

**‘What Works and for Whom?’  
Work with Children and Families in  
Sure Start Provision, Whitley**

**An Interim Report**

**January 2004**

**DRAFT**

**1. Introduction**

This interim report based on two aspects of data collection that occurred in September-October 2003. The first was a consultation with children and families using Sure Start Whitley provision. The second was a broader data

collection that entailed interviews and group discussions with users of Sure Start Whitley services. The report covers the following areas:

- Consultation process
- Criteria considered in planning consultation process
- Aims for outcomes
- Observations and Impressions
- Direct consultations with children
- What children said about Green Frog
- Parent/Carer interview consultations
- User views on project development
- Summary and conclusions
- References

The national objectives of Sure Start provided initial themes for consultation, the four main areas that each initiative aims to improve or strengthen being Social & Emotional Development, Health, Children's Ability to Learn, and Families and Communities. These were the areas covered in the work reported here. Data were collected by devising list of words used in conversation by children and family members in talking about Surestart, and by then drawing pictures of the places, activities, or things named on A5 cards. These pictures were used as flash cards or prompts in talking with the children, to ensure that they understood or recognised each topic, and as a basis for ratings and comparison questions. The use of pictures allows very young or non-verbal children to communicate their opinions in a relatively stress-free way that they can control or reject easily.

It was anticipated that the semi-structured interview questions would allow us to discuss provision on those four main themes while working on the generation of images and word-lists which would represent the specific social vocabulary of the parents, carers, staff and children involved in Sure Start Whitley.

However, on reflection questions on the topic of family understandings were not included as the limited time available would not allow particularly knowledgeable or trusting relationships to be built, and it seemed likely that exploring this area could cause possible distress if there were difficulties, conflict or rifts. If consultation took place over an extended time-span it would no doubt be possible and appropriate to explore the area of family relationships sensitively.

The questions and consultation process were also designed to examine some of the potential for encouraging resilience in young children, as the avoidance of future mental or emotional distress and provision of preventative services is frequently stressed as a Sure Start aim:<sup>i</sup>

*“Children’s resilience and protective factors: In recent times, attention has been directed to understanding why it is that many children who suffer adverse circumstances and a*

*combination of risk factors do not develop problems or a disorder. Three key groups of factors appear to protect children and adolescents (NHS HAS. 1995)*

- *Self-esteem, sociability, and autonomy*
- *Family compassion, warmth, and absence of parental discord*
- *Social support systems that encourage personal effort and coping*<sup>ii</sup>

There is also a body of current work that stresses the protective factor of everyday and quite ordinary – that is to say not directly therapeutic – services:

*“... children may be able to cope with one or two fairly serious adversities in their life, but as the number of adversities rises to three, four or beyond, youngsters may begin to buckle under the strain. It seems that if intervention can reduce the number of problems and build the number of strengths then it may have a very positive effect. To use the weighing scale analogy, the task is to remove negative weights or to add to the side with positive weights, which counteract the effect of negative weights. In either case the effect is the same, leading to a reduced impact of negative factors... It is in the everyday and ordinary that may be found many such supports and opportunities. The naturally occurring opportunities in daily living may ultimately prove more therapeutic than ones which are specially contrived or engineered.”*<sup>iii</sup>

Therefore, in observation and inquiry the research focused on how the creation of ‘self-esteem, sociability and autonomy’ might be built in to ‘naturally occurring opportunities in daily living’ in ways which might impact to counterbalance some of the substantial disadvantages which had brought Sure Start provision to the children of Whitley.

Steve Green, the Director of Sure Start was enormously helpful and active in his support, while also clear that he was interested in useful material that would be relevant and accessible. He provided signed permission letters from parents, handed in via Health Visitors, Community Workers and Green Frog, and the researcher began ringing around to confirm meetings with the children, explaining we would be using drawings and stories, and that parents and carers welcome to come and contribute. They were also asked if they wanted to be involved further, and whether those who don’t usually come in to the centre would want the researcher to visit them at home, or prefer to talk over the ‘phone.

From the positive, but low-key, responses it was apparent these families have in the main been exhaustively researched, questioned, involved, and don’t feel under-represented in any way. There was very little sense of urgency to confide complaints or comments, but some immediate requests from a few parents, who invited the researcher to visit. These were all from contacts with the Community Workers or Health Visitors and are accustomed to home

visits. Some Green Frog parents arranged appointment times, but the majority said they would meet with the researcher at the centre if they wanted to add anything to what their child might say.

Throughout, all the staff at Sure Start were consistently welcoming, helpful and flexible, whether in giving researcher access to address databases to plan home visits, taking the researcher into groups, storing research materials, or putting up with drawing cards and laying out hologram stickers all over the office. In Green Frog the team atmosphere of reflective and cooperative encouragement made it very easy to join in sessions with minimal stress. There was no feeling anywhere of 'a paper exercise' being suffered, which made the consultation process enjoyable and enlivening for the researcher.

It was an advantage that one of the researchers has a background in CAMHS (Child Adolescent and Mental Health Services) and therapeutic work with children, so the general setting and work was familiar. Most staff at one point or another made some brief reference to having someone researching who 'knows what it's like', 'can be trusted not to upset people' or 'knows the ropes' (particularly with regard to Child Protection issues) and it is important to acknowledge the anxieties and prickliness that 'being evaluated' can generate, even in a clearly successful provision. As an outsider the researcher was keen to preclude any level of concern about 'presence' and 'reliability', or comprehension of the complex factors this kind of work entails. Staff and families were constantly offered relevant background information. Several parents questioned me in some detail before embarking on interviews, showing awareness of various professional roles and with a confidence in their right to know which suggested that their relationships with the services have been quite empowering.

## **2. Consultation Process**

The following elements comprised the consultation process.

- Design of semi-structured interview guide based on Sure Start objectives.
- Initial visit to Sure Start and process of unstructured contact and observations with staff, carers and children to create and review initial list of elements to evaluate focus topics.
- Word-lists of activities and concepts, illustration cards: tested and consulted on formats with four carers and children.
- *Consultations with parents/carers and very young children at home and at Sure Start.*
- *Consultations with children in Green Frog using illustration cards, ratings-scales (smiley faces) and games.*

Within the week designated for the data collection 24 children, whose parents had signed consent forms and who agreed to be involved were consulted in the Green Frog. Of these, 5 returned to go through the process again, once, twice, and with one particular child, three times.

There were also 5 family consultation visits at home, telephone consultations with 8 families, and 7 meetings at the Centre with parents of babies/toddlers involved in the service. Of those 20 parents and carers 3 fathers took an active part in responding.

Because of the small numbers involved, and the ease with which families/children could be identified, no details about ethnicity, size of family, gender or age are attached to the quotes or material. Due to the unusually high number of boys attending one of the Green Frog sessions, boys are highly represented in the consultation there.

In designing the methods for data collection was used. This included a range of approaches that would allow for a rich mix of data to be gathered using semi-structured interviews, images, observation, story-telling, open-ended questions, ratings forms with smiley faces, and word-lists to trigger a dialogue reflecting the thoughts and views of those being consulted, rather than imposing a structure for acceptable information-processing.

A model of the child as an active participant with the right and ability to share their opinions and communicate their understandings is crucial to this approach. We have taken the view that

*“... for children’s voices to be really heard, even when a notional space has been created, the way children are viewed needs to be changed. They are social actors... social people in their own right... with developing preferences, views, aspirations, concerns, and interests. They are competent in articulating logical arguments.... and communicating their views... every human being has a story to tell. The telling of it is not dependent on the age of the teller, but on the sensitivity of the listener.”<sup>iv</sup>*

In planning this consultation this process, we have been guided by the view that *“The challenge for social researchers is to involve children in active research in a manner which respects their rights.”<sup>v</sup>* This means that data collection should incorporate the following ideas.

- Children as experts
- Confidentiality – identity and privacy respected
- Fit with the priorities and understandings of the individual child
- Developmentally appropriate format that ‘builds on’ for different levels of functioning
- Clear results for reflection – can be fed back to children and parents
- Pacing – take as long or be as quick as they choose, but be clear there is time to be slow and return, add on
- Respectful and flexible – easy to stop, change format, or withdraw without feeling pressured or that they had not been helpful
- Allow for/Notice/Validate the unexpected
- Allow for/ Notice/Validate difference

- Allow for/ Notice/Validate situated knowledge e.g. range of unique home/faith/cultural beliefs, attitudes, assumptions
- Participative, inclusive, dialogic - part of an ongoing conversation, not just Q & A
- Allow many voices, not a generalised single 'voice' (the hundred voices of children)
- Respond to how knowledge is constructed locally
- Fun, enjoyable, fits in context, but serious in that can see that they are being listened to, recorded, noted
- Explain 'whats and whys' of consultation before, after, frequently; ask if they think it's a good/useful thing to do and check whether they want to be involved
- Not disrupt processes and procedures, cause inconvenience
- Incorporate and respect the principles of the Sure Start Framework for practitioners – particularly 'Acknowledging & Affirming', 'Listening & Responding', 'Making Meaning', and 'Making Connections'.

### 3. Aims for Outcomes

We identified the following broad aims for this piece of work.

- Families, staff and children to feel consulted - respectfully and appropriately
- Communicable information – accessible results
- Positive process of being asked – access confidence, 'the expert position'
- Experience a sense of agency – being people whose opinions matter

*"Recognising children's competencies can help adults reflect on the limitations of their understandings of children's lives: to listen to children more rather than assume that we already know the answers."*<sup>vi</sup>

### 4. Observations and Impressions

The following section of the report comes from the researcher's own field notes.

*These are, unavoidably, personally situated, partial, and specific to my background as well as to the focus of the research.*

*In tots and toddler groups at the centre, which several mothers referred to as 'lifesavers' or 'a godsend', the sense of no longer being isolated seemed very strong, and the benefits to children via the benefits to mothers were clear, both from behaviour shifts/observable lessening of tensions, and as stated by the mothers. Several described how they had quite serious emotional problems after giving birth, were 'stressed' and 'very anxious' and how their Health Visitors actively encouraged/pushed them to get to Sure Start. Most said that they think the main benefit to the kids is that it benefits them as*

*mums, gives them a break/community/resources that are manageable and nearby. All parents I spoke with were positive about Sure Start groups (frequently stressing they had had to be forced to attend or 'dragged in' at first).*

*Toddler and tots staff members seemed keen and creative, although only one or two per group. Behaviour and interactions of these very young children seemed edgy and random, but there was a good range of age-appropriate toys/activities and the workers engaged the children substantially. I failed to confirm whether there are usually more staff in these groups – this is the kind of setting where any tensions are significant because they may replicate incidents at home when things get out of control. When one child throws a tantrum or a parent shouts even babies immediately demonstrate awareness of that, so there can be a touchy anxious atmosphere. It seems to me that a great deal of input is needed to make a difference at this stage, where tired, undermined, anxious mothers require support in handling their own anger and fears, and can feel exposed or put on the spot in public unless there are adequate helpers to assist.*

*The home visits to a range of settings illustrated a service actively reaching out to some troubled, withdrawn, or overwhelmed families. This is a pretty difficult area to get around without a car, often queues for the few buses (not buggy-friendly ones), crowded with schoolchildren, lots of swearing and hitting out/threats. My sense of the area is that it seems quite marginalised in some ways, but is not consistently unkempt or dreary. There are lots of women pushing loaded buggies, small costly local shops, off-licences and bookies, not many park or play-areas. A couple of times I pass teenagers smoking dope in a scrubby bit of hedge, but boys and girls together, giggling and being a bit daring – they are at pains to put it out when they see me nearby.*

*Many houses are run-down, gardens bleak with bits of toys and rubbish, in roads where there is a general mix of well-kept and truly dilapidated-looking semis. Indoors, neighbour noises were often intrusive, with toddlers obviously noticing and very tuned in to shouts and whether mother has noticed/minded. This is a worrying indicator in a small child, that 'alert startle' response to any raised voices, and the awareness that it distresses or perhaps triggers a response in their carer.*

*By visiting at home, or at the Refuge, Sure Start involves people who will, or can only, make use of any service that comes to their door – for example, a stressed overwhelmed mum who makes it clear she can't picture getting herself to anything although she has occasionally been brought to Sure Start and enjoyed 'being able to sit back' there. The sheer effort of going somewhere on time outweighs any possible gains she can describe, though her family has been very happy with the play-worker who visits, and want that to continue.*

*To get that child to a playgroup would probably mean Sure Start fetching them – the family do see the child as needing space, toys, and other kids, but also say that they play at home with relatives (all bigger) and just break everything,*

*will come back exhausted and grumpy or be overexcited and unsettled. This is the sort of family it is so hard to engage, because they are deeply private and self-sufficient, and although willing to put up with some interface with the services when pressed or forced by law, are profoundly impervious, unconvinced as to any benefits. Perhaps Roma, maybe rural, moved unwillingly into this estate, and not wanting to lose their children to some other way of life. This means that, although they clearly conceptualise how their children would gain in terms of speech, development, pleasure, socialising (and they can come up with most of the aims any professional would), the losses in terms of family unity might be too great. The same probably goes for attending school.*

*As all practitioners, and neighbours, know, there are some families who are extremely difficult to engage but about whom there is a great deal of worry. For some of these families there will be substantial risk to the children, histories of abuse over generations, and great loyalty and secrecy. The service getting its foot in the door is a real achievement, although any work has to be tailored not to threaten too much change to be acceptable. But to provide a positive and supportive provision that is seen and experienced as helpful, not critical, and engages cooperatively, not punitively, offers a chance that if/when it comes to conflict there will be at least some history of constructive dialogue with professionals. The children also gain familiarity of enjoyable contact with outsiders, as well as the direct benefits of the speech and play therapy. At every home I visited I was keenly welcomed by the children, and this behaviour showed that they positively experience being noticed, responded to and interacting with their Sure Start people.*

*On the first day Steve Green also introduced me to the manager of Green Frog, who was friendly and helpful; we ran through introductory information, then I joined in with the session. From this I drew some activity-maps, and listed words and phrases the children and staff used throughout the morning for use in developing picture-cards which would help with the data collection. Once drawn these were checked in home visits then used in all the direct consultations. I mainly used any contact I was offered to ask children to tell me about Green Frog and what they did there, explaining that I was new.*

*My immediate impression in the nursery was of un-pressured movement - lots of activities, and free ranging from one to another, from still and concentrated to mobile and active, from solitary to group, etc. Quietly settled but lively atmosphere, safe and cheery feel to the room.*

*There is a careful structure to the sessions, linking with developmental aims around identity, socialisation, co-ordination, concentration, inquiry and exploration. Activities and snacks very calmly handled, generally no leaping on negatives, lots of recognition of positives. The nursery seems paced nicely; these children are at leisure to feel their own feet and choose their activities, but within a clear safe predictable framework. Quite a strong sense of agency, one girl stayed at the same table engrossed in colouring and doing puzzles, while others ranged about spending a tiny chunk of time on everything.*

*With my professional assessment hat on I'd say that a substantial number of these children have quite severe emotional/behavioural difficulties, and there are some significant developmental/cognition problems. But there are enough staff to avert crises, help with co-ordination tasks, encourage engagement.*

*At one point one table negotiated a bit of rowdiness by themselves, and got a thumbs-up from a worker; all returned the thumbs-up, beaming, and sat 'being good' obviously feeling quite proud and pleased. In general the children seem glad to be praised by the staff, a good sign, I think, in terms of socialisation and validation.*

*Unusually, the morning group is mainly male, only four girls to eighteen boys: perhaps because boys are perceived as being so much more of a handful to keep at home, or less welcome in some way (as with many deprived areas, you quickly get the feeling the culture is overwhelmingly female – women in the shops, wheeling the buggies, at the surgery, on the buses, waiting at the school; male figures are rarer, and more peripheral), or some other issues/gender imbalance in the area?*

*Getting to outdoor play was calmly handled, and again a good range of active or imaginative toys and games. Some co-operative play, and some roughhousing, again managed well, distraction from conflict followed by quiet talks about it, but very simple and not too heavy or blaming. Interesting division of labour as regards staff tasks, clear direction from manager overall. Clear consistent goodbye ritual with songs, then waiting for parents; some children bouncing and overjoyed, some apprehensive, a couple with mask-like defensiveness.*

*In Green Frog, generally, the children's experience in terms of encouraging choice, concentration, confidence, active exploration, etc, seems good. Staff are present and actively encouraging, watchful for danger or difficulty, but without being interfering or pressuring. Most children flow from one activity to another, drawing, then dressing-up and playing imaginatively, leaping on the soft play shapes, sitting on the little sofa watching someone do puppets, making up a different story for the puppets, lying playing cars and dinosaurs, rolling play-dough at a table. Hitting out was interrupted, upsets negotiated. A weepy child is sat on a lap and given a cuddle, without being moved away.*

*Regular predictable activities like singing and stories are popular; the children particularly seem to like being in the corner together and with all the staff around them, whether or not they actively join in the gestures or sing, they watch others or curl up and hum privately. Over the course of the week I watched how one very withdrawn and isolated child learned the movements to go with 'The Bell On The Bus' and although by Friday he was only making tiny gestures he was grinning with the pleasure of being in time with the singing.*

*Staff seem to clearly model managing difficult moments and incidents constructively. In outdoor play one child went off to a corner alone, upset, and was left to be quiet for a while before staff checked on him, talked, brought him into leading a game. When later he went off again some of the children*

*playing on the train with me went to see him and played in the corner with him, before bringing him to drive the train, having observed the earlier process.*

*Looking back through the week I could observe changes in several of the children even over that brief time span, in use of words, phrases, patterns of movement, interaction and confidence. In terms of Social and Emotional Development, via “self-esteem, sociability, and autonomy” within “social support systems that encourage personal effort and coping”<sup>11</sup> the children and their parents or carers demonstrate in their responses and their behaviour that Sure Start offers them a range of options which they experience as enjoyable and constructive. To me they consistently displayed a sense of agency, awareness of alternative activities they would not prefer (“Shopping!”) and that the notional space ‘Sure Start’ is one that is positive for them and their families.*

## 5. Direct consultations with children

As part of this work we undertook direct consultation with children in Sure Start provision. This mainly took place at Green Frog, though most children on the home visits also joined in with the picture cards and word-lists. The researcher checked how developed each child’s concepts of ‘I like’ ‘I don’t like’, ‘my favourite’, etc. were. The process was tailored appropriately as far as possible; if the child still seemed interested after one mode of discussion then another was offered.

Ratings with undertaken with picture cards, in sets of three (pick the one you like best/is there any thing you don’t like), then rating the sets of favourites.

- Or whole set (‘What I like best’ at one end, working down via ‘What I like next best’)
- Or ‘pick out your three most favourite’, ‘pick out your three least favourite’
- Or ‘for each picture there are three faces, colour the one closest to what you think about that thing’

The story-form was of boy/girl (depending on context of discussion) who wants to persuade their shy little sister to go to the park, leaving gaps for what the listener would suggest as good reasons. Then, the same story was told with the child trying to persuade shy child to come to Green Frog.

Some very small children scrolled through the cards while the researcher named the activity and picked out the ones they liked best or disliked. All were also asked to tell the researcher if anything had been left out. Very young card-scrolling children chose the same activities that were favoured by those who filled out the smiley-face forms, concentrating on ways of playing, but these have not been included in the numbers of times a card was chosen as we could not be confident the children knew what the pictures or words meant. The sole exception was on a home visit, where a tiny child whose family had clearly weathered severe conflict and upheaval, chose the ‘making

friends' card, and hugged and crooned over this as 'best, best thing'. It was very moving to see how a card that in general elicited little interest was significant to this one child.

Making this image had caused some problems as it is notoriously tricky to *picture* an emotional process, and several children commented on this, letting the researcher know how wrong she had got it.

*"This is someone crying who had a hurt", "Look, he's sad and now they are sorry", and "Is she poorly, then? Being **sick**?"*

Very few children looked at this card particularly carefully, unlike other cards where they would run a finger over a familiar-looking outline, or point out a detail that had been missed, or we had managed to get right. 'Playing Together' also had its critics as it was pointed out that it looked more like 'Dancing' or 'All fall down' the circle-game, and one boy said dismissively "But these are all girls here!" so poor imaging may have affected the popularity of these two cards.

The concept that we had most difficulty communicating was that of *predictable routine*, 'Knowing when things happen', and that card was only chosen once, although with reference to specific activities. In their talk about the day, children frequently spoke of the order things occurred in and knowing something would happen later was seen as a good thing. 'Toilet and Washing hands', and 'Stories' which were both chosen 7 times are regular, timed occurrences, and the elaboration was "That's before snack" or "Then we go to play after..."

The other images were accepted as 'good-enough' representations. In the main the task went well. It was flexible enough that children with sufficient concentration or interest could go through the whole thing colouring in the favourite smiley faces, or go through 3s of each card, picking the most-liked, just grade the lot according to most-liked, or just pick one as 'My Favourite'.

In going through the cards together with parents it was interesting how at times a parent would hold out a card they thought would be a favourite, only to have a different one chosen. In particular 3 parents thought their children (all boys) would choose 'Playing outside', 'Tractor' or 'Train' when in fact they chose 'Painting and Drawing', and 'Stories'. One mother was so taken aback that her son steadfastly chose 'Thumbs Up, Well Done' as his favourite that she went back and mimed it out to be sure he understood.

In the latter part of the week in Green Frog a separate table was set up for the process, which was introduced by staff during the checking-in as a special game children could help the researcher with during the session. They could choose to seek out the researcher if or when they wished. The researcher then explained privacy, freedom to stop or leave and that the idea was to help grownups know what they thought about coming to Sure Start. How we proceeded then depended on the wishes and interests of each child.

Generally, having checked an ability to conceptualise 'favourite' and rate preferences we then went through the picture cards, and those who chose to use the smiley-face forms coloured in the smile by their favourite thing. Most children coloured more than one face, and we soon regretted having a choice of four neon crayons, as they are more interesting and effective if used all together. Several faces were brightened at once. On all forms the favourite was marked with a pencilled star as well, so the crayoning could go in whichever direction the children wanted.

There were, of course, complications. The mainly silent child who had immediately attached to the researcher and wanted to play first was one for whom there was no permission-slip, so he had to be incorporated as a helper (a familiar concept as children take turns being helpers with roll-call etc) and spent most of the session observing and holding the papers for the researcher. Next day his parent had signed, he was first at the table, went through the process, spoke and gave his opinions, then slid off to play, with no further contact. Some children came as little groups and watched as each took turns, two best friends moved the researcher to another table so they had enough room to spread out and hold up the cards and to each other and fill in the faces together.

Other children observed from a distance, and one boy kept saying 'I won't do that' to which the researcher replied, "That's fine, nobody has to unless they want to". But when at his request the researcher joined him later, he gave his opinions in conversation while playing with the Dinos, going through the activities he remembered from the cards but regularly saying "Why would anyone like...", in an exaggerated critical way that seemed to be mimicking a grown up. He was the sole child to question or comment on anyone having different opinions, and the only one critical of other opinions – perhaps familiarity with that process had made him unwilling to sit down and commit himself.

One child seemed agitated by being asked her opinion, responding with "I don't know" to everything, getting faster, seeming upset and angry. Although perhaps she had been attracted by the sticker rather than the process, observing her general interactions later she seemed unused to being consulted, or consulting others. It is a truism that children are usually asked questions when there is blame attached ("Did you do this?" "Where is your coat now?"), and the sense of either being in the wrong or possibly getting it wrong ("What did I tell you?") is strongly linked in some children's experiences. Watching how this child moved around on her own, with very little interaction, and some pushing about, reminds us that the actual conversational process, no matter how collaborative and playful can seem threatening or negative for some children. Again, a longer time span would have allowed a more appropriate format to be found to suit her, and it is particularly such children, whose experiences may prejudice or negatively connote dialogue with adults, whose opinions we most need to clarify. Again, a longer time-span would have allowed a more appropriate format or approach to be created to suit her. It is particularly such children, who perhaps have had negative experiences with adults through neglect, abuse,

racism, or bullying, whose opinions we most need to clarify. The child who is used to being ignored is clearly one who stands to benefit from services that successfully counter that isolation.

Some children insisted on coming back to play again, twice or 3 times, and after one child gave a clue by saying 'No, no, now you ask me 'What do **you** think?' the researcher got him and a couple of others to give feedback on what they made of it, by asking them to play the game the other way around so that they were interviewing the researcher. They acted out the whole process, repeating that it was about what you like or don't like at Green Frog and helping grownups know what you like. This was confirmation that even small children *do* listen thoroughly and recall, relish being asked what they think, and find these games significant.

Two children also included a version of the researcher saying "No, you can't draw on these cards, they belong in the game, you can draw on the paper", although neither of them had tried to draw on the pictures themselves. They were somehow aware that a few of the younger ones had, and how the researcher had responded to this. This was also a substantial reminder about observation and indirect communication, particularly with children who are sensitised to and possibly anxious about, adult interactions. Just because they weren't physically peering directly over the researcher's shoulder didn't mean they weren't aware of what was going on, and the process of observing and making sense of the behaviour of adults is an extremely powerful aspect of learning to communicate and be heard.

At the end of both morning and afternoon sessions all the children received big stickers, so those who hadn't played also got one. They were also thanked formally as a group.

Below, the picture cards are listed in order of rating by the children as 'What I like best about coming here'.

- 9 Painting & Drawing
- 8 Playing on the Train
- 7 Toilet & Washing Hands
- 7 Stories
- 7 Tractor
- 6 Playing Outside
- 6 Sand Play
- 5 Computer
- 4 Snacks
- 4 Thumbs Up/Well Done!
- 3 Making Friends
- 2 Singing
- 2 Play-dough
- 2 Playing Together
- 1 Knowing when things will happen/Routine

## 1 Gardening

Of the favourites, these are activities children said were not usually available at home – painting on a satisfying scale (particularly standing at an easel with the opportunity to develop wider gestures and sweeping marks) is messy and requires space, materials, and enough energy to clean up afterwards.

The train is a large log assembly in the garden outside, where imagination dictates the roles, journey, and destination, and other children or adults can be invited to join in.

Going to the toilet in an orderly calm fashion perhaps featured so high as this an area of anxiety for young children who are not sure how these things will be managed away from home, and glad that it is negotiated in a predictable stress-free way. When asked what was so good about it the children responded with ‘Well, that’s obvious’ stares, along with ‘Everybody goes!’ but to feel safe and respected physically is shown to matter a great deal.

Stories are shared as a group, in a special enclosed corner, and here the ritual of everybody doing something together seemed appealing, with the children pointing to the area, the cushions and where the reader sits. Some children who were asked to elaborate commented that although they have story-tapes at home, few reported getting read or told stories.

## 6. What children said about Green Frog

‘I’m a brave boy here.’

‘Get on train go to Alton Towers.’ ‘No, we’re going to Paris and the sea.’

*‘If you weren’t here in the mornings/afternoon, where do you think you would be?’*

- “Shopping!” (Followed by a kind of groaning eye-roll, mouth turned down).
- “In the park... but not all days.”
- “My aunties.”
- “Home.” (Doing what?) “Videos”
- “With the baby” (Similar face to ‘Shopping!’ although a different child)
- “Gran’s – you be good you” with a finger-wagging closed-eye face.
- “Home, playing”

*‘What do you like very best about coming here?’*

- “Playing” (7)
- “Toys” (3)
- “Lots of ladies” (1)

*'What does the boy/girl say to help the little sister come to Green Frog too?'*

- "Lots of toys"
- "Nice"
- "You be playing"
- "Mummy comes to get us then"
- "She said, look, there's a cake!" (This child had spent the morning play-cooking and had given several of us tea)
- "There is no scary, don't be scary"

## **7. Parent/Carer Interview/Consultations**

These took place in family homes, the Women's Refuge, Green Frog, Tumble Tots Group, and Toddler Group, and by telephone. Some parents directly filled out the interview sheets while talking them through, some were given a copy and their responses were written down, some had their own discussion points to follow. The researcher stressed that the points were a rough guide only, and that discussion could cover whatever they thought best, in as much or little depth as they chose. Most of these consultations took an hour, one an hour-and-a-half, and several half-an-hour. The telephone consultations were in general briefer.

We include the detail of the responses from parent/carers as we believe these illustrate very clearly the value gained from Sure Start.

### **How Long In Contact With Sure Start?**

Over half of these contacts had been in touch for at least a year; the others between 9 and 6 months.

### **Been To Which Activities?**

Mother and Toddler

Outings

Green Frog

Everything I can get to!

Health Visitor

CDW/Play Worker

### **Parent Most Interested By?**

Everything!

Outings

Things with the kids

Adult classes

Time away from the kids

Swimming

Learning about child development

Being in a (Toddler) group and seeing how it works – am interested in training now.

Health Visitor coming round

### **Child Most Interested By?**

Getting wet and messy  
Playing  
Trips out  
Swimming  
New toys  
Different things  
Space

**How Would You Describe Child Now In Terms Of Character And Communication?**

More outgoing  
Doesn't mind being left now  
Own personality, knows what s/he wants  
Bossy!  
Speech has come along a lot  
Daredevil, nothing scares them!  
More well-spoken  
More interested in learning  
More interested in interacting with other children  
Making friends  
More able generally  
Less frightened  
Hitting less  
Friendlier

**6 Months Ago?**

Hardly talking  
Shy  
Wouldn't talk to anyone  
Clingy  
Very frightened all the time  
Speech problems  
Lonely  
Only saw me really  
Bored

**Hope For In 6 Months?**

Settled in nursery  
No worries about how s/he'll be on their own  
Not crying all the time like the others (siblings)  
Speech to improve a lot  
Less clingy  
Me able to leave and not feel guilty  
More focussed  
Better concentration  
Braver  
Happier  
Not hitting

**What Kind Of Situation Child Happiest In?**

When active  
Playing  
Cuddling  
Lots of children & adults around  
Playing  
Exploring  
Getting into trouble  
Playing with others  
Anywhere can get on and not be interrupted

**What Kind Of Situation Child Most Unsettled In?**

Alone, being left  
Unfamiliar place  
Not knowing anyone  
Tired  
Bored  
When waiting to go somewhere like Green Frog that they like – restless  
Being frightened

**Any Ways Going To Sure Start Has Helped, Or Made Worse?**

Keep them active  
Helped me as well  
Helped in me leaving him, worse as now s/he asks if I'm going to leave  
Brought out his/her character more  
Less clingy  
Gives me time off  
Gives them things to do

**Any Health Worries In Past?**

Some developmental problems were identified, but in the main no worries

**And Now?**

None

**Concerns about Future Health?**

None

**Any Ways Sure Start Has Helped That, Or Made Worse?**

Advice  
Let me find out what was normal or not  
Health visitor gave me good advice  
Explaining how they grow

**How Does Child Approach New Learning New Things – e.g. Potty, Dressing, Etc?**

Anything new s/he loves  
Likes to be shown  
Likes company and you to be involved  
Likes new things with friends there too  
Just accepts things, no fuss

**Always So, Or Changing Over Time?**

Always

Better now

Accepts things more

Since coming here knows things get done a certain way

Different not so frightened

**What Do You Think Best Helps Them In Learning New Things?**

Showing them how to do it

Being left to do things

Investigating

Exploring

Being interested – linking to their interests

Active mind, keep them busy

**Any Ways Sure Start Has Helped That, Or Made Worse?**

Giving them lots to do

Challenges them

Helped having toys I couldn't get for home

Other children

Playing and learning

Playing with him/her

Lady comes to play and that really helped them concentrate

Showed new games

Play lady helped bring them out of themselves

**What Are The Things You Think Child Most Enjoys Re Sure Start?**

Play lady coming around

Toys

Other children playing and learning

Variety

Playgroup – if we don't go s/he says 'Are we going playgroup today?'

Being able to make a mess

Space to do things

Messing about

Playing

**What Are The Things You Think Your Child Gets Most Benefit From?**

Being with other children the same age

Activities

Socialising with other children

Meeting new people

Playing

## **What Does Your Child Say About Sure Start When Telling You About Their Time There? (What Do You Think They Would Say?)**

Says who they played with  
Tells me what songs they sang  
What they've been doing

### **Anything Else You Want To Add?**

Need a quiet place for a little nap or a quiet sit down. A blocked-off space would be good. (this re toddler/baby play spaces)  
Sure Start is wonderful for this area, the variety of activities  
Everybody benefits  
Encourage more people to use it  
Wish they still had swimming  
Does both of us the world of good  
More room for toddler activities would be good  
Really helped us both  
That it finishes at four is a big worry, and lots of parents talk about it, too many difficult changes; it should go right through to link with school  
Grateful, I am grateful

## **8. User views on project development**

The second piece of work on which this report draws entailed informal interviews with professionals and users of Sure Start Whitley services.

All the parents interviewed during the course of this research were clearly able to identify benefits that their families and others they knew had gained from their involvement in Sure Start Whitley. However as in all studies parents clearly identified areas in service delivery and logistics that could improve either their own or others' access and use of the service. The following sections deal with these observations and comments for potential improvement and development of the current service.

### ***Age range***

*"My perfect service would be for all kids – not just those under 4."(White British female, 28)*

Sure Start offers services for families with children up to the age of 4. As most children start school at 5 and Children's Fund services begin at 5 this leaves a gap in provision between the ages of 4 and 5. Many parents spoke about their difficulties with this cut off point which they felt was arbitrary in nature and after which they felt 'shoved to one side'. It became clear when interviewing parents that many were counting the days down till they must reluctantly leave the service.

One father spoke about how his partner first heard about Sure Start when she was pregnant, over 3 years earlier. He voiced frustration that just as he feels it is becoming established and the community café just opening, they will no longer be able to use the services. Other parents contested what they saw as

Sure Start's construction of a family unit – stressing that their children were of a wide age range yet were still in need of the service.

*Parent 1: "Surestart should be for families not just stop at 4. If you're a single mum with a child under 4 then you're fine..."*

*Parent 2: "They think you've got a 1 year old, a 2 year old, a 3 year old and a 4 year old (Laughs)"*

*Parent 1: "Soon as you're child hits 4 it's like 'goodbye', you're shoved away and you don't have anything to do with anyone at Surestart."*

*Parent 1: "It should be for Whitley community, not Whitley under 5's."*

*(Group interview)*

As this extract highlights, parents felt that social policy embodied in Sure Start did not mirror the social reality of their own family structures. They felt that Sure Start was created for 'single mums' with children under 4, and thus felt aggrieved that as their family structure did not conform to this model they could be excluded ("shoved away") by Sure Start. At the same time parents spoke about concessions regarding age on recent father's trips and excursions during the summer holidays that had been able to accommodate a wider range of ages.

### ***'Meeting and Greeting'***

As highlighted earlier, parents found the services offered by Sure Start such as the health visiting and midwifery to be an improvement on services they had accessed with older children earlier. However despite the positive factors, women said they experienced in the groups from mutual support, bonding, respite from child care responsibilities and the space to take part in personal development, several women felt that the atmosphere in some of the groups offered at Sure Start could be isolating and potentially put women off from attending. Two women spoke about her first time experience of toddler group

*X "They say it's all friendly. Everyone was in their own little groups."*

*Y "Cliques yeah!"*

*Y "It's like parents sit together..."*

*Y "So if you're on your own, if you don't know anyone then you'll struggle."*

These comments were reflected in a variety of the interview settings. In one interview setting we discussed 'trips out' that were organised by Sure Start and ways in which those participating could feel more confident in joining in.

*Parent 1: "If people know you're on this group they'll tell you stuff to bring in... They tell you on coaches (Trips out)."*

*Interviewer: "They tell you what they think?"*

*Parent 2: "Complaints mostly."*

*Interviewer: "Do these parents feel they could get go to staff directly?"*

*Parent 3: "Mmm yeah... They say who do I need to talk to about such and such so you say that's (Staff members name) you need to talk to her about that..."*

*Parent1: "There's lots of confusion... I dunno maybe it's because they (parents) just go on trips."*

*Parent3: "Well it's like that toddler group yesterday you go in and you sit and you think, "Who should I talk to?" that's why greeting is so important. Usually they just brought in and dumped or left or they just turn up on trips... so they're not gonna meet staff, your just gonna see these two people at the front of the coach ticking your name off."*

*Interviewer: "Who should sort this out?"*

*"Parent 3: "They need to introduce themselves, they need to say I'm and I do..."*

Many parents who use this service might not know who and what Sure Start staff members do. At the Tadpoles Toddler group it was suggested by two women that staff should 'meet and greet' women as a way of making first time attendees feel more welcome.

*X " It feels as if staff are only there for the kids not the parents."*

*Y " That's why I've only been there once."*

*Y"... I wasn't greeted and so I never came back. It's the first impression you get."*

*(Exchange between two parents during activity group)*

*"Eventually Sure Start is gonna be run by the community not by staff, that's the idea isn't it? I think that's why they take a step back."(Check it Out group member)*

It was suggested by one parent that Sure Start would eventually be parent-led and she considered this to be the reason why staff were not always that 'forward', hoping that parents would take a greater role in the day-to-day running of the service. One mother spoke about her own involvement in a group making tea and coffee and 'meeting and greeting' the other parents and children when she felt staff were not taking a greater active role. This, she felt, was an important way of putting people at ease and encouraging them to take part.

An upshot of the remoteness of some Sure Start staff which some people identified was an increased sense of empowerment from some of the parents who 'took charge' of welcoming newcomers. Yet other respondents clearly saw this potential remoteness as a barrier for some individual's involvement. Outreach staff such as those undertaking home visits also clearly have a different role engaging with parents and children on a one-to-one basis and some staff clearly enjoyed close professional contact with families.

### **Whitley boundaries**

*“ I think it should be if you want to go or not... not based on where you live ‘cos not everybody in an area wants to go.”(White British female, 21)*

*One of the main points that arose in our interviews with parents was that of geographical boundaries. This emerged as a major issue for both parents and professionals. Some parents kept quiet about where they resided or did not access services as they were just out of Sure Start area. Parents felt that the Sure Start boundary made little sense and that the project should be continued along the length of Northumberland Avenue.*

*“It’s not fair that you have to live in a certain area. I live too far down Northumberland avenue I’m only here ‘cos I’m moving.”(White British female, 21)*

Many parents felt that the boundaries were arbitrary and, whilst expressing support for the services, felt there should be open access for all parents from the wider area who wanted to use Sure Start services. Other parents said they kept quiet in case staff found out they were living outside the Sure start area. They wanted to access other services but didn’t want to ‘*push their luck*’. In the main office one afternoon a local parent came in wanting to enquire whether her sister-in law who was moving to the area might access the service. The staff asked where she was moving to and upon checking the map on the wall found she was just beyond the boundary so apologetically had to decline any offer of service. This was felt to be very unfair by this parent.

The location of Sure Start itself in Whitley was an issue of some contestation. Some parents had lived in Whitley all their lives whereas others had moved more recently. Respondents in this research construed Whitley itself as a ‘deprived area’, yet this was also a label they contested. They clearly identified the area as a place with a high population of single parents but felt that other areas in Reading had equally difficult issues with crime, unemployment and poverty.

*Interviewer: “Why do you think it’s based in Whitley?  
“Because it’s Whitley shit-hole (laughs) No I dunno I guess this area is more council owned than other areas... Because of the mostly single mums and low income families so they can offer more help in this area than other areas of Reading.” (Parent)*

The parents interviewed suggested that Whitley had been designated as a Sure Start area due to its reputation as ‘deprived’ and a place where historically there had been a high teenage pregnancy rate. One woman said that her school had been known as ‘the maternity ward’ in the local area and was so concerned that her 14-year-old daughter might fall pregnant that she had encouraged her child to have a contraceptive injection.

Whilst acknowledging the high birth rate amongst lone mothers, other parents stressed that Whitley was, like many areas, mixed. They argued that the Sure

Start boundary should include other areas of social housing, as Whitley is a mixed tenure housing including private and social housing. Although many of the parents and professionals interviewed were glad that Whitley had 'special' services compared to other areas, it became clear that many individuals wanted the service to be universal: for all families in geographical Whitley or Reading, as opposed to exclusively for the selected number of households within the Sure Start boundary.

*Interviewer: "Why do you think Sure Start is based here?"  
"I think it's a bit of a deprived area... maybe there's more single mums. It seems a shame that people from all areas can't come here... I think there's a lot of people who could come here but don't" (White British female, 35.)*

The popularity (and we think, effectiveness) of the services offered by Sure Start meant that parents recognised the need for these services for all families and for a much wider age group. It became clear during interviews that in countering social exclusion the boundary of Sure Start itself was, ironically, creating perceived exclusion for others who were equally in need of the service but lived in the wrong postcode or whose children had the wrong date of birth. These may clearly be issues that are concerns for national rather than local Sure Start agencies but it is certain that national policy decisions are being strongly felt at the local level.

#### *Diversity: involving the dads*

It is apparent that this project is particularly gendered. Surestart Whitley is noticeably a female project. Much of its day-to-day discourse is about motherhood and the associated feminine 'cultural capital' of child rearing and 'what it is to be a good mother.' This cultural capital is not only traded between individual women, but 'downwards' from professional to client. In mums and babies groups, for example, the staff members often seem to take roles feeding and cuddling the babies. This focus on 'mothering' (and potentially, femininity) is reflected both in the staff team and in the client profile. As such, it seems that Surestart is not so much about 'parenting' but 'mothering', especially through mother-focused services like the antenatal and post-natal drop in groups.

Very few men appear to be involved in Surestart Whitley. There may be a number of reasons for this: female or 'feminised' spaces are often difficult for men to be part of occupy; the issues with which Surestart is concerned may be seen as the 'proper' role of women only; the timings of Surestart activities may not be suitable given men's labour market commitments. Having said this, there are men who have become involved. As one of them put it:

*"I'd like to see them get more dads involved. I'm quite new to the area, I've only been here three years and I don't know many people so getting to know more people would be good... obviously there's a better way to do it... They need to get more fathers involved... when they started the Saturday club*

*off there wasn't many fathers who came. Obviously it's not their (Surestart) fault, they started that but I think it needed to be a bit better advertised explaining it was going on and everything" (White male 26).*

It is noticeable that the majority of the workers in Sure Start - apart from the director - are white females. There are active attempts to engage more fathers in the scheme with dad's gym sessions and dad's trips out. In terms of staffing, workers felt it important that such ventures should be male-led and this clearly has staffing implications.

Some Sure Start workers took the view that the female only space could create opportunities for empowerment for individual women who may feel inhibited by a male presence. This led to provision such as a healthy eating /weight loss group and 'weight watchers' being advertised as 'women only'. This women-only group was a decision the worker felt necessary to encourage women to attend. She felt that if a man wanted to access the weight loss group and accompanying aerobics that the group would need to make the decision to allow him to join.

So not only are the majority of the staff female but due perhaps to the nature of many of the services, opening hours and local employment patterns most of the parents that use the service are women. The art sessions and parent participation group – *Check it Out* - were attended only by women.

Within some of the Sure Start sessions and groups (because of their focus and nature) conversation and discussion often revolved around the body – post and pre-delivery - with women talking freely about feeding practices and birth experiences. Such spaces may be uncomfortable for both men and women if they were mixed sex.

Many of the women interviewed suggested that the reason that their male partners or fathers in general did not use the service was a combination of employment commitments and not 'wanting to hang out with a load of women.'

*"My husband doesn't like to be seen with a load of women."  
(White British female, 26)*

*"Yeah they do stuff with a load of dads but he wouldn't go to it as he doesn't know anyone. They're not like women."  
(White British female, 26)*

However, some woman said they would appreciate it if more fathers became involved in the service. It would appear that services offered on weekdays are not accessible to a large number of working dads (and mums). Sure Start, with it's focus on the under 4's and child care and child rearing is perhaps seen as fundamentally in the realm of 'the feminine'. This cultural barrier inevitably creates difficulties in engaging large numbers of men within the services.

X "I saw a man here once with two kids."

Y "Yeah?"

X "He only stayed for half an hour."

Y "It would be nice to encourage dad's down."

(X: White British female, 28, Y: White British female, 28)

At the same time some mothers felt unhappy about the 'special treatment' they believed fathers received; including not needing to book on trips in person and having vouchers sent out to them. Similarly father's trip were for fathers and children only whereas there were no equivalent mothers' only trips – although the mothers saw the necessity to encourage more fathers to be involved in the project. Clearly, it is important to understand the politics of this.

This is not to suggest that men did not get involved in the service. Men dropped their children off at the preschool and were present at a speech and language therapy group and first aid training session attended as part of this research.

Three fathers were interviewed during the course of the study about their expectations and experiences of Sure Start services. These were dads already engaged with services. Two of the fathers were currently unemployed and the third worked irregular shift work so had time during the day to participate in courses and childcare. For one father, Sure Start provided space (as for some of the women interviewed) to meet other people.

*"I'd like to see them get more dads involved. I'm quite new to the area, I've only been here three years and I don't know many people so getting to know more people. Obviously there's a better way to do it... They need to get more fathers involved when they started the Saturday club off there wasn't many fathers who came. Obviously it's not their (Sure Start) fault, they started that but I think it needed to be a bit better advertised explaining it was going on and everything" (White British male, 26)*

Despite being involved in some groups the fathers did feel there could be improvements, with better advertising for fathers' events and a wider range of activities opened for dads and their children, although it was clearly acknowledged that it was difficult for all fathers to be involved as many men worked full time.

*"I don't know cos I know dads like to do the swimming side of it with their kids and stuff but it seems always aimed, well what I saw. It's all aimed at mothers and babies groups rather than dads... cos I know that it's not easy cos some dads are always working and some mums are always at home... It seems, not that I want to be funny to women, all seems to be more aimed at women, but maybe more women want to be involved."*

*Interviewer “ So when you come down here do you feel comfortable?*

*“Yeah, I do actually, cos the women don’t make you feel like, well they do look at you like “What’s he doing here? But then again they think “Well at least he’s willing to have a go.” (White Irish male, 28)*

As indicated by these data, fathers did not always feel completely comfortable in this ‘feminine’ environment. Sometimes they felt that other mothers wondered why they were at the toddler group or drop-in, or sometimes felt ignored. However, as the following extract highlights parent and toddler groups could be welcoming for fathers if the attendance was more gender balanced.

*Interviewer Do you feel comfortable here as a dad?*

*“Erm it depends on the activity some yes, some less so... I used to go to one (Toddler group) in \_\_\_\_\_ which was more balanced amount of dads and that was more enjoyable one too.”*

*Interviewer “In what ways?*

*“Well because there were more dads to talk to as a bloke it’s a bit strange. You can as a bloke get people ignoring you.” (Mixed race male, 33)*

It was suggested that increased advertising, a broader range of activities including team and competitive activities would be popular, as some fathers felt that activities were ‘more geared towards the ladies’ through activities like ‘step aerobics.’ At the same time, one father was keen to assert that he was not into sport and it was clear from some men’s involvement in the first aid course that other non-sporting activities could be attractive to fathers.

*Interviewer “How could they get more dads involved?*

*“Possibly more things that dads are more interested like what... erm... am I interested in? Well for myself possibly child or toddler sport sessions...I know they’re doing the gym for dads, I’m not a gym person but I might have considered, was this swim thing and I did enjoy taking (Childs name) to swimming. That was nice but they didn’t continue and we went a couple of times to trampoline...I’m not a sporty person but things like that where you’re more comfortable and more accepted.” (Mixed race male, 33)*

Clearly, this is an area that needs further exploration and development.

### **School site**

*“ I don’t like going down there when they got the kids out. I avoid them. I wait till they’re not there.” (White British female, 29)*

*“I’ve grown used to it. I’m surprised I must confess that it’s on a school site. It does make you a little conscious that you’re stomping in on a school site that means its secure and I think*

*that makes it a little bit harder to approach. It's like this morning I was coming up for the course and I press the buzzer and I wait and I thought I'm not gonna get in... Because it's on a school site it makes it less approachable." (Mixed race male, 33)*

At the time of data collection, the Sure Start Whitley main site was on the campus of Thamesbridge College on Northumberland Avenue. Staff and parents often described Thamesbridge College as having a 'reputation' for poor attainment and bad behaviour by the pupils. During group interviews parents would refer to the school and say that their child would not go there. The school was seen as intimidating because of the behaviour of the pupils, its reputation and the security measure of large telecom controlled gated. However, it may be that reputation is particularly significant here. During the time that this aspect of the research was completed the students were very friendly, often talking to the researcher whilst waiting for the bus in the afternoon. At lunchtimes, the students do sit on the steps up to the sure Start building and on one occasion staff went to the window to watch several young men throwing stones at the school building.

In one group session we had a discussion about the building and the site.

*Interviewer: "If money was no object what changes might you want in the site?"*

*Parent1 "A more accessible building for a start"*

*Parent2 "Yeah, trying to get your pushchair up those stairs for a start."*

*Interviewer: What about the site?"*

*Parent1 "It's crap. That's why most mums don't come."*

*Parent2 "... yeah it's not central. They could have a building round in the middle of Northumberland venue, easy access, people could walk in, walk out. It's just a hassle here. You have to park your car over here, it can get vandalised or smashed and then you have to get through that gate."*

*Parent 3 "There may be a Sure Start sign but people still ask. I mean it's a senior school. Why would there be a mother and toddler group..."*

*Parent1 "It's absolutely crap."*

*Parent 2 "... I thought they were going to move it all down to the community centre but they're not... They need this building somewhere else like in the park where everyone goes"*

*(Group discussion Sure Start)*

The school was seen as intimidating because of the behaviour of the pupils, its reputation and the security measure of large telecom controlled gates. The school site was also seen as unapproachable by some parents interviewed, particularly with the buzzer and gate that need to be negotiated to get into the school grounds. This combination could construct the site as a 'fortress' and this, coupled with some expressed concern about the older students, could set up a barrier for some sectors of the community. Although the parents were

aware of the new community café further down Northumberland Avenue, the split site was seen as a potential problem with some parents saying that they liked the existing building but not its present location within the Thamesbridge College grounds. The only other drawback with the present building was with access difficulties for pushchairs and buggies.

## **9. Summary and conclusions**

This research focused on how the creation of 'self-esteem, sociability and autonomy' might be built in to 'naturally occurring opportunities in daily living' in ways which might impact to counterbalance some of the substantial disadvantages which had originally brought Sure Start provision to the children of Whitley. A number of key points can be made here:

- Parents were aware that staff put considerable energy into engaging and encouraging them to link with SureStart, and clear that they would otherwise have been unable or unlikely to take that step.
- Parents consistently reported that once engaged they found the activities and resources of SureStart helped them build confidence, explore the world, and feel less isolated.
- This was clearly seen as beneficial to their children, measurable in behaviour, developmental achievements and sense of contentment.
- Children reported and demonstrated a positive sense of SureStart as a resource for them and their families, and were in general clear that they would describe it positively to other children.
- The framework of Green Frog observably met the criteria of Social and Emotional Development, via "self-esteem, sociability, and autonomy" within "social support systems that encourage personal effort and coping"<sup>viii</sup> as the careful balance of support, aid, and encouragement led to positive observable changes in children's confidence and ability.
- The multidisciplinary team meets a wide range of difficulties and need in resourceful, creative, and committed manner. The sense of a resilient and steadfast service seemed particularly effective in engaging exhausted parents and those critical of past service contacts.
- The children interviewed consistently displayed a sense of the contact as constructive and enjoyable. In the nursery they can play creatively, imaginatively, and range freely, while developing social and interactive skills, and those who have home visits demonstrated personal changes and a welcoming, assured sense of their SureStart workers.

In conclusion the young users, who communicated their opinions clearly and enthusiastically, view SureStart Whitley positively. It meets the criteria for a preventative and supportive child-centred service. In terms of the national objectives of Sure Start, the three main areas focussed on here - Social and Emotional Development, Health and Children's Ability to Learn – have each been tackled in resourceful and creative ways by a strong team that aims for a coherent multidisciplinary provision. These aims were evident in the groups observed and in parents' own assessments of what they gained from the service. Parents spoke about the high quality of health care in comparison to their experiences with older children 'pre' Sure Start. As indicated earlier

within arts groups, toddler drop in and antenatal classes, parents share advice, experiences and news with one another, thus contributing to social capital in Whitley. In some groups, individual mothers take an active role in welcoming others to the centre, and offer refreshments. Through the Check it Out Group, parents have a mouthpiece, either directly by attending the meetings or indirectly by passing their comments to group members on the quality of the service. Other parents have become involved in the project as volunteers, gaining work experience and developing new careers.

*Issues that arose particularly for parents were around*

- *Who was excluded from the service;*
- *Those outside the Sure Start boundaries and*
- *Those families with children over the age of four.*

*Many parents interviewed felt the boundary lines were arbitrary and divisive and were critical of the age cut off point. The school site remains a barrier for some parents, particularly those most difficult to reach who may find the College students and gated entry point difficult to overcome especially when combined with the issues outlined by some of the parents in meeting and greeting in some of the drop in groups.*

*This research certainly points to aspects of the service that should be further investigated. We believe that there are five specific areas that should be investigated:*

- *The involvement of fathers in Sure Start provision*
- *Further work should be done on children's perceptions of the service*
- *The new provision at SRYCC*
- *Work with 'hard to reach groups'*

*The work of the Community Development team*

## **10. References**

<sup>i</sup> [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) for a summary

<sup>ii</sup> Kurtz, Z. (2001) *Sure Start within the national context of Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services* [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

<sup>iii</sup> Gilligan R. (2000) *Adversity, Resilience & Young People: the Protective Value of Positive School & Spare Time Experiences* Children & Society Vol. 14 (pp 38,40)

<sup>iv</sup> Lancaster, P. 2002 *When listening works for children* Nottingham Early Years Conference [www.ncb.org.uk](http://www.ncb.org.uk)

<sup>v</sup> Iwaniec D. and Pinkerton J. (1999) Making Research Work: Promoting Child Care Policy And Practice Chichester:Wiley

<sup>vi</sup> P.6 Clark A. & Moss P. (2001) Listening to Young Children London: Rowntree Foundation & NCB

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vii Kurtz, Z. (2001) *Sure Start within the national context of Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services* [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

viii Kurtz, Z. (2001) *Sure Start within the national context of Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services* [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

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