parents in writing down their comments, thoughts and ideas. Parents became empowered. They could see that staff were acting on their comments and were developing activities at school that related to their children’s interests at home. They knew that their children’s lives at home were respected, valued and shared and they started to feel part of the learning process. As parents became more involved they started to bring in photographs and pictures from home. The children added these to their “Learning Stories” and gradually these records became a rich reflection of their lives. We now have a learning community in which children can celebrate and share all their wealth of learning with friends at school, staff and their families.



Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners



'I was so proud when I saw G's fireworks picture. G is very creative and takes pride in his pictures. It made my day knowing G shared his picture with the other children in class' Mum

'It's for my mum. I think it looks amazing. She will like seeing it in my book' Child

'It makes it all worthwhile when parents come in and have that special time sharing their child's "Learning Stories" with them. What's amazing is seeing the parents being so "wowed" by their children and saying things to them like "You're so clever I'm so proud of you" and giving them a big hug' Practitioner

What we have learned

Many parents need a really powerful incentive to overcome their anxieties about coming into school, have the confidence to talk to staff and feel they can offer anything to their child's learning. We found that it was vital to build up a trusting relationship with parents in the first instance but once they took that initial step there was no better incentive for returning than to see the joy and excitement on their children's faces. The parents all went away with a real sense of pride, not only in their own children but also in their value as their child's first educator.

Challenges and Dilemmas

Being patient! It takes time to develop trusting relationships.

Possibilities and Opportunities

- We are keen to have cameras that we can loan to parents, enabling many more of them to record those "magic" moments with their children.
- We would also like to offer parents opportunities to use ICT equipment in school so that they can print out pictures and help their child to create their own "Learning Stories" from home.

Outcomes

- **Children's** self esteem was raised
- **Parents** gained a shared involvement in their children's learning
- **Practitioners** have a more holistic approach to children's learning and development

References

1. Sylva, K. Melhuish, E. Sammons, P. Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004) *Effective Pre-School Education. Final Report*. DfES. London: Institute of Education.

11. Grow, Cook and Eat sessions for families

Why we felt it was important to develop our Grow Cook and Eat Sessions

Our Healthy Schools policy promotes a healthy balanced diet which includes a range of fruit and vegetables. In line with this we provide fruit and vegetables at snack time and as part of the lunchtime meal however we were aware that some children were reluctant to eat them.

It became clear through discussions with parents that this was also the case at home; some parents thought this may be because they themselves did not eat and enjoy fruit and vegetables. Staff felt that a good way of encouraging the parents and children to try foods was for them to be involved in growing and cooking them. Staff had already grown produce with the children in school and felt if we included parents the interest may continue at home.

How we got started

- We sent invitations from children and staff to families who had expressed these concerns to request some gardening help “beginners welcome”.
- We accessed funding from the Children’s Centre in order that school staff could be released to work with the families
- School Staff linked with a member of staff from the Children’s Centre in order that the growing sessions developed into Healthy Cook and Eat sessions. This meant that we could also involve younger siblings.



What Happened

Staff children and parents prepared the beds in order to plant broad beans, potatoes, strawberries and tomatoes. Follow up sessions involved the planting and constant caring for the produce. This was incorporated into weekly sessions where the same types of produce were used to cook and taste for example soups, pizzas, fruit kebabs, baked potatoes and many more delicious dishes.

The children and parents were really keen to try their dishes in the nursery and parents requested recipes in order to try them at home. Staff made up little recipe cards including children’s drawings which the parents took home to help remind them of how it was done.

The group continued to nurture the produce and when it had ripened made up the recipes a second time to share with the other nursery children.

Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners

'As a result of learning how to plant things I went and bought some gardening things so we could continue at home.'

Mum

'I'm going to try a carrot and take a big bite'

Child

'We made fruit kebabs, they were sweet and made me happy.'

Child

What we have learned

- Children were really keen to try what they had planted, grown and prepared.
- Children and Parents developed high levels of self esteem as they shared their success.
- Parents and children tried a wider variety of foods at home and at school.
- Parents began to "open up" about other issues they had within this intimate group which allowed us to signpost to other services and link more closely with the Children`s Centre.
- Parents were keen to be involved in something else.

Challenges and Dilemmas

- Keeping the group small.
- Keeping focussed.
- Finding funding.

Possibilities and Opportunities

- Transferring interest and enthusiasm to other projects.
- Working more closely with other partners.
- Encouraging parents to come in and garden and cook with children without staff support on an ongoing basis.

Outcomes

- **Children** eating a wider variety of healthy food both at home and at school.
- **Parents** developed high levels of self esteem.
- **Practitioners** developed enhanced relationships with parents enabling them to better support their needs.



2. Our Experience of working with families who are learning English as an Additional Language

Setting the scene

We are a voluntary-run committee preschool based in a rural village in Cumbria. We have approximately 55 children on the register. We have one child with English as an Additional Language at present. We find in some ways living in a 'mono culture' makes it more difficult to support these children and work closely with their parents.

Our journey of discovery of working in conjunction with parents as partners began when our first child arrived with English as an Additional Language and no member of staff could speak their language. Since then we have had 3 totally different experiences of children with EAL, some positive and some challenging.



Opportunities

We viewed this as an exciting opportunity for our setting to learn more skills. With very supportive parents, the staff and children were enthralled with an exciting new culture to embrace and discover. They shared their customs, festivals, national dress, their writing, their knowledge and their cooking with us. A parent even came to show how different their writing was and demonstrate by writing the children and staff's name for them. As our setting knowledge and confidence grew with this culture and customs, we really embraced it and celebrated with the child special days that were important to them and their families. They brought back some very precious resources for us to share with the children and use in years to come. It was great fun and a unique learning opportunity for all the children. The knowledge we gained from this family has helped affirm their culture and its celebrations.

Another benefit of this positive relationship was that parents were confident to approach practitioners for support and information. For example clarifying pronunciation.

Challenges

Some parents are more reserved and wish their children to quickly speak English in order to fit in with the other children. Imagine being in a room with everyone else speaking a completely foreign language and you cannot make yourself understood! This is how the child must feel. A child learning EAL needs lots of support and patience; it is easy to forget until you put yourself in their shoes and stop and think how you would feel. In order to help the child settle more quickly, activities such as singing, repeating words and phrases alongside lots of praise will aid the process of learning English.

Also, the lack of anyone in the setting with the ability to speak or understand the mother tongue of the child is challenging, however lots of enthusiasm and a close sharing positive partnership with parents can help settle the child quickly and help them learn one of the most complicated languages - English



What we have learned

Top tips: -

- Embrace this valuable free resource and learning opportunity for all children and staff
- Welcome children and parents in their home language;
- Staff to learn key words in home-language to communicate. For example, toilet, hello, their name – the bare essentials;
- Challenge staff to learn one word per week in the child's home language as the child learns English
- Singing is soon picked up and enjoyed by all. Find a song in the child's language or ask the parents to teach you and the children together;
- Celebrate diversity by asking parents what they want their children to learn and what we can share together;
- Many parents are proud of their culture and heritage and are willing to be used as free sources of information, who better to help raise awareness of different values, customs and beliefs than the parents themselves;
- Many parents will share traditional customs of their culture – cooking, special events etc;
- Seeking help from Early Years Consultant team and loaning dual language books and story sacks can be very useful for parents struggling with the English language to enable them to share the story with their child;
- Communication can be challenging but can also be fun on both parts. Be patient and seek help from the document produced by Cumbria Children's Services, 'Embedding cultures and diversity within an early years setting and supporting children learning English as an additional language';
- Celebrate with pictures – easier than words to communicate and can be annotated with simple words and phrases.

Outcomes

- **Children** have improved self esteem and confidence by experiencing their parents and practitioners working together;
- **Parents** are more confident to approach staff and engage in an effective relationship;
- **Practitioners** had more understanding of the 'whole child' and as a result were more able to meet their needs.

3. Using 'Special Books' to involve families in their children's learning

Why we felt it was important to use Special Books and Learning Stories to involve families in their child's learning?

We are a nursery school welcoming children from a wide range of backgrounds and have been inspired by the work of Professor Margaret Carr and practitioners in New Zealand on Learning Stories (1). Learning Stories have been developed to assess children's learning in a positive, credit based approach which enhances learning and deepens the partnership with parents. We hoped that by celebrating children's learning and achievements at school and home we would increase parent's awareness of how young children learn for them to build on at home.

How we got started

Building on the Special Books which one teacher has been doing for many years we introduced these books for all children. In these we collected narrative learning story observations, annotated photographs of their experiences at school and home (supplied by parents) and pieces of work (or photocopies). The process was explained to parents on home visits and at open evenings and their contributions and involvement was encouraged all through the year.

Staff attended training about the learning story process and we ensured that each Key Person had time to manage collating their children's Special Books and learning stories.

What Happened

The Special Books have evolved over the last three years and the learning stories were introduced last year. We have found these to be a great way to encourage parents to be involved and informed about how and what their children are learning.

This work is continuing to evolve this year as we refine how the learning stories are written and ensure there is a balance of learning stories and other annotated photographs and work collected in the Special Books.



Annotating a photo to go into her special book



Sharing a special book

What we have learned

Whole families have felt much more involved in their children's learning – the books are taken home to share and parents have had a clearer idea of how their children are learning. Children have loved having the books, they show them excitedly to family members as new things are added, and love to sit together with friends and look at each other's books.

We assess the learning captured within a learning story and use this to inform future planning as well as to make a judgement about children's progress through EYFS Development Matters.

We evaluated the process at the end of the year and identified things to refine this year. Parents were also asked for their thoughts about the Special Books.

Challenges and Dilemmas

Time is a big challenge – having the time to keep the books and stories up to date so they can impact quickly on planning. Deciding what should be included in the books and keeping a balance. Being aware of children who have fewer learning stories capturing deep level learning, understanding why this is and trying to address the situation.

Possibilities and Opportunities

The books are a wonderful way to celebrate children's achievements and involve parents. Our books will continue to evolve as we look at the balance of things to include. We have already found we can use them to identify learning dispositions which we want to celebrate with children and parents and build on.

Outcomes

- **Children** are interested and motivated to learn because the provision offered is planned around their needs and interests
- **Parents** have a greater understanding of what and how their young children learn and how they too can be involved in developing that learning
- **Practitioners** build up a very detailed picture of the learning of their key children. They identify passions and interests and use these to inform planning to effectively support future learning.

Where do I find out more?

Prof Margaret Carrs book:

Assessment in Early Childhood Settings; Learning Stories. 2001

Comments from Parents, Children and Practitioners

'It's great to have an insight into how they are when we're not there and to see what interests they are developing.'

'Love it! My child loves to share it with members of the family –great to see what she get involved with when at nursery.'

'Very useful to see things that my child has done and who they play with. My child feels very proud to show his family and grandparents his special book.'

'I really love the Special Book – Sophie loves to tell me about it. As a result of the book, I feel I understand more about what she is learning and how she is developing.'

'It's lovely to read – and show to other family members who can't come to nursery to see how well they are doing'

'It's a very good communication tool. As my child says everything that happens is a secret, it's important to me to see and read about what she does at nursery.'