



Stay and Play Evaluation

July 2005

Evaluation summary

Introduction

- The work and activities at a Stay and Play session can be seen to be contributing to all four original objective areas of Sure Start's work.
- Additionally the work encompasses all the areas of the ECM Outcomes Framework (a table discussing these contributions is included in the report).
- Children are dependent on adults to provide quality play in a secure and supportive environment where play is a valued activity.
- Stay and Play sessions run twice a week for 1.5 hours and not only offer quality play for the children through a variety of structured and unstructured activities but also offers parents the opportunity to socialise.

Methodology

- Questionnaires were handed out to all attendees at two Stay and Play sessions.

Results

- 42 questionnaires were returned giving a response rate of 95%.
- The most frequent reason given for attending Stay and Play was a social opportunity for the children.
- All aspects of the sessions received mainly good or excellent ratings. Only snacks had any poor responses circled.
- A selection of verbatim comments is included in the main body of the report.
- The two most popular professionals that parents would like to see at Stay and Play sessions are a dental advisor or hygienist and a nutritionist.
- Most parents agreed that Stay and Play was responsible for positive changes in their child's behaviour.

Discussion and conclusions

- The main reasons parents bring their children to Stay and Play is for the social aspect, both for them and the children.
- The structure of the sessions and the activities therein were largely rated good to excellent by parents.
- The only aspect to receive any poor ratings was snacks but Sure Start Torquay may find it difficult to please everyone with this, as they have adopted a healthy eating stance and only fresh fruit is served.
- All comments, bar one, rating the staff were overwhelmingly favourable.
- CAB and the Library have had a strong presence at Stay and Play with nearly 40% of the respondents having seen representatives of these two agencies.
- Parents noted that they would like to see a nutritionist and some form of dental professional attending Stay and Play sessions to offer advice.
- The majority of parents credited Stay and Play with being responsible for helping their child to play better, share toys and concentrate on tasks. Of those that did not feel Stay and Play had made a difference more than half were attending other playgroups and attributing any change solely to Stay and Play would be difficult.

Recommendations

- Although a number of parents requested a Speech and Language Therapist, a better use of the programme's resources will be to evaluate how useful the training a number of members of staff have recently received from the Speech and Language Therapy service.
- The feasibility of a nutritionist and dental professional attending Stay and Play sessions should be investigated but any plans should clearly detail how the roles would be mainstreamed in the future.
- A small piece of research should be carried out looking in detail at the snacks served. At this stage the only possible recommendation is to serve larger quantities.
- Other agencies should be approached and shown the success of CAB and the library attending Stay and Play. In turn this may lead to mainstreaming opportunities.

Stay and Play Questionnaire Report

Introduction

Stay and Plays are considered a staple of many Sure Start programmes across the country. They tend to be lauded as a wonderful example of the work that Sure Start does due to their flexible nature, widespread appeal and broad target aims.

Stay and Play was designed to do exactly what its name suggests. Parents would bring their children along, Sure Start provides toys, equipment and refreshments and the parents stay and play with their children. According to Gould “parents are the first and most important teachers that children will ever have”¹. As play is such an important part of a child’s learning process it is important that it is made as valuable an experience as possible. Isaacs (1933) summed it beautifully when she said “play is a child’s life and the means by which he comes to understand the world he lives in”.

A basic Stay and Play can be seen to contribute to the original four main objective areas of Sure Start²:

- 1) Improve social and emotional development
- 2) Improve health
- 3) Improve the ability to learn
- 4) Strengthen families and communities

Playing alongside other children at the sessions helps them to develop socially and emotionally³. Early years workers trained in safety and hygiene facilitate the sessions and access the families attending them. The mere act of playing improves the ability to learn (discussed in more detail later). Stay and Plays are often large sociable groups in a community setting. As the carers are expected to stay and play with their child (hence the name) this increases the bond and understanding within the family.

Since these areas were originally set and Stay and Plays set up, the Every Child Matters Outcomes (ECM) Framework has come into existence. All children’s services will eventually work towards these aims and as a result evaluation of Sure Start’s services has to take them into consideration. See the text box below for a discussion of how Stay and Play’s work is contributing to these aims.

The importance of play cannot be underestimated. In today’s climate of mistrust, where parents are reluctant to allow their children to play outside there is little opportunity for children to learn how to play from older children. This has left children dependent on adults “to help them into quality play”⁴. For play to be truly beneficial children need to feel secure and comfortable in their surroundings and be with supportive adults. If adults pay attention to and engage in children’s play, children will feel that their play is a valued activity.

The Stay and Play sessions run for one and a half hours, twice a week. It is a valuable opportunity for them to socialise, as isolation can be an issue for many parents.

¹ Gould, K “The Importance of Play”

² See www.surestart.gov.uk

³ Consultation Paper on the Regulation of Early Education and Day Care

⁴ Page 229, Child Care and Education (2002), Bruce, T. and Meggitt, C.

Stay and Play's contribution to the ECM Framework

Many of the targets and inspection criteria used by those assessing how well children's services are doing in attaining the ECM Outcomes are not appropriate for measuring a Sure Start service's work. As such Sure Start's are now tending to show how they contribute to a family's development, so that they are at least on the right path to ensuring the outcomes are met. Below is a list of the aims that Stay and Play can be seen to be working towards. Not all of these are considered by this evaluation but future work may take them into account.

Aim	
Be Healthy	Much of the play, especially for the older children, is physically active at sessions helping develop physical health. Additionally, there is a very strong ethos of promoting healthy eating, with snack time consisting of only fruit, which develops a health lifestyle and encourages the parents to support the children to follow a healthy lifestyle. Through playing, learning and developing in a supportive environment, where there parents are helped to promote these activities children are nurtured and remain mentally and emotionally healthy.
Stay Safe	Through playing with their children and enjoying time with other parents, parents bond better with their children and develop support networks to help them cope with parenthood and learn new skills, which will reduce the occurrences of maltreatment, neglect and violence.
Enjoy & Achieve	Through both structured and unstructured activities with staff trained in promoting learning and development in young children in a social environment, children become more socially independent and socially able making them ready to engage fully in school when they are old enough. Through these same processes children are able to develop personally and socially while enjoying recreation.
Make a Positive Contribution	Stay and Plays are social environments where children are encouraged to develop positive relationships with other children and behave appropriately in play. Through play children are encouraged to be more independent which helps them develop self-confidence.
Achieve Economic Well-Being	Stay and Plays are visited regularly by an advisor from the Citizen's Advice Bureau who helps parents with benefits, training and continuing education.

Recently Sure Start Bournemouth's evaluation team conducted a study of their Let's Play Together parent and toddler group⁵, which appears to have a similar format to that of the Stay and Play sessions. They made a number of positive findings:

- On the whole parents felt their children benefited from the sessions, in a number of different ways such as improved social opportunities and better behaviour.
- Parents benefited by meeting with a supportive social circle and through having access to a multi-disciplinary team for support and advice. This team also provides a signposting service to other agencies and services.
- The sessions are contributing towards the programme's work towards the Sure Start target.

This evaluation aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) **Do the children benefit from attending Stay and Play sessions?**
- 2) **What do the parents feel about the Stay and Play sessions and activities therein?**

Method

A questionnaire was given out to all 44 parents in attendance of two Stay and Play sessions. The questionnaire was based on a questionnaire used in Sure Start Paignton's evaluation of their Stay and Play service. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

Results

Of the 44 questionnaires given out, 42 were returned giving a return rate of 95%. The following table details the reasons parents gave for attending Stay and Play sessions. Parents were allowed to choose as many options as they felt applicable.

Table 1: Reasons for attending Stay and Play

Reason	Frequency
Convenient time	21
Support	13
For child to socialise	40
Location is easy to access	22
For me to socialise	28
Selection of toys	20
Other	0

The most frequent reason for attending Stay and Play was for the child to socialise with opportunity for the parent to socialise being the second most important factor. Easy location to access, convenient time and selection of toys all received a very similar number of responses.

Table 2 details how the parents rated individual components of the Stay and Play sessions. They were offered very poor as a choice but nobody chose to circle it so the column has been omitted.

⁵ Sure Start Bournemouth Let's Play Together available from www.ness.bbk.ac.uk

Table 2: Parents rating of aspects of the Stay and Play sessions

Aspect of session	Excellent	Good	Average	Poor
Singing	15	20	5	0
Snacks	14	23	2	2
Toys	25	14	2	0
Structured activities	14	23	1	0
Unstructured play	12	27	1	0
Length of session	11	26	2	0
Staff	30	10	1	0

The two aspects rated most favourably are the staff at the sessions and the toys provided. After that the components of the sessions are rated approximately the same. Only two 'poor' responses were made and these were referring to the snacks provided at sessions.

Parents made a number of comments on the returned questionnaires and an illustrative sample of these is included below.

Singing

"Children really enjoy this"
 "interaction with other children"
 "lovely way to round off the session"
 "my son likes us to sing the songs at home too"
 "my son has learning difficulties and loves singing"

Toys

"plenty and variety"
 "more soft toys for toddlers"

Snacks

"Very healthy"
 "don't fill up before lunchtime"
 "not enough"
 "very good for them to eat fruit together"
 "not enough selection"

Structured activities

"Varied, well organised and resourced"
 "good balance of each"

Unstructured play

"great place to let off steam or be quiet"
 "we like the soft play days"

Length of session

"could do with being a bit longer"
 "could be an extra half hour"

Staff

“always helpful, very good with children”

“all staff are very friendly and very helpful”

“very caring”

The parents were asked which professionals they have seen at sessions and which they would like to see. Table 3 details how many respondents chose each option.

Table 3: The professionals parents have seen/ would like to see at sessions

Professional	Have seen	Would like to see
Community development worker	3	3
Midwife/maternity care assistant	4	3
Counsellor	n/a	3
Health visitor	6	10
Speech and Language Therapist	3	12
Teacher	n/a	11
Nursery nurse	6	3
Specialist health visitor	n/a	6
Citizen's Advice Bureau (CAB)	16	3
Nutritionist	n/a	16
Jobcentre Plus	3	2
Dental advisor/hygienist	n/a	23
Library	17	n/a
Other	0	0

The additional services that have attended Stay and Play and seen the most parents are the CAB and the Library. Two in five respondents have seen a representative of these two services.

Of most interest to this evaluation though are the services parents would like to see at a Stay and Play. Clearly some form of dental advice is sought after by the parents with more than one in two respondents saying they would like to see a dental advisor or hygienist attend sessions. The next most popular request appears to continue a health advice theme with parents reporting a desire to see a nutritionist at the sessions. Two in five parents requested a nutritionist to attend Stay and Play sessions. The next three most popular requests are all very close in terms of number of responses. Twelve respondents requested a Speech and Language Therapist, eleven a teacher and ten a health visitor.

Table 4 describes the responses parents made when asked about resulting changes in behaviour in their children from attending Stay and Play. Respondents were offered a Strongly Disagree option but nobody chose to circle it and the column has been omitted.

Table 4 – Changes in behaviour attributed to attendance at Stay and Play

Behaviour	Strongly agree	Agree	No change	Disagree
Plays better	12	19	7	1
Shares toys	7	21	10	1
Concentrates more	8	17	13	1

The majority of parents did feel that attending Stay and Play sessions had positively benefited their child's behaviour. Five respondents felt that attending Stay and Play had made no change to their child's behaviour.

While each option had a disagreement there is a definite positive skew in the responses for "Plays better". While there appears to be a positive skew for the other two options, it is less pronounced for "shares toys" and even less so for "concentrates more".

Of the 40 respondents to the final question, 21 did not attend any other structured play sessions and 19 responded that they did. The details of other sessions that were given did not show any obvious trends so are not reported here, but this does show that for more than half of the attendees Stay and Play is the only structured play session they go to with their child.

Discussion and conclusions

It is clear from the questionnaire that the parents attend Stay and Play sessions for many reasons but by far the most popular is the social aspect, both for the child and themselves. In addition the easy access to the location of the sessions, the timing and the selection of toys are important to the parents, suggesting Sure Start Torquay has organised the logistics of running Stay and Play well.

The structure of the sessions is favourably reflected in parents' responses to the individual aspects. Although only one aspect was rated poorly by two respondents, the qualitative comments made on the questionnaires do provide a richer context to view the individual components of the sessions.

Singing was rated favourably by all parents. It is clear from the comments made by other parents that the singing is a valuable exercise for their children's learning and development, so every effort should be made to make it available to all. One very promising comment made by one of the parents offers clear evidence for the success of the concept of Stay and Play sessions.

"my son likes us to sing the songs at home too"

Stay and Play sessions were designed to encourage parents to interact and play with their children in a quality environment with expert advice and support available. It is hoped that the skills they learn/observe at the sessions are taken home and practised there. This comment would suggest that exactly this is happening.

Snacks provided at the sessions were the only aspect of Stay and Play to receive a 'poor' response. In addition many of the comments appear to suggest a rethink of the snacks may be called for. Unfortunately there is not sufficient evidence here to definitely make a recommendation either way and additionally anecdotal evidence indicates that parents have taken the healthy ethos of Sure Start Torquay's snacks and requested this at other playgroups. So Sure Start Torquay may be caught between a rock and a hard place with snacks. The snacks offered have always been fruit, as opposed to the biscuits evident at so many groups. Unfortunately it is difficult to ascertain exactly what the respondents want from the snacks. Quantity is a potential issue and one respondent (who indicated they thought the snacks to be excellent) suggested "non-fruit items e.g. breadsticks, rice cakes", but unfortunately the returns did not offer enough information to make a more informed decision.

The toys provided at each session were rated very favourably. One parent noted the “lovely educational wooden toys” and the “superior home made play dough”. It is worth noting at this stage that the recipe for this play-dough is actually given to every parent that wants it. Although one respondent (who did rate the toys as excellent overall) would like to see “more soft toys for toddlers”, considering it was the most highly rated aspect of Stay and Play improving the toys does not appear to be necessary.

From the comments made by parents it would appear those planning and running the sessions have got the structured and unstructured aspects of Stay and Play just right. No unfavourable comments were made by any of the parents. One parent noted that structured activities are “not always available in afternoon”. As they appear to be a valued part of the Stay and Play sessions this would suggest every effort should be made to include them in all Stay and Play sessions. This will be entirely dependent on staff resources though and the afternoon Stay and Play sessions are recognisably quieter.

The comments made about staff were almost overwhelmingly positive with the vast majority of the parents offering high praise for those facilitating the sessions. Only one negative comment was made but what cannot be explored here is whether this is a single comment due to ongoing poor experience of staff interaction or just a single incident that has been reported here.

The results displayed in Table 3 show that the CAB and the Library have had a strong presence at Stay and Play sessions in Torquay. For nearly forty percent of the families responding to this questionnaire to have seen these two agencies shows their hard work at the sessions is being appreciated. Other agencies may wish to observe these results and consider having a presence at future Stay and Play sessions.

At present there is no provision for a nutritionist, nor are there any plans. There have been discussions over having some agreement with dental services but at present nothing is finalised. MORI research completed in the area has shown major dissatisfaction with dental services in the area, with access being a primary difficulty. This evidence suggests it's a role that is desired by Sure Start families now and Stay and Play could be the ideal community venue to access this advice.

A primary focus of all Sure Start work is to provide notable outcomes for those families accessing the services. Table 4 evidences the positive differences Stay and Play has made to the families attending. Out of 39 respondents, 31 felt that their child now played better as a result of attending Stay and Play. With play being such an important part of a child's development and learning this is a very promising outcome. The majority of parents (28 out of 39) also felt that their child shared toys better and 25 out of 39 parents felt their child concentrated on tasks more.

Of the five respondents that felt there was no change in their child's behaviour, three of them attended other structured play sessions, which would make it difficult to attribute any change in the child's behaviour to Stay and Play. As one of these parents noted “my kids are used to daycare ... but I think these sessions are really good for socialising children.”

Recommendations

- A number of parents (12 out of 41 that completed that section) expressed the wish to see a Speech and Language Therapist at Stay and Play sessions. The Sure Start Torquay team has recently attended a training session facilitated by the Speech and Language Therapy service. Before looking into having a Therapist attend Stay and Play, a better use of the team's resources would be to evaluate how this training has enabled the team to deliver Speech and Language advice and support to parents.
- The feasibility of having a dental advisor or hygienist and a nutritionist attending occasional sessions should be looked at and if possible planning made to include them at Stay and Play. Any introduction of a new professional would need to be done on a trial basis with quality evaluation to ensure the families receive the service they were expecting. In addition with a role such as this, where the immediate work would be removed from the main target areas of the Sure Start unit's work, mainstreaming needs to be a primary consideration. If a nutritionist were to be introduced to the team there would need to be a clear plan as to how the role would be paid for in the near future.
- Although the snacks received the lowest overall rating of any of the factors of a Stay and Play session, in supporting a health lifestyle agenda for families the fruit should continue to be served. The only amendment that can be suggested is to serve more of it so that all the children get a fair choice and helping. A small piece of research may be conducted in this area in the future to further investigate children's opinions of the snacks.
- This study has shown that for CAB and the library, attendance at Stay and Play is increasing access to their services. Other agencies should be approached with these findings as evidence to offer them the opportunity to become involved in the delivery of Stay and Play. This potentially offers a partial mainstreaming opportunity as well. The only way Stay and Play will be mainstreamed is by other agencies taking on the running of it, hence the need to attract and involve agencies at this early stage.

References

Bruce, T and Meggitt, C (2002) *Child Care and Education* London: Hodder & Stoughton

Department for Education and Employment and the Department of Health (1998) *Consultation Paper on the Regulation and Inspection of Early Education and Day Care* from www.dfes.gov.uk/consultations/downloadableDocs/37_1.doc

Gould, K *The Importance of Play* obtained from <http://www.freenetpages.co.uk/hp/AndyGill/PLAY.htm>

Public Service Agreement for 2003-2004 to 2005-2006 obtained from www.surestart.gov.uk/aboutsurestart

Sure Start Bournemouth *Let's Play Together* obtained from <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/HtmlDocuments/69.htm>

Appendix A



We're evaluating the Stay and Play sessions & to help us provide the best service we can please take a few moments to complete this questionnaire. All your answers will be held in the utmost confidentiality.

Gender of child (*Please circle*) Male / Female

1. Why do you attend Stay and Play? *Tick all that apply:*

- | | | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|
| Convenient time | <input type="checkbox"/> | Location is easy to access | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Support | <input type="checkbox"/> | For me to socialise | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| For child to socialise | <input type="checkbox"/> | Selection of toys | <input type="checkbox"/> |

If other please state: _____

Please rate these aspects of the sessions by circling the word that most applies:

2. Singing:

Excellent Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments: _____

3. Snacks:

Excellent Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments: _____

4. Toys:

Excellent Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments: _____

5. Structured activities:

Excellent Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments: _____

6. Unstructured play:

Excellent Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments: _____

7. Length of session:

Excellent Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments: _____

8. Staff:

Excellent Good Average Poor Very poor

Comments: _____

PTO

9. Which professionals or agencies have you spoken to at these sessions for advice and support? *Please tick all that apply:*

Community development worker	<input type="checkbox"/>	Speech and Language	<input type="checkbox"/>
Midwife/maternity care assistant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Citizen's Advice Bureau	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jobcentre Plus	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nursery nurse	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health visitor	<input type="checkbox"/>	Library	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please explain): _____

10. Which professionals or agencies would you like to see at these sessions? *Please tick all that apply:*

Community development worker	<input type="checkbox"/>	Speech and Language	<input type="checkbox"/>
Midwife/maternity care assistant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nutritionist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Counsellor	<input type="checkbox"/>	Citizen's Advice Bureau	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health visitor	<input type="checkbox"/>	Dental advisor/hygienist	<input type="checkbox"/>
Teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	Nursery nurse	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jobcentre Plus	<input type="checkbox"/>	Specialist health visitor	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please explain): _____

Please indicate your response to the statement by circling the comment that best indicates your feeling.

As a result of attending Stay and Play...

11. my child plays better with other children.

Strongly agree Agree No change Disagree Strongly disagree

12. my child is more prepared to share toys with other children.

Strongly agree Agree No change Disagree Strongly disagree

13. my child concentrates more on tasks.

Strongly agree Agree No change Disagree Strongly disagree

14. Finally, does your child attend other (not Sure Start) structured play sessions?

Yes No If yes please give details: _____

(please circle) _____

Please feel free to make any further comments or suggest how we could improve the session:

Thank you for taking the time to fill this questionnaire in.