



Littlemoor Toy Library Evaluation Report



September 2005

Children learn through play: from birth it enables them to explore their world. Through play, and with regular access to appropriate toys, they learn about their environment, how to relate to people, and how to recognise and handle everyday objects. Play is fun, an essential part of child development, and something to be enjoyed by the whole family. (NATLL 2002)

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Contents	Page No.
List of figures and tables	6
Summary	8
Introduction	11
Background	11
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is a toy library ▪ Parent and Toddler groups/Stay and Play 	
Littlemoor Toy Library	13
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Background ▪ Charges ▪ Staffing ▪ Training ▪ Attendance 	
Purpose of the Evaluation	17
Methods used	17
Phase 1	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Interview with parent volunteers ▪ Interviews with the Sure Start Playworkers ▪ Parent questionnaire ▪ Fast feedback form ▪ Smiley/sad bins 	
Phase 2	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Observation ▪ Parent questionnaire ▪ Parent volunteer feedback ▪ Playworker feedback ▪ Ethical issues 	
PHASE 1	21
Findings	21
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ General details ▪ About the toy library ▪ Using the toy library ▪ Impact of the toy library upon the family ▪ Facilitating the toy library ▪ Postal questionnaires 	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Fast feedback forms ▪ Smiley/sad bins 	
Parent volunteers	39
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feedback from volunteers after four months ▪ Feedback from volunteers twelve months on 	
Relationships within the Toy Library	41
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Relationship between Parent volunteers and SSWP ▪ Relationship between Parent volunteers and Playworkers ▪ Relationship between the Parent volunteers 	
Volunteer fatigue	49
Conclusions and recommendations	51
PHASE 2	53
Reshaping the service	53
Evaluation plan	53
Findings	54
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Participant observation ▪ General details ▪ About the service ▪ Using the Play Time 0-4's Group ▪ The craft activities ▪ Making a difference ▪ Parent volunteer feedback ▪ Playworker feedback 	
Conclusions and lessons learned	77
Up-date	82
References	83
Appendices	84

List of figures	Page No.
Figure 1: Children attending Littlemoor stay and play 2003 & 2004	15
Figure 2: Adults attending Littlemoor stay and play 2003 & 2004	16
Figure 3: Do you generally stay for the whole session at the toy library?	25
Figure 4: Joining in the stay and play activities	25
Figure 5: Satisfaction with stay and play activities	26
Figure 6: Who chooses the toy to take home?	27
Figure 7: Do you or other family members play with your child with the toy(s) you take home?	28
Figure 8: Changes to child's behaviour	30
Figure 9: Why do you come to the sessions?	31
Figure 10: How helpful are volunteers and staff at the toy library	32
Figure 11: Did your child enjoy playing with this toy?	36
Figure 12: Did you and your child play with this toy together?	37
Figure 13: Did you use the guidelines on the 'language tags'?	38
Figure 14: Who do you and your child live with?	58
Figure 15: How did you hear about the Play Time 0-4's group?	59
Figure 16: What made you go to the Play Time 0-4's group?	60
Figure 17: What do you think of the venue for the Play Time 0-4's	60
Figure 18: Do you generally stay for the whole Play Time 0-4's session?	62
Figure 19: Joining in the Play Time activities	62
Figure 20: Satisfaction with the Play Time activities	63
Figure 21: How helpful are volunteers and staff at the Play Time 0-4's group?	64
Figure 22: Changes to child's behaviour	68

Figure 23: I can talk about any worries or problems	69
Figure 24: I am learning new things about play	69
Figure 25: What would have been useful when you first attended the group?	70
Figure 26: What would you like for the future of the play time group?	71

List of tables	Page No.
Table 1: Training sessions offered	15
Table 2: Age range of parents	21
Table 3: Has the toy library made a difference to your relationship with you child	29
Table 4: Suggested activities for toy library	33
Table 5: Attendance figures for Play Time 0-4's during observation	54
Table 6: Age range of parents attending Play Time 0-4's	58
Table 7: Ages of respondents children attending Play Time 0-4's	58
Table 8: Children's reaction to the craft table	64
Table 9: Parents views on the craft table	65
Table 10: Has the Play Time 0-4's group made a difference to your relationship with your child?	66
Table 11: Satisfaction with support from SSWP	73
Table 12: Volunteering needs	75
Table 13: What is important to the Playworkers	76

Summary

Introduction

The evaluation of the Littlemoor Sure Start Weymouth & Portland (SSWP) service is part of the overall research and evaluation strategy of the Sure Start programme that aims to examine the effects of Sure Start programmes for children, families and communities.

This report describes the findings from an evaluation of the Littlemoor Toy Library which was established in February 2003 as a joint venture between SSWP and Littlemoor Sure Start parents. The report is presented in two phases as the service underwent a change in what it was providing for families; Phase 1 describes the findings from data collected from the parent volunteers running the group and from families using the service. Phase 2 shows how families, volunteers and Sure Start project workers felt about the service once changes had been made.

Evaluation Plan

An evaluation plan was developed by the research team in consultation with the parent volunteers running the group and the Sure Start Evaluation Working group. Information was collected using a variety of methods which included focus group and individual interviews with parents, Sure Start workers and volunteers. Self completing questionnaires were used in both phases by parents who used the service, parents who had stopped using the service and with Sure Start playworkers. Observation of the group was also carried out over a three week period during phase 2 and children who attended the group were asked to take part in the evaluation by placing a borrowed toy in a smiley or a sad bin on return.

Key Findings

Phase 1

- 22 questionnaires were completed by mothers using the toy library with their child. The majority were very satisfied with the service and felt that a wide variety of activities and learning opportunities were provided, especially the craft and activity table.
- Although the borrowing of toys was initially high, numbers of parents taking a toy home decreased steadily over the first year due to reasons such as not knowing how to borrow a toy, unaware of a catalogue showing the toys and unsuitable choice for their child's age group.
- Families had the opportunity of socialising with other parents, spending time with their children in a play and learning environment and able to access information and advice from SSWP project workers about their child's development.

- By the end of the first year parent volunteers had began to find the commitment and responsibility of running the group quite difficult. Volunteer fatigue was evident. Reasons for this included, feelings of being undervalued, lack of communication with SSWP around training issues, misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities within the group and a general lack of motivation.
- Meeting Sure Start objectives: It was clear that the toy library service was beginning to meet Sure Start targets, especially within Objective 3: Improving the ability to learn and objective 4: strengthening families and communities.

In September 2004 the Littlemoor service was renamed Play Time 0-4 with more of a focus on providing a stay and play group than a toy library. Changes in parent volunteers occurred and a number of meetings were held with SSWP to plan and develop the service. The evaluation team attended a meeting to feed back findings from phase 1 and volunteers used these findings to help reshape the new service.

Phase 2

- Observation findings showed that SSWP playworker input was very important to parents and children enabling a variety of different activities to be undertaken. Mothers especially liked the fact that they were learning new skills and able to feel more confident in playing with their child.
- A big improvement in how parent volunteers interacted with families, particularly new mothers and children to the group. A relaxed and welcoming atmosphere was noted by both users and SSWP workers which helped cultivate social interaction between parents and safe, fun play for children.
- The toy library resumed by the third week of the relaunch with toys being displayed and positively encouraged by volunteers. Toys were being borrowed by the majority of users on a regular basis.
- The craft activity table facilitated by a SSWP playworker was again very popular with children and mothers.
- A more open and supporting relationship between parent volunteers and SSWP was apparent. Regular meetings and the ability to feedback has ensured that communication has improved and led to a happier atmosphere at the group, which has had a knock on effect to users of the service, ensuring that local families who use the group enjoy the experience.
- As well as meeting objectives 1 and 4, the Littlemoor service has begun to work towards achieving objective 1: Improving social and emotional development by producing a strong social network at the group for all the family.

The way forward

It is clear that the toy library is meeting the needs of those families who are using the service. However, further evaluation of all play and learning opportunities in the area needs to be undertaken to discover ways to engage all families with pre-school children in the Littlemoor area into the Sure Start programme.

Increasing the numbers of parent volunteers is essential for the future of the group. Encouraging new parents to help with organisation and getting more involved in all SSWP activities will further enhance the service and strengthen the community. SSWP need to continue to provide support and guidance to volunteers on a regular basis.

Effective partnership working needs to be further encouraged. The toy library has shown how a multi-disciplinary team can work well together to provide support, good play and learning opportunities and access to other family services.

The Littlemoor Toy Library has come a long way. This evaluation has shown how a service can learn from its mistakes and develop strategies to improve its delivery to the community. The parent volunteers along with SSWP were able to look at the findings from phase 1 of the evaluation and make changes to the service based on what local parents had experienced. Findings from phase 2 of the evaluation has validated that these changes have resulted in the group offering a better service for parents and children in the Littlemoor area.

Introduction

This report describes the findings from an evaluation of a Sure Start service for parents and their children located in Littlemoor, Weymouth. The report is presented in two parts as the service underwent a change in what it was providing for families, therefore the evaluation was carried out in two phases.

Phase 1 - The Littlemoor Toy Library

Phase 2 - Play Time 0-4's

Part one of the report will focus upon the evaluation of the toy library at Littlemoor and present the findings collected from parents who used the service. It will also describe the process of how the parent volunteers decided to reshape the service and what recommendations were made to ensure the new service would meet the needs of local Sure Start families.

Part two of the report will describe the findings from data collected from parents who have accessed the Play Time 0-4's group and provide an overall conclusion of the Littlemoor service.

The evaluation of the Littlemoor Sure Start Weymouth & Portland (SSWP) service is part of the overall research and evaluation strategy of the Sure Start programme that aims to examine the effects of Sure Start programmes for children, families and communities.

The evaluation was also designed to look at how the Littlemoor service was addressing government targets for Sure Start, especially Objective 3: Improving learning and Objective 4: Strengthening families and communities.

Background

Early childhood is a crucial stage of life in terms of children's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development. Growth is both rapid and differential. A significantly high proportion of learning takes place from birth to age six. It is a time when children particularly need high quality care and learning experiences. The aim of the Government's early years policy is to provide a comprehensive range of services for young children. This includes integrated early years education and childcare provision which will make a positive contribution to children's early development, enabling them to build on this foundation throughout their lives. (QCA document 1999).

Education begins in the home and continues there and in a range of settings. Through initiatives such as Sure Start and Early Excellence Centres, the Government is pioneering ways to improve support for families and children from birth. The aim is to work with parents and children to promote the development of pre-school children particularly those who are disadvantaged, to ensure that they are ready to thrive when they get to school.

What is a Toy Library?

The first toy libraries were developed in the 1960's and grew from families exchanging toys in their own homes. Soon recognised as a valuable resource for the community, the idea grew rapidly and was offering all children the opportunity to borrow toys through local toy libraries. In 1981 the International Toy Library Association (ITLA) was established and has since set out the general objectives of a toy library:

- A service that provides members with the opportunity for shared play and the loan of toys. A toy library can be operated by individuals, charitable organisations, local, regional or national governments, or any other such agency or group. Members of toy libraries can be children, parents, grandparents, childcare providers, educators and/or school children, hospital staff and/or patients, or another person or persons interested in toys or play.
- As often as possible, serving as a community resource, offering information, guidance and support to members in addition to the loan of toys.
- Serving people without regard of race, sex, age, handicap, religion, language or natural origin. (ITLA 1990)

The National Association of Toy and Leisure Libraries (NATLL), in its document 'The Importance of Play' acknowledges the value of play and leisure activities and concludes that toys must match a child's stage of development, ability and age. Children learn through play and making it fun ensures children get lots of practice. The games children play link to the needs of the growing body and mind.

There are over 1000 toy libraries throughout the UK, serving approximately 250,000 children and offering loan of a wide range of toys and providing play sessions for children and their parents/carers. They also provide information and advice about all aspects of play in a friendly and welcoming environment where people from the local community can meet others.

Parent and Toddler groups/Stay & Play

A toddler group is usually a group of adults and children who get together to provide activities for children under the age of five. They are usually run by parents, for parents, grandparents and carers, to attend together with their children for a small charge. These groups are able to offer parents a social network, offering support, friendships and learning opportunities for children. Most areas throughout the UK have a wide range of Parent & Toddler groups which offer a variety of activities and are either run solely by parent groups or are affiliated to a specific service.

Littlemoor Toy Library

Background

The Littlemoor Toy Library was planned and established as a joint venture between SSWP and Littlemoor Sure Start parents. Littlemoor is one of four Sure Start areas within Weymouth & Portland. Parents were asked to suggest facilities they would like to see developed in their community. The majority of parents at a local nursery group and the SSWP parent forum especially liked the idea of a toy library. With the help of the Health Visitors located at the Littlemoor Health Centre, a proposal was written and presented to the Weymouth and Portland Sure Start Management Board. The board granted the proposal and it was agreed that the toy library would be situated in the Littlemoor Community Centre once it had been refurbished, a project that was also undertaken and funded by the local Sure Start programme.

Littlemoor Sure Start parents had an initial toy library meeting in September 2002 to plan the setting up and running of the new facility. This meeting was also used as a means to recruit new parents on to the toy library committee. The parents decided it would be beneficial to have a practice run in the interim before the toy library opened at the community centre. They borrowed some toys from the Dorset Toy and Leisure Association and established a small scale lending service at the local nursery, just loaning toys out to each other in order to establish the system they would use when the new toy library opened. The parents also used this time to research the toys they would purchase for loaning by devising a questionnaire that was handed out at the nursery to obtain parents views. The Littlemoor Toy Library officially opened in the community centre in February 2003. An example of the toys available to borrow is shown in appendix A.



Charges

When the toy library first opened users were charged a pound to borrow three toys for two weeks. The two hour stay and play session, with refreshments was free. When the borrowing of toys dipped and the stay and play became more popular the parent volunteers decided to rethink the charging system. The new plan was to charge fifty pence for the stay and play, which would include toy hire.

Staffing

The Littlemoor Toy Library is staffed by a multi skilled team comprising of both professional and voluntary workers. At the forefront are the parent volunteers who not only played an integral role in the planning and setting up of the toy library but also have the weekly responsibility of running and managing the sessions. The number of parent volunteers helping at the toy library has varied since it opened. During this evaluation there was generally a core six parents involved, however this number decreased to just two by the end of the first year due to a number of reasons which will be discussed later in this report. By January 2005 volunteer numbers had returned to six.

When the toy library first began a nursery nurse was seconded from the local Primary Care Trust for six months to provide practical support at sessions, including running the craft tables and helping with the stay and play activities. When the nursery nurse left, parents running the group realized how valuable it was to have such help and asked if she could be replaced by SSWP playworkers. On a typical session two playworkers are present. However, in September 2004 it was decided by the parent volunteers to have a period without the playworkers, but by November 2004 it was requested that they attend again.

Sure Start Weymouth and Portland currently employ seven playworkers. Four playworkers hold an NVQ level 3 or above in child care. The purpose behind the playworkers role within the Sure Start project is to develop and deliver a range of play opportunities that meet the objectives of the programme. They aim to respond to the cultural, physical, emotional, intellectual, and social needs of children, ensuring that the potential of individual children can be realised. In order to fulfil these aims the playworkers undertake running a variety of activities including time out crèches based at the main building, out reach crèches, stay and play sessions and beach play in the summer on Weymouth beach.

In April 2004 the playworkers job title changed to reflect more accurately the work they undertake and as a result unqualified playworkers are now known as Child Care Assistants and qualified playworkers are now Child Development Workers. However, as this evaluation had already begun prior to the new names being implemented the title of playworker will be used throughout this report.

Other Sure Start staff also have a varying degree of involvement with the toy library, including the Speech and Language Development Worker, the Midwife

and SSWP project workers. All professionals attending any of the sessions do so to offer practical advice and support to parents.

Training

When the toy library was in the planning stages a Sure Start Project Worker was assigned to assist the parent volunteers to show them how to organise and manage the sessions. The SSWP Business Manager also attended meetings to explain to the group the financial side of the operation, such as setting up a bank account and charging users for the facility. Two of the parent volunteers also became members of the NATLL who offer invaluable advice and training to those running toy libraries. Other training offered to parents by Sure Start is laid out in the table below:

Table 1

Date	Training session offered
22 nd June 2004	How to chair meetings and compile minutes. (Cancelled due to poor uptake).
5 th July 2004	How to chair meetings and compile minutes.
17 th September 2004	Team building
15 th November 2004	Team building (Cancelled due to poor uptake).

Attendance

The following graphs show the attendance figures for children and their parents at the toy library during the period from May 2003 to October 2004.

Figure 1

Children Attending Littlemoor Stay & Play 2003 & 2004

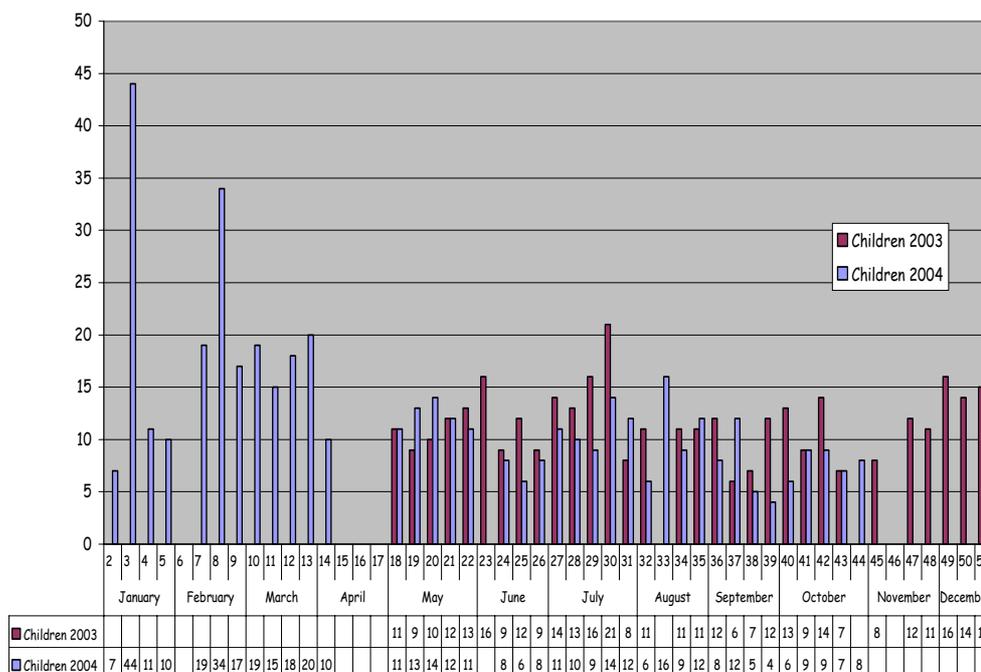
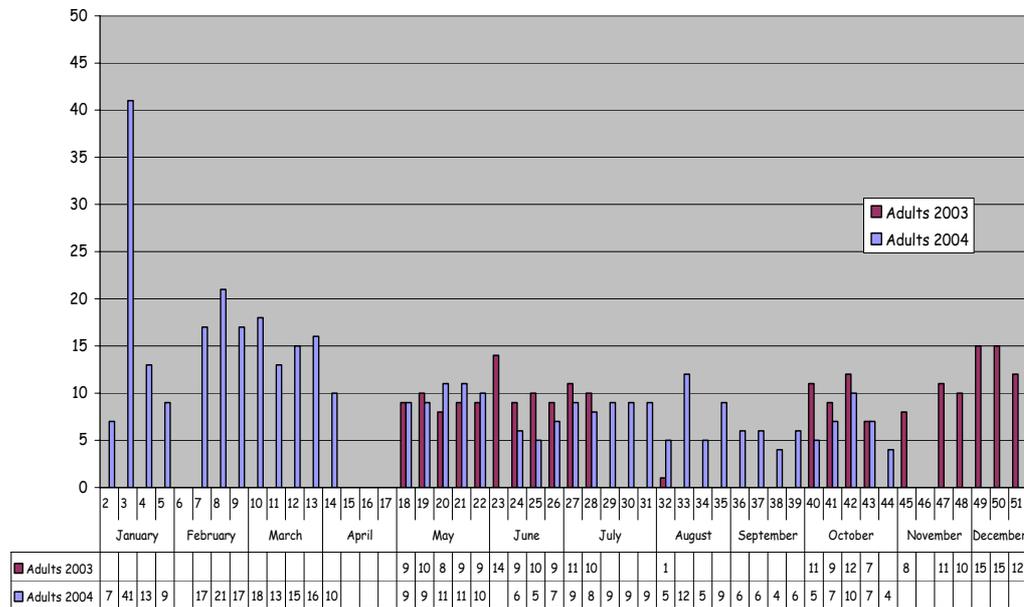


Figure 2

Adults Attending Littlemoon Stay & Play 2003 & 2004



There are some gaps in the data due to figures not being collected, however, the figures do indicate that there has been consistent attendance at the service. The high attendance figures during January and February 2004 were due to a fun day and one year anniversary party. The weekly average attendance for parents and children has been eight during this period.

Attendance figures for the period from November 2004 to date have not yet been collated due to the change in service and the reorganization of parent volunteers. Weekly figures are collected at the venue and sent to the SSWP office where they are put on the monitoring data base.

The project proposal submitted in the autumn of 2002 had requested £2K for toys, plus Toy Library Association membership and venue and running costs and money was allocated for this purpose from the Financial Year 2002/03 budget.

During the following year (FY 2003/04), as well as £1.5K for the running costs, SSWP also spent some £2.5K on additional items for the toy library as well as on larger play equipment for a developing stay-and-play activity that was being run in conjunction with the toy library.

Toy library costs in Financial Year 2004/05 were around £1K, mainly for venue charges.

Currently, SSWP continues to support the project financially by covering venue and other running costs, which amounts to about £1K annually.

Purpose of the Evaluation

Phase 1

The aim of the evaluation was to discover what parents and children (where possible) who attended the Littlemoor Toy Library felt about the service. It also wanted to find out what the parent volunteers who ran the service and the Sure Start playworkers who provided craft activities felt about the sessions.

Phase 2

This part of the evaluation occurred due to a change in focus of the service. It was felt important to discover why the service was changed and the processes which followed. The findings which emerged from phase one played an important part in shaping the new service and recommendations from the evaluation were put into practice. Phase two was then evaluated to discover how parents felt about the changes and the new service which was provided.

The evaluation also hoped to find out if the Littlemoor service was reaching Sure Start National Objectives.

Methods used

An evaluation plan was developed by the Research Team in consultation with the parent volunteers running the group and the Sure Start Evaluation Working Group. Information was collected using a variety of methods:

Phase 1

- Focus group interview undertaken with five parent volunteers (interviewed four months after toy library launched)
- Individual interview with the nursery nurse running a craft table
- Twenty-two questionnaires were completed by parents of children who attended the toy library sessions (included 4 postal questionnaires from mums who had stopped using the service)
- Two focus group interviews undertaken with the SSWP playworkers who organised art and craft sessions at the group
- Individual interviews with five parent volunteers (interviewed 12 months on)
- Eighteen fast feedback questionnaires were completed by parents when returning toys
- Children were asked to put the borrowed toy in a smiley or sad bin on return

Interviews with parent volunteers

The first focus group interview took place with five of the six parent volunteers who were responsible for organising and facilitating the group. The toy library had been up and running for four months and it was felt important that the evaluation included information about the setting up of the service and the expectations of the volunteers. Open questions included:

- How the toy library began and individual involvement
- Aims and objectives of the toy library
- Service offered
- Membership
- Advertising
- Resources
- The toys and facilities
- Stay and play
- Expectations and hopes for the service
- Support and involvement from SSWP
- Working with other agencies
- Training and development

After approximately 12 months the parent volunteers were interviewed again, this time they requested to be interviewed separately. The interviews explored a number of issues:

- Involvement with the toy library
- Feelings about being a volunteer
- Services offered
- Membership
- Meeting aims and objectives
- Changes and developments
- Sure Start involvement and support

Interviews with the Sure Start Playworkers

One individual and two focus group interviews with the playworkers were undertaken after they had been involved at the toy library for six months. The interviews aimed to discover a number of issues about their involvement and how they felt about the service:

- Sure Start playworkers role at the toy library
- Aims and objectives of the stay and play/craft activities
- User involvement
- Working relationships
- Service developments

Parent questionnaires

Twenty-two questionnaires were completed with parents who used the Littlemoor toy library and the stay & play. Parents had to have been attending the group with their child for at least six weeks before completing the questionnaire. A researcher visited the toy library over a period of eight months to collect the data and carried out the questionnaire with the parent at the session.

It was agreed by the evaluation working party and the parent volunteers that questionnaires should also be sent to parents who had stopped attending the toy library. Thirty-five questionnaires were sent by post to parents, which included additional questions about why they were not using the toy library and why they had stopped attending. Four completed questionnaires were returned which have been included in the findings.

The questionnaire contained three sections:

Section A - general details - family information

Section B - about the Littlemoor Toy Library Service

Section C - using the Littlemoor Toy Library

Fast Feedback Forms

Eighteen fast-feedback questionnaires were completed by parents when they returned a toy they had borrowed from the toy library. These short forms asked specific questions about the toy they had just borrowed:

- Did the child enjoy playing with the toy?
- Did the child and parent play together with the toy?
- Were the Speech & Language guidelines that are attached to the toy used?

Smiley/sad bins

On return to the toy library, children were asked to put the toy they had borrowed into either a bin with a smiley face on it or a bin with a sad face. The aim of this exercise was to discover if the children had liked the toy they had chosen from the toy library or not. A total of eighteen children took part.

Finding out about children and what children think is exceptionally difficult - intellectually, physically and emotionally (Graue and Walsh 1998). However, it is important to find out what children think and discover their true feelings about the services they use in order to ensure activities are appropriate. It was difficult to get feedback from the children who attended the toy library about how they felt about the toys they borrowed, but the findings from this small exercise showed that children were able to get involved in the evaluation and express their views in a fun and constructive way.

Copies of the questionnaire and feedback form are shown in the appendices.

Phase 2

Observation

The parent researcher for this evaluation observed the play time 0-4 sessions on three separate occasions. The purpose was to discover how the group had developed since changing its focus, how children were using the activities and explore the relationships and interactions within the group.

Parent Questionnaire

The second parent questionnaire was given to mums who had been attending the group for at least four weeks. This questionnaire was adapted from the first and included questions about using other SSWP facilities, feelings about the Sure Start playworker involvement at the group and whether the group had made a difference to both the child and the parents' lives. The opportunity to share both positive and negative experiences about the group was given. A total of eight questionnaires were given out, with parents having the option to either complete it at the session or take it home. Seven parents completed the questionnaire.

A copy of the questionnaire is shown in appendix D.

Parent volunteer feedback

The parent volunteers were also given the opportunity to feedback their experiences of the group since the relaunch. A short questionnaire was given to all of the parent volunteers (six). Questions included, time and reasons for volunteering, satisfaction with the support from SSWP, feelings about the group and what was important to them when volunteering. Five parent volunteers completed the questionnaire.

Playworker feedback

A short feedback form was given to the two Sure Start playworkers involved with the craft activities at the group asking them about their experiences since the relaunch and what was important to them when there.

Ethical issues

Information sheets and consent forms were given to all participating in the evaluation. Everyone had the opportunity to ask questions about the evaluation and could withdraw at any time. Interviews were taped, with permission, and participants were assured of confidentiality throughout. Parents were asked to consent to photographs of themselves and their children to appear in the report.

Copies of feedback and consent forms are shown in the appendices.

FINDINGS

Phase 1

Parent Questionnaire

A total of 22 questionnaires were completed by mothers using the toy library with their child.

General details

Parents were asked to provide some basic family information which included age, employment, age of children, living conditions and special needs.

Table 2

Age range	frequency
19-24	8 (36.4%)
25-29	2 (9.1%)
30-34	8 (36.4%)
35-39	2 (9.1%)
40-44	1 (4.5%)
45-49	1 (4.5%)
Total	22 (100%)

The majority of mums said they were looking after the home as their main activity, with 5 working full-time and 1 part-time.

One third of the respondents had only one child, with five mums having 2 children, seven with 3 children and three having 4 children.

Fifteen (68%) respondents said that they lived with a partner and the remaining 7 lived alone with their child/children.

Special needs

Five out of the twenty-two mums who answered this question stated that their child had a special need; these included delayed speech and hearing problems.

About the toy library

Attending

Six mums said they had been going to the toy library from the beginning; five had been attending between three and five months and a further five for only one to two months. Half of the respondents were registered with SSWP before they came to the Littlemoor Toy Library.

How heard about the toy library

Most of the mums said they had heard about the toy library from a friend or from one of the parent volunteers. Others said they had received a leaflet through their door, or seen it in the newsletter which they received as members of SSWP. Four mums were told about the group by their health visitor.

Other ways of hearing about the toy library included:

- Attending other SSWP groups/activities
- At the launch party
- Health clinic
- Local nursery school
- SSWP staff

Why is the toy library being provided?

A number of reasons were given by mums at the group about why the toy library was there. The most common reason given was that there was a great need in the area for a place for parents and toddlers to go, so they could meet others from the area and be able to play and mix with both parents and children.

Other reasons included:

- Making new friends
- Provide support to parents
- Give mums a break
- Learning opportunities e.g. parenting skills, arts and crafts
- Get out of the house
- Experience new ways to play with children
- Able to borrow toys and experience different toys

Why attend?

Mums listed a number of reasons why they went along to the toy library for the first time, the most popular reason was for their child to meet and play with other children. For them it was also about meeting other mums from the area and socialising.

Other reasons included:

- Curiosity about the group and what SSWP had to offer
- To borrow toys
- No-where else to go
- New to the area and wanted to meet others
- Went with a friend

How to make other parents more aware of the group

When asked how the toy library could attract more parents, most of the mums said that more advertising was needed, which could include, notices in shops, leaflets to homes and fliers in town. Increasing the referrals and awareness of health, social and education professionals in the area was also seen to be a good way of increasing awareness of the toy library.

Other suggestions were:

- Greater involvement by SSWP workers
- Fun days and outings
- Coffee mornings
- Local paper and radio
- Buddy system

Is the toy library user friendly?

Generally, respondents were very happy and positive about the environment and the atmosphere at the group. Mums said that the quality and choice of toys was excellent although the catalogue was not always visible and some found it hard to know what to do about borrowing toys. Some mums explained that they had found it uncomfortable at first in the group as they were not always included in activities or conversations. They went on to say that if a new mum arrived they were not always greeted and made to feel welcome.

Comments included:

- Information always available
- Plenty to do
- Safe and clean
- Healthy snacks
- Great that it was mums from the area running the group
- Unclear on what toys were available to borrow

Member of local library

One of the national targets for Sure Start is to improve library membership and encourage greater participation in reading together as a family. With this in mind, a toy library that has links to the local library or indeed is held within a library has been shown to achieve greater results towards this target.

Findings of the question about library membership shows that nearly half of the respondents were not members of the local library and of those who were members, their use of the library had not changed since attending the toy library.

Respondents often talked about the need for extra activities within the toy library, such as singing and story-telling. Having a member of staff from the library with experience in this area would be beneficial. Parent volunteers would also have the opportunity to learn new skills and take on this role in the future.

Access

All but one of the respondents walked to the group (one by car). This shows that the venue is accessible to local mums. However, as numbers are still relatively low, access and availability for all parents in the Littlemoor Sure Start area needs to be reviewed. Space for pushchairs was felt to be a slight problem, with most of them being left in the doorway causing problems with access and concerns over safety.

The number of sessions and the length of sessions were felt to be right for the majority of users of the group, with it fitting in well with their routine. Only a couple of mums expressed the wish for an extra session on a different day. Two respondents talked about the difficulties they had with having to leave early to pick up other children from nursery or school.

Using the Littlemoor Toy Library

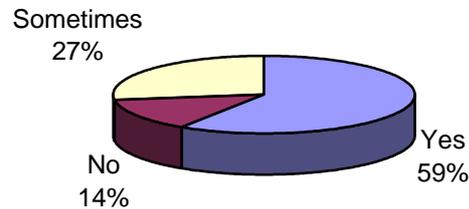
Stay and Play

Parents were asked if they generally stayed for the whole two hour session. Over half of respondents (59%) stated that they would normally stay for the whole session; about a quarter (27%) said they would sometimes stay and the remainder (14%) stated that they did not stay for the whole two hours (Figure 3). Reasons cited for not staying the whole time included the need to leave to collect children from nursery and one parent stated,

Two hours can be a long time for children and me, especially as I don't know many people and it can be draining to keep trying to make conversation.

Figure 3

Do you generally stay for the whole session at the Toy Library?



Since the start of the toy library a craft table has been run by playworkers at every session, providing imaginative and creative play. Parents were asked if their child joined in with the craft table activities. Over half of respondents (54%) stated that their child always joined in with the activities, the remaining parents were evenly split between their children sometimes participating (23%) and never taking part (23%) (Figure 4). One parent commented that their child:

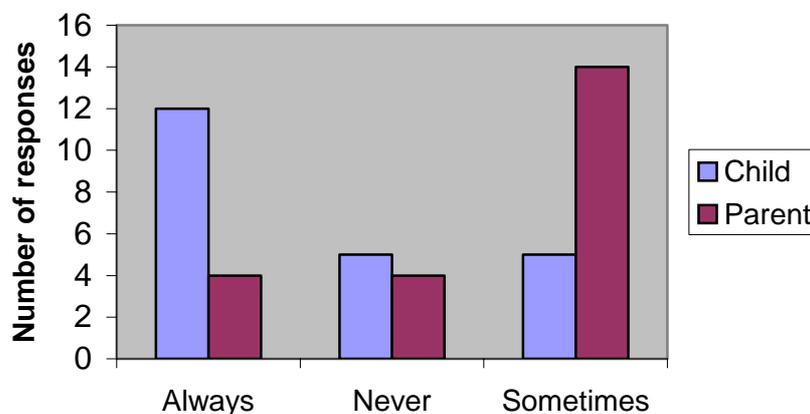
Really loves it, mixing with others, making things and joining in

Respondents were then asked if they took part in the stay and play activities. The highest response was 'sometimes', with fourteen parents choosing this option. One of the reasons cited by parents for not participating in the activities with their child was because they liked to use the time to have a break and to talk to the other parents at the session.

It is important to remember that the results include the responses of parents with young babies for whom the craft table activities would not be suitable.

Figure 4

Joining in the stay and play activities

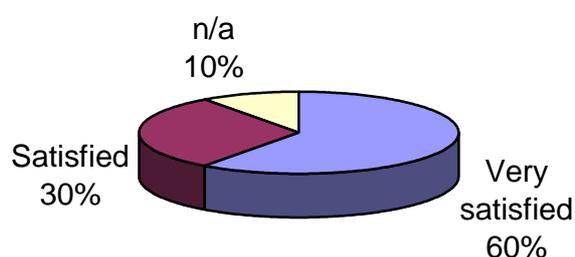


Having observed the toy library sessions the majority of children not participating in the craft table activity would be taking part in free play, on the bikes, the climbing frames or other toys provided. Almost all of the children would dip in and out of the craft activity combining it with using the other toys and activities.

Figure 5 shows that the majority of parents were very satisfied (60%) with the stay and play activities.

Figure 5

Satisfaction with stay and play activities



Parents comments concerning their satisfaction with the stay and play included (the number in brackets indicates the number of responses):

- ❑ Wide range of activities/always something different (7)
- ❑ Do things that wouldn't do at home (5)
- ❑ Good preparation for nursery school
- ❑ Imaginative
- ❑ Child left to own devices and not encouraged to play

One parent summed up why they were satisfied with the provision of the stay and play activities by saying,

You don't always want to do the messy stuff at home, so it's good they can do it here.

In September 2004 the parent volunteers decided to have a trial period without the playworkers. Some of the volunteers believed that the children did not spend enough time at the craft table and would rather spend time playing with the toys and with other children. When asked to comment on this decision one volunteer stated:

I don't think that it's one of the most popular things here. I think the children use the toys more than they use the crafts and stuff anyway. If they do, they'll go for five minutes and then they'll be off again and that will be it for the day for them.

However, the figures and qualitative data collected on the toy library questionnaire clearly show how highly the playworkers and the activities they provided were rated by parents. One parent summed up the general view of the SSWP playworkers by saying simply:

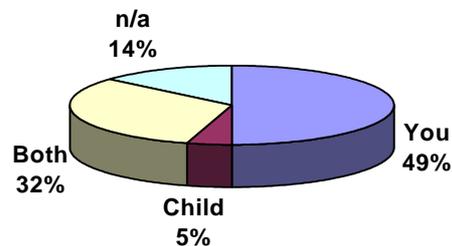
Playworkers make a difference

Borrowing of toys

The questionnaire went on to ask parents questions relating specifically to the borrowing of toys from the toy library. Parents were asked who chose the toy to take home. Half of the respondents said they chose the toy, only one parent said their child chose and seven said they would chose the toy with their child (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Who chooses the toy to take home?



It should be taken into account that some of the children included in this survey are only young babies and therefore parents would automatically choose the toy for them.

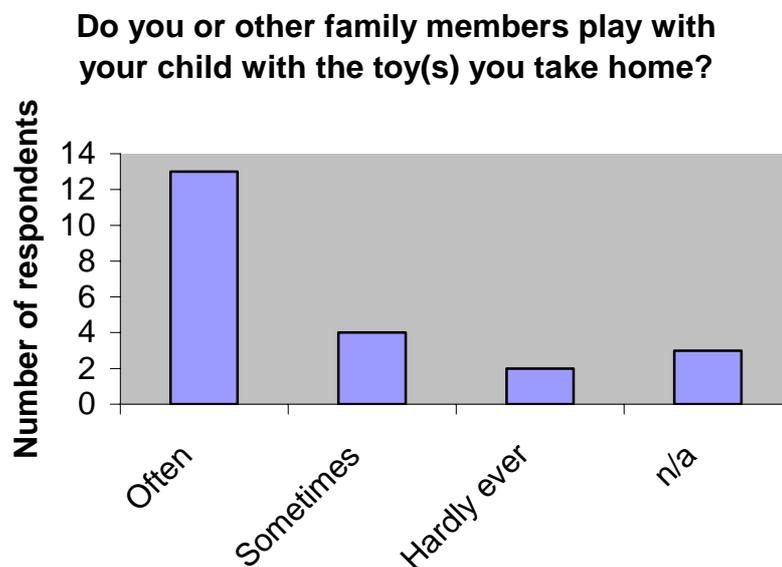
When choosing a toy to borrow just over three quarters of parents who answered this question (16) said they did use the catalogues provided, with a quarter (3 parents) saying they didn't. Some parents raised the point that the catalogues to choose the toys from were not always on show. The parent volunteers did comment on this by explaining sometimes they might forget to put them out. Another problem concerning the choosing of toys from the catalogues was highlighted by another parent who said it was:

Difficult to judge what toys are suitable for an age group as there was no age range on the toys in the catalogue.

Parents were then asked if they felt the length of time they were able to borrow toys from the toy library was satisfactory. The majority of parents (85%) felt that the time for borrowing toys was about right, the remaining responses were evenly split between 'should be longer', 'should be shorter' and 'not applicable' at 5% each.

When asked if parents or other family members played with their child with the borrowed toy over half of parents (60%) stated they often did. Four parents (18%) said they sometimes did and two parents (9%) stated they hardly ever played together with their child and the toy (figure 7)

Figure 7



Parents were then asked to describe how they thought their child felt when the toy was returned to the toy library. Some parents said that their child did not mind returning the toy, whereas others reported their child being disappointed and upset at the prospect of giving the toy back. Listed below are reactions parents saw in their child on returning the borrowed toy:

- No feelings about it (3)
- Gets upset, but knows can take another
- Understands
- Sometimes thinks they are his toys
- Disappointed if really liked toy (3)

Parents were asked if they had ever purchased a toy after borrowing a similar one from the toy library. Just over half of parents (54%) said they had not purchased a similar toy to one borrowed, whereas seven respondents (32%) said they had.

Impact of the toy library on the family

This section of the survey was aimed at exploring the effects the toy library has had upon the families who use it. To begin with parents were asked if they felt using the toy library had made a difference to their relationship with their child. The results were fairly evenly split between parents feeling it had made a difference to the relationship (41%) and those parents who really didn't feel that it had made a difference (36%). The remaining parents (23%) stated that they were not sure if their parent – child relationship had altered because of the service.

Table 3

Has the toy library made a difference to your relationship with your child?	Frequency
Yes	9 (41%)
No	8 (36%)
Not Sure	5 (23%)
Total	22 (100%)

Parents who felt that the toy library had made a difference to their relationship with their child were asked to elaborate upon their answer by describing in what way it had made a difference. It becomes clear from the qualitative data that the toy library has introduced parents to new and creative ideas that enable them to play together with their child, which in turn encourages bonding and a closer relationship. One parent commented:

Before the toy library I wouldn't usually do anything actually with them, but now I go home and we play with the toys together.

Parents were asked if they felt the toy library had any impact upon their child's behaviour. The findings show that the majority of parents felt their child's behaviour had changed since attending the service. Figure 8 shows these findings.

When it came to sharing toys 41% of parents felt that their child's skills had either greatly improved or improved since joining the toy library and they were now able to share toys with other children in a more positive way. However, the majority of parents 50% felt that the sessions had made no difference to their child's ability to share.

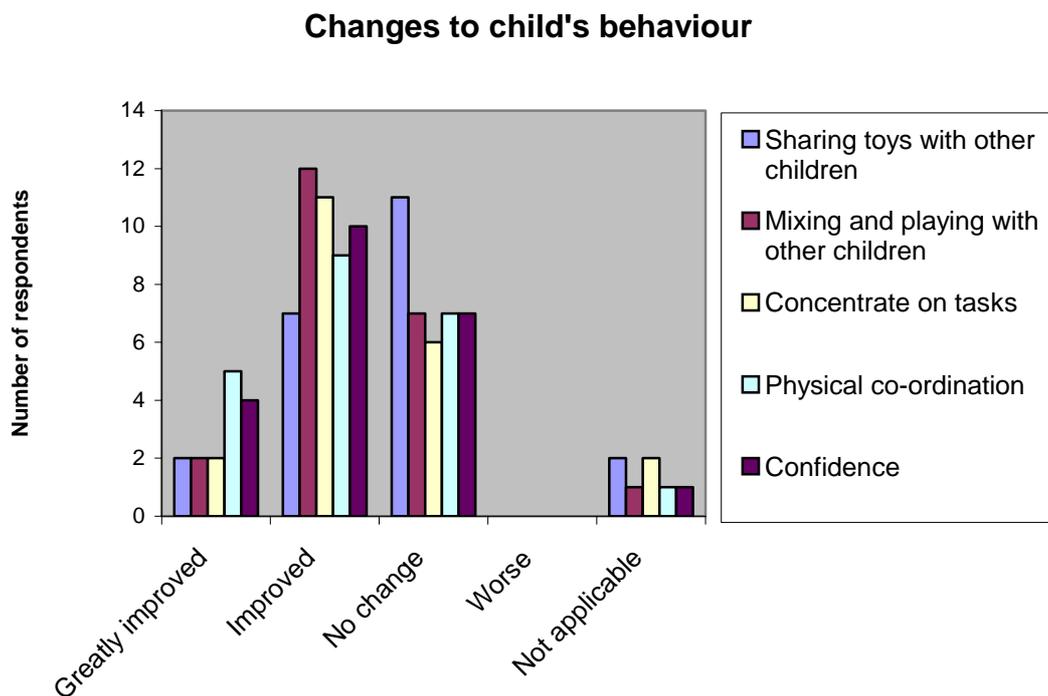
The toy library offers an excellent opportunity for children to socialise with each other, either sitting at the craft table taking part in a creative activity, or whilst participating in the free play, such as playing at the home corner kitchen or riding the bikes. The majority of parents (64%) felt that the conditions at the toy library had helped to greatly improve or improve their child's ability to mix with other children. The remaining parents, who answered this question, (32%) felt that their child's capability to socialise had not been altered by attending the toy library.

Parents were asked if they felt that their child's concentration levels had increased since joining the toy library. Again the majority of parents (62%) felt that their child's ability to concentrate on tasks had improved due to their involvement in the toy library sessions. However, almost a third of parents who answered this question felt their child's ability to concentrate on tasks had not benefited by attending.

Just under two thirds of parents reported noticing a change in their child's physical co-ordination since joining the toy library. The remaining parents, about a third, reported no change.

The final question asked parents to comment on their child's confidence. The findings were about the same as they have been for the majority of the questions regarding the impact of the toy library on children's behaviour, with just under two thirds of parents saying their child's confidence has been either greatly improved or improved and the remaining third of parents reporting no change.

Figure 8

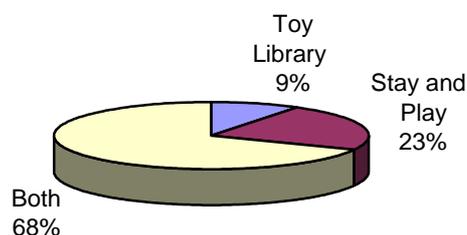


What parents think about the Littlemoor Toy Library

To begin with parents were asked if they came to the toy library sessions specifically for the toy library (2), the Stay and Play (5) or both (15) (figure 9).

Figure 9

Why do you come to the sessions?



It has become evident through toy borrowing figures that most parents attending the toy library did so for the Stay and Play and not to borrow toys. One parent volunteer commented:

I don't think it's the actual hiring of toys that's the priority for most of the people who come here. Most of the people who come here come as a social thing and to bring their children along, have a chat and let their children play.

Even a change in the way users were charged to use the toy library so that they paid for the Stay and Play and could hire toys for free has not seemed to help boost borrowing figures. Another parent volunteer stated:

I think the parents have dictated that they want a Stay and Play and not necessarily a toy library. We've redone brochures, put them out on the chairs, we've made it free to hire the toys and for some reason it's still not being used as much as it should be.

The Sure Start Playworkers attending the sessions felt that the parent volunteers did not promote the toy loaning service to its full potential and this was a contributory factor in the borrowing figures dropping. By observing the volunteers running the toy library one playworker concluded:

They don't seem to promote the toys to take out, ..., every now and again they might have the catalogues out, but I've never seen them actively showing parents toys.

The playworker went on to make some suggestions as to how the parents could encourage more toy borrowing,

Just to have some of the toys available to take home out for the children to play with. Or, they've got the smaller room at the side, where the parents could go in and have a look what's available.

It became apparent from speaking to the parent volunteers that having all of the toys for loan out on display was not an option due to the time constraints

of getting them all out and then packed away again. However, one volunteer stated:

If I was specifically asked if someone could see something before they hire it, then there wouldn't be a problem with that.

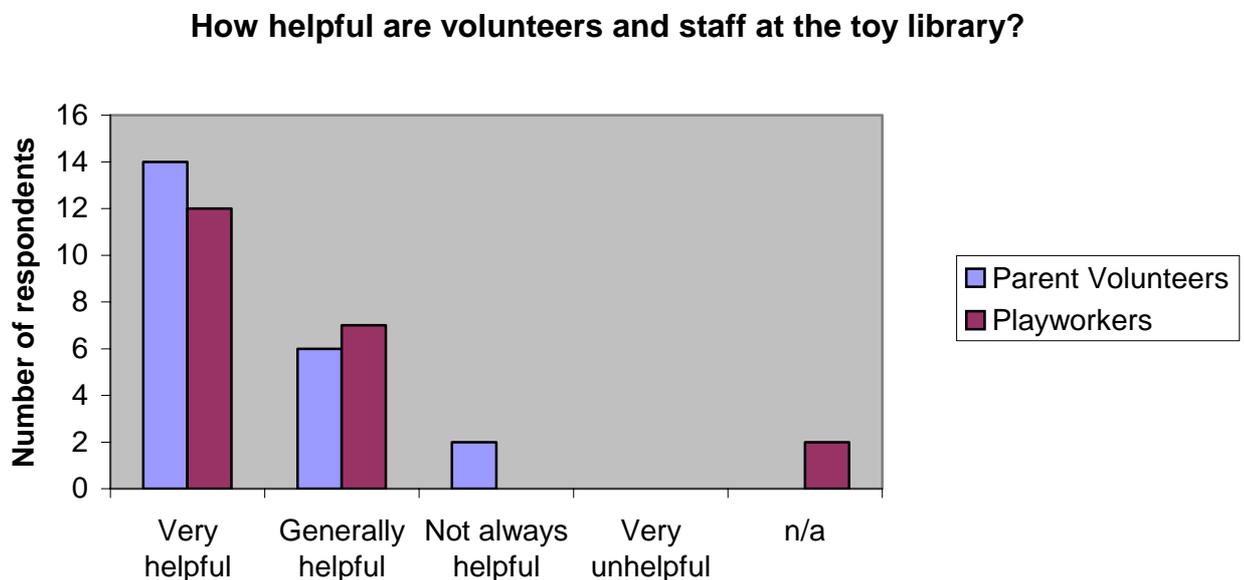
Facilitating the toy library

Parents were invited to give their opinions on the SSWP staff and volunteers working at the toy library. To begin with parents were asked about the parent volunteers running the sessions. Over half of respondents (64%) felt that the volunteers were very helpful; a further 28% felt that they were generally helpful, with only 10% selecting the not always helpful option. No respondent chose the final tick box for this question, labelled very unhelpful (figure 10).

When asked about the playworkers all of the parents who answered this question fell within the very helpful (57%) or generally helpful (33%) categories. One parent gave their opinion of the staff at the sessions by saying:

All the people helping are doing a really good job – keep up the good work

Figure 10



Cost of the using the toy library

None of the parents taking part in the survey felt that the amount they had to pay to use the stay and play was too much. The majority of respondents (86%) felt that the cost was about right and the other 14% felt that the sessions warranted a higher fee than the current 50p.

Parents commented:

It's very good value. I can borrow toys, have a cup of tea and my child gets fruit – very good.

It's better to pay 50p and get two toys to take home. Also get fruit, snack and coffee, its brilliant value

Additional facilities

Parents were invited to suggest any other toys they would like to see offered by the toy library. The following list details parents' responses:

- Educational toys (2)
- More choice for babies needed 6-12months (2)
- Bigger toys e.g. play tents, slides
- Book corner with a link to the local library
- Age related toys or current toys with clearer information as to age suitability

One of the parent volunteers explained that the reason there were not many toys available for loan to babies was because they had few toys overall for that age band and what they did have they used for the stay and play and therefore they couldn't be borrowed.

When asked if there were any other activities parents would like to see offered by the toy library the majority response was organized singing. The table below shows the various suggestions parents made and alongside each the number of respondents who made it. Parents were allowed to make more than one suggestion.

Table 4 Suggested activities for the toy library

Activity	Number of parents
Singing	12
Story time	11
Group Activities	2
Writing	1
Listening to music	1
Nursery rhymes	1
Entertainers	1
Educational speakers	1
Music and dancing	1

Five parents also felt that the toy library session needed more structure for example, organized activities such as getting all of the children together and playing a game, or telling a story to the whole group.

The best things about Littlemoor toy library

Parents were asked what they thought were the best things about the Littlemoor Toy Library. Parents valued the environment in which the sessions were set, labelling it as clean and safe. The atmosphere at the sessions also seems to have been important to users, describing it as friendly. The variety of activities and quality of toys were also mentioned by several parents. The following list displays in more detail parents comments on the best aspects of the toy library. The number in brackets indicates how many parents commented:

- Socialising with other parents (3)
- Meeting new people (2)
- Child socialising with other children (5)
- Friendly (2)
- Stay and play (6)
- Not expensive
- Environment: relaxing, clean and safe
- Borrowing toys (3)
- Variety of activities and toys (4)
- Standard and quality of toys very good
- Healthy snacks and drinks (2)
- Good learning activities
- Able to access health professionals
- Bringing the community together
- Good preparation for nursery

One parent summed up what they felt were the best aspects of the toy library by saying,

He can play, mix, be safe and I can relax and talk to other mums

The not so good things

Parents were then given the opportunity to discuss the not so good aspects at the toy library and what could be improved upon. The main theme that emerged from talking to parents was the need for those running the group to be more aware that some parents lack confidence and therefore find it difficult to mix well with others. It was apparent that some parents had noticed that it was sometimes difficult for some parents to walk into the group for the first time by themselves. Others explained that it was a bit intimidating when everyone seemed to know each other and did not greet new mums. One parent commented:

It has been hard for me to attend as I am quite shy, but I will do it for my son as it is good for him.

Other issues that were mentioned by parents are laid out below:

- Finding the catalogues
- Choice of toys and activities for babies is a bit limited
- Music tapes that are played are not always appropriate
- Rough children can be a problem
- Toilets/changing facilities are cramped
- Need to be more aware of those parents lacking in confidence
- Safety – sometimes bikes and scooter too near to the babies
- Special needs advice
- No lost property box
- Staying inside all of the time – good to have park outside developed

Postal questionnaires

It was agreed by the parent volunteers and the evaluation working group that questionnaires would be sent to parents who had stopped attending the toy library. The questionnaire was adapted to include questions about why they had stopped using the service and if they would return.

Thirty five were posted to parents who had attended the toy library on at least two occasions. Four were returned and the general findings were included with the other questionnaires. The findings from the extra questions are shown below.

When stopped attending the toy library

Three of the parents who stopped going to the toy library had done so quite recently and the other mum had stopped attending soon after joining.

Why stopped attending the toy library

The reasons for stopping included, children attending nursery on the day of the toy library or starting school. One mum explained that she was busy doing other things.

Would return to using the toy library

Two of the mums said they would like to use the toy library again in the future, but because of the timing of nursery school would find it difficult. One mum explained that she enjoyed the toy library but got out of the habit of going, she went out to add:

It (toy library) is such a good place to have at Littlemoor, it gives parents and children somewhere to go.

Fast feedback forms

When parents returned a toy to the toy library they were asked to complete a short feedback form. The purpose of the form was to offer parents the opportunity to comment about their experiences with the borrowed toy and how their children enjoyed playing with it.

The toy library allows children to borrow up to two toys per week and the feedback forms asked parents to offer their views on all of the toys borrowed. Even though only 18 forms were completed the findings are based on 24 responses.

The data collected from the fast feedback forms shows that all but one child (23) enjoyed playing with the toy they had borrowed (Figure 11).

Figure 11



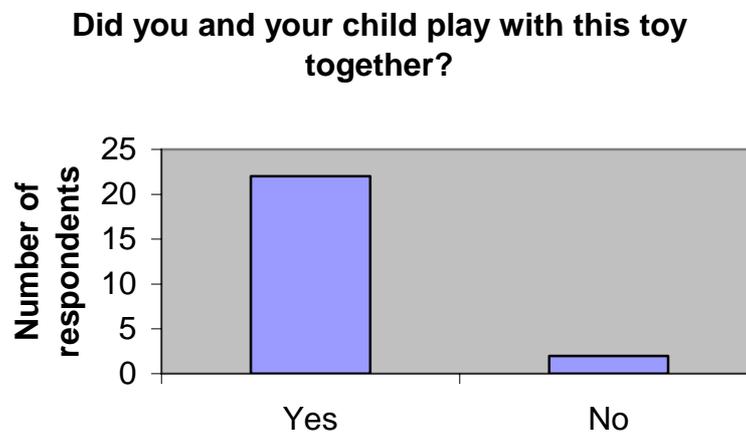
Parents were also given the opportunity to elaborate upon their answers, comments included:

My son had great fun with this toy and did not want to give it back

Didn't want to bring the car back- very popular.

The feedback form then asked parents if they and their child had played together with the toy. The results were very encouraging with 22 respondents stating they did spend time with their child playing with the toy (Figure 12).

Figure 12



Some parents went on to explain the reason for their answers. Parents who had played with their child and the toy commented:

I thought it was a good toy to play together

Helpful to do cooking together so she didn't feel left out.

One of the parents who stated they did not play with their child explained:

It was a new toy; I tend to leave her happily while able to get on with the housework.

Smiley/sad bins

As previously highlighted there are problems when including children in research therefore the findings are very limited in this evaluation. It would be useful in future Sure Start evaluations to collect data from children in order to gain some understanding of how the programme contributes to learning and development. The smiley/sad bins were an attempt to find out if the children using the toy library enjoyed playing with the toys they had chosen and to include them in the evaluation. Eighteen toys were put in the smiley bin, and only two toys in the sad bin. Mothers made the following comments:

He did enjoy both toys, but did not understand concept of the bins.

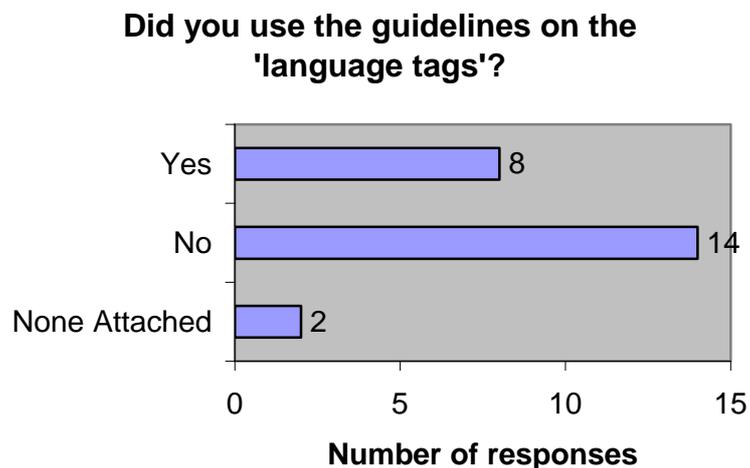
Doesn't like puzzles very much (toy was placed in sad bin).

Speech and Language

The SSWP Speech and Language Development Worker, developed 'language tags' for each of the toys that were to be loaned out (an example of a Language tag is shown in appendix C).

Each of the labels provided parents with guidelines to the various ways the toys could be used to encourage comprehension and expressive language learning. In order to gauge the success of the 'language tags' parents returning toys were asked to complete a fast feedback form. It is clear from the results that the majority of respondents did not use the language guidelines (14), in fact only a third of parents returning toys (8) stated that they had used the 'language tags'. Two parents stated that the toys they had borrowed did not have any tags attached, but would otherwise normally have used them.

Figure 13



Parent volunteers

A total of six local parents (mothers) volunteered to organize and facilitate the running of the Littlemoor Toy Library from the beginning. All of the volunteers had young children of their own and they were all members of SSWP. After a series of meetings with SSWP to discuss budgets, stock and levels of support, it was agreed that the volunteers would have main responsibility for the running of the service with SSWP being available for support.

Feedback from volunteers after four months

A focus group interview was arranged with the volunteers as early as possible to discuss expectations and feelings about the toy library. This was held at the venue after a session with five of the volunteers. The findings of this focus group are described below.

Setting up the toy library

It was clear that all of the volunteers believed that a parent and baby/toddler group was greatly needed in the area and that a toy borrowing service was a good way to encourage local families to come and use the group. They went on to explain that parents in the area, although not short of toys, would benefit in having more educational toys available to them, something different to what they would usually buy. It was important to the volunteers that the toys they lent out had an educational value enabling parents and children to learn together and play together. Many of these types of toys could also be expensive to buy, so by having the opportunity to borrow them was seen to be a good service to parents and children in the local area.

A short needs assessment was carried out by the volunteers to discover what toys parents wanted by ways of a survey delivered by the local Health Visitor. A variety of suggestions were made, which included computer software for children's learning, books and toys that are different to those in the shops. A fun day was arranged at a local church, which was attended by many local parents. Approximately 15 mums signed up for membership of SSWP and the toy library, but as one of the volunteers pointed out, many of these were not followed up and have never attended the group or any SSWP facilities.

The structure of the group was agreed by all of the volunteers. It was important to them that the service was not just about dropping in and borrowing toys, but also a place where parents could meet others, where their children could play and mix with other children and generally a friendly, welcoming environment to enjoy with their children. It was also agreed by the volunteers and SSWP that a nursery nurse from the local Primary Care Trust would attend the group and run a craft table as a trial for a period of six months. This involved her setting up a table and organizing different art and craft activities for the children to do with their parents in a very informal way. This activity had proved very popular with the children and once the six months was up, ways of continuing the service would be discussed with SSWP.

Expectations and wishes for the toy library

Volunteers talked in detail about how they would like the group to develop. It was vital that it remained a parent-led service, encouraging as many local mums and dads to get involved as possible. It was envisaged that some professional involvement was necessary, for example if a parent specifically requested professional support or advice, but it was through a referral system rather than having health or social workers present at the group at all times.

At this first interview with volunteers, the question of training was high on the agenda. All of the volunteers felt that training was essential if they were to be able to provide a safe and beneficial service to parents. Team building, health and safety, childcare, play and learning and first-aid were all areas that were mentioned by the volunteers.

Having a successful toy library and a friendly stay and play facility was said to be the number one priority by all of the volunteers, as one explained:

I want the kids' to have fun and to have decent opportunities. I want them to have nice things to play with, I want them to have inspiration, you know, we want the kids' up here to have fun and have stuff to do.

It was also very important that parents felt welcome and had the opportunity to socialize and make new friends. One volunteer stated:

Expectations are so low up here, so for the parents to be able to get out of the house and to socialize with other people and to be able to sit down and relax is what's needed.

It was hoped by all of the volunteers that more parents from the area would get involved in running the group or just helping out with refreshments and tidying away at the end of the session. Even at this early stage some of the volunteers had begun to feel some pressure to always be at the group and would welcome some extra support. A buddy system was talked about, to encourage others to get involved, but they were not sure how to initiate this and felt that SSWP could help. They continued talking about the pressure of running the group and some felt they were feeling stressed about the amount of time they were contributing to Sure Start:

It takes up a lot of your time. We are doing everything, we're doing the forums, we're doing the Partnerships, we're doing the meetings, we're doing the media, we are doing everything for this area.

It is clear that the commitment the volunteers are making to both the toy library and SSWP had already begun to cause some stress for them. Having some reward for their commitment was talked about. Training with accreditation was felt to be one type of reward for the input they were giving,

as well as having the opportunity to attend courses. This volunteer fatigue is discussed in more detail later in the report.

Increasing the uptake

Volunteers realized that the majority of parents who access the group, heard about it from friends or neighbours. Increased advertising was essential for the future of the group in order to increase uptake and make sure that those families who most needed the group knew about it. SSWP workers and other Health, Social and Education workers were instrumental in providing information about the group to their parents. Some of the volunteers had spent time distributing leaflets. Posters were placed in many community venues and details about the service were in all of the SSWP literature.

One volunteer talked about how she would like to visit other services, for example nurseries and pre-schools to talk about the group, but felt she was "not competent enough". They went on to add that they would feel more confident if they had some training or someone from SSWP with them.

Further fun days and special events will be planned in the near future to try to increase awareness of the group.

Feedback from volunteers twelve months on

After a period of twelve months from the first focus group interview, it was planned to talk to the volunteers again to find out how the toy library was progressing and how they were feeling about volunteering. It was obvious through talking to the volunteers and through meetings with the evaluation working group that the toy library was experiencing a number of problems. These included relationships between the volunteers and relationships between volunteers and SSWP. Uptake of the service and motivation of volunteers were also low.

On request from the volunteers, individual interviews were carried out. Each volunteer met with a researcher from the evaluation team at the group during a session. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The findings from these interviews are summarized below.

Relationship between parent volunteers and Sure Start

Communication

To begin with all the parent volunteers voiced real concerns over the issue of communication. They felt that SSWP had failed to effectively keep them informed of any matters discussed relating to the toy library. One parent stated:

It's all these Chinese whispers about what Sure Start wants and you hear so many different things. They never tell us. We don't know. We haven't got a clue what they're up to.

The parent volunteers were asked if they felt they could contact the SSWP office to overcome some of the communication problems they were experiencing. One parent explained:

I would feel happy enough to just ring up but I wouldn't actually guarantee or I couldn't actually be 100% sure whether I would get the proper answer or I would get an answer from them.

The parent went on to say that if the person you were trying to contact was not available it was a case of leaving a message, which may result in a delay of:

... days before they actually come back and then obviously the message might have got a bit entangled on the way and so it comes back as something else.

In response to these concerns from parent volunteers, a SSWP project worker who had been involved with the toy library from the beginning explained that a series of meetings were held between SSWP and parent volunteers during the first six months. Discussions focused on the running and development of the toy library and the role SSWP should play. At this time the SSWP programme was rapidly developing across four communities and they themselves were unsure on what would work and how individual projects would develop.

It was always the aim of SSWP to encourage and support parent led services and to be as flexible as possible. However, this had its own difficulties as there was sometimes a perception of no fixed guidelines. The SSWP project worker added that the programme also aimed to have open and honest communication within all parent forums and management boards and valued the two way communication that this offered. However, she realised that the process was a steep learning curve for SSWP staff and parents together.

One of the main issues linked with communication concerned the toy library having to meet certain costs, for example, refreshments, damaged and lost toys. It becomes apparent from the interviews with the volunteers that there was some confusion over the timing when this would come in to place. One of the parent volunteers explained,

When we did the planning of our toy library, it was said that we don't have to be self-funding for a good few years and we get about a month, well, a couple of weeks notice to say you're self-funding now, ..., it was like a shock to the system.

This issue became a real problem for the parents when they tried to make a claim to have their damaged and lost toys replaced. One parent described

how they had asked for new toys but were told they would have to wait until the following year. So they waited and reapplied but their request was refused and they were told they would have to fund the replacement of the toys themselves.

It is evident as far back as the initial focus group that was conducted with the parent volunteers, that they were under the assumption that SSWP would fund the replacement of all the damaged toys:

We were told that we'd spent over our budget on toys, and we aren't going to get any more money this year, but they [SSWP] will replace toys that get broken and we have some that go walkabout so we must get some for that.

Early in 2004 the volunteers running the toy library asked for additional/replacement toys to the value of approximately £800 plus, but it was felt that this was far too large an amount to be spending so early in the project, considering the amount that had already been invested in toys and equipment, which had been very generously funded by SSWP far above the original proposal. The parent volunteers were advised that their request couldn't be supported for these reasons and because the Programme's budget was by then already fully committed for the remainder of the financial year, but that it would be reviewed later in 2004 (i.e. in the new financial year) to see what funds might become available.

It was also suggested that some toys might be provided from the funds built up from lending charges taken since the project began. It had been explained at the start of the project that these charges, together with income from their own fund raising events, would be the means of providing replacements within the next couple of years by which time SSWP would expect the project to be self-funding. The volunteers were assisted at that time in opening a bank account to hold the accumulation of this income until such time as it would be needed. However, it came to light at the time of their request that these resources already had been partly put to other uses.

Unfortunately, due to the Programme's increased commitments to staffing costs, running costs and to supporting increasing numbers of other projects, it wasn't possible to provide further funding for equipment in the budget for the financial year 2004/05.

Support

The parent volunteers also raised concerns over the support they had received from SSWP. The main grievance voiced was that SSWP had failed to support the parents by attending a very important toy library meeting. The parents had requested for a member of the SSWP team to attend and act as a mediator for the group. However, due to other commitments nobody was available and the meeting turned into an argument that left some members in tears and others extremely resentful:

I think someone should have cancelled something and said they'd come. It wasn't fair that at that particular meeting I had to play diplomat and I hated it. I lost friends because of it and my other friends lost friends because of it and we've got people barely speaking to us now ... it was really horrible.

SSWP responded to this by apologising for not attending the meeting. In community work there will, at times, be tensions due to individual personalities and expectations. It was important for SSWP to offer support to the group without trying to step in and take over. It was about trying to get a balance of support and not taking over.

Volunteers also felt that there were other areas where SSWP could have offered more support. From the very beginning it was felt that the toy library would be a parent led service, which really allowed those volunteers involved to take the reins and share the responsibilities for running such a scheme. However, from the parent volunteer's point of view the balance of involvement was often one sided, one parent stated,

I think they've [SSWP] expected too much too soon. If they'd given us the support then fair enough, we probably could have achieved it, but they didn't. They expected us to just blossom into these people. It's not the real world.

The same parent did explain that they understood why, in their opinion, SSWP had misjudged the level of support and input needed, by saying,

I think maybe they didn't want to be like big brother, like the headmaster. They didn't want to be too 'mummying' of us.

One of the volunteers did point out that there were also positive sides to SSWP parent led model approach to the toy library:

I think it is quite nice to be running something and organising something ourselves.

The original team that started the toy library were very keen and enthusiastic. Several times at meetings the SSWP project worker suggested that they keep things simple. During the development meetings visits by local agencies such as the Dorset Toy Library and a local Childminding network were arranged and the parent volunteers visited a toy library run by volunteers at a local Toddler group.

SSWP role within the group was to advise and facilitate opportunities for the group to make informed decisions on what they had seen and heard. When the toy library was launched SSWP had no playworkers, however it was recognised that support was needed for the parent volunteers. It was agreed that this should be on the play and learning aspects of the session and arranged the secondment of a nursery nurse from the PCT.

After this SSWP recognised the importance of this support and continued to provide a playworker every Thursday to facilitate play within the sessions. As previously discussed, this support was highly welcomed by families who used the service.

Along with providing playworker support every Thursday, SSWP provided a project worker to work with the Littlemoor Parent's Forum. It was from this group that the Project proposal had originally been submitted. During this time a project worker was available at Parent forum meetings and this was the person to contact with concerns in between these meetings. The role of the project worker was not to take over and organise the meetings but to be a link person with SSWP.

Training

When discussing the issue of support the parent volunteers explained how they felt they had not received the desired training. At the very beginning of the toy library the volunteers voiced concerns over their abilities to run the project:

I don't feel that we are qualified to take on these responsibilities, we are just parents at the end of the day... we very much muddle through, we do muddle through.

One parent went on to suggest what SSWP could do more to help the volunteers feel more capable to undertake their roles, she stated:

What would be nice would be that we could each have individual roles training. For instance, as I am the treasurer it would be nice to have some sort of training as a treasurer and on the lines of parents' forums as well. It would be nice if we could have some training in chairing, secretary role, etc.

SSWP staff did attend meetings with the parent volunteers before the toy library opened to give training on the financial aspects of running the project, such as setting up a bank account and the managing and recording of the money the toy library made. At this time the treasurer's role was filled by another parent who left and was replaced by the parent who made the above statement. Therefore, it becomes clear that the training offered was not filtered down to this new mum by the other parents when she took over the role.

Other areas of training were also requested by volunteers, for example, secretarial skills and how to chair meetings. SSWP did offer this training on two separate occasions, not long after the interviews were held with the parent volunteers, but none of the Littlemoor Toy Library volunteers attended. The parent volunteers were also very keen to have team building training.

One of the parents explained:

We've been asking Sure Start for teambuilding now almost since we started because we do need to all push together and go in the same direction and be able to communicate with each other.

Again, within a couple of months of the parent volunteer interviews SSWP offered the toy library parents a team building session which none of them attended. The training was offered again on another date, but was again under subscribed with only one parent showing interest, therefore it was cancelled and was to be rescheduled.

Relationship between parent volunteers and SSWP playworkers

In September 2004 the parent volunteers decided to have a trial period without the SSWP playworkers. The interviews with the volunteers and the playworkers revealed some underlying issues that contributed to this decision being made.

Communication

Communication again appears to feature as a prominent problem that has led to tensions between the two parties. To begin with communication in general between the two groups appears to be strained, one volunteer stated:

I think there's lack of communication between the playworkers and parents. As volunteers, I don't think they see that they can talk to us, which is a shame.

However, the playworkers felt that the problems with communication were mainly on the part of the parent volunteers, they explained:

Usually you hardly get spoken to at all by the volunteer mums and if you approach them they are a bit stand-offish.

There had been a few incidents where this breakdown in communication had led to disagreements over the running of the service and how the toys were to be used for different groups (The venue was also used as a SSWP crèche). These incidents added further to the worsening relationship between the parent volunteers and SSWP, one parent stated:

I thought they knew us and I thought they trusted us and we thought we were part of the team but that [incident] made me see we're not part of the team.

Another misunderstanding that could have been avoided with improved communication concerned the introduction of singing time. The parent volunteers wanted the playworkers to facilitate singing with the children at the end of the session for about quarter of an hour to give them a chance to tidy and pack away. However, the playworkers were unhappy with this arrangement, one of them stated:

They wanted us to do it so they could tidy up basically and weren't willing to join in, which I didn't really agree with, because I think we benefit a lot ourselves from joining in as then we can then go home and do the songs with the children.

It becomes clear that there was some tension concerning the parents not joining in with the singing, but it was not explained to the playworkers that the volunteers needed to tidy the area in order to vacate the building at the agreed time. Another of the volunteers explained that she felt the relationship had become so strained that:

I don't think they want to be here to be honest, ..., which is a shame because they're lovely but I do find that they probably feel it is more of a chore than a pleasure.

During this time the playworkers did find the atmosphere difficult to work in as they felt the tension from the parent volunteers. From SSWP point of view they could have gone in and closed down the toy library or taken over the running of it but neither of these options would have helped the parents work through their difficulties. SSWP wanted the parents themselves to resolve the difficulties they had in their relationships. This was talked through with individual parents in person and on the phone.

Support

When the toy library was first established the nursery nurse who was seconded from the Primary Care Trust for six months helped as a playworker at the sessions. When this contract ended the parent volunteers realised the support that was offered by a skilled playworker attending the sessions was important to the smooth running of the group, one volunteer explained:

Definitely we couldn't cope without her, we wouldn't happen, the stay and play would just fall apart into complete chaos, well we wouldn't be able to do it.

However, because of the playworkers different time schedules and commitments to other SSWP services the parent volunteers didn't feel that this level of support continued, especially at the end of the session when the toys had to be stored away. One of the playworkers explained how the support they offered surpassed their role within the toy library. The worker explained that at times they were not only carrying out their own duties but also assuming the parent volunteers role, for example, meeting and welcoming new mums to the group. One playworker stated:

I would try and catch them as they came in [parents attending the sessions] and say, "hello, I'm ..., is it your first time..." and tell them what we do and show them around and take them over and introduce them to a few people.

The playworker felt that this extra support on their behalf was necessary to ensure that parents attending the toy library felt welcomed because at times they noticed that mothers, particularly new mums to the group would often be left to walk in by themselves and often sit alone while their child played. It was suggested by playworkers and indeed by the parent questionnaire findings that at times the volunteers were unapproachable.

One option suggested by the playworker which might help the volunteers would be for them to attend a course offering welcoming and general social skills. She went on to explain that learning such skills would help the volunteers to cope more effectively with various situations arising within the toy library and it would also go towards building their confidence to approach parents coming into the sessions.

Relationship between the parent volunteers

When Sure Start funded the setting up of the Littlemoor Toy Library, they envisaged a project that was to be principally parent led, with ongoing support available. From the outset the parent volunteers running the sessions enjoyed the challenge and were very proud of what they had achieved. As time went on the natural progression of the project saw parent volunteers leave and new ones come on board. After a short while the new committee of helpers began to experience tensions amongst themselves. The problem soon snowballed. One volunteer explained:

It was brilliant to begin with, ..., I was one of the people who helped to set up the toy library – we chose all the toys, we decided the times and the day and how we wanted it to run and stuff and that was excellent, ..., but just lately there's been a lot of personality clashes within the group and that's made it really hard and really unpleasant actually to come and be a volunteer.

The deteriorating relationships between the parent volunteers led to a breakdown in communication and a split in the group. One of the parent volunteers described the situation:

Quite often there's even a physical divide in that there's a group of people who sit round the reception desk and don't tend to mix with the parents and don't tend to really do very much but sit amongst themselves and then there will be the two or three who set up the toy library from start to finish and mix with the mums and make teas and coffees.

However, one of the volunteers who always sat at the reception table defended her actions by explaining:

I'm quite a shy person, so I find it hard to talk to new people. I'm on of these who can't really get up and say, "hello, how are you",

Due to the communication breakdown these issues were never confronted, had they been, both perspectives of the situation could have been aired and a better understanding could have evolved. Instead of the opinion that those volunteers at the reception table were just being unhelpful and unapproachable, the group could have focused their energy into a positive approach of looking for ways these volunteers could be helped to become more confident and facilitate the group in a more positive way.

The animosity amongst the group was not only taking its toll on each individual parent volunteer but was also causing a strained atmosphere for those attending the sessions. One of the playworkers made the following comment having observed the situation:

Every now and again the volunteers would fall out with each other, so there would be two or three of them at one side of the hall and two or three at the other side of the hall and it was so easy to pick up on. I thought it was a little bit embarrassing and quite uncomfortable for new parents coming in.

The root of the problem with the group appears to stem from a lack of clarity concerning the role and duties of a parent volunteer. When interviewed the volunteers explained that there was no job description to accompany their positions and even though they had tried to designate jobs using a rota system some volunteers were still not welcoming parents or helping with the general running of the sessions. One of the parent volunteers explained that the problems could have been avoided:

If it was maybe made clear what your role was as a volunteer and what you were taking on, then maybe some people wouldn't have taken it on.

Volunteer Fatigue

Despite the fact that there are millions of people, particularly women participating in voluntary activities, there is very little written about their experiences. Merrell (2000) argues that this is because of the sensitive nature of volunteerism and concerns regarding the potential for exploitation. Merrell continues by stating that volunteers gain from their participation as well as giving of their time and effort. However, in order for volunteers to view their volunteering positively and to sustain their interest there needs to be a balance between giving and taking.

The parents at the toy library began their volunteering with great enthusiasm and were motivated to provide a much needed service to residents of the Littlemoor area and to SSWP. But as the findings show from this evaluation, this enthusiasm slowly and steadily waned. It can be concluded that the primary reason for this was feelings of not being valued, by each other, by the community they were trying to provide for and by SSWP.

All of the volunteers at the toy library talked in depth about the level of commitment they had to give and receive little in return, which led to tensions both within the group and with SSWP. However, it is also clear from the data collected from SSWP workers that support and advice was always available from them, but due to a breakdown in communication, time constraints and sometimes just a lack of understanding, the desired levels of support and collaboration was never achieved during the first year of the service.

The literature that has looked at some aspects of volunteering, particularly in Health and Social Services and children's education, reveals that there has to be some level of personal gain when becoming involved in voluntary work (Thomas & Finch 1990, Merrell 2000). Personal development gains including acquiring new skills and knowledge, raising self-esteem and gaining in confidence are often reported from studies about volunteering. Having links to paid work and further education also has been shown to be important to some who volunteer.

Parent volunteers at the toy library often discussed their wishes for their own personal development. Training in areas of child care, team working and first-aid were mentioned by all of the volunteers. It was clear that the acquiring of these skills for the parents was to increase their confidence and raise their self-esteem as most of them had not worked or been involved in any activities which required them to facilitate or support others.

It must be noted that training and support was offered on a few occasions by SSWP, but was not taken up by any of the volunteers. Time constraints and other commitments were blamed for this; however, if the toy library is to succeed using this parent-led model, a greater effort in organizing training has to be made by both parties.

Merrell (2000) reports that a prominent gain expressed by most of the volunteers in her study was the opportunity for social contact and friendship. Volunteers talked about a 'group spirit' and a 'family feeling' between volunteers. The parents at the toy library believed that a social network did exist at the beginning but soon diminished, with friendships breaking down and volunteers leaving. Volunteers often act as a support to each other, however, it is vital that each volunteer 'pulls their weight' and others are not left to carry the majority of the responsibility. The relationship between the toy library volunteers became very strained towards the end of the first year of the group and after meeting with SSWP and having a series of meetings themselves, it was realized that changes had to be made if the service was to be continued.

Conclusions and recommendations

The primary aim of this evaluation was to discover what local families felt about and the experiences they had of the Littlemoor Toy Library. Based upon the findings from the twenty two mothers who completed a questionnaire it can be concluded that the service was meeting a need for families in this SSWP area. Parents who accessed the group greatly valued the environment, the facilitators and the play and learning opportunities created for their children. It is clear that having a safe, friendly place for parents and children to attend together and meet others was extremely important to them.

Although in the early stages of the service attendance was consistent, numbers did fluctuate and began to drop by the end of the first year. It would have been beneficial to find out why more families stopped using the group and indeed why some SSWP residents never attended at all. Further evaluation in these areas need to be conducted so that the toy library service can discover where they need to promote the group and how to encourage more families to attend.

One of the suggestions to increase attendance and encourage more local families to use the group was the introduction of a 'buddy' system. This has proved to be an effective way to attract new members in a number of other Sure Start services, for example, breastfeeding groups and mother & toddler groups. Having a named person as a contact, who can introduce you to a new service and be available to answer any queries has been shown to be effective in increasing and sustaining attendance.

The findings from this first phase of the evaluation also highlighted the problem of volunteer fatigue. From the very beginning, parent volunteers found the commitment and responsibility of running the group quite difficult and by the end of the first year, motivation was low. Findings suggested that volunteers felt unsupported by SSWP in a number of ways, particularly in relation to training and future funding of the service. Data collected from both parent volunteers and SSWP project workers show that there was clearly a lack of communication at times and confusion over roles and responsibilities.

Parent volunteers need to have a clearer understanding of their roles and responsibilities within the group in order for them to gain confidence and promote better teamworking. Training with appropriate accreditation and/or reward needs to be organised with non-attendance being followed up and acted upon.

Training in areas such as teamworking, confidence building, administrative skills, first aid and all aspects of childcare were requested by all parent volunteers. It is important for SSWP to address these needs, not only for the toy library, but for all groups and services that are run involving parents as volunteers.

Findings suggest that having experienced and motivated playworkers from SSWP involved at the group had been one of its main successes. Many

parents who used the group felt that the craft activities run by the SSWP playworkers was the best part of the service. It is clear that parents wanted the group to offer a varied and stimulating environment for their children, offering not only a toy borrowing service but more importantly a place for their children to play, learn and mix with other children which included more structured play, for example, story time and singing time. It was also important that parents could utilise this time to relax and chat to other parents from their community. Like with many community based groups, a strong social network was being developed.

By the end of the first year, it was clear that the borrowing of toys was less important than the stay and play aspect of the group. Findings showed that parents were often unclear on how to borrow toys and what was available, therefore the number of parents borrowing toys was minimal. This was felt to be unfortunate as the quality and choice of toys was excellent and still felt by volunteers and SSWP to be a beneficial service. Suggestions to increase toy lending included having the toys on show and the catalogues more easily accessible.

A further aim of the evaluation was to discover if the Littlemoor service was meeting Sure Start National Objectives.

Objective 1: Improving social and emotional development
Objective 2: Improving health
Objective 3: Improving the ability to learn
Objective 4: Strengthening families and communities

It can be concluded from this evaluation of phase 1 that the Littlemoor Toy Library has met some of the Sure Start targets, especially within Objectives 3 and 4. Increased opportunities for children's play and learning has been apparent, as well as having a variety of developmental and educational toys available for families to take home and play with together. It is clear that the service has started to bring families closer together within the community, providing a place where people can socialise and form new friendships. The fact that parents from the area are running the group and beginning to encourage more local families to get involved can also strengthen the community.

By the end of the first year of the group, although families who were attending remained positive, the morale and motivation of parent volunteers was low and the relationship between SSWP and the volunteers was tense. It was obvious changes needed to be made. The remainder of this report describes those changes and evaluates phase 2 of the Littlemoor service.

PHASE 2

Reshaping the service

In the summer of 2004 several parent volunteers resigned their positions and stopped attending the group because of the difficulties they were experiencing, leaving just two parents to run the sessions. By the following September the number of volunteers had increased up to six due to the recruitment of some of the mums already attending the toy library. It was at this time that the volunteers decided a change in service provision was needed.

Several meetings were arranged with SSWP to discuss the reshaping of the group. Options discussed included closing the service or taking a break, stopping the loaning of toys and concentrating on the stay and play. It was decided to continue the stay and play under the new name of Play time 0-4's. The aim was to focus on a drop-in service that provided an opportunity for local families to meet others, for parents and their children to play together in a safe and stimulating environment and to increase awareness of what SSWP had to offer. The borrowing of toys was put on hold until the new group was established.

The evaluation team attended a meeting at the group to feedback findings from Phase 1. The volunteers were given the opportunity to view users comments on how the service could be improved, for example having the toys for loan on display, expanding the activities table and playworker input and creating a more welcoming atmosphere. Parent volunteers appreciated the input from the evaluation team and were keen to act on these findings when reshaping the service.

Evaluation plan

It was agreed at an Evaluation Working Group Meeting (which included members from the toy library and SSWP) that the evaluation of the service would be extended. This was to provide the opportunity for the group to put into place the recommendations from Phase 1 and the new ideas from the parent volunteers, and then to discover if the restructured service was meeting it's aims.

Data was collected in a variety of ways, which included observation of the group over a period of three weeks, a questionnaire completed by parents who had attended the new service for at least four weeks and feedback from parent volunteers and SSWP playworkers. Due to time constraints for the evaluation, only a small number of parents were able to complete the questionnaire in Phase 2. However, important information was gathered which showed how the service had developed and how the problems which had existed were resolved.

Findings

Participant observation

The parent researcher undertook the task of collecting the data for the second phase of the evaluation. This member of the evaluation team had been involved from the early stages and had become very familiar with the parent volunteers at the toy library. It was felt to be important that the volunteers were comfortable with the person observing the service and requested that she was the only evaluator present.

It is interesting to note that the researcher herself has a young child who accompanied her to the group, this was seen as a positive factor when talking to the volunteers about their experiences of the evaluation. This highlights the importance for Sure Start nationally of parent-led services and indeed parent-led evaluation.

The researcher had devised a list of questions that she wanted to explore within the group. This included how many parents and children were attending each session, how the group was set up, for example, what toys were being used and the activities on offer. It was then important to explore the relationships and interactions in the group. The findings are presented below.

Attendance figures for the three sessions that were observed are in table 5.

Table 5

	1 st session	2 nd session	3 rd session
Parent volunteers	6	5	5
Parents	10	8	8
New mums	3	0	0
Children	25	13	13

Activities and participation

Craft table

1st session

One playworker was in attendance. Activities on offer were gluing and sticking different materials and a tray of ice cubes with underwater models, such as a diver, sharks and whales. On average five children were participating in one of these activities at a time, with the majority of children taking some interest. The majority of parents encouraged their children by taking part themselves.

2nd session

No playworker present due to the move of the SSWP main offices. There were crayons, pencils and paper on the craft tables, but no volunteer

helping the children with this activity. Only five children participated and were very much left to their own devices by both the volunteers and their own parents. It has to be noted that volunteers were understaffed at this session and were busy with other aspects of the service.

3rd Session

One playworker in attendance. Painting with Brushes. Two to three children at a time participated, with over half of the children at the session showing some interest in the activity. Majority of parents were sitting with their children and helping them.

It is interesting to note that the sessions that included a playworker did attract more children to the craft table and also encouraged parents to get more involved.

At eleven o'clock the craft activities were packed away and the tables were used for the fruit and drinks. On all three occasions children were stopped in the middle of the craft activity because it was time to clear up. Children did not return to the craft table to finish what they were making as it was packed away. This was disappointing to some children and their parents.

Set up of the group

- Bikes and scooters by the front door. This area was cordoned off from the rest of the hall by the use of a plastic partition to stop the younger children being injured. This activity was very popular with the older children with six or more playing there at all times. At the 3rd session when the toy library was relaunched the bikes and scooters were put away at eleven o'clock because the toys were being displayed in that area.
- Baby corner with a plastic pen contained soft cushions and mobiles to lay children in. Seating was provided around this area. Three to four babies were in this area for most of the sessions with their parents who were able to socialize.
- Home corner with a kitchen, play food, dolls and pushchairs.*
- Play mat with the design of roads and houses on it and plastic cars to push around.*
- Play tube for the children to crawl through.*
- At the 2nd session there were dressing up clothes laid out on the floor. These included ethnic dresses and also the more traditional job costumes, such as postman. This activity was not very popular, with only two children venturing to try the clothes on. This was however, left for children to do independently.

* It is difficult to give an accurate number of children using these activities as they would run between them sometimes stopping for only a few seconds. On the whole however I would say the majority of children at the sessions at some point dipped into one or more of these activities even if it was just for a very brief time.

With the free play activities the majority of parents would leave their children to play whilst they had a coffee and a chat with other parents. The only activity that really inspired parents to participate and interact with their children was the craft table.



Interaction and relationships

Parent volunteers and Parents

The parent volunteers all interacted very well with the parents during the sessions. Parents were greeted when they entered the room and the volunteers made a point of holding even just a brief conversation with them. On one of the sessions a parent volunteer was waiting by the main doors. A new parent was expected that day and she was waiting to welcome her. During the sessions the volunteers would circulate around the room speaking to parents. The volunteers were all very approachable and all had name badges on so were easy to identify.

Parents

There was a really nice relaxed and welcoming atmosphere at the sessions and this environment appeared to be helping to cultivate social interaction

between the parents. At each of the sessions parents were engaged in conversations and nobody appeared left out or uncomfortable.

Children

Both old and young children interacted very well throughout all of the activities. There were only a couple of instances of fighting over toys but either the parent volunteers or the child's parent resolved these. The skill of sharing was very evident at all of the sessions. At one of the sessions however there was one child who was constantly being aggressive to the other children, including pulling hair, smacking and jabbing crayons in their faces. The parent of this child took no notice of their behaviour and allowed it to continue. The parents of the children being hurt obviously did not feel they could approach this parent instead they comforted their own child but did not try to remedy the situation.

This did cause some awkwardness within the group and instances like this and ways of dealing with disruptive children are areas that need developing with the help of SSWP. This could be by offering specific training to parent volunteers in order for them to gain the confidence and skills necessary to facilitate the group in a positive way.

Toy library relaunch

At the 3rd session the loaning of toys was resumed. All of the toys available to borrow were set out at the end of the hall by the main doors on two long tables. At eleven o'clock one of the parent volunteers announced that the toy library was open. Two other volunteers remained at the tables to help parents and to record the toys being borrowed. All of the parents at the session went to look at the toys to borrow and the majority took a toy home with them. The set up of toys on view was excellent and really encouraged parents to borrow.

Parent questionnaire

The questionnaires to parents were distributed over a period of three weeks. The researcher attended the group and asked parents who had been using the service for at least 4 weeks if they would consent to completing a questionnaire about their experiences at the group. Parents were given the option of filling in the questionnaire at the group or taking it home. Eight mothers were identified and given the questionnaire. Seven of them completed and returned the questionnaire to the researcher. The findings are as follows:

As the numbers in these findings are based on only 7 respondents, the data is presented in frequencies and not in percentages.

General details

All of the parents who completed the questionnaire were female. The ages of respondents ranged from 25 to 39, with the majority of parents falling into the 30 to 34 year old age category (Table 6).

Table 6

Age range	Frequency
25-29	2
30-34	4
35-39	1

When asked about their employment status five parents stated they were 'looking after the home', with the remaining two working part-time.

Parents were then asked how many children they had under 16 years of age. Table 7 shows the ages of respondents children.

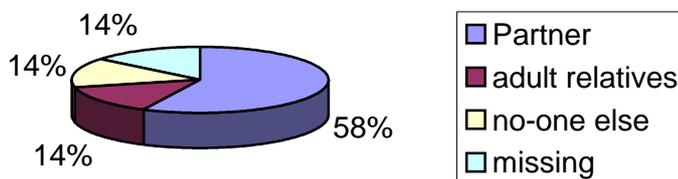
Table 7

Under 1	One	Two	Three	Four	Five	Six & over
2	5	3	1	2	1	5

The questionnaire went on to ask respondents about their living arrangements. Most of the parents stated that they lived with a partner. (see Figure 14).

Figure 14

Who do you and your child live with?



None of the parents completing the questionnaire reported having special needs themselves. One respondent stated that her child had special needs associated with autistic spectrum disorder and speech and language delay.

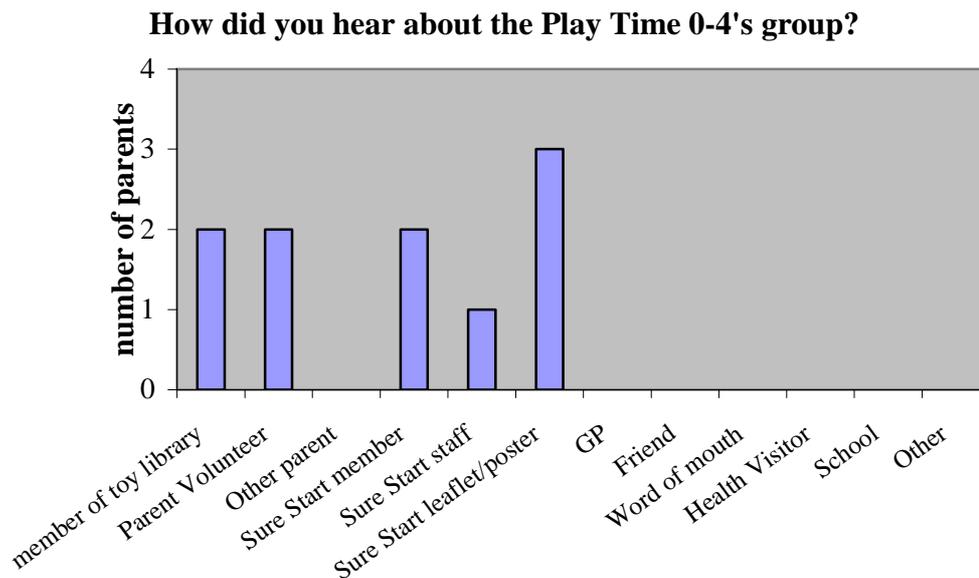
The final question parents were asked in the general details section of the survey was if they were registered with SSWP. Six respondents stated that they were SSWP members.

About the Service

Parents were asked how long they had been attending the Play Time 0-4's session. Answers ranged from five weeks up to a year, with the average attendance time being two to three months.

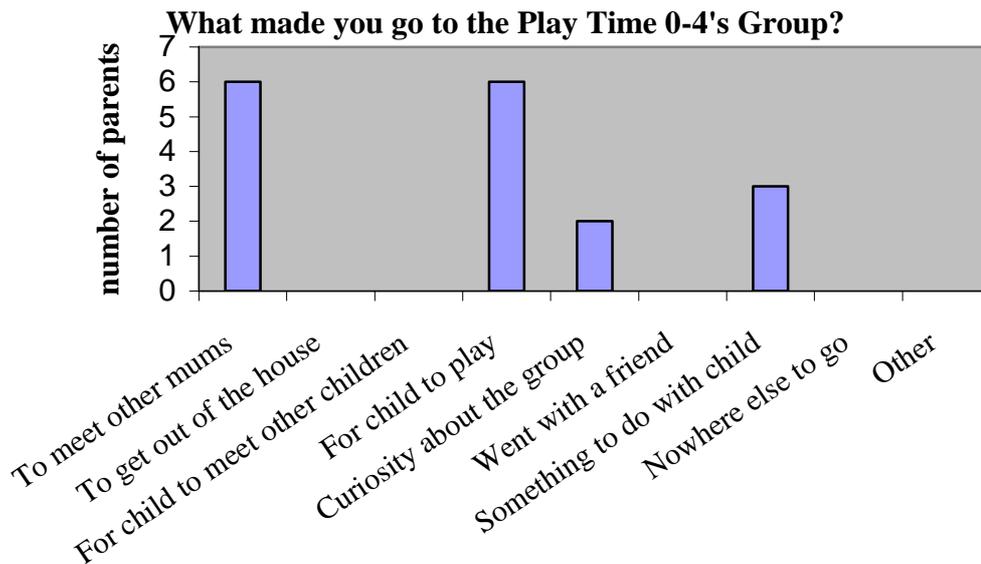
Next, parents were asked how they found out about the Play Time 0-4's group. The most popular response was via SSWP leaflets and posters, with three parents choosing this option. It should be noted that respondents were asked to select all of the tick box options that applied to them and the results show that some of the parents received information concerning the sessions from more than one source, (Figure 15).

Figure 15



The survey offered respondents the chance to reflect upon the reasons why they decided to go to the Play Time 0-4's sessions. Again parents were allowed to select more than one option. 'To meet other mums' and 'for child to play' rated the most popular reasons for joining the group, with six responses each. Three parents also stated that they attended the group for something to do with their child and a few parents felt that their curiosity about the sessions inspired them to go (Figure 16).

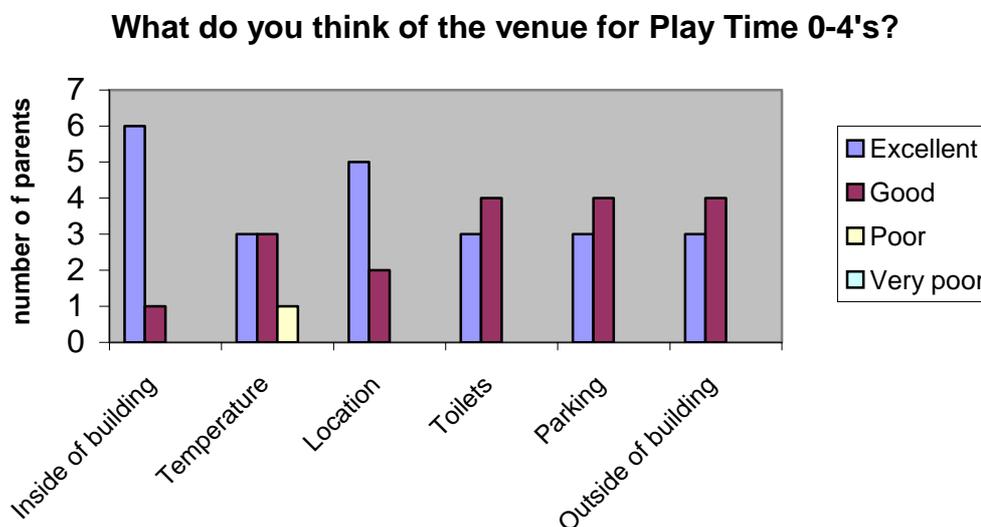
Figure 16



Parents were given the opportunity to convey their views on the Littlemoor Community Centre, the venue used for the Play Time 0-4's group. All of the respondents agreed that the condition of the building, both inside and out was of a good or excellent standard. Facilities provided, such as the toilets and parking were again described as either excellent or good by all taking part in the evaluation. When asked what parents thought about the location of the building they were unanimous in their reply that it was excellent or good.

The only concern that was expressed in connection with the venue was that the temperature inside the building could be slightly cold. This issue was only raised by one parent who has a young baby and felt that it was not a warm enough environment, she commented – *I would prefer a slightly warmer building*. All of the other parents questioned had no problem with the temperature and described it as either excellent or good (Figure 17).

Figure 17



The parents were asked how they would normally travel to the group. All of the respondents who answered the question stated that they would generally walk. This finding suggests that the venue for the sessions is ideally situated for easy access by those members of the community who attend. However this is only a snapshot and accessibility to all SSWP parents living in Littlemoor would need further exploration.

Parents were then asked three questions relating specifically to the logistics of the group. Firstly respondents were asked what they thought about the number of sessions offered. The majority (4) felt that one session a week was about right, whereas the remaining 3 expressed a wish for more. Secondly, all of the parents surveyed felt that the length of the sessions at two hours was about right. The third question asked if the time of the sessions suited the needs of the users. All of the parents stated that the times for the group were ideal for them. It is clear from the findings from both phases of the evaluation that the timing and length of sessions are suitable for families in the SSWP community.

With one of Sure Starts Objectives being to 'increase use of libraries by families with young children', parents were asked if they were members of the local library. Findings show that three of the respondents were not library members.

The next few questions were designed to find out what other groups or activities the parents attending Play Time 0-4's also participated in. Over half of respondents stated that they attended another toddler group apart from Play Time. Groups that were mentioned included the NCH playgroup at St Francis Church in Littlemoor, a playgroup at Willowbed Hall in Chickerell and a toddler group on a Tuesday at Osmington.

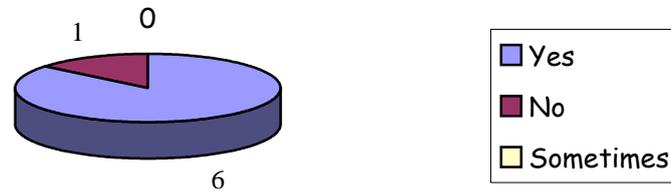
Parents were then asked if they attended any other SSWP activities. Again the majority of parents (4) said they did attend other activities run by SSWP including Breast friends, Colour strings, Stay and Play, The Time out crèche and 'messy time' at the Littlemoor Community centre. In order to understand why more of the parents surveyed didn't participate in other SSWP activities respondents were asked if they were aware of the services on offer. All of the parents stated they had an understanding of what SSWP had to offer. The questionnaire went on to offer parents the opportunity to have a member of the SSWP team contact them to discuss the services available, all of the parents declined.

Using the Play Time 0-4's Group

Parents were asked if they generally stayed for the whole two-hour session. Six parents stated they would normally stay for the whole session, with the remaining respondent explaining they didn't stay for the whole two hours, citing reasons including the need to collect older children from nursery and school. (Figure 18).

Figure 18

Do you generally stay for the whole Play Time 0-4's session?



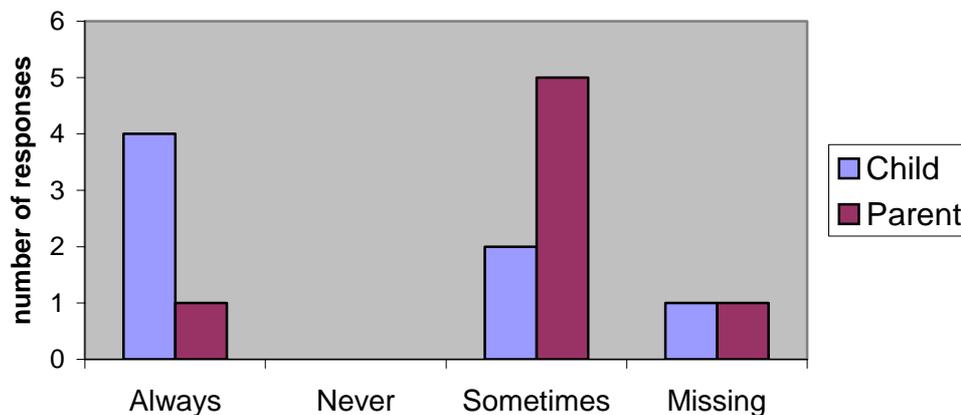
The Play Time 0-4's session offers a variety of activities combining free play, such as bikes and scooters, a home corner and play mat with plastic cars, and more structured creative and imaginative craft activities run by the Sure Start playworkers. Parents were asked if their child joined in with the activities on offer. Four respondents stated that their child always participated in the activities, with the remaining parents who answered this question explaining that their child sometimes took part.

Parents were then asked if they joined their child and took part in the Play Time activities. Only one parent stated that they would always join in with their child and a further five said they would sometimes participate (Figure 19). Having observed the sessions it becomes clear that the majority of parents liked to combine some time at the group playing with their child and the rest of the session taking a break and socialising with the other parents.

It is important to remember that the results include the responses of parents with young babies for whom the craft table activities and much of the free play would not be suitable and therefore some of these parents chose not to answer questions relating to participating in the activities.

Figure 19

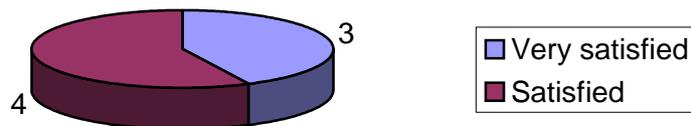
Joining in the Play Time activities



It becomes clear from the data collected that all of the parents attending the Play Time 0-4's group were either satisfied or very satisfied with the activities on offer (figure 20).

Figure 20

Satisfaction with the Play Time activities



A few parents offered comments concerning their satisfaction with the activities:

Needs more toys, a 1 year olds attention span is short.

I feel that my child is too young to paint or draw or glue at the moment.

One parent explained that even though she was satisfied with the activities on offer she felt,

It would be nice if children were helped more and were played with so that mums can chat knowing child is getting some attention.

Parents were invited to give their opinions on the personnel working at the Play Time 0-4's group. When asked about the parent volunteers running the sessions the majority of respondents stated that they were very helpful (6), with one describing them as generally helpful.

Parents were then asked about the SSWP playworkers running the activities table. Again the majority of parents (5) categorised them as very helpful, with one opting for generally helpful. One parent did state that they felt the playworkers were not always helpful (Figure 21).

Figure 21



The craft activities

The questionnaire went on to ask parents specifically about their views on the craft table run by the SSWP playworkers. All of the parents agreed that the table activities were an important part of the Play Time 0-4's session. Parents were then asked to comment on their child's reaction to the craft table activities. Table 8 shows how parents rated their child's reaction to the craft activities.

Table 8 Children's reaction to the craft table

	Strongly agree	Agree	N/a	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
Runs to the table first to participate	1	1	1	1	1	2
Really likes the activities	1	2	1	0	1	2
Prefers to play with toys	3	1	1	0	0	2
Loves making things	1	1	2	0	1	2
Enjoys getting messy	2	0	2	1	0	2
Will not participate	0	0	1	3	0	3
Wants to do the same at home	0	2	2	1	0	2

Parents were given the opportunity to add comment about their child's reaction to the table activities. A few parents raised the issue that they felt the activities were not suitable for the younger children, one parent stated:

I feel it's not aimed at a one year old. Too difficult. He needs to be helped more by the playworker.

Parents were then asked to reflect upon their own feelings about the craft table activities (Table 9). Once again the parents not answering this question had babies too young to join in the activities.

Table 9 Parents views on the craft table

	Strongly agree	Agree	N/a	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No response
Gives me a break	4	0	0	0	1	2
Good to see child being creative	3	1	1	0	0	2
Good to do together	4	0	1	0	0	2
Get ideas to do at home	5	0	0	0	0	2
Good preparation for school	5	0	0	0	0	2
Better than doing messy stuff at home	3	1	0	0	1	2
Playworkers enthusiastic	4	1	0	0	0	2
Would like more structured play	2	1	1	1	0	2

When asked to elaborate upon their answers parents suggested they would like more singing and story time and one parent commented,

Playworkers should play with the children to show them how to play and occupy them whilst mums get much needed chat and break. (My five children – all boys and I need to chat with women to stay sane!!)

All of the parents surveyed felt that the 50p cost for accessing the Play Time 0-4's Group was about right. For the nominal fee parents get two hours of creative play for their children, time to relax and socialise with tea or coffee and their children also received a snack of fruit, vegetables and a drink. This also includes the opportunity to borrow two toys for a week.

Making a difference

The final section of the questionnaire was designed to explore the effects the Play Time 0-4's group had upon the families using it. Firstly, parents were asked if they felt that attending the sessions had made a difference to their relationship with their child. Four respondents felt it had made a difference. The remaining parents were split between feeling the group had made no difference and not being sure if their parent/child relationship had altered because of the group.

Table 10

Has the Play Time 0-4's Group made a difference to your relationship with your child?	number
Yes	4
No	2
Not sure	1
Total	7

Parents who felt that the group had made a difference to their relationship with their child were asked to elaborate upon their answer, comments included:

Made us both more sociable

We are closer and more relaxed together but not so clingy

It stops us getting bored at home and reduces stress levels

Given me time with just him, one to one. Gives him time with other children without his older brothers around.

Impact on child's behaviour

Next parents were asked if they felt the Play Time 0-4's group had any impact upon their child's behaviour. The data collected clearly shows that the majority of parents felt their child's behaviour had changed since attending the group. Firstly parents were asked about their child's sharing skills. Four parents felt that since joining the Play Time 0-4's group they had seen development in their child's ability to share toys with other children. Out of those four respondents, three stated that the development they saw in their child was either 'excellent or good' with the other one reporting a 'minor' development in this area. Only one respondent expressed the opinion that there was no change in their child's sharing skills.

The Play Time 0-4's Group offers an excellent environment for children's social skills to flourish. Children are given the opportunity to socialise with each other through the activities on offer. Parents were asked if they felt that their child's ability to play and interact with other children had changed since becoming part of the group. All of the parents who answered this question felt that there had been a change in their child's ability to socialise with other children; four reported an 'excellent or good development' and the remaining one stated seeing a 'minor development'.

Parents were then asked two questions relating to their child's motor skills development. All of the parents surveyed felt that since joining the group their children were more skilled with toys. The majority of parents also felt that their children were more skilled with art and craft activities.

All of the parents who answered this section of the questionnaire felt that their child's communication skills had progressed because of the group. Just over half of respondents described the development in their child's ability to communicate with other children as either 'excellent or good', with the others seeing some 'minor' change. When it came to their child's ability to communicate more effectively with adults all of the parents again felt there was some change in their child's skills, with three reporting an 'excellent or good development' and two recording a 'minor development'.

The survey went on to ask parents if they had seen any development in their child's language skills since joining the group. Two respondents stated that they had noticed some minor progress in their child's speech and use of words.

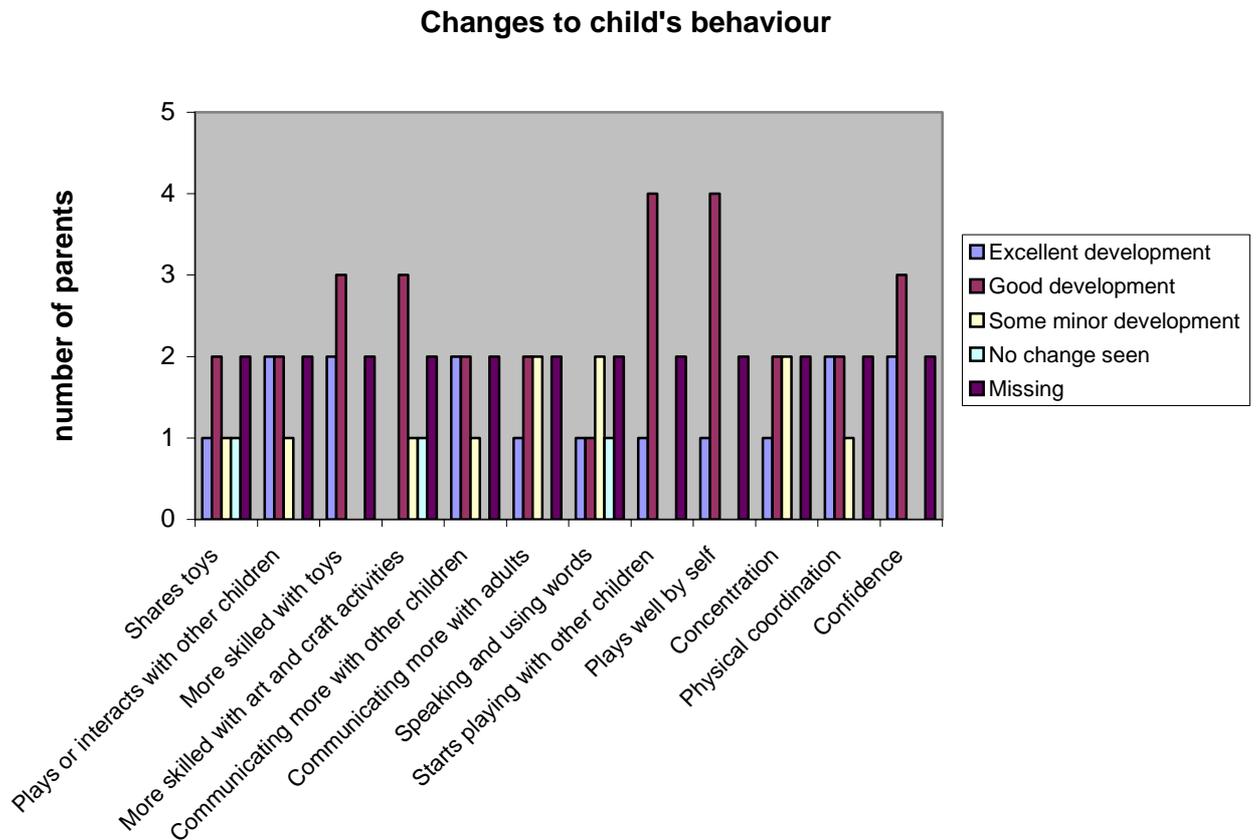
All of the parents questioned reported 'excellent' or 'good' development in their child's play skills. One respondent stated that their child's ability to play with other children and by themselves had developed at an 'excellent' rate, with four parents noticing 'good' development in this area of their child's behaviour. The Play Time group offers a wonderful opportunity for a child's development in this area with the free play activities promoting both independent and shared play opportunities.

When questioned about their child's concentration levels all of the parents felt that they could see some development, with one describing the progress as 'excellent', a further two stated that the development was 'good' and the rest of the parents felt there was some 'minor' change.

Attending the group also appears to have benefited the children's physical coordination with all of the parents' once again recording progress in their child's development in this area. Four parents described the development as either 'excellent' or 'good'.

The final behaviour related question asked parents to comment on their child's confidence. All of the respondents felt that attending the sessions had encouraged their children to become more confident, two described this progress as 'excellent' and three parents as 'good'. (See figure 22).

Figure 22



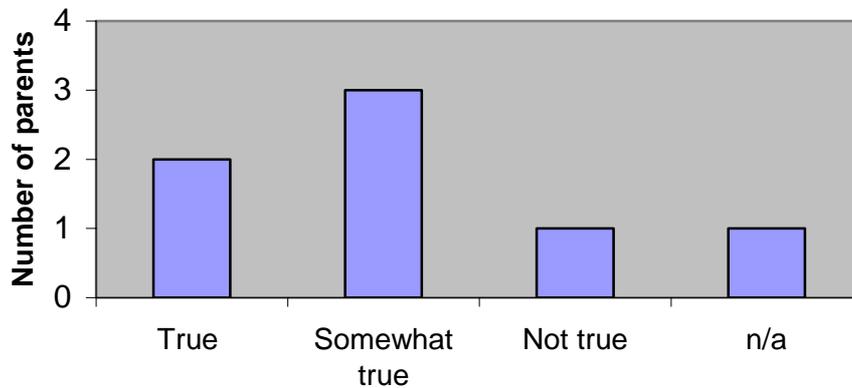
Impact on the lives of parents

Parents were offered the opportunity to reflect upon the difference the Play Time 0-4's group had made to their lives. To begin with parents felt it was 'true' or 'somewhat true' that the sessions offered them an opportunity to mix with other parents and to join in and chat. These findings indicate that the sessions provided an environment suitable for parents to socialise with each other. This is further backed up by all of the parents describing the statement that they had made new friends as 'true' or 'somewhat true'.

Parents were then asked if they felt the volunteers at the group were approachable. Six parents felt this statement was 'true' and one described it as 'somewhat true'. This response ties in with parents being asked if they felt they could use the sessions to talk about their worries or problems. Figure 23 shows that the largest proportion of respondents felt that this was either 'true' or 'somewhat true'. When asked if they felt they could relax at the sessions knowing their child was happy all of the parents said this was 'true'.

Figure 23

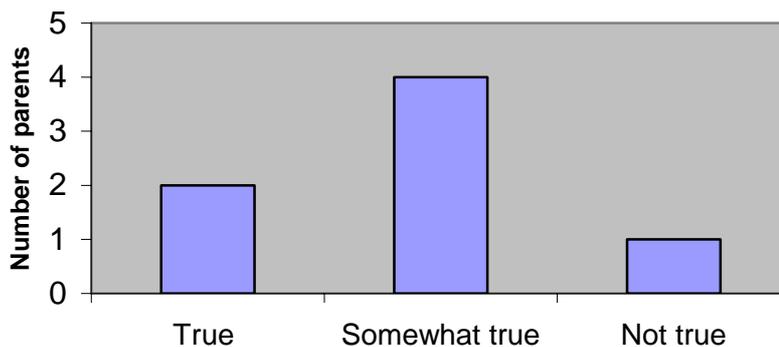
I can talk about any worries or problems



All of the parents stated that it was either 'true' or 'somewhat true' that they were able to cope better at home. Leading on from this five respondents felt that attending the group had to varying degrees made their relationship with their child better. This development could be linked to the fact that all of the parents said that it was 'true' or 'somewhat true' that they were playing more with their child at home. In turn this closer relationship and more time to play could be attributed to the fact that the majority of parents (6) felt it was 'true' or 'somewhat true' that the sessions had helped them to learn new things about play (Figure 24).

Figure 24

I am learning new things about play

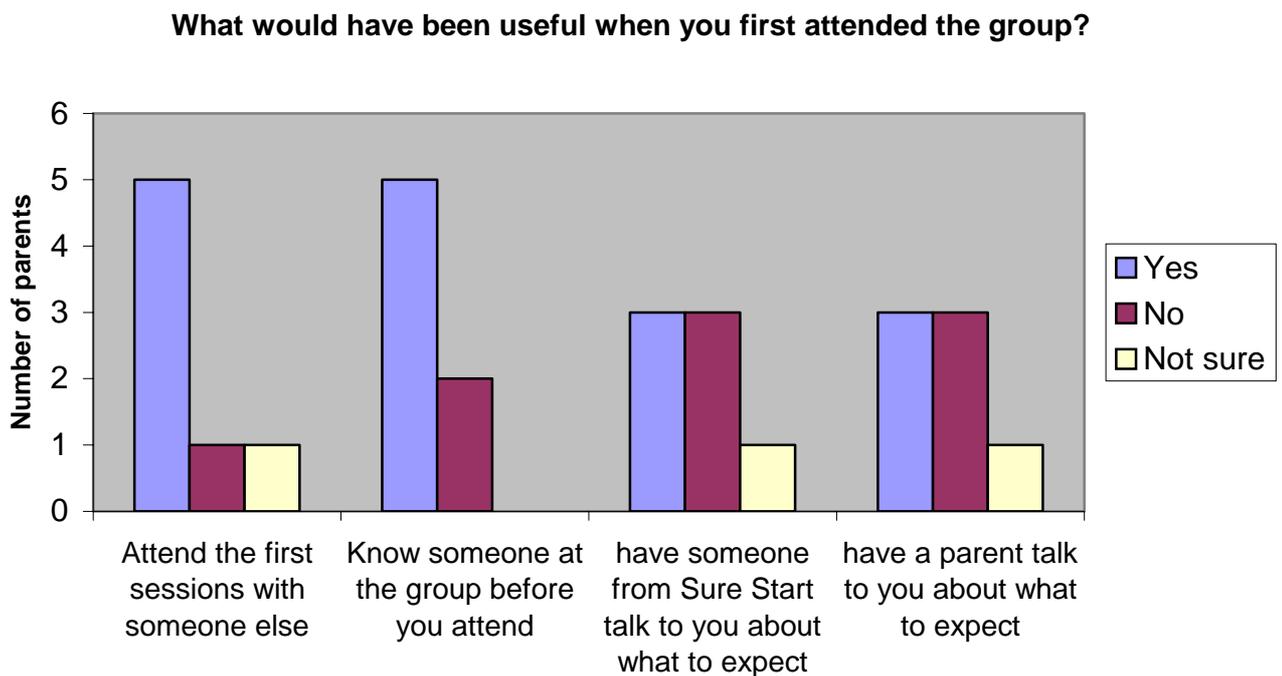


All but one of the parents said it was 'true' or 'somewhat true' that they knew what SSWP had to offer, even though earlier in the questionnaire all of the parents stated that they had an understanding of what other SSWP services were available. A large proportion (6) of parents agreed that it was 'true' or 'somewhat true' that the Play time 0-4's was important to them.

Finally parents were asked to reflect on the Play Time 0-4's Group and comment on how the sessions could be improved and what they would like for the future of the group. To begin with parents were asked to think back to

when they first attended the group and give their views upon what help or support would have been useful to them at that time. Figure 25 shows that the support parents would have valued most would have been attending their first session with someone else or knowing someone else at the group before they arrived. Talking to someone from SSWP or another parent about what to expect from the group was not considered to be as useful as actually having someone to act as a 'buddy' to attend the group with or be met by when they arrived.

Figure 25



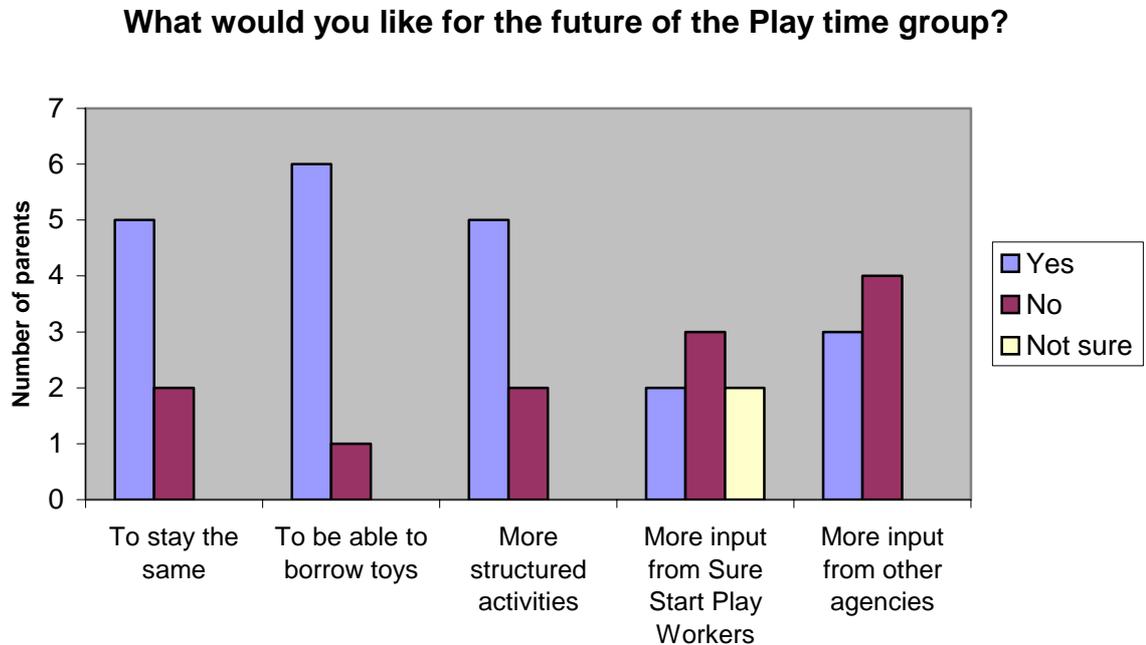
Parents were then asked to consider what they would like for the future of the Play time group. Being able to borrow toys was a popular response with six parents wishing to see this service available in the future (the toy library had not been relaunched at the time of the questionnaire).

The parent volunteers have taken on board past comments and improved the toy library service accordingly. All of the toys for loan are now on view and there is an announced start and finish time for parents to select toys to borrow. The system is very well organised with the same two volunteers in charge each week. The first week the toy library operated all of the parents at the session viewed the toys on offer and the majority took a toy out on loan.

Figure 26 shows that over half of parents wanted to see more structured activities introduced into the sessions, including story time, singing and more messy activities.

It becomes clear from the findings displayed in figure 26 that the majority of parents do not view more input by the SSWP playworkers or other agencies as important features for the future of the group.

Figure 26



The opportunity was then offered to parents to comment on what they felt were the best things about the group. The atmosphere at the sessions seems to be important to users, describing it as 'lovely' and 'very welcoming'. The social side of the group also appears to have been greatly valued by parents. Comments made by parents about the best aspects of the sessions included:

- Meeting others
- Very Welcoming
- Fruit and vegetables for children
- Keeping the bikes away from the play area
- Baby area
- Getting out of the house
- Son is happier playing with other children
- Lovely atmosphere
- Range of toys available
- *My girls are excited about coming each week*
- *All of it*

Finally parents were given the chance to express any ideas they had about how the sessions could be improved, parents' responses are shown below:

- Singing (with sign-a-long)
- More input from playworkers
- Visiting speakers e.g., OT, Speech and Language Therapy, Sleep talk
- Structured activities
- More advertising so more people would attend.

Having offered ideas for how the group could be improved, one parent felt it necessary to add an extra comment summing up her view on the sessions,

Very valuable. Really enjoyable. Well done to everyone involved. I'm not criticising, just suggesting improvements because I am really impressed. Toy library is wonderful.



Parent volunteer feedback

Five parent volunteers completed a short questionnaire about their experiences and feelings of the service. The findings are as follows:

The Length of time being a volunteer ranged from nine months to two and a half years. Two parent volunteers had been involved with the group since the beginning.

Reasons for becoming a volunteer included wanting to get involved in a community project, having somewhere to go with their child that was local and inexpensive. One volunteer explained that she automatically started to help when she arrived at a sessions and became involved that way.

Volunteers were asked how satisfied they were with the support they received from SSWP. Table 11 shows how they answered:

Table 11. Satisfaction with support from SSWP

Very satisfied	satisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
2	1	2	0	0

Volunteers were given the opportunity to explain this answer. Three described how they liked to be independent and have the responsibility for the running of the service, although one explained:

I feel a lot is left up to us which is nice for our independence, but sometimes feel a bit stranded.

Another volunteer was glad that the group was parent-led but felt they needed the support of SSWP to fall back on. Other comments included:

We are able to ring up and ask for help

They (SSWP) are helpful and encouraging, open to ideas and very supportive.

It is interesting to note here how the feelings about the support offered by SSWP have altered since the relaunch of the service. Findings from the individual interviews by parent volunteers at the end of Phase 1 showed negative feelings about the relationship, especially around communication, between the volunteers and SSWP. Volunteers feel much more positive about the support and advice they now receive.

From SSWP point of view the level for support has remained almost the same. As from the start a playworker for the toy library and a project worker to input into the parent forum group is provided. When the volunteer group partly changed in September 2004 a second project worker was given the role of reassessing with the parents what the future shape of the toy library should take. As has been mentioned above the options were discussed and a course of action taken. This project worker has remained as a link but the parents volunteers have continued to take the project from strength to strength

The questionnaire asked volunteers to explain why they thought families in the area needed a group like Play Time 0-4. All of the volunteers said the main reason was for parents and their children to have the opportunity to meet other families from the community and make new friends. The fact that it was inexpensive and provided a good quality play and learning environment was also important.

Volunteers were asked if they felt it was difficult to get parents to attend the group. Three responded to this question and stated that it was difficult. Reasons for this included:

Some people are shy and find it difficult to get out and meet new people

Toddler groups can be seen as unfriendly places. Parents can be nervous or just not have the motivation to come.

Volunteers were asked what were the best things and the most difficult things about being a parent volunteer at the group.

Best things

- Making new friends
- Making a difference in the community
- Seeing the group develop
- Feeling of worthwhile
- Meeting friends and knowing you are giving your time for others

Difficult things

- A lot of commitment
- Packing away and setting up with few people
- Telling other people's children to behave
- Getting on with everybody all of the time
- Too busy to take interest in own children

To follow this question, volunteers were asked what changes, if any, they would like to see at the group. All of them stated they would like more volunteers. Other suggestions included trips away, parent-only activities, and an increase in good quality toys.

The final question asked what would be important to them being a parent volunteer. The following list was constructed from previous interview data obtained from the volunteers when asked about their needs when volunteering at the toy library. Table 12 shows the findings:

Table 12 Volunteering needs

	Very important	Important	Not important
Getting the toy library running well	5		
Training	4		1
More parent volunteers	4	1	
Feeling valued	4	1	
Gaining qualifications	3	1	1
Becoming a buddy (peer support)	2	3	
Extra support from Sure Start	2	3	
More play time sessions	2	2	1
Having outside play area	2	2	1
Increased funding	2	2	1
Improved communication with Sure Start	1	4	
External links e.g. education, libraries		5	
Being paid			5

Playworker feedback

In order to obtain the views of the playworkers attending the Play Time 0-4's group a short questionnaire was devised. Two questionnaires were handed out with only one being returned. The playworker was asked if she felt that the sessions had changed since the relaunch of the group. The response given was a definite yes, with the playworker explaining that:

The parent volunteers are positive about their roles, more friendly and they want the group to be successful.

The playworker's response is a very important insight into how the group has overcome difficulties and moved forward. During their interviews for Phase 1 of this evaluation the playworkers involved in the toy library expressed their concerns regarding the parent volunteers being unapproachable and not fulfilling their roles within the group. These issues have clearly been resolved and the volunteers are pulling together to achieve the overall goal of providing a successful parent and child group.

The playworker was then asked what she felt were the best things about her role at the group. Meeting Littlemoor parents came top of her list, followed by providing children and parents with opportunities to do art activities together and finally helping to promote SSWP activities to the parents attending.

An opportunity was offered to the playworker to express what she felt were the most difficult things about her role, but no response was given, however, she felt that the introduction of group singing, involving parents, children and staff was needed at the group.

The final question offered the playworker the chance to indicate what was important to her when working at the group. The following table shows her response.

Table 12. What is important to the Playworkers

	Very important	Important	Not important
Parents more involved in activities	✓		
Structured play e.g. singing, storytelling	✓		
More play time sessions		✓	
Increased funding	✓		
More feedback from parents		✓	
External links e.g. education, libraries		✓	
Getting the toy library running well	✓		
Having an outside play area		✓	
More parent volunteers		✓	
Parents running the activities	✓		

Finally, the playworker concluded the questionnaire by offering the following comment:

It's lovely to see the Play Time group change to a positive activity.

Conclusions and lessons learned

The Littlemoor Toy Library opened its doors almost three years ago with the aim to provide a service where local families could meet others and children could play and learn in a safe and welcoming environment. A group of local parents were fundamental in running the service with support from SSWP. It is clear that the service has been through many changes and developed positively in many areas. This evaluation has shown how a local project can learn from its mistakes, both at working and management levels, and continue to develop and provide a much needed facility to the local community.

Access and availability

Data collected from both phases of the evaluation has shown that families who accessed the group felt very positive about what was offered. The environment was viewed as safe and welcoming. Excellent progress had been made in ensuring that new parents to the group were acknowledged and introduced to others. The wearing of name badges by volunteers and better integration into the group was seen as a positive improvement.

Availability of toys to borrow had dramatically improved. It was always the aim to reinstate the toy library and after a short break to get the stay and play up and running and to increase members, the borrowing of toys was encouraged. Having the toys on display and a designated volunteer to organise the facility greatly improved the service. The quality of the toys, especially educational and developmental toys is excellent and it is important that this standard is maintained in order to ensure that families have these play and learning opportunities.

Throughout the period of this evaluation, attendance figures have fluctuated. Both parent volunteers and SSWP have raised concerns over the service not being accessed by families in the area who would benefit from it. Suggestions for ways to increase attendance were provided and the volunteers are extremely keen to encourage more parents to get involved in the running of the group. Improved advertising methods and more fun days to raise awareness are planned. Alternative times and extra sessions were also discussed by some parents who may find it easier to attend the group and also encourage Dads to attend.

Social network

Providing a place where families can meet others from their community is paramount for all Sure Start Programmes. SSWP recognise how important it is to facilitate groups within all of its Sure Start areas and encourage local parents to be actively involved in the running of them. The Littlemoor Toy Library has shown how a service can bring people from the local community together and provide a safe and welcoming environment where parents and children can socialise with each other and learn from each other.

Community cohesion is also advocated as a means to improving relationships and encouraging people to become involved in their communities (HMSO, 2005). It is also clear that this involvement for parents at the Littlemoor group has been fundamental in improving confidence and self-esteem and has had a positive effect on the behaviour of their children.

Learning environment

It can be concluded that the Littlemoor Toy Library is providing an environment where children are benefiting from stimulating and enjoyable play. The quality of toys, both fun and educational, and the physical space are excellent. This, together with dedicated and motivated parents and the experience of the SSWP playworkers, ensures that children receive a high standard of play and learning opportunities.

Language skills, improved coordination and social skills are areas where children have developed. This has been the result of a group which has enabled children to access a wide variety of activities, professionals and other families. Although mainly parent-led, the support and interaction of different health and social care professionals has been important for the group. Having the opportunity to talk to health visitors, midwives and SSWP workers when needed has been seen as a positive aspect of the group. Also knowing that appropriate referrals can be made when needed is important to families who use the service.

One area that could be developed is the work with the Speech & Language project worker. The use of the language tags was not very successful at the toy library with very few parents using the guidelines. A very positive evaluation of the Speech & Language service was undertaken and it is clear that this service is really making a difference to families within SSWP, therefore, developing the Speech & Language service with the users of the toy library should be encouraged.

The craft activities have proven to be a major success of the toy library. In both phases of the evaluation, parents talked about how their children enjoyed taking part in the different craft activities run by the playworkers. Not only was it fun for the children to learn new things and 'get messy', but it was an opportunity for parent to also learn how to make things and increase their interaction with their child, and more importantly be able to transfer these skills back to their home.

It was reported in phases 1 and 2 that there could be more structure at the sessions. Activities such as organised singing and story time were often suggested by parents and the playworkers. Although the free play and the craft activities were positively seen, parents felt that their children sometimes needed a more focussed activity where they could learn specific skills. Parent volunteers took these suggestions on board and organised group singing at the end of the session and are planning to have some story telling time.

Working together

It was always the aim of the Littlemoor service to be primarily parent-led with the added support of SSWP. A number of SSWP project workers have been involved with the group since the beginning and have offered support and advice when needed. Visits were often made at the group by the local Health Visitor and Midwife to answer any questions or worries about parenting and SSWP, through their membership programme gave out valuable information about who to contact if any specific problems occurred. Families also have access to information about other Sure Start services and groups throughout the Weymouth & Portland area. This collaboration between parents, SSWP workers and other local agencies has to be further encouraged and built upon to ensure that local families are receiving a wide range of family support services.

By the end of phase 1 of the evaluation it was clear that the relationship between volunteers and SSWP was at a low. Poor communication and lack of understanding about role expectation were the main reasons for this dissatisfaction. After a series of meetings and a change in volunteers, the relationship improved greatly. Discussions around volunteers needs and what was expected from both sides led to a clearer understanding and improved collaboration. It is vital that this level of interaction between volunteers and SSWP is continued and that both parties can discuss their anxieties and needs in an open way, if the group is to continue to provide a much needed service to the local community.

Training

The findings from the initial focus group interview with parent volunteers indicated that training and any other types of learning opportunities were very important to them. The majority of volunteers throughout the evaluation had never been in a situation where they had been responsible for organising or facilitating any type of group and it was clear that by the end of the first year many of them were feeling overwhelmed by the responsibility. Initially, a number of training areas were identified but through a lack of communication, time constraints and misunderstandings, these never materialised.

However, training and support was offered on a number of occasions and not taken up by volunteers. It is clear that a more efficient way of organising and delivering training needs to be developed in order to meet the needs of parent volunteers and sustain a high standard service.

By the end of phase 2 of the evaluation many of the problems around poor relationships between volunteers and volunteers and SSWP had been resolved. A more open and supporting relationship has evolved which has led to a happier atmosphere at the group. This has obviously had a positive effect on how the group is run, ensuring that local families who use the service enjoy the experience.

Previous studies have found that there has to be some level of personal gain when volunteering to avoid volunteer fatigue (Merrell 2000). Personal development gains, including acquiring new skills and knowledge, raising self esteem and gaining in confidence are often reported from studies about volunteering. Having links to paid work and further education has also been shown to be important to some who volunteer. Identifying specific training needs for parent volunteers is essential if they are to achieve any personal development and for SSWP to meet National Targets (objective IV: Tackle the adult skills gap).

Sure Start Objectives

The Littlemoor Toy Library service has begun to meet some of the National Sure Start objectives, particularly Objective 3, improving learning where the aim is to increase the proportion of children having normal levels of communication, language and literacy at the end of the foundation stage and to have access to good quality play and learning opportunities, helping progress towards early learning goals when they get to school.

Increasing links with other agencies and services in the community, for example, the local library would help the group meet this objective. Linking with the library and having library staff involved with the toy library would encourage reading, story telling, library membership and further integration into community services for the whole family.

The Littlemoor service is beginning to work towards achieving Objective 1: Improving social and emotional development by producing a strong social network at the group. Families have a place where they can meet others and form new friendships as well as enabling their children to interact and learn with other children. There are many young parents; some unsupported living within the Sure Start area at Littlemoor and having a group like the toy library where they can meet others, get information and receive support can make a huge difference to their lives.

This is also true for the children attending the group, for many of them, the toy library is the only place where they are mixing with children and adults outside of the immediate family. This interaction helps to improve their personal, social and emotional development and begins to prepare them for the transition into school.

The development of parent volunteers has been an important step for the group. The fact that the service is parent led with the opportunity to access professional advice and support when required has meant that families can feel that they 'own' the group and have control over what is offered. This plays an important role in strengthening families and communities (Objective 4). The introduction of a buddy system, where more parents can get involved at both the group and out in the community will further enhance this resource. It has been well documented that with the right amount of training, support and guidance volunteers can benefit from increased social interaction, positive attitude change and professional development which could lead to

paid work. It has also been recognised that there are benefits for the agency involved and the community at large (Miller et al 2002).

The way forward

It is clear that the toy library is meeting the needs of those families who are using the service. Other parents of pre-school children may not be attending the group because it is not what they want or they may not be using it because they do not know about it. Further evaluation of all play and learning opportunities in the area needs to be undertaken to discover ways to engage all families with pre-school children in the Littlemoor area into the Sure Start programme.

It would be beneficial to explore children's views and perspectives about the toy library in a more effective way. This evaluation attempted to find out what the children felt about borrowing the toys, but it was very difficult to do and only provided a vague understanding of how the children liked the particular toy they had played with. Further ways of exploring the field of listening to and consulting with young children needs to be developed throughout the Sure Start programme in order to ensure that services are appropriate and meeting the needs of all children.

There needs to be on-going evaluation of the toy library service. It is important for the future of the group that families are providing feedback on a regular basis, and also trying to find out why some parents and their children stop attending. SSWP project workers are very good at evaluating their own projects and can deliver training and advice to parent volunteers at the toy library on how to evaluate the group.

It may be beneficial for the volunteers to conduct a review of the project's finances to ascertain whether or not their current income is adequate to meet future needs or whether, in fact, this area of the project needs further attention to determine what will be required for the future. It may be possible for the parent volunteers to apply for grants and donations from various other organisations to assist them with purchasing new equipment in future years. SSWP project workers are on hand to advise on these matters and give assistance where possible.

Increasing the numbers of parent volunteers is essential for the future of the group. Encouraging new parents to help with organisation and getting more involved in all SSWP activities will further enhance the service and strengthen the community. Development of a training programme for volunteers would ensure that all interested parents have the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills that would benefit their personal development. SSWP need to continue to provide support and guidance to volunteers on a regular basis. Regular meetings and opportunities for volunteers to attend general meetings and be part of the wider Sure Start Programme needs to be encouraged.

Effective partnership working needs to be further encouraged. The toy library has shown how a multi-disciplinary team can work well together to provide support, play and learning opportunities, and access to other family services.

The Littlemoor Toy Library has come a long way. This evaluation has shown how a service can learn from its mistakes and develop strategies to improve its delivery to the community. The parent volunteers along with SSWP were able to look at the findings from phase 1 of the evaluation and make changes to the service based on what local parents had experienced. Findings from phase 2 of the evaluation has validated that these changes have resulted in the group offering a better service for parents and children in the Littlemoor area.

Up-date from a parent volunteer – December 2005

As a volunteer at the Littlemoor Toy Library I would have to say one of the best elements of it is the volunteer team we have at the moment. We are a close knit group, we work hard and we gain satisfaction from seeing the impact we have in our community. A couple of new volunteers have recently joined us who share the same mindset as ourselves, although we still need more help. We have recently re-elected volunteer posts, and evaluated what our individual roles are.

We have recently produced a questionnaire for the toy library members about the range of toys we currently lend out, as we are looking to purchase some more. We felt rather than making the decision as what to buy ourselves, we would ask the parents and carers that use the service what they would like to borrow.

As a group our priorities are still to make a wide variety of toys available to parents and carers in a community such as Littlemoor, and to make everyone who walks through our door feel cared for and welcomed.

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APPENDICES

- A Littlemoor Toy Library Catalogue**
- B Information sheet and consent form**
- C Language Tag**
- D Littlemoor Toy Library Questionnaire**
- E Fast feedback form**
- F Playworker Questionnaire**
- G Parent Volunteer Questionnaire**

Littlemoor Toy Library Catalogue (an example)

<p>Imagination</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shape sorter • Fireman outfit • Police outfit • Postman outfit • Kitchen • Tool set • Playmobil farm • Town mat • House • Puppets • Cultural outfits • Shop scales • Fruit and veg 	<table border="1"> <tbody> <tr> <td> <p>ITM 7</p>  <p>1 Penguin tambourine</p> </td> <td> <p>ITM 8</p>  <p>1 Koala tambourine</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> <p>ITM 9</p>  <p>Nursery collection 2 CD's</p> </td> <td> <p>ITM 10</p>  <p>Teletubbies CD ROM (no booklet)</p> </td> </tr> <tr> <td> <p>ITM 11</p>  <p>Pingu CD ROM (no booklet)</p> </td> <td> <p>ITM 12</p>  <p>YOHO AHoy CD ROM (no booklet)</p> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<p>ITM 7</p>  <p>1 Penguin tambourine</p>	<p>ITM 8</p>  <p>1 Koala tambourine</p>	<p>ITM 9</p>  <p>Nursery collection 2 CD's</p>	<p>ITM 10</p>  <p>Teletubbies CD ROM (no booklet)</p>	<p>ITM 11</p>  <p>Pingu CD ROM (no booklet)</p>	<p>ITM 12</p>  <p>YOHO AHoy CD ROM (no booklet)</p>
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<p>ITM 11</p>  <p>Pingu CD ROM (no booklet)</p>	<p>ITM 12</p>  <p>YOHO AHoy CD ROM (no booklet)</p>						
<p>IT and Music</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition of sounds • Lollipop drum • Penguin tambourine • Teletubbies CD Rom • Pingu CD Rom • Tweenies ready to play • Lego • Variety of music videos • Phonics radio 	<table border="1"> <tbody> <tr> <td> <p>IMG 1</p>  <p>Firefighter playsuit 1 trousers, 1 jacket, 1 helmet</p> </td> <td> <p>IMG 2</p>  <p>Police playsuit 1 jacket, 1 helme</p> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<p>IMG 1</p>  <p>Firefighter playsuit 1 trousers, 1 jacket, 1 helmet</p>	<p>IMG 2</p>  <p>Police playsuit 1 jacket, 1 helme</p>				
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<p>Construction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Click clack track • Wooden train set • Bricks • Mobilo 	<table border="1"> <tbody> <tr> <td> <p>IMG 3</p>  <p>Postie playsuit 1 jacket, 1 bag, 1 hat</p> </td> <td> <p>IMG 4</p>  <p>Box of cars. 32 various cars</p> </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<p>IMG 3</p>  <p>Postie playsuit 1 jacket, 1 bag, 1 hat</p>	<p>IMG 4</p>  <p>Box of cars. 32 various cars</p>				
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<p>Early years</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stacking rings • Musical turtle • Wonder cubes • Activity ball • Dinosaur eggs • Tiny trike 	<table border="1"> <tbody> <tr> <td> <p>IMG 5</p>  </td> <td> <p>IMG 6</p>  </td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<p>IMG 5</p> 	<p>IMG 6</p> 				
<p>IMG 5</p> 	<p>IMG 6</p> 						

Appendix B



Information Sheet for Parents

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

A team of researchers from Bournemouth University are carrying out a number of research studies in the Littlemoor, Westham, Melcombe Regis and Underhill areas to find out how families feel about the Sure Start Weymouth & Portland programme.

What is the study about?

The Littlemoor Toy Library/Stay & Play

What is its purpose?

The purpose of this study is to describe the service and consider whether it is starting to meet the national Sure Start Programme target of improving children's play and learning opportunities.

Why have you been chosen?

The Littlemoor service is one area of the Programme we would like to get your views about and would be very grateful if you would consider answering a questionnaire about your experiences and involvement with the service.

What will happen if you do agree to take part?

This research will take place over a period of 12 months and we aim to ask parents/carers who have had contact with the group to answer a questionnaire taking about 20 minutes of your time.

Confidentiality – who will know that you are taking part in the Study?

If you do decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Everything that you tell us is strictly confidential and will only be seen by the research team. All information will be anonymous when written up.

Where can you get further information?

If you would like to talk about this study further, Dawn Jackson (Researcher at Bournemouth University would be very pleased to talk to you on 01202 – 962172)

Thank you for your help



CONSENT FORM

Title of Project: Littlemoor Toy Library Evaluation

Please tick box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet [dated]

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. Confidentiality and anonymity are assured.

3. I agree to take part in the above research study.

4. ***I agree that a photograph of my child(ren) may be taken at the gr***
The photograph may be used in the evaluation report/literature (without any personal details attached) .

Name

Date

Signature

Example of a Language Tag from the Speech & Language Project worker

CD ROM GAMES
“Play is a child’s work”

Try sharing this computer game with your child in ways that encourage language:

- It’s really important to share this toy WITH your child – they’ll learn much more than if they are playing with it on their own.
- Whilst you and your child are waiting for the cd to load how about:
 - singing together
 - counting together
 - looking at the instruction book together (if there is one) – name the pictures.
 - Or get out the book/toys that match the computer game (if you have them)
- Talk about what to try out first: “Lets see what Milo does” or “what happens when we click on the elephant”.
- Talk about what is happening on the screen. There is usually a running commentary on the game but if YOU describe what is happening as well, your child will learn more.
- Let your child operate the mouse.
- If your child just keeps clicking try and encourage turn taking with the mouse – you click on a picture and do what it says, then your child’s turn.
- Try and relate what you and your child see on the computer screen to real life – “we do painting like the Tweenies”, “we saw a digger like that on the street didn’t we” etc.



Littlemoor Toy Library Questionnaire

Section A: General Details

1. Are you: Female Male
2. Age:
- under 18 19-24 25-29 30-34 35-39 40-44 45-49 50+
3. Employment details: (tick one box)
- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Looking after the home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Part-time working | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Full-time working | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Training/Course | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> |
4. How many children under 16 do you have? _____
5. Age of children (please write in age)
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 st child | 2 nd child | 3 rd child | 4 th child |
| 5 th child | | | |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | | | |
6. Do you and your child (children) live with:
- Partner Adult relatives Other adults No-one else
7. Do you consider you or your child (children) have special needs?
- | | | | |
|-------|--------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| | Yes | No | e.g. <i>hearing</i>
<i>speech & language</i>
<i>physical</i> |
| You | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
| Child | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | |
8. If 'Yes' would you mind telling us what these special needs are?

Section B: About the Littlemoor Toy Library Service

9. How long have you been coming to the toy library?

1-2 months

3-5 months

6-8 months

since the beginning

10. Were you already registered with Sure Start?

Yes

No

11. How did you hear about the Toy Library service?

12. Why do you think the Toy Library is being provided?

13. What made you go to the Toy Library?

What do you think of the venue where the sessions take place?

	😊		☹	☹
	excellent	good	poor	very poor
General condition of the inside of the building				
Temperature				
Location of venue				
Toilets				
Parking				
Condition of outside of the building e.g. play area				

15. How do you get to the Toy Library?

Walk

Car

Public transport

Other

16. Do you think the number of sessions offered is:

Right

Need more

17. Are the length of sessions right for you:

Yes

Should be longer

Should be shorter

18. Does the time of the toy library suit your needs:

Yes
No

18a. Please explain:

19. What do you think would be a good way of making more parents aware of the Toy Library?

20. Do you think the Toy Library is user friendly?

Yes
No

20a. please explain

21. Are you a member of the local Library?

Yes
No

22. If you are a member of the Library, since joining the Toy Library do you use the Library:

More often
Less often
No difference

23. Do you attend any other parent/toddler groups?

Yes
No

24. If yes, what are they? (if no why not)

Do you attend any other Sure Start activities or groups?

Yes No

If yes, what are they? (if no, why not)

Do you have an understanding of what other Sure Start services are available to you and your children?

Yes No

Would you like one of the Sure Start team to contact you to give you more information about the services there are on offer?

Yes No

IF YES, PLEASE WRITE YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS BELOW.

Section C: Using the Toy Library

25. Do you generally stay for the whole session at the toy library?

Yes
No
Sometimes

26. Does your child join in with the stay and play activities?

Always
Never
Sometimes

26a. Please explain:

27. Do you join in with the stay and play activities?

Always
Never
Sometimes

27a. Please explain:

28. How satisfied are you with the stay and play activities:

Very satisfied	satisfied	dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied

What do you think about the table activities run by the Sure Start playworkers:

They are an important part of the sessions	
They are not needed at every session	
They are not needed at all	

What do you think about the activities run at the session: (tick one answer)

CHILDRENS REACTION TO THE ACTIVITIES

	<i>strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
<i>Runs to the table first to participate</i>					
<i>Really likes the activities</i>					
<i>Prefers to play with the toys</i>					
<i>Loves making things</i>					
<i>Enjoys getting messy</i>					
<i>Will not participate</i>					
<i>Wants to do the same at home</i>					

Any other comments about your child's reaction to the activity table?

YOUR REACTION TO THE ACTIVITIES

	<i>strongly agree</i>	<i>agree</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>disagree</i>	<i>strongly disagree</i>
<i>Gives me a break</i>					
<i>Good to see child being creative</i>					
<i>Good to do together</i>					
<i>Get ideas to do at home</i>					
<i>Good preparation for school</i>					
<i>Better than doing messy stuff at home</i>					
<i>Playworkers enthusiastic</i>					
<i>Would like more structured play</i>					

If you would like more structured play, what sort of things would you like?

29. Who chooses the toy to take home?

You
 Child
 Both

30. Do you use the catalogue to look for toys?

Yes
 No
 Sometimes

31. Do you or family members play with your child with the toy at home?

Often
 Sometimes
 Hardly ever

32. How do you think your child(ren) feels when the toy is returned?

33. Do you think using the Toy Library has made a difference to your relationship with your child?

Yes No Not sure

33a. If yes, could you describe how?

Have you seen any change in your child's development since coming to the play time group?

On a scale of 1-4, where 1 is *excellent development*, 2 is *good development*, 3 is *some minor development* and 4 is *no change seen*. Please tick the relevant box:

	😊		😊	😞
	1	2	3	4
<i>Shares toys with other children</i>				
<i>Plays or interacts with other children</i>				
<i>More skilled with toys</i>				
<i>More skilled with art and craft activities</i>				
<i>Communicating more with other children</i>				
<i>Communicating more with adults</i>				
<i>Speaking and using more words</i>				
<i>Starts playing with other children</i>				
<i>Plays well by self</i>				
<i>Concentration</i>				
<i>Physical coordination</i>				
<i>Confidence</i>				

We would also like to know if attending Play Time 0-4's has made any difference to you. Please tick the box which is closest to how you feel.

On a scale of 1-4, where 1 is *True*, 2 is *Somewhat true*, 3 is *Not true* and 4 is *not applicable*.

	😊	😊	😞	
	1	2	3	4
<i>I am able to mix with other parents</i>				
<i>I can talk about any worries or problems</i>				
<i>I have made some new friends</i>				
<i>I feel that the volunteers are approachable</i>				
<i>I am aware what Sure Start offers</i>				
<i>I can relax, knowing the children are happy</i>				
<i>I am able to cope better at home</i>				
<i>I am playing with the children more at home</i>				
<i>I can join in and chat with others</i>				
<i>I am learning new things about play</i>				
<i>My relationship with my child is better</i>				
<i>Play Time 0-4's has been important for me</i>				

Thinking back to when you first attended the group, would it have been useful to:

	Yes	No	Not sure
Attend the first few sessions with someone else			
Know someone at the group before you attend			
Have someone from Sure Start talk about what to expect			
Have a parent talk to you about what to expect			

Which of the following would you like for the future of the Play time group:

	Yes	No	Not sure
To stay the same			
To be able to borrow toys			
To have more structured activities e.g. storytelling or singing			
To have more input from the Sure Start play workers			
More input from other agencies e.g. visiting speakers/health			
Other - please explain:			

34. Have you ever purchased a toy after borrowing a similar one from the Toy Library?

Yes No

35. When you attend the toy library how helpful do you find:

	Very helpful	Generally helpful	Not always helpful	Very unhelpful
Parent volunteers				
Playworkers				

36. Is the length of time you are able to borrow toys:

About right
 Should be longer
 Should be shorter

37. Is the amount you have to pay for using the stay and play:

About right
 Not enough
 Too much

38. Do you come here specifically for:

Toy library
Stay and play
Both

<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>

39. Are there any other toys you would like to see offered by the Toy Library?

40. Are there any other activities you would like to see offered by the toy library, eg, story sessions, singing?

41. Are there any toys you would like to see offered by the Toy Library Service for children with special needs?

Finally, it would be very helpful if you could answer the following questions:

42. What are the best things about the Toy Library?

43. What are the not so good things about the Toy Library?

44. Any other comments?

Thank you very much

Fast Feedback Form

LITTLEMOOR TOY LIBRARY

TOY REF 1:

TOY REF 2:.....

	TOY 1	TOY 2
1. Did your child enjoy playing with this toy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
2. Did you and your child play with this toy together?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
3. Did you use the guidelines on the card attached to this toy?	Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>

Any comments? _____

IN WHAT BOX DID YOUR CHILD PUT THE TOY?



Any comments? _____

Toy 1
Toy 2

**Play Time 0-4's Group
Child Development Worker Questionnaire**

1. Do you think the sessions have changed since the re-launch?

yes no

please explain: _____

2. What are the best things about your role at the group?

3. What are the most difficult things?

4. What changes (if any) would you like to see at the sessions?

5. Which of the following would be important to you as a child development worker at the group?

	Very important	Important	Not important
Parents more involved in activities			
Structured play e.g. singing, storytelling			
More play time sessions			
Increased funding			
More feedback from parents			
External links e.g education, libraries			
Getting the toy library running well			
Having an outside play area			
More parent volunteers			
Parents running the activities			

Any other comments?

Thank you

**Play Time 0-4's group
Parent volunteer Questionnaire**

1. How long have you been a volunteer? _____

2. Why did you decide to become a volunteer?

3. How satisfied are you with the support you receive from Sure Start?

Very satisfied	satisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied

4. Could you please explain your answer?

5. Why do you think parents need a group like Play Time 0-4's?

6. Do you think it is difficult to get parents to attend groups like Play Time 0-4's?

yes no not sure

Please explain: _____

7. What are the best things about being a parent volunteer at the group?

8. What are the most difficult things?

9. What changes (if any) would you like to see at the group?

10. Which of the following would be important to you as a parent volunteer?
(Please tick)

	Very important	Important	Not important
Training			
Gaining qualifications			
Extra support from Sure Start			
Increased funding			
Being paid			
External links e.g education, libraries			
Getting the toy library running well			
Becoming a buddy (peer support)			
Having outside play area			
Improved communication with Sure Start			
Feeling valued			
More play time sessions			
More parent volunteers			

Any other comments?

THANK YOU