

Sure Start Nuneaton

Evaluation of the Early Years work and Child Care Service

August 2005

1. INTRODUCTION

The early years and childcare service is a core activity of Sure Start Nuneaton. The service is well established and successful, as defined by self evaluation. In 2004, the service won a national award at the Sure Start Partners in Excellence Awards in the “Enabling Children’s Learning” category for the way it prepares children for nursery education.

The service aims to offer children play opportunities that support their emotional, social, intellectual and physical development within a relaxed and welcoming environment and to support parents and model good practice.

The sessions offered fall into two categories – childcare and play provision:

- Childcare is offered as a crèche facility at the Riversley venue to parents or carers undertaking adult learning at Sure Start Nuneaton.
- Play provision is the term used to describe groups for parents and children together. The groups are age specific, covering children aged 8 months to 3+ years. Play provision is available at both Donnithorne and Riversley

Parents and carers have access to a very well stocked toy library, situated at the Riversley centre.

2. THE RESEARCH QUESTION

This study has sought to evaluate the short term impact of the early years work and childcare service funded by the Sure Start Nuneaton Partnership to provide evidence for the sustainability of the work when Sure Start funding ceases. *The term “impact” in this instance refers to the effect the Sure Start Nuneaton early year’s service has on those who receive the service.*

3. RESEARCH METHODS

The research has been mainly qualitative, seeking the opinions and perceptions of both service users and a wide range of service providers. The following methods have been employed:

- Scrutiny of a range of documentation
- Observation of groups – a total of nine sessions were observed, seven at Riversley and two at Donnithorne.
- Interviews with three clinicians and three other Sure Start staff. Interviews were also held with the Early Years and Family Support Manager and with the Childcare Supervisor.
- Questionnaires and a focus group interview with the early years staff

- Interviews with parents and carers – a total of thirty eight parents or carers were interviewed, either individually or in small focus groups
- Interviews with staff at four receiving nurseries

4. FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

All the findings have contributed towards the following conclusions. Evidence has been sought from both service providers and service users, from focused observations and from written documentation. In analysing the findings, it has been possible to find common threads across the range of sources of evidence, and to find similar opinions and perceptions from a range of service providers and service users.

The early years work and childcare service is effective in its aim of impacting on the lives of parents and children who access services. In summary:

- It provides a well managed and well resourced service that is highly valued by both parents and staff both within Sure Start, in receiving nurseries and in the mainstream Health Visitor service.
- It provides quality care and early year's education for children within a safe, secure and happy environment so that children can have fun as they learn through play.
- It supports parents and carers by modelling positive parenting, by offering non judgemental support and advice when sought and by signposting parents to other services when appropriate.
- Early years staff work in partnership with parents, exhibiting both respect and equality within the partnership.
- The service helps to prepare children for nursery through a suitable curriculum based on the Birth to Three Matters framework and the Early Learning Goals of the National Curriculum Foundation Stage. Activities are thoroughly planned and prepared and are well delivered.
- Staff are suitably qualified and benefit from a comprehensive range of on-going professional development opportunities.
- The service both supports and is supported by the contributions of clinicians and Sure Start staff to form an integrated delivery of services.
- The early years work uses resources from mainstream services wherever possible, and contributes to mainstream provision, particularly in the health sector.
- Parents are beginning to take ownership of and make contributions to the service. For example, at the Donnithorne facility parents create displays and select activities themselves. Staff skilfully facilitate and encourage this involvement.
- The early years work covers the majority of the inspection criteria from the Every Child Matters framework.

HYPOTHESES

From the data collected and the findings identified, there is clear evidence to support all the hypotheses tested.

- ***The Sure Start aims and objectives are firmly embedded and are evident within the ethos, values and culture of the early years work and childcare service.***

Partnership with parents, respect and equality are all amply demonstrated within the service. Parents trust the early years staff, not only to care for their children in childcare sessions, but also to follow through on any queries or concerns. The staff offer time and attention to each family, showing care and concern and responding to them as individuals.

- ***The quality of resourcing – human, physical and environmental is of a very high and this affects both the quality of provision and responses of parents.***

The early years work is very well resourced in terms of toys, equipment and facilities. The environment is safe and secure and good use is made of the space available at both the Donnithorne and Riversley sites. However, to some extent, the space available limits the range of activities that can be provided and opportunities for further development. Parents appreciate the quality of the resources but in general this is only one reason why parents use the service.

The service is working to capacity, particularly at the Riversley site, and it is difficult to see how the service here could be extended within the space available. The Donnithorne facility is only timetabled for some sessions during the week and it is here that there is capacity for extending services, subject to identified needs and availability of staff.

The single most important feature contributing to the effectiveness of the service lies with the early years and childcare staff. From observations and interviews with service providers and service users it is clear that the staff themselves are the service's greatest asset. Strong and effective leadership and management, clear vision, on-going professional development, a commitment to the families they work with and the desire to continue to develop and improve the service are all significant factors.

- ***The development and delivery of an integrated approach, using practitioners from different professional backgrounds (health, social services and education) and with differing expertise to offer, improves the quality and effectiveness of the services offered.***

The integrated service provision is extremely significant, contributing towards the effectiveness of the early years work. The quality of provision in groups is enhanced through input from clinicians and staff with a range of expertise. Clinicians influence the professional development of early years staff, both directly through training in the clinical development group sessions, and indirectly by being available for support and advice. The open plan, single office arrangement helps to facilitate this. Early years staff are all positive about the benefits of integrated service provision and are eager to take advantage of the additional expertise available.

The early years and childcare service is greatly valued by clinicians, other Sure Start service providers and the mainstream Health Visitor service. The early years work makes a valuable contribution to the priorities of other service providers.

- ***The positive relationships with parents and carers and the influence of using a modelling approach to the teaching and development of parenting skills is an effective tool in embedding successful parenting.***

Positive relationships were apparent in all sessions observed, and were echoed time and time again in interviews with parents and carers. There is an ethos of respect and equality throughout the service. Staff are non judgemental, genuinely friendly and show real concern for the families they work with. The outcome is a partnership of trust. Early years staff model positive parenting through play and they are successful in engaging parents and children together within sessions.

EVERY CHILD MATTERS INSPECTION CRITERIA

Through examining planning and through focused observations, the evidence suggests that the early years and childcare service addresses the majority of the inspection criteria for four of the five Every Child Matters outcomes. In particular it exhibits comprehensive coverage of the criteria for “Enjoy and Achieve”, promoting healthy lifestyles and supporting children’s mental health (Be Healthy), providing a safe environment (Stay Safe) and helping children to develop socially and emotionally (Make a Positive Contribution). In addition, by providing childcare, it enables parents to undertake adult learning, which may contribute to their ability to seek work (Achieve Economic Well-being).

THE SURE START OBJECTIVES AND MAINSTREAMING

As a core activity of Sure Start Nuneaton, the early years and childcare service is one of the central methods of meeting the Sure Start objectives. In addition to the ways in which, through its own activities, the objectives are addressed, it also supports other Sure Start services with their own agendas, as they aim to meet the objectives. There is also evidence that, through work with Health Visitors, it contributes to mainstream health provision.

CONSTRAINTS

Capacity and Attendance

The service appears to be working to full capacity, particularly at the Riversley site. Here there are waiting lists for all groups and the space available limits the number of children who can be safely accommodated. At the Donnithorne site, there is capacity to develop the service, subject to identified need and staffing levels.

Good use is made of space at both sites. The recently developed outdoor area at Riversley will enable the outdoor curriculum to be developed here. Outdoor space at Donnithorne is very limited, although best use has been made of this small space.

The Early Years Manager and Childcare Supervisor have identified several areas for future development of services, but space and staffing levels may limit future developments.

Non attendance appears to be an issue in many groups. Managers are aware of this, and are continually seeking ways to address the issue, without alienating families.

The early years staff, both managerial and childcare workers, work extremely hard to deliver the high level of service and appear to be working to full capacity. At present this may limit further development of services.

The toy library, sited at the Riversley facility is very well resourced and organised. The tips cards that accompany each toy give parents and carers ideas to promote learning. The toy library is sometimes promoted within groups, but not consistently. The statistics for usage indicate that the library is underused at present. The toy library sited at All Saints Primary School and available to families in the Donnithorne area is apparently used only rarely.

Links with Nurseries

Links with nurseries have been developed from the onset of services at Sure Start Nuneaton through consultation and liaison from managerial staff and throughout the early years service. The links are currently maintained mainly through Family Support Workers. Some of these links appear to be strong and well established resulting in positive partnerships. Other nurseries have looser ties, and here the partnerships appear to be less fruitful. In all cases the sharing of professional information regarding individual children does not take place consistently. As a result, nurseries are not able to clearly identify all families who have accessed Sure Start services. Consequently, it is not currently possible to track the progress of individual children in order to evaluate the long term impact of Sure Start on children's progress or to ensure a smooth transition to nursery for all children.

The early years and childcare service has made great efforts to develop this transition process through Surestarters groups, providing a curriculum based on the Early Learning Goals of the Foundation Stage of the National Curriculum, and involving parents so that they understand how their children will learn in nursery settings. In previous years these groups have proved very successful, as determined through attendance rates, feedback from parents and from some nurseries. This year attendance rates have been lower, thought to be as a result of children accessing groups at a recently established neighbourhood nursery. However, plans are already in hand to re-consider how best to deliver Surestarters, for example by offering groups throughout the year and not just in the summer term.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Further Development of Links with Nurseries

Further development and strengthening existing links with nurseries in order to facilitate the sharing of professional information, tracking pupils to assess progress and seeking ways to support each others aims and objectives is the primary recommendation of this evaluation study.

In addition, the following recommendations are suggested:

Development of Services within the Resources Available

Due to limits on space and staffing available, it may be useful to consider creative ways to develop the services offered. This will be particularly significant with the development of Children's Centre status in 2006, when the service will cover a larger area and population. Space for additional groups may be available within local

schools, and this could be one way to strengthen the links with nurseries. Alternatively, space could be available in other local community venues.

There is clearly a limit on the extension or development of services within current staffing levels. It may be possible to consider ways of using other Sure Start staff within groups, as already successfully occurs when Family Support staff and clinicians work within groups, or to build on the existing practice of working in partnership with mainstream service providers such as Nursery Nurses from the health sector.

The toy library may be used by a higher number parents and carers if it could be promoted more consistently within groups, and if parents could be encouraged to use the library available at All Saints school.