



The Evaluation of 'Here We Grow'

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The author welcomes any questions or comments readers may have about this evaluation and can be contacted at the following:

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1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 Background

This report provides a summary of the findings from the evaluation of 'Here We Grow,' a parent-child toddler group developed by the West Green and Chestnuts Sure Start local programme. Sure Start is a UK initiative targeted at improving the lives of young children living in the nation's most impoverished wards. The initiative is delivered through over 500 local programmes across the country. Each local programme develops services for parents and children based on community need. The National Unit strongly encourages local programmes to evaluate their services in order to understand the ways in which parents and children benefit.

West Green and Chestnuts is a Sure Start local programme located in North London. 'Here We Grow' was developed in conjunction with the Haringey Adult Learning Service (HALS) in response to the identified need for community groups. It was originally delivered as a weekly family learning course where parents could learn about their child's early language development. The emphasis of the 'course' shifted to a drop-in, however, in response to suggestions made by the parents.

The West Green and Chestnuts local programme commissioned the evaluation of 'Here We Grow' in January 2004 in order to 1) inform its ongoing delivery and 2) identify successful practices that can be mainstreamed into core services. There are now three 'Here We Grow' services delivered through the West Green and Chestnuts Sure Start local programme. Attendance at 'Here We Grow' has steadily increased over the past three years and one of these services is oversubscribed. The 'Here We Grow' staff believe that this success is a positive example of how Sure Start can add value to the lives of young children and their parents. The evaluation therefore considered how key activities improved the lives of children and parents in terms of the four Sure Start objectives.

1.2 Evaluation design and methodology

The evaluation utilised a 'Theory of Change' design to compare the beliefs of staff with the experiences of parents. Seven staff members participated in in-depth interviews that explored their understanding of how service activities supported the four Sure Start objectives. The responses from the staff interviews were used to develop a question framework for an in-depth interview that took place with twelve parents. The responses from the parent and staff interviews were analysed with qualitative methods. The findings were fed back to the 'Here We Grow' staff during a workshop so they could identify priorities for taking the service forward. The identified priorities were then incorporated into a partially completed action plan.

1.3 Key Findings

Parents said:

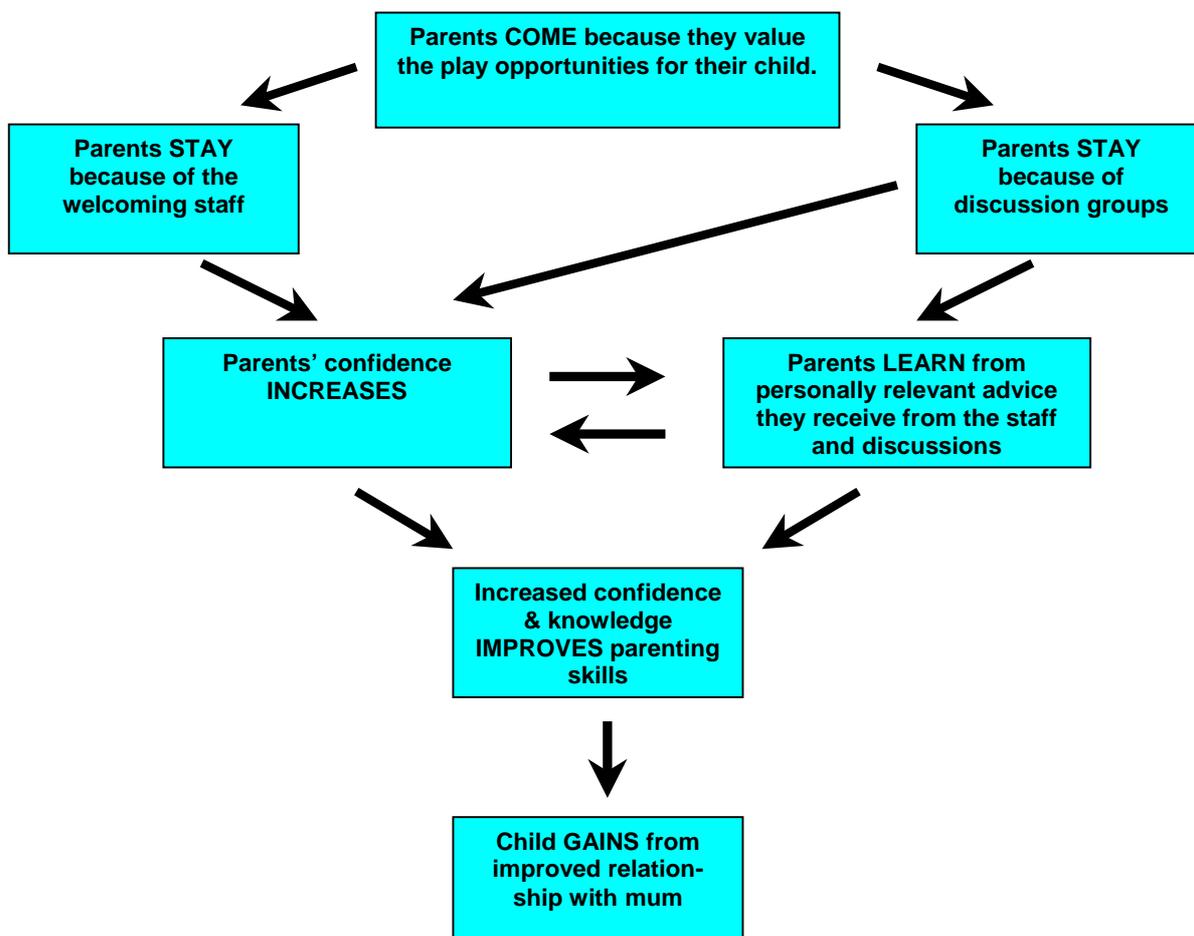
“This group is far better than other groups that I have visited because there is always something to learn. It provides support, education and enjoyment.”

“I think it is a fantastic facility for our community ...it helps people solve their problems....”

“Very friendly, very well informed and just really supportive.”
[see p.64]

The evaluation found that both children and their parents learned at ‘Here We Grow.’ Children learned important school readiness skills, such as ability to share, take turns and effective communication. Figure 1.1 provides a model of how parents and children benefit from ‘Here We Grow.’

Figure 1.1 Model for parental learning and increased confidence at ‘Here We Grow’



Mothers reported learning important coping and behaviour management strategies, and this, in turn, increased their confidence in their parenting skills. The mothers also reported learning valuable health advice and provided many examples of where they had put it to use.

These outcomes were supported through three key activities:

- Structured and unstructured opportunities for children to play together
- A warm and non-judgemental staff available to address parents' personal concerns, giving consistent and broad support and encouraging skill development in all families whatever their background and current circumstances
- Advice provided by qualified professionals during weekly group discussion

Advice appeared to be the primary way in which mothers learned and gained confidence. All the mothers reported wanting and using the advice they received from staff and discussions. However mothers facing significant stress in terms of multiple risk factors appeared to rely on and benefit from this support the most. Half of the families were highly vulnerable and two thirds were at moderate to high risk:

Risk Factor	Number of families at HWG
Single parent	7
Claiming benefits/temporary housing	7
Not in work or training	6
Teenage parent	0
No secondary school qualifications	4
Seeking asylum	5

*Adapted from Early Head Start research 2001 US Administration For Children & Families

Additional benefits from the service included increased community awareness. More than half the mothers reported using 'Here We Grow' as an access point to other community groups and learning courses. In addition, six of the parents said that using 'Here We Grow' helped them feel better about living in Tottenham.

1.4 Conclusions

This evaluation suggests that 'Here We Grow' successfully adds value to the lives of families with young children in terms of all four of the Sure Start objectives. The supportive and welcoming attitude of the staff creates an

environment where parents and children can and do learn. However this evaluation relied on parents' recollections and opinions and did not directly measure specific service impacts. The next stage would be to identify and measure specific child and parent learning outcomes. The service may also want to enhance parents' opportunities to learn through playing with their child, place a greater emphasis on the parent-led aspects of the service and provide more privacy and focus when supporting parent's individual needs.

2 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Aim of the report

This report summarises the findings of a process evaluation of the first 'Here We Grow' drop-in developed by the West Green and Chestnuts Sure Start Local programme. The West Green and Chestnuts programme commissioned this evaluation to identify successful practices that will inform the ongoing development of this service. The staff believes that lessons learned from this evaluation can be used to develop similar core services, including those that will be part of local Children's Centres.

The evaluation took place between January and December 2004. It utilised qualitative methods to explore the perceptions of the 'Here We Grow' staff, parents and children in terms of the following four Sure Start objectives (Please see Appendix A for a description of how these objectives relate to service activities):

- Improving children's ability to learn
- Improving children's health
- Improving social and emotional development
- Strengthening families and communities

The report summarises these findings first in terms of staff's theories of how the service meets these objectives and then in terms of parents and children's actual experiences. The findings suggest that the service is highly valued by both the staff and the families who attend it and that the programme should continue to invest resources to ensure that it is available to those who need it the most.

2.2 Understanding 'Here We Grow'

2.2.1 The History

'Here We Grow' is one of the first services to be developed by the West Green and Chestnuts Sure Start local programme. West Green and Chestnuts is located in the North London borough of Haringey and is a combination of two programmes. West Green received its approval as a Round 1 'Trailblazer' in January 2000 and Chestnuts (whose border exists within the confines of West Green) was added in April 2001 as part of Round 3. The two programmes combined cover 2200 children under the age of four and constitute one of the largest Sure Start programmes. The first 'Here We Grow' course took place in June 2001 in response to the need for community support groups identified in the West Green delivery plan.

'Here We Grow' was developed in conjunction with the Haringey Adult Learning Service (HALS). It was initially conceived as a weekly family learning course where parents could learn about their child's language development. As one staff member described it:

[In the beginning] it was described as a course. It was six-week sessions long and we had quite a defined timetable and the main emphasis was around communication. So we had things around story telling, helping your child to talk, the development of sounds, and using music and rhythm to help children communicate. Very defined sessions.

Parents and children were initially recruited through the waiting list at a local nursery and the first session had a positive response with 15 mother-child pairs who attended regularly. The first course took place in a school classroom with crèche facilities in the parents' hut. Unfortunately, the course was continually interrupted because the children were distraught over leaving their parents. The staff decided that it would be better for the toddlers to remain with their parents and the parents were happy with this decision. The weekly sessions continued, but the formal atmosphere of the 'course' had significantly changed.

2.2.2 Parent-led discussions

As the course progressed, the staff discovered that parents had their own suggestions regarding what they wanted to learn. For example, while the course focussed on early communication, parents also had many questions about their children's eating or sleeping behaviour. So the staff decided that they would ask the parents what they wanted for discussion topics rather than work from a pre-determined curriculum. This formula proved successful and once the six weeks were over, the parents were reluctant to leave. Because of this, the staff decided to call the service a drop-in, although one staff member felt that the term 'drop-in' was not necessarily the best way to describe what actually took place.

We found that some people seemed to be a bit scared off by the idea of it being a course, so we kept it much more fluid. We called it a drop-in, but people did come every week. It's not a group to which people tend to sort of drop in once a month. At the beginning of every half a term we sit down and we say to the parents "What would you like us to do?" We have an idea, always, of course – we always . . . talk about communication and play and language development . . . and adult learning, but the parents have a say.

After the initial positive response, attendance began to fall off. The staff became concerned that the service was not properly advertised, and efforts were made to recruit more parents. As one staff member related:

When we were at [the school] at some point we had quite bad attendance for a while and I felt like the Pied Piper. They all lived really close, so I used to go and knock on doors.

The staff concluded that advertising needed to be improved and that the small school hut was insufficient for both the children and the parents. The service was subsequently moved to a local community centre in a room specifically designed for pre-school play. The space at this venue is more open and accessible and is filled with stimulating toys for children under four. Attendance has improved steadily since the service moved to this new location.

2.2.3 'Here We Grow' today

The 'Here We Grow' staff believe that the programme has evolved over the past three years in a manner that reflects the needs of local families. The service currently defines itself as "a needs-led group [to] promote communication with babies and infants through play, books, song and language and give valuable input regarding health, nutrition and behaviour."

HALS has developed six objectives and outcomes for 'Here We Grow' that complement the Sure Start objectives outlined in Section 2.1 and Appendix A. The objectives are:

- To provide a rich play and social setting for the all-round development of children under 4
- To provide a stimulating environment for parents/carers, in which they feel comfortable to discuss any family issues, thereby increasing their general confidence and ability to function effectively in their every day life
- To offer information related to health and education to the parents and carers and promote discussion related to this
- To link children's activities to the discussion thereby bringing about a greater understanding of what the children are doing and why
- To offer a time when parents/carers play alongside their children to bring about an understanding of the benefits of play-good role models to be present
- To promote a more active role in the general education and care of their own children or children in their care.

The anticipated outcomes are:

- Children will have a rich experience focussed on their social, emotional and intellectual development
- Parents/carers will have greater knowledge, and feel able to use this, of health issues

- Parents/carers will feel more confident in supporting their children's learning
- Children will settle into nursery more easily
- Parents/carers will feel more confident about accessing facilities in their local community
- Parents/carers will have the opportunity to access Haringey's Adult Guidance Service and ICT facilities.

The evaluation will also consider how the service meets the HALS objectives and outcomes within the context of the Sure Start objectives.

Currently, three 'Here We Grow' drop-ins run out of the West Green and Chestnuts Sure Start local programme (although the findings from this evaluation only involve the first service), and HALS supports several more across the borough. Whilst 'Here We Grow' was initially intended for children between two and three, the service is now open to any family with a young child – not just those with children of nursery age. At the time of the evaluation, the youngest child was six months and the oldest was over four.

The service still meets weekly during the school year and follows roughly the same schedule each session. Families arrive between 9:00 and 10:00 and children play with their parents and each other for approximately one hour. This is followed by an arts and crafts activity. After this, parents participate in a group discussion, which is followed by a healthy snack and some group songs. The session officially finishes at 11:30, but parents often stay to chat and ask questions until 12:00.

While the service still provides information about early communication, it has expanded its range of topics for the discussion sessions to include information on the following:

- healthy eating
- early years' education
- early psychological development
- dental care
- stress and relaxation
- adult education
- homeopathy

Local professionals lead the weekly discussions. These individuals include dieticians, health visitors, dentists and child psychologists. Parents are also encouraged to suggest topics and the staff do their best to fulfil these requests. For example, one recent immigrant asked for more information on the geography of Great Britain, so one discussion centred around the nation's major cities and tourist destinations. During the past 18 months, field trips have been added to the list of 'Here We Grow' activities. These include visits to the Natural History Museum, the London Eye and the National Transport Museum.

2.2.4 Empowering parents

Sure Start and HALS feel that it is important that parents realise personal goals through their 'Here We Grow' experience. When a caregiver enrolls in the course, he or she is encouraged (but not forced) to fill out an Individual Learning Plan with a parental involvement worker (Appendix B). This form asks parents to identify areas where they can work to help their child and areas where they can work to help themselves. The parental support workers occasionally review these plans with the parents. The staff report that parenting skills (especially in the areas of communication and behaviour management) have improved through the use of these plans.

2.2.5 A safe and welcoming environment

'Here We Grow' staff feel strongly that learning will take place when parents feel welcomed and emotionally supported. One parent involvement worker described how she creates a welcoming environment by making a point of remembering every mother and child's name.

I make a big thing about remembering everybody's name and every child's name. I think that's very important. If you pluck up enough courage to come here once, the second time if you go again and somebody doesn't remember who you are, I don't know if you'd come again.

Another member of staff felt that it was the non-judgemental attitude that keeps parents coming back:

The parents have said to me "I feel so welcomed." And so first impressions count, they don't feel that they're being judged. It's non-judgemental, I think that's really important.

Staff report that the parents respond well to this open and caring environment. An objective of this evaluation is to understand how this climate of support is realised through practice in order to mainstream it into core services.

2.2.6 The previous evaluation of 'Here We Grow'

Prior to this evaluation, 'Here We Grow' was monitored through Summary Data Forms (Appendix C) that were completed by staff members. These Data Forms include a space for recording the demographic characteristics of those who attend the group, as well as a space for recording the numbers of parents and children who demonstrated (or reported) improvement across a variety of skills. While results from these forms suggest that improvement takes place, it is difficult to measure it with any consistency, since baseline

information on the parents and children was never collected upon registration. For example, although service providers believe that parents' confidence is increased after attending 'Here We Grow,' there is no way of knowing what their level of confidence was before attending the drop-in in comparison with what it was afterwards. In addition, the Summary Data Forms record staff members' perceptions, but not always the parents. A primary goal of this evaluation is to understand whether parents themselves perceive any benefits from attending the drop-in. This information will allow the service to identify specific outcomes in order to monitor parents' and children's progress more rigorously and consistently.

2.3 'Here We Grow' within the context of early development

2.3.1 Parenting support in the UK

Although 'Here We Grow' began as a six-week course, its evolution into a full-fledged parent-toddler group reflects the need for a service that allows parents to interact with their child and other parents in a warm and supportive environment. This need was also identified by the Government through the interdepartmental childcare review "Delivering for Children and Families" (2002). This report identified the following potential long-term benefits of quality educational support targeted at young children from low-income families:

- Higher educational attainment
- Improved language skills
- Improved child behaviour
- The potential to prevent participation in crime
- Reduced health inequalities
- Greater community cohesion across racial and socio-economic boundaries
- Improved parenting skills

The need for supporting parents through educational services is further underscored in the Government's Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' (2003). This paper cites research that suggests that "parental involvement in education seems to be a more important influence than poverty, school environment and the influence of peers." The report goes on to say that policy should be geared towards providing support to parents during two critical periods in the child's development: the early years and adolescence. The paper emphasises the need for family learning programmes like 'Here We Grow', suggesting that:

These programmes [should] focus on engaging parents in their children's development and offer opportunities to increase involvement in learning, to break down barriers between school

and parents and to act as a link to targeted help and support. (p. 41)

The UK government further underscores the need for services that provide support for parents with pre-school children through the Core Standards outlined in the “National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services” (2004). Standard Two underscores the need to support parenting, stating that they want to see:

Parents or carers who are confident and able to bring up their children in a way that promotes positive health and development and emotional well-being. (p. 65)

Standard Two mandates that all Primary Care Trusts and Local Authorities provide information and support that includes support and advice concerning “. . . how to nurture babies and children, set appropriate boundaries and manage behaviour effectively.” (p. 71) Services targeted at families with pre-schoolers that promote parental confidence and increased knowledge of child development are likely to fulfil the objectives outlined within the ‘Supporting Parenting’ standard.

2.3.2 Family learning and early emotional development

Research from the US further confirms the need for quality family learning experiences during the early years (Raver and Knitzer, 2002). Research consistently shows that early emotional and cognitive development are strongly linked, thus suggesting that early years’ educare should include emotional support for the parent and child (David, et. al. 2002). In a national policy review, Knitzer (2002) advises that emotional support for young children and their caregivers is particularly crucial for families living in poverty and cites the following research evidence to support this claim (pp. 6 – 7):

- *The roots of later healthy emotional and behaviour functioning lie in the earliest relationships that infants and toddlers have with their primary caregivers*
- *Emotional problems in you children often, although by no means always, can be traced to family care-giving environments that cannot meet children’s needs for nurturing and stimulation*
- *Early learning and early emotional development are connected*
- *For some proportion of children, behavioural problems visible in the pre-school and early school years lead to later conduct disorders*
- *One of the most harmful risk factors to young children, including their emotional development, is poverty.*
- *The more risk factors young children experience, the higher the probability that their emotional and cognitive development will be compromised.*

Knitzer proposes that an effective way of supporting young children's emotional development is to "help parents be more effective nurturers. . . because of their age, the best way to help young children is to help their caregivers—family members, child care providers, home visitors, and teachers—be more effective."

Knitzer goes on to suggest that an effective way of supporting parents is through family learning services that focus on the needs of the early parent-child relationship. The West Green and Chestnuts staff strongly support this ethos and believe that the 'Here We Grow' model improves the parent-child relationship. For this reason, the evaluation will specifically consider activities that enhance parental learning and positive parenting practices.

2.3.3 Early Head Start 'Socializations'

Further evidence of the need for family learning comes from research involving Early Head Start in the US. Services like 'Here We Grow' are a central component of Early Head Start programme strategies in the U.S. These services, called 'socializations,' have one distinct purpose ". . . to support child development by strengthening the relationship between parent and child." (Early Head Start National Resource Center, 2001). Interim research findings (The Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, 2001) suggest that socializations offer many benefits to parents that include:

- The increased use of routines during mealtimes and bedtimes.
- Decreased likelihood of using corporal punishment.
- Enriched opportunities for language development within the home.
- Parents are more likely to read to their child.

Socializations always work in conjunction with home visiting services. When home-based services are fully implemented (meaning one weekly visit and a minimum of two socializations per month) significant impacts on children's cognitive and language development are observed.

The model for Early Head Start socializations is very similar to 'Here We Grow' in the following respects:

- Socializations are designed for families with children aged three and younger.
- A group setting is used to promote parent and child learning.
- Staff believe that parents respond best in an environment that is welcoming and supportive.
- Parents identify learning goals for themselves and for their child through personal development plans.
- All of the objectives of Early Head Start (involving learning, health, social-emotional development and strengthened communities—the same as for Sure Start) can be addressed through the service.

However, the socialization model differs slightly from 'Here We Grow' in that they do not necessarily offer discussion groups as part of their service. Instead, socializations always take place within the context of a home visit and personal development plans are used with every parent. Whilst some of the families attending 'Here We Grow' do receive home visits from the West Green and Chestnuts Community Team, this is not a stated feature of the service. In addition, it is not mandatory for parents to fill out Individual Learning Plans. This makes it difficult to consistently monitor how personal goals are realised through attending 'Here We Grow.'

Given the similarities between 'Here We Grow' and Early Head Start socializations, the evaluation will consider whether Here We Grow parents provide enriched play opportunities for their children at home and implement mealtime and bedtime routines.

2.4 Overview of the evaluation design and methodology

This evaluation utilises a 'Theory of Change' design (Weiss, 1998) to compare the beliefs of service providers with the experiences of parents and children. Theory of Change evaluations compare three core 'theories' that influence service delivery (Hernandez, 2000);

- 1) Recorded Theory. This is the intended action that is recorded in the service' delivery model. In the case of 'Here We Grow' the intended action is stated through its aims and objectives (Appendix A and Section 2.2.3), where specific activities are linked to the four Sure Start objectives.
- 2) Expressed Theory. These are the line staff's beliefs about how the service meets its objectives (recorded theory). In this evaluation, staff members and managers were asked to provide explanations of how the drop-in improved the lives of parents and children in terms of the four Sure Start objectives. The staff were also asked to explain how these beliefs were linked to service activities. Responses from these questions were then used to develop a framework for evaluating how these theories corresponded with the parents' experiences (or active theory).
- 3) Active Theory. Active theory is what is documented through the evaluation. In the case of this study, it is the experiences of the parents who participated in 'Here We Grow.' The parents' experiences were then compared to the staff's theories to assess whether the parents were receiving the service's intended benefits.

The evaluation also considered whether families achieved any of the benefits identified through the Government's "Delivering for Children and Families" interdepartmental review and the evaluation of Early Head Start. These

questions were included in the parent interview and considered how 'Here We Grow' parents cared for their children through daily routines and disciplinary practices. The responses to these questions allowed the evaluation to consider the value of the service within the broader context of emotionally supportive educare targeted at families with young children.

2.5 Evaluation findings

This evaluation design yields a great deal of qualitative information that will allow Sure Start and HALS staff to understand where their theories correspond with parents' experiences and where discrepancies exist. This will enable the staff to further develop the service's strengths and address any potential weaknesses. It is important to remember, however, that because the evaluation relies solely on the opinions of parents and staff, it will not be able directly assess the impact of the service. The interpretation of the findings is limited because:

- It was not possible to consistently observe or measure the behaviour of children.
- The findings involve a small group of parents over a short period of time and therefore the sample may not be representative.
- A control group was not available, so the opinions of the parents can not be compared to those who did not use the service.
- Change could only be measured indirectly through the parents memories. It was not possible to obtain 'before' and 'after' data because parents could enrol and drop out of the course whenever they wished.

Nevertheless, the author believes that the information collected through this evaluation provides valuable insight into how the service does (or does not) add value to the lives of the children and parents who participate in it. The data will also prove useful for identifying key variables for future, more rigorous evaluations.

2.6 Structure of the report

This report includes a detailed description of the methodology and the evaluation findings. The report also provides a summary of the decisions made during two evaluation workshops. The purpose of the first workshop was to gain a shared understanding of the implications of the findings and identify a set of priorities for the future development of the service. The purpose of the second workshop was to develop an action plan for addressing the identified priorities. The report also includes an outline for future 'Here We Grow' evaluations, since it will be crucial for the service to measure its impact on specific outcomes if it wants to go forward with

mainstreaming. The report concludes with a summary of the implications arising from the evaluation – both in terms of the future development of ‘Here We Grow’ and in terms of the learning needs of parents with young children.

3 METHODS

3.1 Participants

Staff. Seven ‘Here We Grow’ service providers participated in one semi-structured interview that considered their theories of how the service met its objectives. The service providers included two crèche workers, two parental involvement workers (or tutors), two service administrators (the Area Programme Manager and the Family Learning Co-ordinator from HALS) and the Sure Start child psychologist.

Parents. Twelve mothers participated in a separate interview designed to explore their experiences of the service in terms of its aims and objectives. These parents were invited to participate in the interview by one of the parental support workers. Ten of these parents were attending the drop-in at the time of the evaluation and comprised approximately two thirds of those currently enrolled in ‘Here We Grow.’ Table 3.1 provides the distribution of parents in terms of how long they attended the service.

No longer attending	2
Two years or longer	2
Between one and two years	1
Between six months and one year	4
Two months	3

Eleven of the participants were the child’s biological mother and one child was adopted. Table 3.2 provides demographic information of the mothers who participated in the in-depth interview.

Married	7
Single without partner	5
UK Citizen	6
UK Resident	2
Asylum Seeking	4
English as first language	6
English as second language	6
Attending with first –born child	4

Table 3.3 provides information regarding how the mothers heard about 'Here We Grow.'

Table 3.3 How the parents found out about 'Here Grow'	
Allocated family	2
Core services (housing, midwife)	2
HALS	1
West Green Library	3
Another drop-in	1
A friend	2
School	1

The twelve mothers cared for 14 children who attended the service. Nine were boys and five were girls. Table 3.4 provides the age distribution of these children at the time of the evaluation.

Table 3.4 Distribution of children's age	
12 months and younger	2
1 – 2 years	3
2 – 3 years	7
3 – 4 years	0
Over 4	2

3.2 Interviews

Appendix D provides an example of the question topics covered during the in-depth interviews with 'Here We Grow' staff. The interviews were conducted in an informal, conversational way, where the questions were used as guides rather than asked verbatim. At the onset of the interview, the author explained the purpose of the evaluation and asked the participants for permission to audio-tape it. Interviewees were explicitly asked whether they understood the purpose of the study, what would happen to the data, whether they gave their informed consent to participate in it and whether they agreed to have the interview audio-taped. Verbal consent to all of these questions was recorded on the audio-tapes and transcripts. The interviews took place on the 'Here We Grow' premises or in staff members' offices. Each interview took between 45 minutes and 2.5 hours to complete.

Appendix E provides an example of the question topics covered during the in-depth parent interviews. These interviews were also informal so that the parents would not feel as though their parenting skills were being evaluated. Once again, the questions were used as a guide and were not always asked verbatim. Whenever possible, parents were prompted to provide examples

to support their opinions. All of the parents received a description of the evaluation and an explanation of what would happen to the data. The parents' verbal consent for participating in the interview and audio-taping is recorded on all of the audio-tapes and transcripts. Nine of the interviews took place on the 'Here We Grow' premises and three took place in the participants' home. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours. Three interviews took place on two separate dates because of time constraints.

The evaluation consultant was able to review attendance records, Individual Learning Plans and service descriptions. The consultant also had the opportunity to observe and record two 'Here We Grow' play sessions.

3.3 Analysis

Modified analytic deductive methods (Patton, 2002) were used to analyse the participants' responses within question categories and inductive methods were used across categories for the staff interviews. Using a 'Theory of Change' model (Weiss, 1998), the evaluator identified themes from the theories generated by the service providers. These themes provided the framework for the parent interview questions and also generated the first set of hypotheses for analysing the parents' responses. For example, staff hypothesised that communities and families were strengthened because parents used the service like ". . . a trampoline. Parents come here and then they go off. A lot of them go to ESOL, but they're also going to family learning classes or adult learning classes." This hypotheses was then tested by asking parents whether they accessed more community services after attending 'Here We Grow.' Responses to this question were used to confirm the service providers' theory, but also to generate alternative theories of how the service enabled parents to access community services.

Additional hypotheses were generated from an examination of the research regarding family learning programmes and the data was also analysed within the context of these hypotheses. For example, research from Early Head Start evaluations suggest that an advantage of socializations is that parents learn from observing other parents. Therefore, a line of questioning explored whether parents had learned anything by watching other parents and children interact.

The findings are reported in terms of the stated service objectives. The theories of the service providers are provided first, followed by the parents' responses. This format allows the reader to compare where service providers' theories and parents' experiences are similar and dissimilar and also provides an understanding of how the findings confirm previous research.

4 WHAT IS 'HERE WE GROW?'

At the beginning of the interview, all of the service providers were asked to provide an explanation of what they thought 'Here We Grow' was. Staff members had different definitions of the core purpose of the service, but most mentioned that 'Here We Grow' had something to do with family learning:

It's not just [about] parents and it's not just [about] children. The emphasis is very much on them working and learning and playing together and enjoying themselves, hopefully. So yeah, I think it's a family learning sort of ethos.

It's a user-led negotiated programme with a background of tutor experience and what worked well in the past and a view of what we feel people might be interested in. So it's like a gelling, a marrying of those two aspects.

You're bringing together vulnerable parents and vulnerable children in each other's company, you're engaging the children in creative play which is developmental in its own right, but demonstrating the value of that to the essential parents and carers.

It's about teaching parents . . . not to be really lofty and ambitious about it, not to bring them a theory about child development – but help them watch their children and help their children try and learn within the context of other mums.

These statements suggest that the purpose of the service is to educate both parents and children. However, there were differing opinions concerning what the service was called. Some called it a course, while others called it a drop-in. As one manager put it:

Its not been easy, because it's like this whole thing of, is it a roll-on or roll-off? Is it a course? We still haven't really come up with the definitive answer around that. I like to see it as a course and I think we do. I think it's about encouraging commitment. It's not a drop-in.

Nevertheless, other staff members called it a drop-in--

We found that some people seemed to be a bit scared off by the idea of it being a course, so we kept it much more fluid. We called it a drop-in, but people did come every week.

Still others defined it as a group:

It's not really a course as such, it's like a group. [Would you call it a drop-in?] I wouldn't specifically call it just a drop-in, no.

The parents were not asked if they thought the services was a course, a group or a drop-in, but it appeared clear to all of them that 'Here We Grow' was a place where parents and children could learn. The next section considers how children learn at 'Here We Grow' through the theories of the service providers and the experiences of the parents.

5 OBJECTIVE 1 – CHILDREN’S ABILITY TO LEARN

5.1 Service activities that promote child learning

The first Sure Start objective of ‘Here We Grow’ is to improve children’s ability to learn. Programme documents state that this is supported by three service activities:

- Opportunities to play with other children
- Guided play sessions with trained crèche workers
- Information for parents about Early Years’ education and encouraging them to participate in school activities – e.g. Family Learning.

The ‘Here We Grow’ staff were asked whether there were always enough opportunities for children to play with other children. All of the staff said yes. As one crèche worker put it “there’s always lots of children, maybe 7 or 8 children.” However, one member of staff made a point of qualifying ‘play’ in developmental terms.

I mean with the little ones, that doesn’t happen because they’re just doing a lot of parallel play They may not play with each other at that age, but I think they do recognise each other.

The service providers reported that guided play sessions took place every week on both a formal and informal level. Examples of formally guided play included arts and crafts activities like collages or painting or group games. Informally guided play included times when a staff member would sit down with an individual child and engage him or her in an activity, such as building a block tower, setting up toy train, or solving a puzzle. Crèche workers also said that they encouraged children to play with each other by giving them soft toys to share or by inviting groups of children to play together in the miniature kitchen.

Information regarding Early Years’ education was provided in two ways: 1) through leaflets that are printed in different languages and 2) at least one discussion session per term with an invited nursery teacher. The staff also gave examples of how individual mothers were given personal assistance in finding a school for their child. One member of staff told of how she helped a mother get her daughter onto a nursery waiting list:

Sometimes with one or two parents I’ve actually gone to the school with them. . . because they’re afraid, they’re not quite sure how to respond. I took one parent to a school who speaks French. With the very limited French that I know (and it’s very limited). . . I was able to help her fill the form in and do it and she was like ecstatic.

While the Sure Start literature did not mention anything about toys, the author observed that there were many high quality, developmentally appropriate toys for the children to play with. When the staff were asked about the toys, several mentioned that they believed their quality contributed to child learning.

I think the quality of the toys that we have here is very good, really good, so it encourages a lot of different play situations.

Another manager described how quality toys and equipment were a priority for the service.

I'm very keen on supporting the purchase of the most valuable equipment and the best equipment. In other words I'm not looking for savings anywhere. . . so I definitely want us to buy high quality wooden toys if we can.

This evidence suggests that activities aimed at improving learning take place on a weekly basis: children are able to play creatively with each other, children engage in guided play with crèche workers and parents receive information regarding early years education.

5.2 Parents' perceptions regarding service activities

The parents were asked whether their child always had opportunities to play with other children. All of them said that their child played, but not all of them played with other children. Two said that their child played alone, and both of these children were under the age of two.

A second question explored whether the children made any special friends from 'Here We Grow.' Eight mothers said that their child had made a special friend and looked forward to seeing this friend every week. Four mothers said that their child was still working on this. Two of these four mothers had very young children and two children were new to the service.

When parents were asked about the guided play sessions with trained crèche workers, everyone said that they enjoyed participating in these activities. All but one mentioned the songs and nursery rhymes as a favourite activity. Every parent said that they liked the toys and many said they especially liked the miniature kitchen and outdoor play space.

The parents were also asked if they received information about early years' education. Seven parents said that they had received either leaflets or attended a discussion group on the topic. Five of these parents reported receiving assistance in enrolling their child in school. Four of the five parents who did not recall receiving information about early years' education had older school aged children and said that they did not really need it. One parent did not understand the question.

These findings suggest that the parents' experiences are consistent with the first HALS/Sure Start objective that states that the service should "provide a rich play and social setting for the all-round development of children under four." The service also appears effective in getting early years information to the families who need it the most.

5.3 Staff's perceptions of children's ability to learn

Staff members were asked to provide explanations of how children's **ability** to learn is improved through their participation in 'Here We Grow.' Most members of staff answered this question by providing examples of the opportunities available for children to learn. These included activities targeted at small motor development (like cutting and pasting) and gross motor development (like tricycles and balls). Several also said that children learned by participating in structured group activities.

I think [learning takes place from] the very fact of the children coming together in a group so you have to learn how to share. It takes a while, but you're learning how to share and you're learning to listen. When [a crèche worker] says "No, you can't do that" then you're learning that no, actually you can't do that. So you're beginning to take instructions from other people, as well as your own parent.

When discussing how children's **ability** to learn improved, most mentioned that this occurred through play. As one manager put it:

I think that there is still a huge misunderstanding about the nature of play, creative play, and what goes on in a drop-in, and what services children really need. And we perhaps take it for granted too readily that people understand that children need to play because that's how they understand the world, that's how they will grow and that's how attachment can take place. We assume that that's understood and I'm not sure it is.

Another service provider put it this way:

Sometimes children need the time to explore without too much intervention. I'm finding that sometimes the children need just that you're there as a kind of guidance I suppose.

These statements are consistent with the learning philosophies espoused in the Sure Start early years framework 'Birth to Three Matters' (David, et. al., 2002):

Where there are high quality opportunities for babies and toddlers to create and imagine . . . the key person is attentive to a child's creative explorations, providing assistance in a way that does not disrupt the child's flow of thinking and through the unobtrusive support gives the child the emotional security to experiment. (Manning-Morton and Thorpe, 2001, as quoted in David, et. al. p. 94)

This theory underscores the need for young children to engage in free play, where they are allowed to control the pace and content of the play. Some of the 'Here We Grow' staff felt that more parents needed to appreciate children's need to play:

I'd like to think that as a result of coming here . . . parents feel more relaxed around play and they begin to realise that play is a very essential part of learning. I think a lot of parents still feel all we ever do is play, but here there's quite a very strong emphasis on play. Anything we do around improving their child's language development, their physical development all has to do with play, games, and songs. We encourage the parents to play the games and, you know, make the musical instruments or whatever it is. I think that it . . . will definitely help the children to learn and that's a very essential idea of coming somewhere every week and doing a particular thing every week and being able to make that decision about play.

Not only does this theory imply that children's ability to learn is supported through play, it suggests that parents need to understand the importance of play in order to support their child's learning. This theory is similar to Knitzer's (2002) suggestion that early child development is often best achieved by helping caregivers help their children.

The 'Here We Grow' staff also felt that children's ability to learning was supported by having access to materials and play activities that they would not necessarily have at home. As one staff member described:

I know some people don't like messy play and all that, but it's a part of [learning]. I find that at home children are never going to get to do messy activities, like gluing, sticking. Parents aren't going to do all of that. So that's another thing for parents and children to come and learn new ideas and activities and putting it into practice here, which they're not going to get at home.

Unfortunately, the evaluation could not verify whether the opportunity to play at 'Here We Grow' did, in fact, improve children's ability to learn. However, the research outlined in 'Birth to Three Matters' (David, et. al., 2002) suggests that play provides the context where many early skills develop:

Play of course becomes the contextual space where meaning is made and negotiated as children develop ways of interacting with toys, space and 'others' to construct and reconstruct worlds. (p. 78)

Clearly, play is an essential part of early child learning and the 'Here We Grow' staff feel that this is well supported through the service. The next section considers whether the parents themselves noticed changes or improvements in their children's learning while they attended 'Here We Grow.'

5.4 Parents' perceptions of their children's ability to learn

None of the parents were able to comment on whether their child's *ability* to learn had improved. The parents also had difficulty articulating why or how their children learned at 'Here We Grow.' However, eleven parents said that their child had learned something since attending the drop-in. The child who had not learned anything was under 18 months.

Half of the mothers reported that their child's language skills had improved. One recent asylum seeker was thrilled that her daughter had learned how to say 'baby' and 'hi' in just three weeks after attending the drop-in. Three mothers reported they were able to communicate better with their child because of their child's improved language skills. One mother described the change in her son as follows:

Before [coming to 'Here We Grow'] my son was only interested in watching TV. Now he's not. Now he plays with his toys and he plays kitchen and he comes to talk to me, because he would see other kids play with the toys. For example, the music person, when we start to sing, sometimes he doesn't sit and sing with them, he'll go and play with his toys, but when he comes home he'll sit on the sofa, or with his toys and he'll start to sing the same music.

Four parents also said that their child had learned how to share at 'Here We Grow.' One mother described how pleased she was with the social skills her child was learning.

[He's learned all about] sharing and playing with other children, being in a regular group, more together, more positive play, and that was what I was asking for and hoping he would get. [The staff] give good advice on that sort of thing at different stages.

Four parents also observed changes in their children's ability to sit still and take turns, although one parent questioned whether her child learned this just from his experiences at 'Here We Grow.'

I mean I sort of notice changes in him sort of generally, but I couldn't specify that it was this programme that has induced that change. . . . They do need to do taking turns and I suppose the one thing he does here that he doesn't have to do anywhere else is when they have a story they all have to sit round. He can't sit right in front, he can't obscure the vision of anyone else or dominate the story or stop and ask questions all the way through it.

Interestingly, only one mother said that her child had gained any intellectual skills after attending 'Here We Grow.' The example she gave was that her son's attention span had improved enough to sit still and do a puzzle.

5.5 Children's learning at 'Here We Grow'

The 'Here We Grow' staff were in agreement that both the free and guided play sessions provide children with a variety of opportunities for early learning. The staff all remarked that they witnessed children learn during these activities and they believed the children's ability to learn had improved.

While the mothers were not able to comment on whether their children's *ability* to learn had improved, they were able to provide many examples of what their child had learned at 'Here We Grow.' These examples included a variety of important social skills such as effective communication, sharing and taking turns. While it was not possible to verify whether children learned these skills as a direct result of attending 'Here We Grow' (or as part of their natural development), the findings suggest that early social development is supported through the play activities that take place there.

The skills promoted at 'Here We Grow' are likely to help children 'settle into nursery more easily' as the HALS outcome suggests. In addition, it is possible that these school readiness skills will decrease the likelihood of conduct disorders in nursery and increase the potential for learning (Raver and Knitzer, 2002). In this respect, the play opportunities at 'Here We Grow' provide young children with much more than a good time – they give them important skills that will increase their chances for future school success.

6 PARENTAL LEARNING

6.1 The HALS' parental learning objectives

Parental learning was not stated as one of Sure Start's four objectives, but it does comprise two of HALS' objectives:

- To link children's activities to the discussion, thereby bringing about a greater understanding of what the children are doing and why.
- To offer a time when parents/carers play alongside their children to bring about an understanding of the benefits of play-good role models to be present.

While the HALS literature describes these two processes as objectives, they are actually specific activities that encourage parental learning. The previous section makes it clear that the service provides many opportunities for children and parents to play together and the staff feel that this takes place during the free play-time at the beginning of each session. During this period, crèche workers are supposed to engage parents in joint play with their child and model appropriate play behaviour.

The free time, the time for interaction at the start of the session is key to that. We promote the parent/child interaction, that's key to it all. There's good role modelling by the facilitators.

The staff also remarked that an awareness of child development was created during the discussion time when explicit links were made between play activities and child learning:

In the group discussion, it might well be that we'll bring in a toy and say "How did you used to play with this?" or "How could you play with this with your child?"

These responses suggest several activities targeted at parental learning take place every week. The next section considers the staff's theories of how parents learn during these activities.

6.2 Staff's theories regarding parental learning

When staff members were asked to provide their theories of how 'Here We Grow' supports parental learning, they identified six separate processes. Parental learning took place when parents:

- 1) Observed their children play
- 2) Played with their children
- 3) Received advice – both from individual staff members and during the group discussions
- 4) Worked through their Individual Learning Plans
- 5) Received support for English as a Second Language
- 6) Talked with and observed other parents.

The staff's theories regarding each of these processes are presented below.

6.2.1 Learning through observation

A core component of the family learning ethos is that parents learn through guided observation of their children. One staff member described how she guided a mother's attention to her child's affect:

[I have said] to a mum 'he loved it, didn't he when you sang with him.' You know, kind of drawing it to the parent's attention the child's response to their involvement.

Another staff member described that she felt this non-pressurised kind of learning was important.

I think [Here We Grow] also gives parents space. I think they actually have time to, they're encouraged here, because that's how this works, to actually sit back and look, look at what their child is doing, use observation. It's not sort of, you know, intensive "We've only got half-an-hour, so you've got to do this." It's much more "Oh, by the way, did you notice that was going on?"

Another service provider believed that reflection was an important aspect of the observation process.

There is the opportunity for adults to just see things happening. Not necessarily getting worse or better, just see things happening and they have a short period of time where they've detached themselves from actually controlling the child, looking after the child and being a responsible person, which can be a real chore for many parents in difficult situations. They're detached enough to know that there are other adults doing that and they're free to observe and reflect and they're being encouraged to do so by the staff.

This statement also implies that parents need opportunities to distance themselves from their child in order to learn.

6.2.2 Learning through play

The entire 'Here We Grow' staff believed that the promotion of play was at the core of the service provision. As one manager put it:

It's all about appreciating play, valuing play. [We promote] practical ideas of how to interact with children on a very easily accessible level. There are things that you could do very easily and promote that parental involvement.

Another staff member felt parents learned about their children by having fun with them:

I'd like to think what it does is that it encourages parents to realise that they can have fun with their children. Sometimes I think a lot of the parents who come here, all parents actually, are under enormous pressures, they've got all sorts of other things going on in their lives, really important things like housing or, you know, status or money or whatever it might be. Coming here gives them the space to actually be with their children. The time is just for their children and for them and I think it's very much for both of them, so it's a sort of sharing of a time and I don't know how often in the normal life people get that really.

The staff also made efforts to introduce the importance of play during the group discussions – ***"We always make a point to talk about communication and play and language development during the discussions."*** Clearly, the staff feel that play is one of the most important opportunities for parental learning at 'Here We Grow.'

6.2.3 Learning from advice

Staff also believed that parents learned from individual advice. One service provider remarked that parents often approached her with specific problems:

Like if one mother don't know something or any problem she's got she might talk to us, one of us or a parent or something and then she'll take that idea home and she'll put it into practice and that is helping her, and she's going to have a try isn't she, so it is helping.

Sometimes parents sought advice to help with child behaviour at home:

I've had a parent say to me recently, you know "What kind of activities can I do with my little girl at home? She's just drawing on the walls." And those parents were quite concerned, they said anything, you know, crayons, pens, she

just draws, so I just gave them some suggestions. I told them which shop they can go to and get arts and crafts materials really cheap.

Sometimes advice was provided because staff thought it was necessary:

We've had some parents who really don't have much of an idea about parenting. We've had parents who've hit children, you know, so there are times when you have to be very specific and say 'No, you mustn't hit your child, it's not a good idea.' And then we talk with them around ways of dealing with that and certainly encouraging people to play.

Some staff members felt that it was helpful to share a philosophy of parenting with the mothers:

I find that a lot of parents want to be perfect parents, okay? And some parents feel guilty about not being the parent they want to be and a lot of the parents feel that providing their children with material goods is what a good parent is. So my role, I think, is to get parents to respond to their children and to communicate with their children in a positive way by using different strategies . . . What I try and do is get the parents to see that you don't have to be a so-called perfect parent, but there are ways you can communicate and interact with your children better.

A good deal of advice was also shared during the group discussions:

Discussion time – that's pivotal. I think it's that discussion time that brings all this . . . that's when the learning, the active learning to all the analysis takes place.

In sum, these responses suggest that the service providers are giving a great deal of advice to parents, both on the individual and group level.

6.2.4 Learning through Individual Learning Plans

As mentioned in the Introduction (Section 2.2.4), Individual Learning Plans are offered to the parents when they enrol in 'Here We Grow.' Not everyone opts to fill these out, but the staff believe that when they do, the plans are an effective way for parents to learn. One service provider described how they worked:

For example, if a parent has a concern about the child's sleep routine or feeding or potty training, we may put that as an area of concern [in their Individual Learning Plan]. Then midway through the course we'll have a look at that again and we'll see whether there are any improvements, any of the

strategies that have been suggested and how it's going, so the parents feel that, you know, they can refer back to what they said at this particular date and has there been any progress on the next date. So that's been quite helpful and I find that the parents like the one to one about themselves and their children.

This statement suggests that Individual Learning Plans promote learning by providing a framework for reflection and observation. The staff remarked, however, that it was difficult to consistently offer these forms to all of the parents, since it was sometimes hard to find the right time to fill them out.

6.2.5 Support for English as a Second Language

Support for English as a Second Language (ESOL) was not listed as one of the primary objectives of 'Here We Grow.' Staff remarked, however, that issues surrounding parents' language skills inevitably came up, since so many parents were relatively new to the UK. Support for this came in three ways: 1) directing parents to local ESOL classes, 2) directly – by helping parents overcome language barriers and 3) indirectly, through activities led by the 'Here We Grow' staff.

One service provider described the ways in which she helped parents who needed assistance with their English:

If a parent says to me "I've written an application form, I'm not sure whether it's right." I will look over it, I will check their grammar, check what they've written and guide them, not write it for them, I don't do that, but I will guide them, give them different ideas. I have helped parents get onto ESOL classes that want to learn more English, so it's a whole kind of community-based thing, the group actually extends from being the 'Here We Grow' group.

Another staff member provided a theory of how ESOL was supported indirectly through play:

The value of the stories, the value of reading, the value of singing, the value of following the rules of the game, become so important and so motivation to change that springs up early. It may well be there, people may very well know they're handicapped not having English, or not having enough opportunity to join clubs in their language, so they may come saying that 'this is why I'm here actually because of that, you can teach me.' If it isn't there, it certainly becomes obvious very quickly.

A third staff member suggested that English skills improve through the opportunity to talk with other mothers.

We have foreign bi-lingual parents, and English is a second language for them, so when they come here they're learning English by meeting other parents.

6.2.6 Learning from other parents

The above statement implies that parents learn a great deal from listening to and watching each other. The staff observed that many parents made new friends at 'Here We Grow' and they often exchanged ideas and experiences.

There's sort of a continuing modelling . . . and discussion around issues and how people handle issues. I think its also just observing other parents actually and other parents being quite reassuring. Parents who've got older children being quite reassuring to parents who've got younger children. They'll say things like 'Oh, I remember when my one used to push the baby,' or whatever it might be. I think that gives them a sense of sort of 'Oh well, that's all right. I'm not the only one. Other people have been through it.'

These responses echo the findings from Early Head Start that suggest parents learn by being with each other. The next section considers what parents have learned (and how they have learned) from their own perspectives.

6.3 What parents have learned at 'Here We Grow'

During the in-depth interviews, all of the mothers were asked 1) whether they had learned anything new since coming to 'Here We Grow' and 2) whether they used this information. They were also asked questions specifically about play, such as "Have you learned anything new or meaningful about your child's play since coming to 'Here We Grow?'" and "Have you learned anything interesting about the way your child learns at 'Here We Grow?'" If the parents answered yes to any of these questions, they were asked to describe how they gained this insight into their child's learning.

Ten of the mothers were able to give examples of things that they learned at 'Here We Grow.' One mother remarked that she had not learned anything, and another said that she only came to the service for her child to learn, not for herself. Examples from the ten mothers who reported learning something at the drop-in are provided within the six categories identified by the staff in Section 6.2.

6.3.1 Parents learning through observation

Only one parent said that she had learned anything about her child through observation by recalling that the staff had pointed out changes in her child's behaviour:

They've been talking to me about settling and watching, observing, that sort of thing. Very positive, which is helpful. Sometimes I think "Oh my God, she's really behaving that way" but they'll say "but actually she's done this as well" and I'm like "Oh yes, OK."

It is unclear why the other parents did not mention observation as a form of their own learning. It may be because they were not fully aware that learning was taking place when they observed their child. Or, it may be that they do not feel that they have observed anything new on account of coming to 'Here We Grow,' because they are already observing their children in a variety of other contexts.

6.3.2 Parents learning through play

While the parents were specifically asked if they had learned anything by playing with their child at 'Here We Grow,' none of them could provide an example. Even though many parents mentioned the play activities that took place at the provision (like nursery rhymes, puzzles, cooking games, etc.), no one had said that they personally had learned anything about themselves or their child through this play. In fact, several parents said that they did not play with their child at 'Here We Grow' because they were socialising with the other parents. As one mother remarked:

Really, I don't play much with him in Sure Start programme. I am so busy with other parents, so I don't play much with him.

While one parent mentioned that she learned that play was important, she reported learning this from the visiting psychologist as a piece of advice, not from playing with her child at the service.

However, when their parents asked if they thought it was important to play with their child, all of the parents said yes. Furthermore, many parents (7) mentioned this as one of the reasons for coming to 'Here We Grow.' All of these women said that they took their children to many places to play during the week and that 'Here We Grow' was just one part of a busy play schedule.

These responses suggest that the parents clearly value play and in many cases, this was a primary reason for attending the service. The fact that they may not perceive themselves as learning through play at 'Here We Grow' may have to do with the fact that they don't perceive this as learning, *per se*. It may also mean that the parents regard their experiences at 'Here We

Grow' as complementary to what they are already doing with their child and therefore do not believe that their experiences at 'Here We Grow' are unique in this respect. However, the parents provided many examples of things that they had learned through advice from the staff. It may also be that the advice they receive is so important to them, they don't fully recognise what they are learning when they observe and play with their children.

6.3.3 Parents learning from advice

All ten parents who said they learned something at 'Here We Grow' provided an example of when they received help or advice for a specific, personal problem. This advice came in the form of individual help from a staff member or information provided during the discussions. One parent described how much she learned about behaviour management both through her one-to-one conversations with the parental involvement workers and the group discussions:

[I've learned] mainly by talking to [the staff], exploring things and getting ideas, positive management as you say. You don't want to fly at the child and smack him or anything, so I've been dealing better. And of course, [the psychologist] coming here gives us a chance to ask questions and it's informal, because it's very difficult to talk to a psychologist.

Another parent described how she learned to control her child's biting during one of the discussions:

I think they had some psychiatrist or child therapist who gave advice how to deal with it. Just looking out for it, because children bite when they're stressed so it's just looking for the key moments.

Another mother, who joined the group after the biting discussion, said that she was sorry that she didn't receive any information about biting, because she really needed it:

We had someone come to talk about the behaviour of the children, but she didn't talk about the biting because she didn't have time. It's only a half hour. When he bites, I smack him, when he bites again, I smack him again. But it isn't going to work like that, is it?

A number of parents also offered examples of where the staff actually showed them how to get their child into school, access speech therapists or gave them information about finding a childminder. Six of the parents remarked that it was particularly important that the advice came from qualified professionals. As one mother put it:

My favourite things is like run by people, some like a nurse or those who I can ask about the food and they explain to me everything. I learn here, like I'm at school, I learn here, I don't hide but I learn.

Parents also reported receiving advice for their own needs. One mother told about how much she enjoyed the ballroom dancing course she signed up for through 'Here We Grow.'

It's very relaxing, and I never though it would be. Having the stress taken away with all this, ballroom dancing, and relaxing sensation. It relaxes the mind.

Other mothers told of how they got information about job opportunities, computer classes, English courses and further education.

While the parents were pleased with all of advice they got, they especially valued the help they received regarding child development issues – particularly when it came to behaviour management strategies. As one mother put it:

It's important that we can talk about how we feel as parents and the consistency. That's what I remember the most, is being consistent when something happens. And being able to go back [to your child] and say look, this isn't happening here.

Another mother described what she learned through her son's behaviour:

My son has now learned that when I say yes, I mean yes and when I say no, I mean no.

A third mother described how the advice she received calmed her own emotions:

They just kind of support you if you start getting a bit tetchy or whatever. It's never fuelled--they diffuse it somehow. It's accepted that we are fallible humans and we will as parents get wound up and children will misbehave and that we shouldn't make it any worse by getting wound up. Just accept it.

This statement reinforces the parental involvement worker's theory that parents benefit when they are reassured that no one is a perfect parent (Section 6.2.3). These responses also suggest that the parents clearly value the advice they get from the staff at 'Here We Grow.' Only one parent said that the advice was not important to her – ***"If the children have problems, I can't talk to [the staff]. I deal with it myself."***

For the others, however, advice appeared to be the primary reason for coming. When the mothers were asked to list three favourite things about 'Here We Grow' eight mentioned receiving advice either from staff members or from the discussion groups. As mentioned in the previous section, it may be that this advice is so important to parents, they are less aware of the learning that takes place through other processes.

These statements also suggest that mothers want and need advice that is connected to their emotional well-being. As one mother put it:

I think there's such a need and at this age it's so challenging, it's very challenging. For some it's just a short time that they're like that, but for others it becomes endless.

These findings suggest that the 'Here We Grow' model provides emotional support for many mothers. They suggest that mothers want and need advice to help them cope with the challenges of the 'terrible twos.' The findings also suggest that advice containing emotional support should be available to all mothers through mainstream services.

6.3.4 Parental learning through the Individual Learning Plans

All of the parents were asked if they knew about the Individual Learning Plans. Four of the mothers did not know about them. Five of the parents mentioned filling one out and all of these parents had attended the service for longer than six months. Three of the mothers said that they knew about the plans, but did not feel that they were personally necessary.

The five mothers who filled out the Individual Learning Plans said that they were useful. Three of the mothers said that the plans helped them to manage communication and behavioural issues with their children. One mother described how she had difficulty getting her son to dress himself and the goal setting helped her manage this situation. Another mother said that it helped her stop hitting her child and develop positive behaviour management strategies. A third mother said that it helped her communicate more effectively with her child. Two other mothers used these forms to identify personal educational goals.

Clearly, the Individual Learning Plans help parents learn when they are used. The question is why four of the mothers did not know about them. This may have to do with the reason the parental involvement worker provided—that there was not always enough time to implement them. It is also possible that the mothers who speak English as a second language may have missed this information, since three of these women were recent immigrants to the UK and were still struggling with their English.

6.3.5 Parents receiving support for English as a second language.

As mentioned in Section 3.1, half of the mothers spoke English as a second language and five of these women were asylum seekers. The language skills of two of these women were sufficient enough not to need additional English support. Only one of these women said that she received specific support from 'Here We Grow' for her English. While the other three women said they were taking ESOL course, it was not clear whether they got this through attending 'Here We Grow,' or if they had found out about these courses separately.

These findings do not necessarily suggest that those who needed help with English did not receive it from 'Here We Grow.' It may be that these women are not aware of how the programme benefits their English or that this is not a priority for them attending the service.

6.3.6 Parents learning from other parents

Both the 'Here We Grow' staff and research from Early Head Start suggest that parents learn from watching other parents. When parents were asked if this took place, their responses were mixed. Eight of the mothers reported learning something by watching other parents interact with their own children. Three of these women said that they admired other mothers who provided calm and sensitive support. As one described:

I quite like the parents who actually are playing with their children, even in the groups. They play with them, show them things, read books together, playing nicely.

Another described how she used a piece of advice from another parent to solve a problem involving sibling rivalry with her children at home. Five parents remarked that they gained insight into how to manage their own child's tantrums through watching the staff and other parents manage difficult situations with other children:

[There's a boy who] obviously has a problem – he pushes children, strangles them and things. But we learn [from the staff] to deal with that as we go along, telling him no, it's naughty, mustn't do that. But other than that there's not much that we can do because his mum's trying to control him as well. What we can only do is try and help her as well.

Additionally, four parents said that watching other parents have difficulty with their children helped them to feel more relaxed about their own parenting. As one mum put it:

I think the main thing that I draw extreme comfort from is that other children are more badly behaved than mine.

This statement reinforces the staff's beliefs that parents feel better when they realise that everyone faces the same challenges.

However, three mothers said that they did not learn anything from watching other parents interact with their children. One mother said that she wouldn't trust other parents to know how to interact with their children, and therefore relied on the advice of the parental involvement workers. Another mother felt that the other parents were not really playing with their children.

To be honest, the parents don't engage that much with their own children.

A third mother said that she only learned things from trusting her own judgement.

These responses suggest that the majority of parents do learn by watching other parents interact with their own children. However, it appears that some may be resistant to this idea, either because they prefer to rely on professional advice or use their own judgement.

6.4 Parental learning and 'Here We Grow'

The evaluation findings suggest that parents are learning a great deal at 'Here We Grow.' However, not all of the parents appeared to be aware of their learning through the play and observation opportunities provided at the service, despite the fact that a number of service activities supported this learning process. Instead, parents said that the majority of their learning came from the personal advice they received from the staff and the group discussions. Parents also reported learning through the Individual Learning Plans, and two-thirds of the mothers said they learned things by watching other parents play with their own children.

The advice that was most highly valued by the parents involved strategies for managing difficult child behaviour. It was also important for at least half of the mothers that this advice came from trained professionals. The parents reported that this advice yielded positive results with their children at home and it made them feel more relaxed and confident (see also Section 9.3.2). These responses suggest that the staff at 'Here We Grow' are especially skilled at providing the kind of advice parents want, especially when they 'coach' parents on the individual level. The next section considers how parents use the advice they receive concerning child health and nutrition.

7 OBJECTIVE 2 -- IMPROVING HEALTH

7.1 Service activities that support the health objective

The Sure Start 'Here We Grow' literature states that the health objective is supported by:

- Child development sessions run by core health professionals.
- Advice on healthy living provided by Sure Start staff or core professionals. For example – advice on healthy eating from a Sure Start dietician.

The HALS literature states a similar objective:

- To offer information related to health and education to the parents/carers and to promote discussion related to this.

The previous section provided examples of how child development issues, such as play and behaviour management, were introduced during the discussion sessions. The 'Here We Grow' staff also use these discussions to provide parents with information on nutrition, healthcare, oral health and parent education. Parents are encouraged to suggest topics for the discussions as well. This means that while health and child development issues are covered each term, the specific topics change with the needs of the parents.

The service providers had very straightforward theories of how the health objective was supported through service activities--that Sure Start or core professionals gave the parents health advice and presumably they used it. However, one service provider was concerned that parents were not always able to digest the information they received during the discussion sessions:

I mean I suppose that that's always the trouble with time, isn't it? You know, I don't know whether twenty minutes or half-an-hour [is enough]. It's a very noisy atmosphere, your mind is sometimes with your child because he's crying, so how much you take in I'm not certain, but what I like to think is that people know that we're here and that if there was something they wanted to know about they would ask us.

The next section considers whether parents do digest and use the information they receive about child health and nutrition.

7.2 Child development advice

As mentioned in the previous section, eight of the parents listed the professional advice they received as the most important part of 'Here We Grow.' Six of these parents specifically mentioned the group discussions. As one mother put it:

I like it when we're sitting down and talking . . . About how we can control behaviour in children and things like that. We can learn from there and when we go away, we can sit down and think either we've done something wrong or the child has done something to prevent this from happening.

These statements suggest that not only do parents listen to the information discussed, they reflect upon it afterwards. While the parents were not asked to say which discussions they liked best, eight of the parents spontaneously said that they especially looked forward to the days when the Sure Start psychologist visited.

7.3 Health advice

When the parents were asked about health advice during the in-depth interviews, eight parents were able to give examples of things that they had learned from core professionals. Most of these examples were about food or eating. One parent described the fun her son had when the dietician came.

When the dietician came that was a really good fun thing. She had a big round circular pie chart and x percent was dedicated to starchy foods, x percent to vegetables, then fat and protein whatever, and the kids had to put things on the pie chart. [My son] really enjoyed taking these items of pretend food and putting them on the pie chart.

Another parent said that she was glad to know about healthy snacks and that she no longer gave her son Ribena after finding out that it high concentration sugar. Many parents said that they enjoyed the cooking sessions when the parents shared their own healthy food traditions with each other.

These responses suggest that parents do listen to the advice they receive during the group discussions and many put it to use. The next section considers how the child development advice influences the way parents manage their children.

8 PARENTING PRACTICES

8.1 How do the parents who attend 'Here We Grow' nurture their children at home?

As mentioned in the Introduction, research from Early Head Start suggests that parents who participate in socializations are more likely to use routines during mealtimes and bedtimes and less likely to use corporal punishment (Section 2.3.3). Early Head Start parents were also more likely to provide a stimulating play environment at home and read to their children. This section therefore considers whether the parenting practices of the mothers who attended 'Here We Grow' are similar to the parents who participate in Early Head Start socializations. In order to explore these issues, parents were asked to describe bedtimes and mealtimes, as well as the ways in which they played with their child at home. The parents were also asked to give examples of how they managed difficult behaviour. The parents were not asked directly whether or not they hit their child, however, since this question could be interpreted as judgmental and it was not the point of the interview to evaluate the mothers' individual parenting skills.

8.2 Mealtime and bedtime routines

The parents were asked to summarise what took place during mealtimes at their home. Half of the mothers had consistent routines and rules for what (and when) things could be eaten. However, half of the mothers described difficulties. One mother couldn't get her son to sit down and eat an entire meal and she complained that she often had to prepare two dinners for him. Another described a situation where her child "eats whenever he wants to, he doesn't eat all the time when I eat." Two mothers said they had difficulties getting their toddler to give up breastfeeding.

Only three of the mothers reported having a bedtime routine, referring to the three 'B's' (bath, book and bed). All three of these women said they received this advice from a relative. The rest of the mothers described a variety of problems. One mother expressed frustration when she told of how her two-year-old son would not stay in his bed:

He likes to really, really play up at bedtime, he gets out of bed all the time. A couple of times I've threatened him with shutting the door, turning off the light. Sometimes I lock the door and I sit outside and wait.

Half of the mothers said that their children either woke up in the middle of the night and came into bed with them or that the child needed the mother to lie with them until he or she fell asleep. One mother described why she thought her son needed her to lie with him:

If I'm still awake, he won't go to bed. I don't think he trusts me. [What do you think he thinks you're going to do?] He thinks I might do a runner, basically.

Four mothers said that lack of a bedtime routine was a major problem for them, since they were unable to get a full night's rest.

The parents were asked whether they received advice regarding mealtimes and bedtimes. The mothers said they were given information regarding what children should eat, but nothing about mealtime routines. Three mothers said they would like more help with these issues. The parents also said that they had not received any professional advice regarding bedtime, although one mother said that she gave advice to another mother. Three mothers said they would like more advice on sleeping routines.

8.3 Play activities at home

As described in section 6.3.2, the parents were asked if they thought it was important to play with their child and if they enjoyed playing with their child. All of the parents said yes to both of these questions. Seven parents volunteered the details of their child's busy schedule. One mother told how reading and play were part of everything her son does:

[My son] likes reading. He likes reading all the time. He likes books books books books books. From the first thing in the morning to the last thing at night he likes books. We do go to the park and like this afternoon I'll take [him] to his tap-dancing. We do painting and drawing or making things, things like that, but I do prefer to do those sort of things at groups, because the clearing up is just a disaster (laughs). Our kitchen is miniature, but we do attempt to make some things at home food wise, cakes and things, but we sort of stick generally to jellies. Puzzles and stuff, Napier Road is really good for puzzles because they've always got a table laid out for puzzles so its very easy to do puzzles. And then we go to things like gymnastics at the Haringey club and I take him to a ballet dancing class.

Another parent described how her house was a toy emporium.

We have a playroom because we have too many toys, so we have a playroom at the top of house and its sort of like divided into a Barbie section, Power Rangers and Transformers section and a keyboard and a dolls' house. It's a very big room and its full of toys. We have more toys downstairs . . .

Four of the mothers said that they did puzzles with their children at home and two mothers gave examples of rough and tumble play. Trains and building blocks were also mentioned. Eight of the mothers said that reading to their child was important and reported doing it on a daily basis. Three of the mothers who did not mention reading did not speak English as their first language.

These findings suggest that play is a priority for the parents who attend 'Here We Grow.' It is difficult to verify, however, whether parents go to 'Here We Grow' because they value play, or if they learned to value play because they go to 'Here We Grow.' Whatever the case, it appears as though the ethos of 'Here We Grow' is consistent with the values of the parents.

8.4 Behaviour Management

Several questions considered behaviour management strategies. The parents were asked whether or not their child was strong willed and this was followed by a series of prompts that explored how the parents dealt with behavioural difficulties.

Ten of the parents reported having behaviour problems with their child. In addition to the problems with mealtimes and bedtime, eight parents said that they had separation difficulties. Three of the parents said that coming to 'Here We Grow' helped their child overcome separation anxieties, but two mothers reported that they were experiencing ongoing problems and that this was interfering with their ability to attend courses and go out with friends.

Nine of the parents said they had problems with negative or aggressive behaviour. Examples of aggressive behaviour included biting, hitting and high-pitched screaming. Some parents became quite agitated when describing the difficulties they were having with their child.

All I want him to do right now is to stop screaming. When I change his nappy he's shouting, crying and screaming and you know, really he never used to do that. He's started two weeks ago because I went to a friend's house and she had loads of children there and the children were making so much noise and after that he started screaming.

Four of the children exhibited negative behaviour during the in-depth interview and it was clear that this was an ongoing frustration for the mothers. However, six of the parents said that they learned to manage their child's difficult behaviour through advice received at 'Here We Grow.' Two of the parents received this advice from the group discussions, one parent got specific guidance when working through her Individual Learning Plan and three of the parents received personal help from the parental involvement workers. However, three parents said they felt that they would like more

support from the 'Here We Grow' staff and group discussions, but were uncertain about how to ask for it.

8.5 'Here We Grow' and parenting practices

The findings suggest parenting toddlers is a difficult task. It is clear that parents who attend 'Here We Grow' welcome and use the advice they receive. What remains unclear, however, is the extent to which this advice influences parenting practices at home. While these findings make clear that the parents who attend 'Here We Grow' play with their children, relatively few parents have adopted consistent mealtime and bedtime routines. It could be argued that routines at this time in children's development are not necessary. Given that a number of parents said that mealtimes and bedtimes were a source of personal stress, however, it appears as though the mothers who go to 'Here We Grow' would benefit from this support.

The findings do suggest that parents have received and used advice regarding behaviour management strategies. This appears to be a particularly important part of the service for parents, and many parents said that this advice was helpful. However, the findings also suggest that some parents would like even more support and several say that they are too shy to ask for it directly. The next section considers how advice and emotional support increase maternal confidence and enhance the parent-child relationship.

9 OBJECTIVE 3 – IMPROVING SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

9.1 Staff's perceptions regarding service activities

'Here We Grow' documents state that social and emotional development is supported by two activities:

- Providing a regular group in a safe environment.
- Supporting good relationships between parents and children.

When 'Here We Grow' staff were asked about whether they felt the environment was safe, they all said yes – especially since they moved their location from the school parents' hut. The staff members all reported that they were pleased with the venue and the toys that are available.

9.2 Staff's theories involving improved social and emotional development

As mentioned in the Introduction, the staff members believe that it is very important to create a welcoming environment for parents. Many said that they thought a welcoming environment was necessary for parents to learn:

The first thing that happens in a Here We Grow is that a parent's or carer's inquisitiveness about this group and they're decision to put their toe in the water can lead to a feeling of safety and security, and nothing will happen unless that's there. So, the first thing that we look for is that the actual atmosphere and circumstances of the group are comfortable and acceptable to parents and carers. . . Once you're comfortable and once you can separate from your child and once the agenda items are there for you, its likely you're going to keep coming and keeping coming is essential. . . So, do you see what I'm saying, the habituation is likely to lead to a good attendance and good attendance is likely, more likely to lead to the development of skills, understanding and presentation and therefore practice in parenting.

Another staff member emphasised the relationship between confidence and new skills.

I think it improves people's confidence in themselves as parents and also as individuals because, you know, there's an emphasis also on their own skills.

These statements suggest that the service providers believe that confidence is gained through two processes: 1) through learning itself and 2) through feeling as though one is in a safe and supportive environment.

Staff members also felt that increased parental confidence enhances the parent-child relationship. One parental involvement worker described it this way:

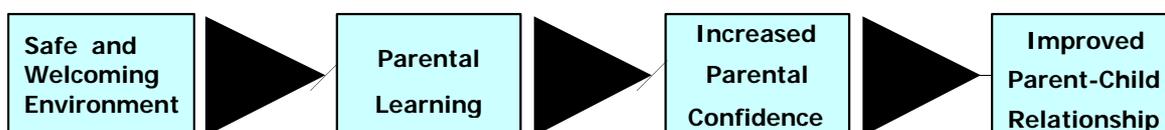
I think that gives them a sense of sort of self-value, self-worth and that will make that relationship better because they'll start thinking "Well actually I'm quite a good parent, I do know how to do that" or "I do know where to put this."

I think for parents it's very, very good. Because they are building their confidence as well – the parents . . . If the parents are confident, the children will gain.

And it's just really seeing parents grow and gain their confidence and seeing children grow and gain their confidence and seeing the interaction between parent and child and how it grows at their own individual, you know, level, that means a lot to me.

These statements suggest the following model (Figure 9.1):

Figure 9.1: The staff's theory of how 'Here We Grow' improves the parent-child relationship



This model suggests that once parents feel comfortable in a safe and supportive environment they will learn new skills. The new skills increase the parent's self-confidence and this results in less stress and an improved parent-child relationship. The following section considers whether the mothers feel the same way.

9.3 The perceptions of parents

9.3.1 A welcoming environment

All of the parents said that they found the 'Here We Grow' staff welcoming. Some parents were quite enthusiastic about this:

[The staff are] extremely supportive. I mean they're absolutely excellent. They're extremely supportive and they're calm and they also manage to exude an energy that brings this group together. They've got a very sort of looking after everyone attitude. So I mean they're fantastic really. . . they're very energetic . . . they're an umbrella I think.

It's so special when we go there. It's special because they are so friendly. We can sit and talk, we can play with them. I don't know how I can explain it, but I look forward to our Thursdays to go there.

I came along and [the staff] were really bubbly and lively and I thought "wow, this is nice, to be welcomed like that."

It's the feeling that you get from [the staff] basically. It doesn't matter what is your background or your religion or your cultures, they would accept you for who you are.

I have to say, coming here, it was good here, nice atmosphere here you feel like friendly and welcome when your child does not behave very well you know? You get support rather than judged and you see what I mean? That's very important.

[The staff are] very friendly, very well informed and just really supportive. They're great at listening and if they're not sure, they'll find out, and they'll always say to you 'we'll sort that one out, see what we can do.'

I feel like Sure Start is my family, you know?

These statements make it clear that the parents find the environment welcoming and supportive. However, does this support lead to improved confidence? The next section summarises the mother's responses.

9.3.2 Increased confidence in parenting

The mothers were asked whether they felt confident meeting their child's needs and if participating in 'Here We Grow' improved their confidence. Eight mothers reported that they felt confident meeting their children's needs. Nine of the mothers said that their confidence in parenting improved after coming to 'Here We Grow,' and all of the mothers said that this increased

confidence came from the advice they received either from a staff member or during a group session.

One mother described how the advice she received about communicating with her son dramatically improved her relationship with him. Another mother said that she understood how to deal with her son's jealousy towards her infant daughter and this made her feel much more relaxed. A third mother summarised it this way:

[I feel better now] about how to work with children, how to cope when they don't want to eat, they don't want to sleep or they just cry without any reason, how to cope with it. Because I really didn't know before, and I know that I didn't know before how to cope with this kind of situations.

A fourth mother remarked that the non-judgemental environment contributed to her feeling comfortable and confident:

I think it's about my insecurities about child development. I know there's stuff you can get in books, but there's nothing like actually talking to somebody who's got years of experience, or 'we hear what you're saying, what can we do about this.' Then you feel that you've been heard, listened to, you can rant and rave if you want and they're still listening.

However, four of the parents did not feel confident in meeting their children's needs. It is noteworthy that all of these mothers were single parents. In addition, two of these women did not feel that their confidence had improved since coming to 'Here We Grow.' Unfortunately, both of these women were going through particularly difficult periods in their lives. When asked about their confidence, they spoke more about a general feeling of depression and frustration with their lives, rather than anything specifically about the service. In fact, both mothers said that they still enjoyed coming to 'Here We Grow' because it improved their general mood. As one mother put it:

To be honest, I really look forward to coming to this playgroup because 1) to get a break from a monotonous routine and 2) to get away from my partner as well. And apart from that, learning something.

9.4 'Here We Grow' and emotional well-being

The parents responses confirmed the 'Here We Grow' staff's beliefs that a welcoming environment makes the parents want to come and stay with the service. Once the parents are there, they feel secure enough to seek advice from the staff and through this, gain confidence in their parenting skills. These findings provide support for the HALS' objective that states that:

The service will provide a stimulating environment for parents/carers, in which they feel comfortable to discuss any family issues, thereby increasing their general confidence and ability to function effectively in their everyday life.

However, it is important to note that the mothers' confidence improved when they received specific advice for an individual problem, either from talking to a member of staff, a core professional at a group discussion or from filling out an Individual Learning Plan. None of the parents said that their confidence had increased as a result of observing their child, playing with their child or talking to other parents.

These findings suggest that increased confidence is related to learning when it is specifically connected to the parents' personal needs. The findings also suggest that a sense of emotional well-being is achieved when parents feel confident caring for their child. A sense of well-being and confident parenting is also likely to improve the parent-child relationship. These findings reinforce the idea that children benefit when their parents benefit and demonstrate how valuable emotionally supportive services can be for families with young children.

10 OBJECTIVE 4 – STRENGTHENING FAMILIES & COMMUNITIES

10.1 Activities that strengthen families & communities

'Here We Grow' documents state that the service strengthens families and communities through the following three activities:

- Parent-led discussions, so that parents are in control of what is discussed in the group. It is not ready made, parent's needs and opinions are sought and listened to.
- There is a general feeling of support within the group. Parents are encouraged to bring their own expertise to share with the group.
- English is the language used, but is supplemented with signs, drawings and gestures. Parents who have some English help each other and the crèche workers also help. One group employs a link worker.

During the in-depth interviews, the staff described how parents were allowed to select topics for discussion at the beginning of each term. The parents' were also encouraged to make suggestions as the term progressed. Staff members provided specific examples of when individual parents shared their expertise during the group discussions.

10.2 Staff's theories regarding how families & communities are strengthened

10.2.1 A multi-cultural group

When the 'Here We Grow' staff were asked how the service strengthened families, service providers talked about how the parents confidence improved the parent-child relationship and these findings are covered in Section 9. When discussing how 'Here We Grow' strengthened communities, all staff members said they felt that the multi-cultural aspect of the programme was one its strong points. One service provider described it this way:

I think it's probably the thing that it does best . . . it gives some an opportunity to meet people from other communities that often would not necessarily meet and again. . . [Here you have] a group of people who previously didn't know each other, they couldn't talk, they couldn't communicate, but of course they can communicate. You can communicate if you've got children the same age, so I think that's really important and I think it works very well here.

This staff member went on to say that despite the fact that many parents do not speak English as their first language, communication within the group was not a major problem. She explained it as follows:

I don't see it as a problem at all. I mean again, I suppose it's my training because I work with people who can't communicate. But the fact is everybody can communicate and just not use the same language. You can always communicate with people.

The ability to communicate at 'Here We Grow' is also supported by the fact that the crèche workers are multi-lingual and the parents often translated for each other. While language barriers do exist in the service, the parents and staff do their best to get around them.

10.2.2 Parents selecting the discussion topics

The 'Here We Grow' literature states families and communities are strengthened because parents are allowed to choose the topics for discussion. However, during the in-depth interviews, the 'Here We Grow' staff did not make any explicit links between how the 'parent-led' aspects of the group directly resulted in strengthened families and communities. Instead, their explanations were more general, describing how the confidence gained at 'Here We Grow' might make parents feel more confident accessing other community groups. One staff member explained how a parent's outlook might change after gaining confidence at 'Here We Grow':

[The parent might think] I might become very interested in other groups that Sure Start is running, which could also be helpful to me to develop the skills. I might even want to volunteer to help with some of those things myself and take much more of a role in the organisational development. And I might start to think that actually it might be possible to get a job – something that I've not been able to do – have put off and found very difficult to do.

Another service provider described 'Here We Grow' as a trampoline:

A lot of parents who come to this group seem to use it as a sort of trampoline. They come here and then they go off. A lot of them go to English as a second language, but also go to family learning classes or they go to other adult learning classes that are available. That's happened lots, that's happened to a lot of our parents and I think that they probably wouldn't have gone straight to family learning, because they're nervous and anxious.

One staff member described a specific situation where a parent gained the confidence to seek professional advice outside of the context of 'Here We Grow' after discussing her problems with a parental involvement worker:

[This parent] started to worry a bit about [her son's] behaviour because one or two parents were getting a bit upset with the way they felt she was not dealing with it. This parent then actually went to find out more about . . . a course about managing children's behaviour . . . and she became more consistent with him and more confident in dealing with his inappropriate behaviour.

These remarks make it clear that the staff believe that the 'Here We Grow' experience empowers parents to go beyond the group and access other community services. This philosophy is consistent with the Sufficiency and Empowerment model that assumes that families will gain when mothers receive assistance in accessing community resources, such as training, childcare, housing advice and core health services (Kurtz, 2004). However, no staff member made any explicit connections between how parents' ability to choose the discussion topics increased their confidence or empowered them to access other community services. The next section considers these issues from the parents' perspective.

10.3 The ability of 'Here We Grow' to strengthen families and communities from the parents' perspectives

In order to understand how parents experienced 'Here We Grow' in terms of the staff's theories regarding strengthened families and communities, the parents were asked the following questions:

- Do you belong to any other community groups in Tottenham?
- Is belonging to community groups important to you?
- Have you made any new friends through coming to 'Here We Grow'?
- Do you feel as though it is easy to express your opinions or ideas?
- Do you feel as though your opinions and ideas are valued?
- Do you ever share advice or expertise with the teachers or other parents?
- How difficult do you find communication?
- Do you feel as though it is easy to express your needs here?
- Has coming to 'Here We Grow' improved your confidence in accessing other services in the community?
- Has coming to 'Here We Grow' changed the way you feel about living in Tottenham?
- Have you made any new friendships with other parents at 'Here We Grow.'

Whenever possible, parents were asked to provide specific examples of how confidence gained through their 'Here We Grow' experience led to other community activities or a sense of belonging.

10.3.1 Multi-cultural experiences at 'Here We Grow'

Many of the parents mentioned spontaneously that they liked the fact that parents from many different cultures attended the group. One parent said that this was her primary reasons for attending the service:

I have to say that I think this is absolutely fantastic this group. This is very higgildy piggildy, very multi-cultural [area] and I live here and I want my children to be able to feel comfortable and part of the community that enjoys it's multi-cultural feature. I want my children to grow up appreciating . . . things like that, so that's my main reason of thinking this group is good.

Nine of the parents also reported that they had made new friendships with parents that they met at 'Here We Grow.'

None of the parents reported any difficulties communicating at 'Here We Grow.' Their perspectives of how the service overcame language issues were quite similar to the staff's. One mother explained it this way:

I don't know how it works. It's because they are so kind. You don't want to say something, and straight away, they're trying to help me how to explain.

Another mother explained how the desire to communicate takes the parents beyond their inability to speak fluently to each other.

Even though they don't speak English, I still want to talk to them and often I don't even know what language they speak, let alone any words. So I don't think that the communication rest entirely with language, you do smile and all that sort of stuff. Language obviously isn't a problem, the desire to communicate and express yourself is important and you can do things, ...when somebody doesn't speak a word of English you still know that you get on.

These opinions indicate that the staff have found ways of to successfully communicate with the parents and help the parents communicate with each other. These responses also suggest that many of the parents share the staff's belief that the multi-cultural aspects of 'Here We Grow' are a valuable part of the service.

10.3.2 Parents accessing courses and community groups as a result of attending 'Here We Grow.'

Two of the mothers reported that going to 'Here We Grow' was the only community activity that they engaged in. Both of these women said that they did not feel ready to go to other groups, but that they highly valued their time at 'Here We Grow.'

When I got here I was very nervous, but now I'm more confident. Now I am able to come here and talk about whatever I need to talk about. It is sort of like, relief from all of the tension.

Another mother said that she was originally scared to come out of her house:

It's so hard to stay every day at home, but I didn't go outside because I was scared to meet new people and things like that. I was scared because in my country it's very troubled and I thought it is like that, and when I come here I find a nice place. I'm very happy now and my son he's very happy, he wants to come every Thursday here.

These statements suggest that at least two of the mothers were 'putting their toe in the water' as one manager suggested. Hopefully, they will gain enough confidence through this experience to join other community groups, as the 'Here We Grow' staff theorised.

While these two parents had not yet tried any other groups, seven other mothers reported how they used 'Here We Grow' as a 'trampoline' to other groups and courses. One mother said she started to come "***because I have no one in here, I have no family here. I think I started to feel alone and then I started to go here.***" She went on to describe how she found out about more play-groups and activities for mothers and children at 'Here We Grow' and she now had a very full weekly schedule. This individual provided a concrete example of the staff's theory, as it was very clear that her positive 'Here We Grow' experience gave her the confidence to try other groups.

Six other mothers told of how 'Here We Grow' service providers got them into training, work or other playgroups, but it was not evident that this happened because they gained more confidence from coming to 'Here We Grow.' In fact, seven of the mothers described themselves as "***confident already***" about accessing community services and courses. As one mother stated:

I feel quite all right myself to be able to do these things – for me to go out and find out exactly what I want, exactly what I need and make a decision, even at the school.

These answers provide only partial evidence for the staff's theory that 'Here We Grow' serves as a 'trampoline' for parents to access other services. In one instance, a lonely and unconfident mother put her 'toe in the water' and

went onto other groups. In two other cases, 'Here We Grow' was their first group, and both reported that their confidence was improving. However, over half of the parents said that they were already quite confident about the community and may have signed up for courses and groups under any circumstances.

Nevertheless, it is clear that finding out about these courses and groups added value to these parents' lives. In fact, half of the mothers said that their participation in 'Here We Grow' made them feel more positive about the Haringey community. As one mum said:

['Here We Grow'] is like being part of a community, basically, because I don't feel alone . . . I don't feel like a lonely parent. I just feel that I'm part of the community, that I'm part of the group.

10.3.3 The parent-led group discussion

When the mothers were asked about the parent-led discussions, all of them said that the group was an important part of the service (see Sections 6, 7, 8 and 9) and half knew that the discussions were parent-led. The women were able to recall when they had the opportunity to make suggestions for speakers and 'Here We Grow' outings. While it was clear that the mothers enjoyed providing their in-pu into the service, no one remarked that this was necessary or important for them.

However, half of the parents currently attending 'Here We Grow' did not know that the group discussions were 'parent-led.' Some of these mothers may not have been aware of this feature, because they were absent on the days when the topics were selected. However, when these parents were asked if they had any suggestions regarding the group discussions or activities, no one said yes. Instead, they shrugged, said "no, not really," or "I haven't a clue."

The mothers were also all asked if they felt comfortable offering their opinions during the discussions and whether they ever shared their expertise with other parents. Four of the mothers were comfortable doing this, and provided examples of when they shared information about health, nutrition and other activities. Not surprisingly, all of these women described themselves as fairly confident and all but one had attended the service for six months or longer. However, six mothers said that they did not feel like sharing their opinions or even asking for help. Four of these mothers had been attending the service for six months or longer. One mother said that she only felt comfortable sharing her opinion "in confidence." Another mother explained her reluctance to share her feelings as follows:

Because . . . I [feel like] I'm spoiling the atmosphere you know, that it's really my problem. In this group, or in the other Sure Start groups I think at least they should have ten

minute sessions for all the mothers to raise their own issues or problems like that about their children. That would be really helpful, listening to other parents, they might have come across that situation and they might give advice on that.

These findings suggest that parents who are less confident are also less likely to benefit from the 'parent-led' aspect of the group discussion. They also cannot confirm any link between the 'parent-led' discussions and strengthened families and communities. Instead, they suggest that while some parents might enjoy selecting the discussion topics, it is not a primary reason for attending the service, nor does it influence their decision to access other groups.

10.4 How 'Here We Grow' strengthens communities

The findings suggest that both staff and parents value the fact that families from multiple cultures and ethnic groups attend 'Here We Grow.' While the service does not employ a link worker for translation, the parents did not report any difficulties with communication, as both the staff and parents were highly motivated to overcome any potential language barriers.

However, the evaluation findings were not able to confirm that the parent-led discussions strengthened families or communities. In fact, only half of the parents were aware that they had any choice regarding the group discussions. The 'parent-led' aspect of the group did not seem to be important to some of the parents and several remarked that they did not feel comfortable sharing their opinions in a group setting. Therefore, while the fourth objective, strengthening communities, appears to be met – this is primarily supported through multi-cultural nature of the group that is promoted by the staff's ability to overcome language barriers.

These findings do not mean that the opinions and suggestions of parents are not important. They simply indicate that parent-led aspect of the discussion group is less meaningful to the parents than other aspects of the service, such as the advice they receive. While the 'parent-led' aspect of the service may not be related to further community involvement, it is a democratic feature that reflects how much the staff cares about the opinions and needs of the individual parents. The author suspects that parents do enjoy offering their input and it is likely that the less assertive mothers will contribute if the voting procedures are confidential and made clear and available to everyone.

11 'HERE WE GROW' AND VULNERABLE FAMILIES

11.1 Staff's theories

The vulnerability of the 'Here We Grow' families was a major theme throughout the staff's interviews. As one service provider put it, **"there are a lot of parents who are very fragile and you need a very gentle approach."** Another member of staff explained it this way:

The needs [of the families] are enormous and the majority of parents do have big socio-economic problems and a lot have uncertain immigration status. Masses of insecurity, big experiences. I should think there'd be a lot of issues about the lives that their children [face] -- what sort of parents they're being at the moment to their children.

The vulnerability of these families resulted in staff feeling that it was important that 'Here We Grow' strive to alleviate the stress and pain these families experienced.

Sometimes they just want someone to talk to and just someone to listen or maybe give a bit of advice maybe. I've had parents cry on me and say "Well I don't think I'm good enough" and, you know "I'm trying so hard." And then they've broken down and I'm like sometimes it will be just a bit of comfort -- "It will be okay, let's look at what the problem is and let's try and break it down and let's look at ways that we can try and work it out gradually."

Others felt that part of their job was to help individual parents feel better about themselves.

I asked somebody to take away a doll the other day to sew it up because she's a bit quiet and a bit out on a limb and I just sort of thought "I want to get her to do something." So I asked her if she could take away and sew up and it wasn't difficult, so I knew that she couldn't say she didn't know how and what did she do? She made a new dress for it. You know, the poor thing probably spent ages making it, but it's lovely and it's things like that. You know, that isn't really anything to do with her children, but it was to do with her, but that's important and I hope that will make her think "Oh, I can do something" and then that will make her feel better about her children and feel better about herself and so on. I think that's very important.

These statements reflect the compassion the 'Here We Grow' staff bring to their job. Throughout their interviews the staff provided many examples of

how 'Here We Grow' helped mothers in need. However, some service providers still wondered if the service could go farther in recruiting vulnerable families. As one individual put it, ***"I'd like to see ['Here We Grow'] be more representative to the most needy groups."*** The following section considers the degree to which these families are needy and the ways in which 'Here We Grow' supports its most vulnerable families.

11.2 Vulnerable families

In order to understand the vulnerability of the families attending 'Here We Grow,' the evaluation considered the parents in terms of the risk factors they experienced in their lives. Early Head Start research (2001, US Administration for Children and Families) has identified five factors that put families socially at risk. Table 11.1 provides a list of these factors alongside the number of mothers who faced them at the time of the evaluation. While the Early Head Start research does not include asylum seeking status as a risk factor, it is included here, as this appeared to be creating significant difficulties for some families.

Table 11.1: The number of families attending 'Here We Grow' who experience risk factors	
Risk Factor	No. Families
Being a single parent	7
Claiming benefits/temporary housing	7
Not in work or training	6
Teenage parent	0
No secondary school diploma	4
Seeking asylum	5

The U.S. Administration for Children and Families categorises risk in term of high, moderate or low. Families experiencing only one risk factor would be considered low. Families with 2-3 risk factors would be considered moderate and families with four or five factors would be considered high.

At the time of the 'Here We Grow' evaluation, four of the mothers did not have any risk factor aside from the fact that they were not currently pursuing any training or work. These women were married, their husbands were employed and they were enjoying this time in their lives to be with their children. These families would be considered at low to no risk.

However, eight of the parents were coping with one or more risk factors. Three of the mothers fell into the 'moderate' category, where they were either single or in temporary accommodation. Five of the mothers fell into the 'high risk' category with multiple stresses in their lives. Four of these women were seeking asylum, were single parents, did not have any prospects for work or

training (except ESOL) and were in temporary accommodation. In addition, two of these five mothers did not appear to have obtained the equivalent of GCSE qualifications. While there were no teenage mothers attending 'Here We Grow,' there was one mother who had a physical disability.

These findings suggest that roughly half of the families attending 'Here We Grow' are highly vulnerable. Research from Early Head Start suggests that service impacts are less likely to be achieved with families at low-risk. However, families at moderate or high risk are more likely to demonstrate improvement when compared to control groups. In particular, high-risk families were more likely to report that participation in Early Head Start services alleviated some of the stress in their lives.

When considering the findings from the parents' in-depth interviews, it appeared as though highly vulnerable families relied on the service chiefly for emotional support. While every mother said she enjoyed going to 'Here We Grow,' the most vulnerable women talked about how the service provided a relief from their daily stresses.

I look forward to ['Here We Grow'] every week. It's a bit of a getaway, really. . . If they had this kind of group running every day or every other day it would be better.

I've learned to be more calm [with my children], because sometimes – I think it was too much for me. When my husband left, I was so nervous, I couldn't concentrate myself. The only thing I could do was go to bed, and I stay to bed as well. But now I am more relaxed. I can see and talk to [my children]. I can enjoy the day with them now.

I don't have any family support. I don't have any moral support. I really don't know what to do. . . Honestly, I don't get like five minutes for myself and it's very hard for me to go out. So, very definitely I do need [this] support.

In four instances, it was clear that mothers were relying on the 'Here We Grow' staff for support and advice that went beyond childcare issues. Some women were receiving advice for their ongoing housing concerns and others were seeking help for marital problems. These women said that they wished that they could get even more help from the service and two mentioned that their time at 'Here We Grow' was the highpoint of their week.

11.3 Meeting the needs of vulnerable families

These findings suggest that two-thirds of the parents interviewed during the evaluation were at moderate to high risk. This finding is consistent with the staff's belief that many of the families who use the service are highly vulnerable. In addition, the statements of the most vulnerable parents

suggest that the service is particularly important to them, as it provides them with much needed respite and emotional support. While the evaluation considered the viewpoints of a very small sample, they are consistent with the evidence provided by the Early Head Start evaluation and demonstrate how important emotionally supportive early years' services can be for at-risk families. The emotional support 'Here We Grow' provides to its neediest families should be considered one of its primary strengths and it should continue to invest in resources to ensure that it is available to everyone with young children.

12 STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

12.1 The strengths of 'Here We Grow'

The findings contained in this report suggest that both staff and parents highly value their time at 'Here We Grow.' In many respects, the parents' views correspond with the theories of staff in their description of a service where children and parents learn together in an emotionally supportive environment. In order to understand what parents valued most in the service, each parent was asked to list her three favourite things about 'Here We Grow' at the end of the in-depth interview. Box A provides a summary of the twelve mothers' statements.

Box A: Parents' favourite things about 'Here We Grow'

I would say here we grow is very open to different ethnic minorities, because you get Muslim's, Indians, Chinese, Half Cast, Black. So that's quite good having a mixture, having a mixed race of different races. That's one. The second one is that its quite near to home, its not far walking distance. And three, they go on outings quite regularly, so they make you feel as welcome as possible. So three is to go on the outings, taking part in the outings, and four is they make you feel as welcome as possible.

This group is far better than other groups that I have visited because there is always something to learn. It provides support, education and enjoyment.

I think it is supportive, I think it is a fantastic facility for our local community, I think its extremely welcoming and well, its functional, it helps people solve their problems . . . and everything, I think it does what its supposed to do, probably a bit more.

The discussion and the singing and the, at most groups they usually give biscuits but here they give them little fruit and vegetables.

Children play with the water, and they make things and they go outside.

My favourite things is like run by people, some like a nurse or, or those who I can ask about the food and they explain to me everything. I learn here, like I'm at

school, I learn here, I don't hide but I learn.

I like coming here, it's a nice bright place, the parents and the staff are friendly, there's lots of activities for myself as well as my child, its not too far away. And we've been on nice outings.

[My favourite thing is] sitting down talking in that little group. We've got woman here who looks after the children whilst you're sitting down talking and if anything happens they'll bring them in to you, so that's a bit of a relaxing bit.

For the West Green Learning Centre I like the friendliness of the staff. I think they are very friendly, very friendly. I look forward to going there, I really look forward to going there on Thursdays.

Very friendly, very well-informed and just really supportive. They're great at listening and if they're not sure, they'll find out, and they'll always say to you "we'll sort that one out, see what we can do"

Well, the best I like the staff particularly the staff . . . my second favourite is the story sack, I could do this every week . . . and the third one is the outings together.

The people who work here, the way that they talk with the parents, the way that they look after children and the different programmes, like dancing. I like that someone comes from somewhere to visit and gives advice.

These responses suggest that the parents greatly appreciate the support and care the staff provides. In fact, all of the mothers said that they would recommend the service to a friend and four had already successfully recruited other families to the drop-in. These statements also suggest that the group discussions are an important aspect of the service and that parents value the fact that they are run by professionals. The parents also said that they like the venue and enjoyed the outings.

12.2 Need for improvement

12.2.1 Three things to change

By and large, the parents were very enthusiastic and complimentary about the service and the staff. However, each parent had suggestions and occasionally complaints. The parents were therefore asked to list three things they would like to change about 'Here We Grow' in order to identify where improvements might be made. These statements are summarised in Box B.

Box B: Parents' suggestions for changes for 'Here We Grow'

Maybe a little more outings . . . maybe have crèche workers to look after the children during our small group time to really give us peace and quiet. And twice a week would be even nicer.

The time and the frequency. I want more than one day, and I haven't got anything else that I would change, really.

To change, nothing.

I don't think there would be anything to change.

I think the physical resources, I know they haven't got a lot of space, and the outdoors. I think they need to limit the numbers.

I don't know [what I'd like to change.] An extra one would be nice. This is the only one that I go to that I am in the same room as [my child].

I don't think I'd change anything to be honest. I think they should have it running more often. It shouldn't be just once a week thing.

I suppose the paint, I would like more paint, I like more messy things, more art and paint I suppose. I don't like that silly gate, that gate you have to wait to get in and out of. I suppose other people would say parking, that's it.

The buzzer for coming in, yeah... It would be nice if they could have a dressing up, where children were allowed to dress up in clothes and be whatever they wanted. That's one. Two is having, they do have this story time basically, but some of the children don't pay attention to the story time.

Again, the 10-15 minutes for discussions. Second, a little privacy, a little break from the children, if the parents could have a little break for themselves, maybe a discussion about long-term and short-term goals about themselves. I think the crèche workers should be qualified to handle and if the child is crying they let him.

More support with my personal life and more often. That's it.

Everything's okay.

These statements provide further evidence of how pleased parents are with 'Here We Grow.' Half of the parents said that they would not change anything or that it should take place more often. In fact, eight parents said that they wished that 'Here We Grow' met twice a week.

12.2.2 More structured discussion time

These statements reflect the parents' enthusiasm for the group discussions, since some parents wished the crèche workers would distract the children so they could concentrate on what was being said. In fact, over half of the mothers shared this concern at various points during the in-depth interview.

I think it should be structured so that the adults get time and the kids get time and then you get time together. They do encourage that and they do have sessions where the crèche workers mind the children, but it doesn't always work. Stopping, starting, stopping, starting. Then you have to go off and deal with your child and when you get back you've lost the plot.

But what I would like is ten minutes only for the parents, the crèche workers should attend to the children, the children should be taken out to leave a ten minutes break from their children, [to provide them with the chance] to discuss the pressing issues about the child.

So maybe only in this particular time, and there is a special talk, a special visitor, at this time maybe on this day have extra crèche worker...and like trying to take the children out, like we were talking about like putting some separate walls on things like, a wall which you can easily take aside in the corner, then you can talk.

These remarks reflect the fact that the parents like the balance between play and discussion during the sessions. In fact, all of the parents were asked how they felt about the formality and structure of the service and all but one said they were satisfied. This individual said that she wished there was more structure, but others remarked that they thought it was "just about right." In sum, these statements suggest parents want more structure during the discussion times, but in general like the informal nature of the drop-in approach.

12.2.3 Too many children

Another theme that arose during the in-depth interviews was that the service was becoming a bit chaotic and overcrowded.

You're just constantly running around after the children because you're not sure what's going to happen. You don't know if one's going to hurt the other.

It didn't work too well today, everyone was crying.

I think it is very busy. It is very busy and not a lot of space, a bit of queuing up to do things, queuing up to do the water play. Too many people. It's very popular.

Suddenly it is more busy and now it is extremely busy I think.

While the service activities and space are ideally suited for 15 parent-child dyads, there were times during the evaluation when 24 mothers and children arrived. These statements suggest that the service is becoming overcrowded and parents are not always receiving the support they want.

12.3 Summary of 'Here We Grow's' strengths and areas for improvement

These findings suggest that 'Here We Grow' is a popular service where parents feel welcomed and supported. While at one time staff members felt like they needed to be the 'Pied Piper' to attract parents to the drop-in, this is no longer the case. Parents are now successfully recruiting other parents to the service, and during the time of the evaluation it was oversubscribed. It appears that the success of the service has led to its one weakness—it is now overcrowded. All of the mothers said they liked the staff and two-thirds wished that it took place twice a week. In sum, these statements suggest that 'Here We Grow' is well delivered service where both children and parents feel free to grow.

In terms of service activities, many parents ranked the group discussions as one of their favourites and some would like more distance from their children so they can concentrate during these times. The fact that core professionals come to the discussions is also important for many parents. These findings are in keeping with recent research that suggests professional or 'dispensing' advice is highly valued by parents with pre-school children (Miller and Sambell, 2003). This research also suggests that parents of young need and value advice and support that focuses on their needs and validates them in their role as parents. The evaluation evidence suggests that 'Here We Grow' is especially effective in fulfilling this objective for the parents who attend.

13 TAKING 'HERE WE GROW' FORWARD

The evaluation findings suggest that 'Here We Grow' is a successful service that is highly valued by both staff and parents. One could interpret these findings to mean that nothing needs to change. However, the goal of evaluation is not to prove, but to improve. This evaluation design therefore included two workshops with the 'Here We Grow' stakeholders to encourage and support change management. The aim of the first workshop was to gain consensus over the meaning of the findings and identify a set of priorities for service development. The second workshop concentrated on developing an action plan for taking the identified priorities forward.

13.1 Identifying priorities

A primary aim of the evaluation was to identify key practices that could be mainstreamed into core services. As one manager suggested:

I'm very attracted to the idea that if we can demonstrate in a very robust way that 'Here we Grow' works and I could get drawn into how we know it works. . . then we have a good chance, as good as we could have of ensuring that it gets into core services.

For this reason, the first workshop concentrated on helping the 'Here We Grow' staff reflect on the meaning of the evaluation findings in terms of 1) identifying specific strengths and 2) considering how these strengths are upheld through service practices and activities.

Unfortunately, it was necessary to conduct two consensus workshops because the 'Here We Grow' stakeholders could not find a period of time when everyone could meet. This meant that all of the participants did not have the chance to hear each other's thoughts regarding the significance of the findings, and thus consensus was only partially achieved when the priorities from the two workshops were discussed and merged at the second meeting. One parental involvement worker and the child psychologist were present at the first meeting. The Sure Start and HALS managers, a crèche worker and two parental involvement workers who run another 'Here We Grow' attended the second meeting.

The evaluation findings were fed back to the 'Here We Grow' stakeholders via a Power Point presentation at both meetings. The staff were then given a summary sheet of what the parents liked about the service and areas for change (see Boxes A and B, previous section). This initiated a dialogue concerning the strengths and weaknesses of the programme. The stakeholders agreed that the supportive and welcoming attitude of the staff was a key component of the programme's success.

The participants were then given an outline of suggestions for further service development. The suggestions were based on the findings from the evaluation and included practice guidelines from similar services targeted at early social and emotional development, including Early Head Start socializations. The recommendations included a number of suggestions aimed at clarifying the purpose of the programme and the target user group so that it could be evaluated in the future in terms of specific inputs, outputs and outcomes. This would enable key practices to be evaluated more rigorously so that the benefits of the service could be successfully mainstreamed.

After further discussion, the 'Here We Grow' staff were invited to list a set of priorities for taking the service forward. All agreed a strategy should be developed to market Here We Grow to core services and agreed to the following priorities:

- Consider how the objectives of the Here We Grow service fit within the programme's community development strategy
- Define a target user group
- Define the primary aim of the service. It was agreed at this meeting that the programme should focus on increasing the confidence of parents with young children
- Define a set of service inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes based on an experiential model of learning (i.e. play) for both the child and the caregiver
- Identify processes that will ensure that the service provision remains flexible.

Some 'Here We Grow' stakeholders were particularly concerned that 'flexibility' be listed as a priority, despite the fact that this was not identified as a theme during the evaluation. In fact, the words 'flexible' or 'flexibility' were not mentioned by any 'Here We Grow' staff during the in-depth interviews and they were only mentioned once by a parent. The evaluation consultant found the emphasis on this priority puzzling, since it had very little to do with the evaluation findings. However, the consultant subsequently learned that the 'Here We Grow' staff were concerned about flexibility because a Sure Start manager from another programme rejected the service's model because she thought that it was not flexible enough. Thus, the priority concerning service 'flexibility' was identified for reasons external to the evaluation.

This example illustrates the pressures managers and staff face when marketing their service models to external agencies. It also illustrates the need for robust evidence that supports the service's ethos and delivery activities. The author believes that the evidence contained in this report is substantial enough to inform future conversations where service practices must be marketed and defended.

13.2 Taking action

The 'Here We Grow' stakeholders reconvened two weeks after the first workshop to develop an action plan for addressing the identified priorities. All relevant stakeholders were able to attend this meeting, with the exception of the child psychologist. Prior to this meeting, the Sure Start Programme Manager circulated a second action outline for the 'Here We Grow' service. The outline was informed by the priorities identified during the consensus building workshop and consultation with a Haringey-wide advisory group. These points overlap with the priorities identified at the first evaluation workshop, but are not identical. In particular, they include a number of issues regarding the dissemination of the evaluation findings, but do not address the priority surrounding the service's flexibility.

- Disseminate the Evaluation Report deciding carefully on audience with a view to mainstreaming
- Establish a regular Stakeholders' Group including parents and representatives from the venues used
- Contextualise all future development within the Community Development Strategy
- Define the Aims, Objectives & ideal target age group
- Take account of the inherent tension between HWG as a 'course' or as a form of regular drop-in
- Consider the use of schools as venues
- Design an induction/welcome leaflet/other introduction
- Clearly specify Inputs, Outputs and desirable Outcomes that are capable of monitoring and evaluation, but beware of too much structure
- Design a monitoring and evaluation programme for HWG
- Set a timetable over the next financial year.

The group agreed to work through the outline, with the understanding that evidence collected through the evaluation would be used to help determine action.

13.2.1 Dissemination of the evaluation findings

The first priority identified through the outline was to determine the audience for the Evaluation Report with a view to mainstreaming. After some discussion, the following was agreed:

- The 'Here We Grow' service is ideally suited for Children's Centres, as it creates a unique meeting point for promoting health and education for both the child and parent

- While health and education would be the target audience, the evaluation findings should also be shared with voluntary groups and parents
- Lessons learned regarding parental involvement from the 'Here We Grow' experience could also be 'mainstreamed'
- The findings should be shared with the parents who participated in the evaluation.

All of the stakeholders agreed to these points, but no further action was decided.

13.2.2 A Stakeholders' Group

The second priority identified in the outline was to establish a Stakeholders' Group that would include parents from the programme. One staff member pointed out that a 'Here We Grow' Cross-Borough Group already existed so it was decided that its membership should expand to include parent representatives. This group would review the evaluation findings and monitor further progress of the service. No further action was determined regarding how individuals would be recruited to this group.

13.2.3 'Here We Grow' within the West Green and Chestnuts community development plan

The third priority identified was that the future development of 'Here We Grow' be integrated into the programme's community development plan. This meant that future plans for the service must demonstrate how they fit within the programme's community development plan and that the community development leads would need to ensure that 'Here We Grow' is incorporated into the community agenda. No further details of how this would be acted upon were discussed at the meeting.

13.2.4 Define the aims, objectives and ideal target group of the service

The fifth priority identified was to define an ideal target group for 'Here We Grow' and determine a new set of aims and objectives. This priority actually comprised three of the priorities identified at the consensus workshop and therefore a great deal of time was necessary to work through the details of it. The evaluation consultant encouraged the group to use the evaluation findings to prioritise the service's objectives. It was agreed that the evaluation findings suggest that the service increases parents' confidence in caring for their children and that children benefit from improved communication and school readiness skills, such as sharing and taking turns.

The service providers and managers also felt that the community was strengthened by the fact that parents were allowed to select the discussion topics, despite the fact that this point was not supported in the evaluation findings. Some felt that the empowerment process was too subtle for parents

to be aware of it, whereas others suggested that the evaluation may not have tested this aspect of the service thoroughly enough.

During this discussion, concern was raised as to whether parents were learning anything about their child through observing him/her play at 'Here We Grow.' The evaluation findings did not strongly support this conclusion and it was suggested that the service might want to make parents aware of what they can learn through observation. The Ounce Scale (Marsden, et. al. 2003) was distributed to participants as a way of encouraging parental observation. The tool has been successfully introduced into Early Head Start services as a way of helping parents learn about their children (Dichtelmiller and Ensler, 2004). The scale was met with resistance, however, as some staff thought that it was too focused on achieving a score.

The evaluation consultant encouraged the 'Here We Grow' staff to prioritise the services objectives. However, the participants felt that flexible delivery was a key aspect of 'Here We Grow,' and expressed concern that this would be lost if the objectives were prioritised. The evaluation consultant pointed out that the service model can be flexible or rigid, just like a human skeleton. The aim of prioritising the objectives would simply help define what was in the skeleton or model.

The staff also discussed who 'Here We Grow's' target group should be. Everyone felt that Here We Grow was best suited for families with children between the ages of two to three. The group considered whether it should be targeted at vulnerable families, and decided that all parents with two-year-olds were vulnerable.

The above discussions took place while the group worked through a service delivery model to further articulate the service's primary objectives in terms of inputs, service activities, outputs and outcomes. In the time that was available, the group identified specific inputs, activities and outputs for the increased parental confidence outcome. These relationships are illustrated in Table 13.1.

Table 13.1: Inputs, activities, and outputs for the 'Here We Grow' outcome of improved parental confidence		
Inputs	Activities	Outputs
1) Provide a dedicated space and time for a discussion to take place. This might include the opportunity for parents to separate themselves temporarily from their children.	Support groups that offer advice and encourage parent participation through facilitated discussion of issues pertaining to families with young children.	11-15 parents attend 'Here We Grow' discussions on a weekly basis. Parents participate in these discussions by sharing their own experiences and advice.
2) Develop a data base of speakers who are readily available. Make sure that the programme's developmental psychologist is available, as behaviour management issues are a popular choice.	Provide parents with the opportunity to select topics for discussion base on their needs, but with guidance from staff. Staff should make sure that all parents are aware of this opportunity.	Parents select topics from a pre-set list that includes a space for parents to make their own suggestions.
3) Ensure that consistent parental involvement workers are in place to maintain continuity. 4) Ensure that staff have the time to provide support to individual families. 5) Use training and recruitment to ensure that staff are aware and sympathetic to the needs of families with young children from all ethnic groups.	Create a welcoming environment by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Remembering names ● Providing families with individualised support (chasing down information) ● Creating a non-stigmatising atmosphere that acknowledges that children can be difficult at times. 	Parents will develop individual relationships with 'Here We Grow' staff where they feel comfortable sharing their personal concerns.
6) Provide Individual Learning Plans	Develop a system for offering Individual Learning Plans to all parents	Parents identify personal learning goals pertaining to their parenting skills

It was concluded that another action planning meeting should take place with the evaluation consultant. At this third meeting, the staff would decide a specific plan of action for the all of the agreed decisions and develop a service delivery framework for additional parent and child outcomes. During this time, a monitoring and evaluation plan would also be developed that would include methods for measuring the outcomes identified by the group. However, it was subsequently decided that a second action-planning meeting with the evaluation consultant would not take place. While it is likely that there will be further action with regard to developing the service, this will take place outside the context of the evaluation.

13.3 Summary

A completed action plan is one of the most important outcomes of any evaluation. In fact, many evaluations do not include final reports, since the ultimate goal is to facilitate action rather than discover new findings or describe processes (Patton, 1998). Research demonstrates that an action plan significantly improves the chances that evaluation results will be used to improve services (Aubel, 1999) because:

- It ensures that the findings have been disseminated to all of the relevant stakeholders.
- It demonstrates that the findings were carefully reflected upon.
- Stakeholders gain ownership over the findings as they reflect upon them.

In the case of 'Here We Grow,' a partial action plan was developed. This demonstrates that the evaluation findings were disseminated to the key stakeholders, they were reflected upon and hopefully, the stakeholders feel as though they own and understand them. The fact that the plan was not completed reflects the small amount of time available for evaluation activities. The plan may have also become too ambitious once further priorities were added to it between the first and second workshops. Nevertheless, the 'Here We Grow' stakeholders have put a fair amount of time into identifying priorities for future service development. This report recommends that the 'Here We Grow' stakeholders remain committed to these priorities so that they can successfully prepare the service for mainstreaming. In order to help with this process, a plan for an outcome-based evaluation is included in the next section.

14 GUIDELINES FOR FUTURE EVALUATIONS

14.1 Outcome based

The National Unit is currently developing new standards for local programme evaluations to ensure that they are outcome focussed (Meyers, 2004). This means that programmes will be required to evaluate the impact of their services in terms of pre-defined parent and child outcomes. Outcome-based evaluations will also make it easier for programmes to mainstream their services.

14.2 Identify a beginning and an end

Ideally, future evaluations should consider service provision as an intervention with clearly defined measures for before and after 'treatment.' Applying these guidelines to 'Here We Grow,' future evaluations will need to define a beginning and end of 'intervention.' The fact that parents are allowed to enrol and leave whenever they wish makes establishing a beginning and an end difficult. However, there are clear cycles in the service, as a new set of topics is introduced each term. In addition, families tend to leave once their child is ready for nursery. The service can take advantage of these cycles by making an effort to recruit new parents at the beginning of each new school term. When enrolling parents at this time, staff could ask them if they would be interested in participating in the evaluation of the service. If they say yes, parents would be asked to fill out a brief questionnaire (or questionnaires) at the beginning of the term and then again after a set period of time (perhaps 12 weeks).

Given that only 15 parents will be using this service at a time, it is recommended that the evaluation recruit as many parents as possible, so that the sample is large enough. The service may want to provide parents with an incentive for participating, such as a give voucher or entry in a prize draw.

14.3 Define a target user group

Sure Start Guidance suggests that "all services for children and parents need to have as their core purpose better outcomes for children" (Sure Start Guidance, 2002). This suggests that the primary beneficiary is always a child. The staff agreed at the action planning workshop that the target user group is children between the age of 2 and 3 and the optimal group size for the West Green Learning Centre is 15 children and parents. Now that the service is over-subscribed, parents with a child between two and three years should receive priority. Families who do not have children in this age range can be directed to other Sure Start services. When parents enrol, they should be encouraged to attend, since they are potentially taking a space from another

family. Consistent attendance will also make it easier to reliably measure service impacts.

Research involving parent-toddler groups suggests that the parent-child relationship benefits when the parents receive emotional support. For this reason, 'Here We Grow' may want to clearly define a target parent group as well. Findings from the evaluation suggest that parents who are particularly vulnerable rely on the service the most. The 'Here We Grow' staff may want to take measures to recruit families who experience multiple risk factors.

At the time of the evaluation, four families were referred from core services and three received home visits from members of the Sure Start team. Research from Early Head Start suggests that families who attend centre based services along with home visits benefit the most. Families who receive home visits from the Sure Start team are also a potential target user group for 'Here We Grow.'

The West Green and Chestnuts programme can select potential users through need identified on the programme level. For example, individual ethnic groups or families experiencing a specific challenges (disabled children, single parent households) might be targeted based on needs identified through the delivery plan consultations, the Partnership Board or community data.

14.4 Prioritise the service's objectives

Sure Start local programmes are required to meet the four Sure Start objectives on the programme level, but not necessarily on the service level. It is unrealistic for any service to try to achieve all four objectives equally well and impractical to evaluate all of them. 'Here We Grow' should therefore prioritise its objectives in terms of the programme's overall strategy and in terms of the core services identified for mainstreaming.

During the action planning meeting, it was agreed that 'Here We Grow' is ideally suited for Children's Centres. In addition, the evaluation findings suggest that children attending 'Here We Grow' learn school readiness skills, such as taking turns, sharing and improved communication. Parents learn how to manage their children and social-emotional development is enhanced through improved parental confidence. However, there is less support for the 'strengthening communities' objective. For the sake of future evaluations, the service may want to prioritise its objectives as follows:

- 1. Improving children's ability to learn**
- 2. Improving parenting skills**
- 3. Improving social and emotional development**
4. Improving children's health
5. Strengthening families and communities

By prioritising the objectives, the service will be able to identify primary and secondary outcomes that can be measured to demonstrate the direct impact of

the service. This step is necessary for a cost-effectiveness evaluation, which is required for all major services.

14.5 Complete a service delivery plan

A service delivery plan involving parental outcomes was partially completed during the action-planning workshop. The service should develop a similar plan for child outcomes. The evaluation findings identified three school readiness skills at 'Here We Grow:' 1) improved communication, 2) sharing and 3) taking turns. Table 14.5 provides an example of what this would look like for children learning to take turns:

Table 14.1: Inputs, activities, and outputs for the 'Here We Grow' outcome of improving children's ability to take turns		
Inputs	Activities	Outputs
1) The service will provide appropriate arts and crafts materials.	Guided play through arts crafts	Children will have to take turns using the materials
2) Appropriate toys	Guided games	Children will take turns through rules of games
3) Provide food	Group eating	Children will have to wash hands wait turn for food
4) Songs	Guided song games where everyone has a turn	Children all have a chance to participate in group songs
6) Outdoor play space & time	Slide and tricycles	Children will take turns using outdoor play equipment

While a table such as this may appear to some like an unnecessary step for illustrating common sense relationships, it is actually a useful tool for understanding when and how the service is working. For example, waiting in line to use the slide may be a particularly good way to learn turn taking. However, this may not be possible during terms when the weather is bad. A service delivery framework that specifies links between inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes will allow the staff to reflect on whether or not all the necessary inputs are in place for the desired outcomes to be achieved. It will also make it easier to describe and evaluate the service.

The fact that there was some confusion over whether the service was a course or a drop-in did not create any problems for the parents and only a little tension for the staff. However, the service may want to resolve this issue in order to defend its model to external agencies. The statements of the staff suggest that 'Here We Grow' is not a course, because parents do not partake in a set curriculum designed to achieve specific learning goals. The theories of the staff do not suggest that it is a drop-in either, since parents do much more than 'drop-in' and relax with their children. The author encourages the Here We Grow staff to develop a consistent way of referring to the service that reflects the educational opportunities it provides to 2-3 year olds and their parents.

14.6 Identify child and parent outcomes

14.6.1 Child outcomes

Once specific child outcomes have been identified, behaviours can be measured when the child enrolls in the service (before) and at the end of a term (after). The Ounce Scale (Marsden, et. al. 2003) is a proven method for encouraging parents to do this on their own. It does not result in a score, but a developmental profile. Parents and service providers create family albums that allow parents to observe and record changes in their child's behaviour. Evaluation results involving the Ounce Scale describe that:

The Family Album provided the family with an observational tool that acknowledged the family's unique knowledge about their child. As one care provider said, 'If we do the Family Album together with parents as partners, our relationship grows and we are able to establish trust. Doing it together removes us from the role of expert and empowers parents to become the experts about their own children.'

The advantage of this method is that it gathers evaluation data at the same time it promotes parental learning. Other scales that use parental reports included the Achenbach Child Behaviour Checklist (Achenbach, 1991) and the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (Squires, et. al. 1999). The Achenbach Checklist involves 100 items and takes less than a half-hour to complete. The Ages and Stages Questionnaire is made up of 19 smaller questionnaires of 30 items or less. Service staff decide which questionnaire is appropriate based on the child's age and skills that need to be measured.

While these scales can be used to measure outcomes through 'before' and 'after' 'Here We Grow' comparisons, it would be ideal if the children could be tracked into nursery and teachers complete the questionnaires. The results from the teacher completed scales could then be compared to a group of children in the same classroom who did not attend 'Here We Grow.' This step would provide specific information about the impact of the service by comparing the behaviour of service users to non-service users. Although it is sometimes difficult to track children, families are often easier to follow when they receive an incentive, like a gift voucher.

14.6.2 Parent outcomes

The evaluation identified two parent outcomes: increased confidence in parenting skills and improved behaviour management strategies. Maternal confidence can be measured through the Maternal Confidence in Toddlerhood Scale (Gross and Rocissano, 1988) and behaviour management strategies can be considered through the Parenting Scale (Arnold, et. al. 1993). Parents knowledge of child development can be assessed through the Knowledge of Infant Development Inventory (MacPhee, 1981). The Family Problems Questionnaire (Gibbons 1990) and the Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1990) measure family stress.

Professional experience is not required for any of these inventories. They are all 40 items or less and either a parent or service provider can fill them out. The items are easy to score and will enable the staff to conduct quick 'before' and 'after' comparisons with the parents in a manner that is not stigmatising. Some of the parents may need some help with translation, however. This can be provided by a link worker or done in conjunction with a parental support worker where the worker verbally asks the questions, so that reading is not a problem.

The questionnaires can also be used as screening tools. The fact that staff members help parents to complete these questionnaires should not be a problem, as long as all of the data protection principles are upheld. It is not recommended that the 'Here We Grow' staff develop their own measures when reliable measures are already available at minimal cost. All of the recommended measures have been successfully used to evaluate family support services, both in England (Statham, 2000) and the US (US Administration for Children and Families).

14.6.3 Additional measures

The 'Here We Grow' staff may also want to measure whether parents access more community and educational services after attending 'Here We Grow' and whether they put the health information they receive to use. In these cases, it will be necessary for the service to develop its own measures. Accessing community services can simply be measured by asking the parents to list the groups and courses they attended when they first enrolled in the drop-in, and then again when they leave. Health information can be measured by asking parents to review a list of the discussion topics that were presented each term. At this time, parents would be asked to check off the discussions they attended and indicate whether or not they used the information. Table 14.2 provides an example of what this measure might look like:

Table 14.2 Example form for assessing parents use of information received during the discussion sessions		
Please put a check next to the discussion sessions you attended and if you used any of the information presented at the session.		
Session	Attended	Used Information
Dietician	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dentist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Speech & Language	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Homeopath	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Child psychologist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adult learning	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

It will be more difficult to measure how parents' ability to choose the discussion topics directly strengthens families and communities. The staff could explore this issue by asking parents 1) if they were aware that they could choose the discussion topics, 2) if they chose discussion topics and 3) how important (on a scale from 1 – 5 or 1 – 10) was this to them. The answers to these questions still would not explain how parents choosing the discussion topics is linked to strengthened communities, but it would provide consistent information about how parents value and use this aspect of the service. More complicated measures and analyses (such as regression analyses between parents' community engagement and responses to a set of question) are possible, but are generally beyond the scope of most local evaluations.

14.7 The evaluation cycle as part of the service delivery plan

The evaluation guidelines provided in this report can be incorporated into any future 'Here We Grow' service delivery plan. Once decisions have been made regarding the target user group and parent and child outcomes, the service should establish a period to get baseline data. Baseline data can then be used to establish targets. This will allow the service to monitor its ongoing development by assessing whether targets are achieved. This data can also be used to understand how 'Here We Grow' meets the needs of the area's families in terms of the programme's aims and objectives and support strategies for future mainstreaming.

14.8 Cost Effectiveness

The 'Here We Grow' service should go through a cost-effectiveness exercise if it has not already done so. Positive evidence of its cost-effectiveness will support arguments for its continuation beyond the West Green and Chestnuts' contract period. The programme's financial officer should have all of the information and skills to conduct a cost-effectiveness exercise and further support for this activity is available from the National Evaluation of Sure Start

(NESS). In order to measure cost effectiveness, the service will need to take into account all of the resources allocated to it (HALS, Sure Start, etc.) and costs. It will then need to compare itself to other similar local services. A well articulated service delivery plan should make a cost-effectiveness exercise easier. Should the programme discover that 'Here We Grow' is more expensive than other similar services in the area, it will need to justify its extra expense. Rigorous evidence of the service's positive impact on both mother and child variables will help justify the expense of this service.

14.9 Summary of evaluation guidelines

This section provides a logical framework for explaining common sense relationships between service inputs, activities, outcomes and outputs. Clearly the 'Here We Grow' staff implicitly understood some of these relationships, as the service is successfully delivered to parents with young children. However, it will be necessary for the service to document these relationships in the future, since it is likely that the National Unit will require evaluations to be outcome-based within the next six months. If properly implemented, the evaluation processes described in this section will enable the 'Here We Grow' staff to capture reliable and consistent data about the service's impact. Evidence of impact (along with cost-effectiveness information) will support future discussions with mainstream agencies.

15 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

15.1 A recipe for learning success

In sum, the evaluation findings suggest that 'Here We Grow' is a well-delivered service that is highly valued by parents with young children. As one mother commented:

There are lots of drop-ins, but to have the resources they have, you know, the amount of staff and the resources -- it's just great, especially for this age. Not so much when they're younger, there are other things around, but I think from the age of two it's a nightmare.

This statement suggests that 'Here We Grow' fulfils a unique service in the area by providing help for mothers who are struggling with 'the terrible twos.' The evidence contained in this report suggest that parents want and need help during this time in their child's development and that the 'Here We Grow' effectively provides this support.

The support that families appear to value the most comes in two forms: 1) play opportunities where children can learn and 2) group discussions where parents can learn. In fact, learning appears to be the primary outcome of 'Here We Grow,' since all of the parents said that all their child learned something and 10 of the 12 mothers reported that they learned something as well.

15.2 A place where children learn

During the in-depth interviews, the parents reported that their children learned important school readiness skills, such as sharing, taking turns and improved communication during their time at 'Here We Grow.' Figure 15.1 provides a model of how parents and staff describe child learning at 'Here We Grow.'

Figure 15.1 Model of how children learn at 'Here We Grow'



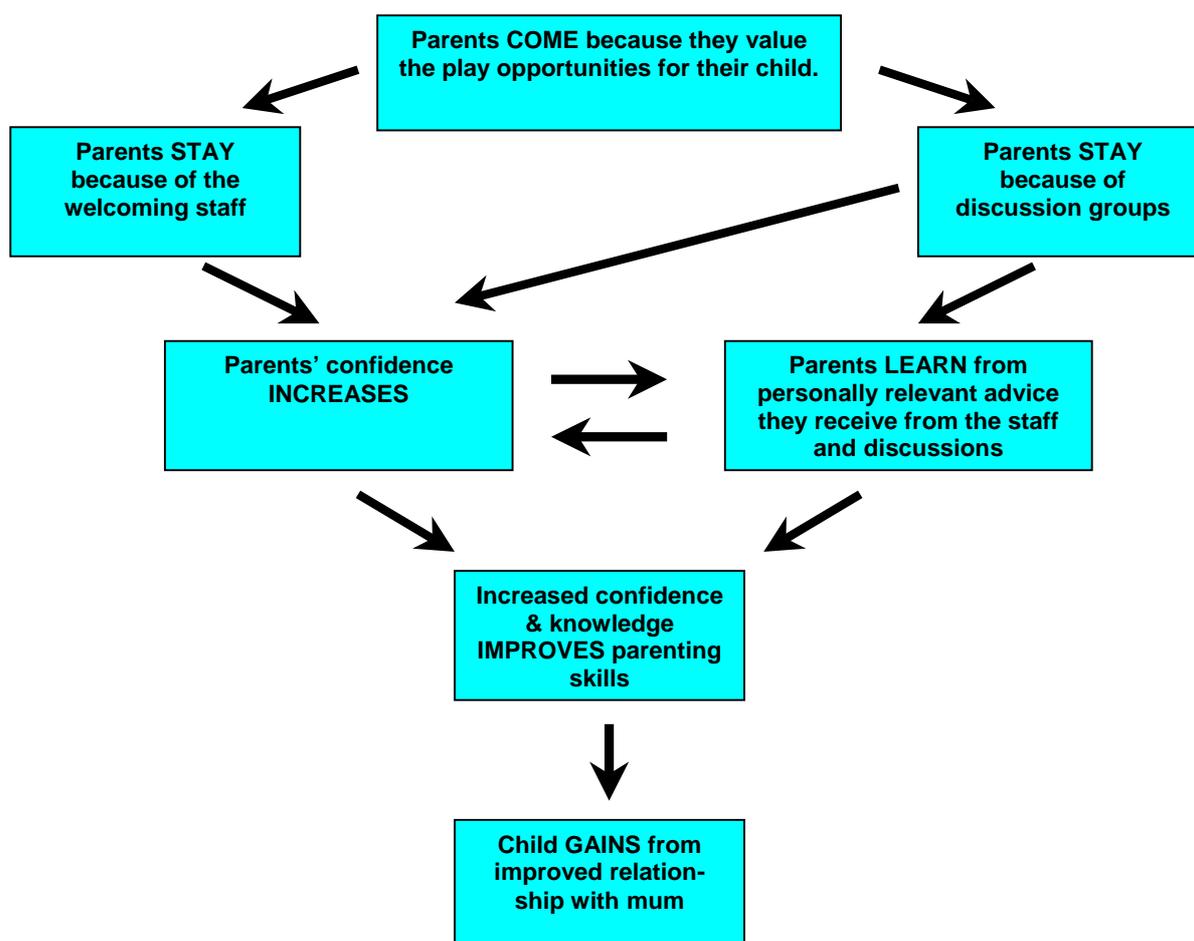
Play activities that supported learning included nursery rhymes and songs, taking turns on the slide and sharing toys in the play kitchen. The service is now so popular, it has become overcrowded and some parents have complained that the play sessions are chaotic and too many children are crying.

Recommendation. In order to ensure that children get the most out of their playtime, 'Here We Grow' should establish enrolment criteria to make sure the service is not oversubscribed.

15.3 A place where parents learn and gain confidence

15.2 provides a model of what parents gain when they come to 'Here We Grow.' Most of the parents reported that they came to the service for their child to play with other children. Once the families came to 'Here We Grow,' however, they stayed because of the welcoming and supportive staff and the discussion groups. Parents reported that they learned primarily from the personally relevant advice they received from the staff and the core professionals who led the group discussions. Advice and personal support also increased the mother's confidence in their parenting skills and many reported that this improved their relationship with their child.

Figure 15.2 Model for parental learning and increased confidence at 'Here We Grow'



This model suggests that increased parental confidence improves the parent-child relationship. Given that young children learn to regulate their own behaviour within the context of a healthy parent-child relationship (Stern, 1985), increased parental confidence is likely to also improve the child's behaviour and ability to learn.

15.4 Learning from advice

All but one of the parents said that the advice they received at 'Here We Grow' was important to them. Behaviour management advice appeared to be the most valuable to the parents and over half of them were able to provide specific examples of how they used it to manage their two-year-old's non-compliant behaviour. This finding is consistent with research that suggests that parents with young children benefit from friendly, but professional advice that is personally relevant and validates them in their roles as parents (Ghate and Hazel, 2004; Miller and Sambell, 2003). For the most part, 'Here We Grow' parents felt that they were getting adequate support in managing their children, although half of the mothers reported problems with sleeping and mealtime routines.

Recommendation: The 'Here We Grow' staff may want to consider ways of making sure that advice regarding daily routines is consistently available.

Learning from advice is one of six examples of parental learning provided by the 'Here We Grow' staff. The staff also said that parents learned from 1) observing their own children, 2) playing with their own children and 3) being with other parents. While many mothers said that learned from watching other parents, only one mother said that she learned from observing her own child and none of the mothers said that they learned anything from playing with their children at 'Here We Grow.'

These responses do not necessarily mean that learning does not take place when parents observe and play with their children. This form of learning may be less obvious to the 'Here We Grow' mothers, however, since they are able to observe and play with their children at any time. Parents are more likely to perceive themselves as learning through play and observation if they are made aware of these processes. The Ounce Scale provides a framework that ensures that parents learn through observation and the Individual Learning Plans can also be used in a way that promotes observation and reflection.

Recommendation: The 'Here We Grow' staff may want promote learning through observation by consistently using the Ounce Scale and/or Individual Learning Plans with all parents.

15.5 Critical ingredients

The evaluation identified three activities that are critical for 'Here We Grow's' success.

- Structured and unstructured opportunities for children to play together
- A warm and non-judgemental staff who can flexibly respond to the individual needs of parents
- Advice provided by qualified professionals during weekly group discussion sessions.

The venue also contributed to the success of the service, as enrolment steadily increased since the service moved to the West Green Learning Centre.

HALS and Sure Start should continue to invest the necessary resources to ensure that these activities continue. In particular, the parents reported that the discussion group was particularly important to them and several wished that arrangements could be made so the children were less disruptive.

Recommendation: The 'Here We Grow' staff should consider ways of keeping distractions to a minimum during the group discussions by using the space and the crèche workers more effectively.

The fact that the discussions were led by qualified professionals was important for many of the parents. While it may be true that some parents would not have attended the service had it been rolled out as a course, all but one of the parents said that they wanted and used the advice they received from the professionals. ***The importance of advice from the staff and professionals was a dominant theme throughout the parents' interviews and cannot be ignored as one of the major findings of the evaluation.***

Recommendation: 'Here We Grow' should continue to make sure that professional advice is available to the parents through the discussion groups and individualised support.

15.6 Additional benefits

'Here We Grow' met its health objective by providing valuable information on nutrition, early dental care and childhood illnesses. All of the parents reported receiving this advice, and several were able to provide specific examples of when they put it to use.

No parent reported difficulties with communicating, despite the fact that over half of the mothers spoke English as a second language. 'Here We Grow' also enabled over half of its parents to access other adult learning courses and community groups. In addition, half of the parents said that their experience at

'Here We Grow' made them feel better about living in Haringey. As one mother described:

It makes me feel much better about living in Haringey. Its got a rich end and a poor end, and people think that if you live in a poor place then there won't be any services, that the standard of everything will be much lower and I think these groups make you feel that's simply not the case.

15.7 Giving parents a choice

The 'Here We Grow' staff felt that it was important for parents to select the discussion group topics. While half of the parents were aware that they could do this, the other half did not know that this was an option. In addition, four of the parents said that being able to choose the topics was not important to them, and two others said they did not feel comfortable making suggestions in a group setting.

The 'Here We Grow' staff may want to make some changes to the way parents choose the discussion topics if they want to retain this as a feature of the service. It appeared as though some of the parents were not aware of their ability to choose because they were not present on the day the topics were selected. Other parents expressed reluctance to voice their opinion in the group.

Recommendation: The staff may want to develop a confidential voting system whereby parents select topics from a list on a sheet of paper that includes space for recommendations. This would ensure that the parents were made aware that they had a choice and would allow them to voice their opinion confidentially.

15.8 Vulnerable families

Two-thirds of the families attending 'Here We Grow' were at moderate to high risk in terms of the life stresses they were experiencing. The families who were at the greatest risk (experiencing three or more risk factors) appeared to rely on the service the most. These parents reported using the service for advice and support that went beyond their relationship with their child and several wished they could receive more support in the areas of marital counselling and housing advice. In addition, these families said that participation in the service helped them relax and they looked forward to their time at 'Here We Grow' as a weekly respite from their ongoing stresses. While these findings were observed with a small group of families, they are consistent with the research from Early Head Start that suggests that participating in family support services decreases stress in high-risk families (US Administration for Children and Families, 2001).

These findings suggest that the West Green and Chestnuts programme consider ways in which making the 'Here We Grow' experience available to more vulnerable families. Experience from Early Head Start suggests that families who experience greater risk also benefit when they receive one-to-one support from home visits. Four families were receiving visits from a member of the Sure Start community team during the time of the evaluation.

Recommendation: The programme may want make home visits a feature of the service that is formally recognised in its literature and consistently implemented through practice.

15.9 A complete action plan

'Here We Grow' is an example of a service that functions successfully without a well-defined delivery framework. This success is due, in part, to the fact that the staff is committed to providing a high quality service. It is likely that 'Here We Grow' would continue to function effectively without a well-defined delivery plan as long as the same core people and resources were available. Once the stakeholders or resources change, however, the service will need to rely on a model that is well articulated and uses evaluation to inform its ongoing delivery.

Research (Kurtz, 2004; Moran, Ghate and van der Merwe, 2004) suggests that manualised and structured services are more effective than unstructured ones. A plan that specifies how resources, activities and practices result in outputs and outcomes will enable the 'Here We Grow' staff to:

- Understand how service activities are (or are not) directly linked to parent and child outcomes
- Understand whether resources are used effectively
- Identify barriers to effective service delivery
- Explain the effectiveness of the service to external agencies.

The evaluation findings provide useful evidence of how service activities are linked to outputs and outcomes and should make it easier to complete and implement an effective plan.

Recommendations: The 'Here We Grow' staff should set aside sufficient time and resources to complete a well-considered action plan that includes input from all of its key stakeholders. The completed plan should include a service delivery framework that clearly identifies links between service activities and parent and child outcomes. The action plan should include a timetable and specific action for disseminating the evaluation findings and integrating the service within the West Green and Chestnut's community development strategy. The service may also want to decide on whether it is a course, a drop-in or a parent-toddler group.

15.10 Future Evaluations

The qualitative information gained through this evaluation provides a detailed account of parents' experiences at 'Here We Grow' during a twelve week period between March and June 2004. It provides insight into the outcomes that are valued the most by the parents and identifies a number of processes that support these outcomes. However, these findings lack empirical significance because they involve the opinions and recollections of a small number of parents during a short period of time. In the future, 'Here We Grow' will need more objective, outcome-based data to meet the National evaluation requirements. Outcome-based data will also help the service successfully market itself to the mainstream and avoid some of the misunderstandings that have already occurred.

Section 14 provides a set of guidelines for obtaining objective and reliable data that demonstrate the impact of the service on parents and children. The key to future evaluations will be for the staff to evaluate their service during a cycle that has a beginning and an end. This will allow the staff to measure parents and children's skills when they enter 'Here We Grow' and then again after they have participated in the service for a minimum length of time. Future evaluations will also need to identify a target user group and specific, measurable outcomes. The current investigations has identified measurable outcomes for both children and parents. Outcomes for children include improved communication and social skills. Outcomes for parents include increased confidence and improved behaviour management skills. Reliable measures of young children's social skills and parental confidence already exist and are readily available at a nominal cost (both in price and training).

Recommendation: The 'Here We Grow' staff should invest sufficient time and resources into an evaluation system that accurately and objectively measures the positive impacts the service provides. The guidelines in Section 14 provide a good starting point.

15.11 Conclusion

The findings from this evaluation underscore the need for family services that enhance early child development within the context of the mother-child relationship. They suggest that the 'Here We Grow' model is particularly good at supporting this relationship by increasing mothers' confidence in their ability to parent through advice and personal support. While many drop-ins offer opportunities for young children to play, relatively few provide the level of support parents receive at 'Here We Grow.' The weekly discussion groups with core professionals appear to be a key element to the service's success and it is recommended that the programme continue to invest resources into this activity.

The evaluation findings also suggest that the 'Here We Grow' model is ideally suited for Children's Centres and meets the criterion for Standard Two, 'Supporting Parenting,' detailed in the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity. While the primary benefits of the service are improved learning for both parents and children, many families also use the service as an access point into other community groups, adult learning and core health services. The author is optimistic that future evaluations will demonstrate that the 'Here We Grow' model is an effective form of universal prevention that can add value to the lives of children living in Haringey.

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APPENDIX A: Here We Grow Sure Start Objectives

Improving Children's Ability to Learn

- Opportunities to play with other children
- Guided play sessions with trained crèche workers
- Informing parents about Early Years education and encouraging them to participate in school activities, e.g. Family Learning

Improving Health

- Child development sessions available run by core health professionals
- Advice on healthy living provided by Sure Start staff or core professionals, for example: advice on healthy eating from Sure Start Dietician

Improving Social and Emotional Development

- Provides a regular group in a safe environment
- Supports good relationships between parents and children

Strengthening Families and Communities

- Parent-led so parents are in control of what is discussed in the group. It is not ready made, parents' needs and opinions are sought and listened to
- There is a general feeling of support within the group. Parents are encouraged to bring their own expertise to share with the group.
- English is the language used, but is supplemented with signs, drawings and gestures. Parents who have some English help each other and the crèche workers also help. One group employs a link worker.

APPENDIX B: HALS Individual Learning Plan



**Family Learning
Individual Learning Plan**

Name: _____

Date: _____

Course: _____

I have received and signed the Learning Agreement (please tick)

Include core curriculum references where appropriate

Areas I can work on to help my child	Date Completed

Areas I can work on to help myself	Date Completed

Mid course review

End of course review

APPENDIX C: 'Here We Grow' Summary Data Forms

Summary Data Forms - Here We Grow

To be completed by the named person responsible for the co-ordination and monitoring of courses.

LEA: _____

Number of courses completed: _____

	Parents/Carers
Number recruited	
Number Female	
Number Male	
Ethnic group details	
Language details	

	Children
Number recruited	
Number Female	
Number Male	
Ethnic group details	

Language details	
Give details of the age range of children attending	

% Attendance	
% Retention	
Number of adults achieving part/full accreditation	
Number of parents/carers interested in further learning opportunities (please specify)	

Parents

<i>Give the numbers of parents/carers who:</i>	<i>not at all</i>	<i>a little</i>	<i>significantly</i>	<i>a great deal</i>
<i>Have developed behaviour strategies</i>				
<i>Have improved parent/child communication</i>				
<i>Have greater awareness of the importance of play</i>				
<i>Are better informed about health issues/services</i>				
<i>Have improved interaction with their child/children</i>				
<i>Have increased their confidence in their own reading skills</i>				
<i>Have developed social skills</i>				
<i>Feel more confident about supporting their child's developing speaking, listening and reading and writing skills</i>				
<i>Have increased their time with child/children in home activities</i>				

Children

<i>Give the numbers of parents/carers who:</i>	<i>not at all</i>	<i>a little</i>	<i>significantly</i>	<i>a great deal</i>
Improved their confidence in their approach to play				
Shown a greater interest in books				
Shown a greater interest in play				
Shown an improvement in general listening skills				
Shown an improvement in general speaking skills				
Have begun developing pre-writing skills				
Have developed social skills				
Where appropriate shown improved behaviour				

Name:..... Job Title:

Signed: Date:

APPENDIX D: 'Here We Grow' Staff Interview Questions

Provide Information & Gain Consent

- Explain the purpose of the study.
- Give assurances of confidentiality and explain how the information will be collected and used.
- Ask permission to tape record the interview. Explain that this is for practical purposes and the tape can be stopped at any stage if they wish.
- Explain that they do not have to answer any particular question if they don't want to.

Background Questions

What is your role with the programme?

How long have you worked here in this capacity?

Questions about Playing with Other Children

Do children always have the opportunity to play with other children at 'Here We Grow'?

How structured is this play? Do they ever have free play opportunities?

Provide some examples of how 'Here We Grow' supports play between children.

Do children make sustainable friendships through the programme?

Is there any way that you feel play opportunities could be improved?

Parent & Child Play

How is parent and child play supported through the 'Here We Grow' programme? Please provide specific examples.

Do you ever provide the parents with specific play advice?

Is there any way you believe play between the parent and child could still be improved?

What is your favourite 'Here We Grow' play activity? Why?

What is your least favourite 'Here We Grow' play activity?

What aspects of parent and child play do you think are particularly helpful?

What aspects of parent and child play do you feel could be improved?

The Parent and Child Relationship

Please give me your theory as to how 'Here We Grow' improves emotional and social development?

In what ways do you feel the programme improves the parent/child relationship. Please provide specific examples.

In what way do you feel the programme could go farther in improving this relationship?

Do you feel comfortable bringing up sensitive issues with parents if there are problems with the child?

Have you seen many troubled parent/child relationships since you have worked here? If so, please provide examples and indicate how they changed through the programme's intervention.

Have you seen any emotionally troubled children? What resources are there to help children with 'issues'?

Improving Learning

Please give me your theory of how activities at 'Here We Grow' improve child learning?

What early childhood skills does the programme try to develop?

Are there any specific skills that you try to promote?

In what ways do you think the programme promotes learning?

In what ways do you think the programme promotes school readiness?

Do you think the programme should promote more learning? If so – how?

Do you think the programme should promote more school readiness skills? If so – how?

Do you feel that the toys and supplies are adequate to promote learning?

What is your favourite learning activity?

What is your least favourite learning activity?

Information about Early Years Education

What kinds of information do the tutors and crèche workers provide parents with regard to Early Years Education?

What do they do to ensure that all parents get this information?

What are the barriers that keep parents from getting this information?

Do you often provide parents with advice regarding their children's education?

Do you feel that they follow this advice?

Do you feel that this advice gives parents more confidence in accessing other services in Tottenham? (ask for specific examples)

Questions Regarding Health

Please explain your theory of how participation in 'Here We Grow' improves health?

What kinds of health information do you provide families?

What kinds of child development advice do you provide families?

Is this advice well received?

Is this advice put to use?

Do parents ask for this advice?

What difficulties do you encounter when trying to provide health advice to families?

Strengthening Families and Communities

Please give me your theory as to how families and communities are strengthened through participation in 'Here We Grow.'

Do you feel as though parents' opinions and ideas are valued? Please provide an example of this.

Do you feel that parents find it easy to express their ideas and opinions here?

How difficult do you find communication with parents?

Are there ways in which the programme could improve communication?

Do you think the workers are always responsive to the parents' needs?

How successful is 'Here We Grow' in improving parents' confidence? Provide examples where this has happened and where this could improve.

General Questions about the Service

Do you feel this is an adequate facility?

Do you believe this is an enriching environment?

Do you think it is a safe space?

Do you like the informality of the programme, or do you wish there were more structure?

Tell me your three favourite things about 'Here We Grow.'

Tell me three things that you don't like about the programme.

Do you enjoy working here?

Would you recommend that other Sure Start programmes adopt similar programmes?

APPENDIX E: ‘Here We Grow’ Parent Interview Questions

Provide Information & Gain Consent

- Explain the purpose of the study.
- Give assurances of confidentiality and explain how the information will be collected and used.
- Ask permission to tape record the interview. Explain that this is for practical purposes and the tape can be stopped at any stage if they wish.
- Explain that they do not have to answer any particular question if they don’t want to.

Background Questions

How old is [child’s name]?

How did you hear about ‘Hear We Grow?’

Why did you become involved in the programme?

How long have you been coming to the sessions?

How frequently can you attend these sessions?

Why do you come?

Do you have any other children?

How long have you lived in the UK?

How long have you lived in Tottenham?

How far away do you live from the West Green Learning Centre?

Questions about Playing with Other Children

Does your child frequently play with other children when he/she comes to ‘Hear We Grow?’

Does your child enjoy playing with other children?

If yes, Can you tell me why?

If no, can you please tell me more? (prompts needed?)

Has your child made any special friends at 'Hear We Grow?'

Tell me a little bit about how your child plays at 'Hear We Grow.'

Can you tell me a positive story about how your child plays at 'Hear We Grow.'

And can you tell me a not so happy story about how your child and another child played together at 'Hear We Grow.'

Have you noticed any changes – good, or not so good - in the way your child plays with other children since you have attended 'Hear We Grow?'

How important is play?

Playing with Your Child in Here We Grow

Have you learned anything new or different about your child's play since you have been coming here?

Do you think it is important for a parent to play with his or her child?

Do you enjoy playing with your child?

Tell me some happy stories about playing with your child.

Tell me some not so happy things about playing with your child.

Do you think it is important for a parent to play with his or her child?

Have the crèche workers or tutors given you any helpful information or support about playing with your child? (If yes, ask for them to provide an example)

Would you like more help or support from the crèche workers or tutors when playing with your child. (If yes, ask them what kind).

What is your favourite 'Here We Grow' play activity?

The Parent and Child Relationship

Tell me a little about your daily routine. How is your child at meal times? (prompts – good eater – fussy -- clean plate, etc.)

How about bed times?

What about play at home? (if appropriate) And TV?

Could you give me three words to describe your child's personality?

Is your child ever wilful? (prompt into misbehaviour issues if necessary/appropriate)

How do you feel about your relationship with your child? (prompt with 'was it always that way?' to get history)

Do you feel as though you are good at meeting your child's needs?

Has coming to @here We Grow' helped you understand your child's needs better?

Do you feel that your relationship with your child is better/the same/worse since coming to 'Here We Grow?'

Learning

Have you learned anything new/helpful since coming to HWG?

How have you used this information?

What has your child learned since coming to 'Here We Grow?'

Is there anything that you would like your child to learn here, that he/she hasn't learned yet?

Do you like the toys and supplies here?

Would you like to see any other kinds of toys or supplies?

What is your favourite learning activity?

Have you learned anything interesting about the way your child learns?

I am interested in whether you have hopes and dreams do you have for your child?

Do you have any special educational goals for your child?

Is there any specific way that 'Here We Grow' could help you meet these goals/dreams?

Information about Early Years Education

Have the crèche workers or tutors given you information about educational opportunities for your child here in Tottenham?

Have you been able to use any of this information? (If yes, ask if it was helpful)

Have you participated in any other school activities in Tottenham since you have started attending 'Here We Grow' sessions?

How confident do you feel about finding more on your own about educational opportunities for your child?

Has attending 'Here We Grow' improved your understanding of school activities?

Has attending increased your confidence about going to these programmes?

Do you feel nervous or worried about your child attending school when he or she gets older? (if yes, probe accordingly, asking if there is any way 'Here We Grow' can help with this.)

Is there any other information that you would like from the 'Here We Grow' workers?

Questions Regarding Health

Have you learned anything interesting about your child's development since coming to 'Here We Grow.' (If yes, ask them to explain, if no, ask why not).

Have you learned anything you didn't already know about your child's sleeping since coming to 'Here We Grow?'

Have you learned anything you didn't already know about your child's eating since coming to 'Here We Grow?'

Have you put any of this advice to use? (If yes, ask them how so)

Do you think your child is eating differently in any way since coming to 'Here We Grow?'

Strengthening Families and Communities

Do you belong to any other community groups in Tottenham?

Is belonging to community groups important to you?

Have you made any new friends through coming to 'Here We Grow?'

Do you feel as though it is easy to express your opinions or ideas?

Do you feel as though your opinions and ideas are valued?

Do you ever share advice or expertise with the teachers or other parents? (if no, ask them if they would like to)
with ??

Are there ways in which the programme can improve communication for you?

Do you feel as though it is easy to express your needs here?

Are the workers responsive to your needs?

If you had a personal problem with your child, would you feel comfortable asking a worker to help you with it? (if this has already happened, ask them to provide an example)

Has coming to 'Here We Grow' improved your confidence in accessing other services in the community?

Has coming to 'Here We Grow' made you feel better/the same/worse about living in Tottenham?

General Questions about the Service

Do you feel welcomed here?

Do you like the facility? Is it easy for you to access?

Do you feel safe when you are here?

In what ways is the staff supportive?

Do you like the informality of the programme, or do you wish there were more structure?

How do you feel about the frequency of the meetings?

Are you happy with the activities?

Are there any activities you would like to see omitted/added?

Tell me your three favourite things about 'Here We Grow.'

Tell me three things that you don't like about the programme.

Would you recommend the service to another parent?