The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes

By Angela Anning1, Elizabeth Chesworth2 and Lucy Spurling2

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Introduction

Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs) operate in disadvantaged areas and are part of the Government’s policy of reducing social exclusion. The programmes aim to improve the health and wellbeing of families and children under 4, so that the children will have a greater opportunity to flourish when they start school. Early learning, play and childcare are core services offered by all Sure Start Local Programmes. This study focuses on how these services are being reshaped to fit the Sure Start vision of accessible, responsive and good quality services in disadvantaged areas.

Key findings

- Early learning, play and childcare services had increased in range, number and type in SSLPs and have benefited both children and parents.

- It was easier for families to get access to early education, play and learning activities, as there were more of them and they were being offered in venues near to peoples’ homes.

- In their early learning experiences, children were getting more support for speech and language and emotional development and extra opportunities for physical and literacy development.

- In their play experiences, children were getting extended opportunities, including outings, toy libraries, outdoor and physical exercise and shared experiences with parents.

- For parents the provision of childcare was increasing their opportunities to work, to volunteer or undertake training, as well as giving them a break. Childcare and informal drop in ‘stay and play’ sessions were being used as gateways to encourage parents to take part in other services.

- In some services there appeared to be insufficient emphasis on children’s cognitive development, with the bias being towards support for parents and enhancing the parent-child relationship.

- Some learning activities were ill-matched to the capabilities of very young children because they were either too difficult for them or they lacked challenge. In both cases children were not motivated to engage with the activities.

1 University of Leeds; Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birbeck
2 School of Education, University of Leeds
**Background**

Sure Start Local Programmes are delivered in geographical areas where there are between 400 and 800 young children under 4. The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) is assessing the impact, implementation and cost effectiveness of the first 260 programmes, which have been rolled out in four stages.

The Implementation module of NESS has been looking at the way services are provided by SSLPs, how these are organised locally, and how far Sure Start has re-shaped or added value to existing service provision. This study is one of a series looking at subjects of particular interest in the delivery of the programmes.

**Aims of the Study**

The study was designed to look progressively at the way good quality early learning, play and childcare services are delivered in group settings by SSLPs. It investigated:

- If and how early learning, play and childcare services which existed before the advent of Sure Start had changed
- What new services had been established
- Whether early learning, play and childcare services established with the help SSLPs were of good quality
- How staff, parents and children in SSLP areas perceive good quality services
- What good quality services look like in practice.

**Methods**

There were four stages to the research:

- Data from the National Survey of SSLPs in the first four rounds of the programme, carried out between 2001 and 2004, were examined to map what services were reported as inherited, changed and newly created. Sixty programme managers were telephoned to elicit further information about how they had changed early learning, play and childcare services and for their views on the quality of their services. The programmes were representative of SSLPs and selected on the basis of round, size, demographic and geographic characteristics and lead agency.

- Fifteen programmes were selected as representative of SSLPs (on the same criteria) for visits to explore services nominated by the managers as being of good quality. Services were observed using common observation schedules and standardised instruments and semi-structured interviews were conducted with professionals responsible for delivering the services to explore aspects of quality. Standardised measures of quality were applied to the services identified by SSLP staff as of high quality.

- Five services were chosen as examples of good quality services and extended visits were made to these, to explore the perspectives of the children, parents and professionals on aspects of quality.

- From the findings a model was developed of good quality in early learning, play and childcare services within the context of SSLPs and good practice examples were identified to show the model at work.

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1. The Early Childhood Rating Scale (Revised); The Infant and Toddler Environment Rating Scale; the Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale
Main findings

This summary describes the features of the quality of play, early learning and childcare services as perceived by managers and staff, parents and children. The summary also reports on areas for improvement and provides a checklist for quality early learning, play and childcare services based on this research.

The research study found that services were being reshaped to promote good quality joint parent/child interactions. Parents and children were benefiting from shared, fun activities, like sessions of music and movement, drama, storytelling and art and craft together, designed to enhance the relationship between them.

There was evidence that aspects of the delivery of services were in the process of improving. Continuity from one type of service to another—from part-time to full-time daycare, for example—was beginning to be managed sensitively at times of change in a child’s or family’s life. The quality of relationships between providers and users, both parents and children, was becoming recognized as centrally important if the services were to be effective.

The nature of multi-agency working in SSLPs allowed services to be offered in good time to prevent difficulties developing, especially where children had additional needs. The SSLP approach was making services more responsive, offered in ways that families were saying they needed and preferred.

Particular issues required further attention, however. There was tension in some services between different professional and community beliefs about the role of play in promoting early learning. Practitioners trained to work in early childhood education prioritised preparation for school. Practitioners from childcare prioritised language and social development.

Some parents were reluctant to acknowledge that children learn through play.

The supply of services does not always match the demand: parents often wanted part-time sessions rather than full daycare provision for their children. This resulted in excess daycare places in some settings.

Perspectives on quality: the views of managers, practitioners, parents and children

Managers of Sure Start local programmes reported that Sure Start was delivering high quality services. In nominating examples of such services they were more likely to nominate new services, started by the SSLP, over which they had a sense of ownership. They tended to select early learning and play services as exemplary and in early learning they commended in particular on the high quality of nursery education and speech and language services. These have traditionally been highly regarded services in the sector, which suggests that Sure Start has not yet equalised the status of all early learning and play services.

Where managers considered play services to be good they focused on newly established toy libraries, which had been well resourced with good quality toys and equipment, and parent and toddler groups, which were easier to access. In childcare they cited crèche sessions, many of which were set up by SSLPs to support parent training and employment opportunities or to provide respite care for family support. Far more of these were now available and parents could rely upon them.

They reported some threats to maintaining quality in services. These included: problems in recruiting, training and retaining appropriate staff; anxieties about future funding; the complexities and time taken to manage multi-agency teamwork; poor premises; and the background characteristics of local communities.
Practitioners working in combined early learning and play services identified the promotion of well-being, learning and enjoyment as key elements in good quality provision. They reported that they were drawing on the best traditions of both play workers and early childhood educators in offering children opportunities to explore their surroundings and be stimulated by them. They were concerned about health and safety aspects of service delivery, but also that settings should be welcoming and attractive.

Staff offering services focused more specifically on early learning tended to focus on preparing children for learning in school. In contrast those offering focused play services prioritised wider aspects of child development, including general well-being. These differences in beliefs about approaches to promoting child development resulted in some parents being unsure about the value of play for learning.

Practitioners in childcare settings were especially concerned about providing continuity for babies and toddlers at transition points from home to new settings or between settings. They reported that this could be a difficulty in short term, occasional, crèche provision, where it was harder for SSLPs to achieve improvements in the quality of care.

Parents reported that they valued practitioners who established positive, respectful relationships with them and their children. They valued services that provided opportunities for children to learn and socialise and services that enabled them to enjoy activities with their children. They preferred to access advice about parenting in a non-stigmatised setting. They valued services giving them the chance to make friends which empowered them to move on and set up their own networks of support.

It was important to access the children’s perspective on services too. With children over three key workers were asked to explore what mattered to them. Key concerns for children were: forming friendships; being able to do their favourite play activities, particularly outdoors; and sensitive, individualised provision by adults of eating, resting and toileting routines. In the high quality SSLP services used as exemplars of good practice in the study, children’s key concerns were being addressed in routine self-evaluation procedures based on consulting with and observing children.

Observations of children under three and reports by their parents and key workers indicated the following aspects of quality as important for them: sensitive procedures, co-operating closely with parents when settling children into new services; professionals with a clear grasp of how very young children develop and learn; opportunities for shared, fun activities with other children and caring adults; a recognition of their individual needs and preferences in daily routines and activities. Again, in the high quality programmes these concerns were addressed and resolved.

**How have Sure Start local programmes improved the quality of early learning, play and childcare?**

Examples of aspects of high quality services in SSLPs include:

Parents, practitioners and managers had a clear understanding of the purpose of activities

**For Example:**

In an SSLP area where there are concerns about attachment between parents and young babies, a weekly opportunity for babies to engage in play experiences with everyday materials is observed by parents in order to:

- offer the children high quality play experiences
- share information with parents about how to support their child’s early learning
- enrich the relationship between child and parent
- The service ethos values the home cultures and competencies of parents and families

For Example:
At a fortnightly play party, held in a local library with the aim of encouraging families to use the library services, all SSLP staff are present. A local recruitment policy has insured that they are representative of local community cultures. A grandmother who was attending the event with her grandchildren said:

“I think the staff here are wonderful, I really do. They represent all the cultures we have in this area - it’s very multicultural here and Sure Start has really helped those cultures to come together for days like this. It’s brilliant.”

The quality of relationships between practitioners, parent/carers and children is prioritised.

For Example:
The development of quality relationships between practitioners, parents and children is of central importance in a nursery, where staff make sure that parents are welcomed, and always make time to talk to them. Parents say that this aspect of the nursery is very important.

“The staff are great – like gold-dust, really. You know that you can always come in and talk to them if you have a question or are worried about anything, or just to have a chat. The atmosphere in here is lovely.” (Mother)

Vulnerable families and children are quickly identified and offered specialist support.

For Example:
At a regular play session for toddlers, a young single parent says that when she first brought her child along she had been concerned about his behaviour and his aggression towards other children. Because the sessions are run by a family therapist from a health Trust and a play worker from the voluntary sector, the mother quickly accesses specialist advice and support about modifying her own and her child’s behaviour. Regular attendance at the sessions has given the child opportunities to socialise and interact with his peers. The mother reports his behaviour is much less aggressive. She now feels able to take him to ‘stay and play’ sessions where she is meeting other young mothers.

Parents are encouraged to reflect on children’s learning activities and what they mean for their child’s development.

For Example:
In one SSLP crèche workers are employed to care for the children after an early learning session, so that parents and staff can talk about what they have observed as their children played together. When parents gain confidence they use video cameras to record observations. They take the tapes home to share them with partners or grandparents. One parent commented:

“Coming here, it’s helped me to understand why she does things and how I can support her better. Things like when we’re at the café she always gets the sugar cubes out of the bowl and stacks them up. I don’t get mad now – I know a bit more about why she’s wanting to do it.” (Mother)

Other important aspects of quality demonstrated in SSLP services include:

Nurturing staff

SSLPs achieving good quality services have invested in training for staff in daycare settings, including those run by voluntary organisations and private providers. There is some evidence that improved quality of the venues for activities – newly built or converted centres, freshly decorated familiar ones – and of the equipment, is itself
encouraging for workers. In many SSLPs all staff participate in early learning and play sessions on occasions and have undergone joint training. Staff report enjoying the contact with practitioners from other agencies and specialisms, and feeling more effective in their work with families because of it.

Responding to the needs of parents

In the best SSLPs, parents have been involved in the planning of new services. Services are more sensitive to the needs of the local community as a result of parental participation. In some Sure Start areas there had been no local daycare provision for children under three until the SSLP provided it. In these areas parents report that it was impossible for them to work unless family or friends provided informal childcare for them. A mother said, “The nursery opening has been great – a real godsend. And it came at the perfect time for me. If it hadn’t opened I wouldn’t have been able to go back to work. There’s no other nurseries for babies around here.” (Mother)

At the same time the practices within high quality provision are responsive to individual parents. Another mother commented on the concerns she had when her three-month-old began at a Sure Start nursery. “I was a bit worried about his routine – you know, that he’d have one at home and one for nursery and what would happen. But the staff was great. They just said, ‘Tell us what you do at home and we’ll follow the same routine here’. And they do.” (Mother)

Using early learning experiences to enhance the relationship between parent and child

In the context of the multi-agency approach that is a functioning SSLP, early learning, play and daycare are one of several approaches used to support family relationships and healthy child development. Practitioners commented on how powerful early learning services could be in this process. “We’re really getting to those relationships... we see a lot of parents kind of really seeing their children as individuals... And that helps that parent to really connect with their child.” (Early Years Worker)

Focusing on the needs of the child

Good learning experiences are based on close observations of children’s interests and development. Sure Start practitioners in the best quality provision are knowledgeable about child development, are responsive to the changing needs of individual children, and keep detailed individual records which are available for parents to look at and to which they can contribute. They acknowledge how important it is for children to have friends, physical care, nurture and fun while they are growing and learning.

Weaknesses in the provision of early learning, play and childcare in Sure Start local programmes

Some Gaps in Focus

The overall reported aims of SSLP early learning services emphasise the social and emotional development of children, and enhancing their speech and language development. There was little emphasis on the children’s cognitive development, though other studies have shown that children achieve the best developmental outcomes when they attend services that give equal systematic weight to developing their cognitive and linguistic competence as well as their self-esteem. There was little evidence of attention to children’s mathematical development though there were many services to support early literacy – like Book-start and library sessions. Although SSLPs are aware of the importance of physical activity, and are developing new services to support this, opportunities for physical play were limited in many services. Outdoor play, in particular, did not have a high profile, especially where services were being delivered in rented or
borrowed buildings like church halls. This situation should improve when purpose built Sure Start buildings are in use.

A Tension over Aims

There is occasional conflict among early years staff, even within SSLPs, about the purposes of daycare services. The vision is to enable parents to work or to attend training or family support, but daycare also offers respite from caring for children. Crèche provision was the most common service used in this way, often to enable parents to take specific courses at local colleges. The highest quality care was not observed in crèche settings.

Some practitioners argued against the respite role, believing that the key purpose of childcare services was to promote shared opportunities for parents and children to learn and interact. An Early Years Coordinator commented:

"Of course the idea is... for people to be able to access courses to get into work... but what we've found from experience is that parents aren't necessarily accessing that. They are usually bringing in their children, but most of them are going home. They are not accessing things."

There was also tension in another group of SSLPs where it was felt that the needs of users were becoming less important than the need to meet Sure Start targets for daycare places to release parents for employment and training. In these SSLPs it was observed that full childcare services were significantly underused, with many vacant places.

How quality services can be maintained and improved

This study has identified a range of principles and practices which were present in the highest quality provision. These are presented in the checklist at the back of this summary.

Conclusions

Sure Start local programmes were asked to reshape or replace the ‘traditional’ services of early learning, childcare and play. They were expected to make SSLP services easier to access, with staff from various disciplines working together to support children and families and deliver what local people wanted in ways that would be easier for them to use. The challenge was to maintain good quality services while transforming them to better meet the needs of local communities. With a rapid increase in services, would the quality hold up? Would it improve? Or would quantity reduce quality?

SSLPs have increased the supply of early learning, play and childcare and in many instances they have improved its quality, particularly by promoting interaction between parent and child. Locating the services in a multi-agency setting, with quick and easy access to a range of health, social care and family support practitioners, has led to some innovative combinations of early learning and family support, with health promotion, and with parental learning. The good level of resources available has meant that services can be delivered in appropriate and sometimes very high quality buildings, where facilities and equipment are of the highest standard. Providing joint training opportunities for early learning, play and childcare staff has increased the skills of the workforce.

Particular challenges to maintaining good quality services were reported as recruiting, retaining and retraining staff and, for the longer term, sustaining innovative services once Sure Start funding is devolved to local authorities and rolled out to set up children’s centres.

This research study has found that, at their best, SSLPs have developed some exemplary services, and have made incremental improvements to many services. Aspects for improvement have been noted, but if the checklist for quality derived from the best SSLP practice is followed, overall standards in early learning, play and childcare services will continue to rise.
A Check List for Good Quality Services

Principles and Shared Understandings in SSLPS

- a clear vision and rationale for services and activities shared by managers and staff
- an ethos in settings which positively values the home cultures and competencies of service users
- an ethos which sets a high value on the emotional well-being of everyone: practitioners, parents and children
- a commitment to anti-discriminatory and inclusive approaches to service delivery
- a commitment to the early identification and protection/ response to vulnerable families and children
- a sound understanding of the nature and needs of young children and their parents
- a commitment to promoting the quality of relationships between practitioners, parent/ carers and children
- a commitment to developing high quality staff expertise, valuing a range of staff experiences/ qualifications and promoting professional development
- a commitment to making interagency links and multi-agency teamwork effective
- a commitment to self-evaluation and reflection

Good Practice in Services

- monitoring the impact of the service against its aims and objectives
- balancing the delivery of services between outreach and centre-based delivery so that the needs of the whole community are met
- having whole team meetings and individual supervisions of staff
- providing for the physical and emotional well-being of staff, parents and children
- having effective ways to identify and provide help to children with additional needs and families at risk
- making sure that information collected from observations of child development are fed into practice and reviewed to demonstrate the impact on services
- providing shared, enjoyable experiences leading to learning for adults and children
- developing good quality relationships between practitioners, parent/ carers and children
- having clear plans to recruit, train and retain staff
- having plans to share information and expertise between practitioners and parents
- having good inter-agency links and multi-agency teamwork
- systematically evaluating the effectiveness and cost benefits of the services

Responding to the Community

- having links to local community, political and professional groupings to sustain credibility
- responding to the priorities of the SSLP community
- developing services which are understanding, respectful and responsive to community cultures, child-rearing practices and languages
- balancing concern for empowerment of parents with concern for the rights of young children
- providing targeted services for the individual needs, strengths and preferences of families and children
- ensuring that services are accessible and relevant for users, including for those who have not yet been found not to be using them.
Towards understanding Sure Start local programmes

Summary of findings from the national evaluation

Further information

Further copies of this summary are available from:
DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham, NG15 0DJ; Tel 0845 6022260;
Email: dfes@prolog.uk.com
Quote reference NESS/2005/SF/009

Copies of the full report ‘The Quality of Early Learning, Play and Childcare Services in Sure Start Local Programmes’ are available from the above address.

Quote reference NESS/2005/FR/009 or from the Sure Start website www.surestart.gov.uk

Further information about the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) can be found at www.ness.bbk.ac.uk

Further information about Sure Start local programmes can be found at www.surestart.gov.uk

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