

SURE START BOURNEMOUTH

LET'S PLAY TOGETHER



Making a difference



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Summary

This report describes the findings from the evaluation of the Let's Play Together Parent and Toddler Group at Sure Start Bournemouth. The aim was to discover how parents who attended the sessions felt about them and if the groups were making a difference to their or their children's lives. The evaluation also aimed to find out if Let's Play was reaching the Sure Start National objectives.

A total of 50 questionnaires were completed by parents/carers over a period of two weeks who had attended one of the Let's Play groups

The findings show very high satisfaction with the sessions.

- Parents were positive about the quality of toys, the environment and the Sure Start Workers who facilitated the groups. They felt that their children greatly benefited from attending Let's Play, especially in the way they played and socialised with others. Improvement in behavior was reported, such as sharing, concentrating and mixing with other children. Many parents stated that their children's speech and language had improved since going to the sessions.
- The study shows that Let's Play has made a difference to the lives of parents. The groups have become a social network for many parents, providing a place to meet others from their community, develop friendships and provide support. Parents have also been encouraged to become involved in the Let's Play groups as 'parent buddies' and have the opportunity to participate in training courses.
- Let's Play sessions are delivered by a multi-skilled team. This integrated model allows parents and their children access to many different services. It not only gives Let's Play sessions added value in terms of what they can offer but also provides a gateway to other agencies and services.
- Let's Play is meeting many of the Sure Start National targets, especially objective three, Improving Children's Ability to Learn. The presence of project workers with experience and expertise in a variety of professional fields at the groups ensures that targets within the other Sure Start objectives are being addressed.

Due to the popularity of the current service, the sessions often reach capacity. Extra sessions and alternative venues were suggested by parents. This however, has resource and staffing implications. It is the aim of Sure Start to support and develop existing services in the area and not to replace them. Grants, training, advice and extra support is given to other services in the area ensuring there is good quality play and learning opportunities throughout the Sure Start community.

It is clear that the Let's Play Together Parent and Toddler Group is providing a much needed play and learning opportunity for children in the Sure Start area as well as being an important resource for parents enabling them to meet other parents from their community. The evidence from this evaluation will be reported to the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and contribute and inform the development of a Preventative Strategy for all of Bournemouth's children.

Introduction

This report describes the findings from the evaluation of the Let's Play Together Parent and Toddler Group at Sure Start Bournemouth. This evaluation is part of the overall research and evaluation strategy of the Sure Start programme which aims to find out if over the years, there is an impact on children's readiness 'to flourish when they get to school' which is the aim of Sure Start nationally.

Sure Start workers are committed to ongoing evaluation of their practice and to further development of services where necessary, to find out if services are of value to families of young children,

This evaluation was designed to look at how Let's Play Together was meeting the need of Sure Start residents and how it was addressing government targets for Sure Start, especially the following.

Improving children's ability to learn, in particular by encouraging high quality environments and childcare that promotes early learning, provide stimulating and enjoyable play, improve language skills and ensure early identification and support of children with special needs. (Objective 3)

There are three targets associated with this objective:

To achieve by 2004 for children aged 0-3 in the 500 Sure Start areas, a reduction of five percent in the number of children with speech and language problems requiring specialist intervention by the age of 4.

All children in Sure Start areas to have access to good quality play and learning opportunities, helping progress towards early learning goals when they get to school.

Increased use of libraries by families with young children in Sure Start areas.

The Let's Play Together service focuses primarily on the second of the targets. In addition it addresses the other targets by incorporating other family services, i.e. speech and language, toy library and the Sure Start project workers.

◆ Background

The social and educational benefits of Lets Play type activities for children are well documented, however little research is available on the advantages such programmes give to parents who attend with their children.

Play enables children to learn important social skills of sharing, listening, turn taking, giving and taking instruction, story telling, and imagination. Language skills are practiced and developed through play. These are the skills that children need when they start school because without them they cannot thrive.

Looking at the benefits pre-school play provision brings mothers the Pre-school Playgroup Association (PPA) told an Education Select Committee (1989):

Parents learn and develop from working with their own and others' children ... The pre-school play movement can be seen as a major contributor to adult education and a catalyst for change in the lives of hundreds of thousands of adults, mainly women.

Parental involvement is therefore an essential principle in the overall development of a play activity in its local community. Children benefit from the participation of their parents whether it is working directly on the educational activities, servicing the needs of the group or involvement in the management process.

The research does show that mothers' involvement is more common among the more socially and economically advantaged groups, though a substantial proportion of less advantaged mothers do participate in their children's play groups. Sure Start providers from the Foxhill and Parson Cross scheme in Sheffield, commented positively, within an evaluation of their play and learning opportunities in 2001, on the social benefits mothers obtained from attending groups regularly where they are able to gain information and advice and become involved in the running of the group.

Mothers from the same Sheffield scheme reflected on the loneliness of raising young children and how participation in play schemes can enhance their lives as well as those of their children. Comments such as "To socialize with people of my age and to get me out of the house" and "I also get some adult conversation myself by talking to other Mums" indicates the need to mix with other grown ups. The social aspect is not always easy and there are tensions sometimes within the groups. "... The other mothers tend to ignore you if you are not in their circle" reflects this.

The social network that mothers can develop and the peer support obtained from others within the community seems to provide important psychological and social benefits. Therefore apart from the obvious advantages play activities have for the children these groups can also be a source of advice, information, friendship and support for the mothers.

◆ **What is Let's Play Together?**

Sure Start began in the old community centre in January 2001, where the brand new Sure Start building now stands. Before the new building was completed the programme was based at the Heathlands site within a primary school setting where the Project Manager was working alone until September 2001 when the Sure Start Bournemouth Project Workers were recruited.

The first Let's Play was held at Heathlands in March 2001 and was attended by a total of two families. The Project Worker Early Years and Special Needs started in her post in the following September and began recruitment of the Early Years Team, who were all fully qualified, experienced Nursery Nurses. The team consists of five full-time staff and three regular part-time workers. Plans are in place to employ a further two part-time workers later this year to help meet the needs of the community.

The aim of this Sure Start project is to bring improved opportunities, such as better children's play and learning opportunities, increased support for families, training and help for parents/carers of children with Special Needs. As a result the health, education and quality of life for children and their families will be improved.

In March 2002, the now expanding team moved to the new Sure Start Centre at Moore Avenue, West Howe, where there are now two Let's Play sessions held during the week and one still held at Heathlands. All sessions are very well attended, sometimes to capacity.

Sure Start parents/carers are always being invited to attend the Let's Play groups, often by the Sure Start Home Visitors and also by the other Project Workers. Health Visitors, Midwives and parents/carers themselves are continually spreading the word about the groups. All of these people will offer to accompany new parents/carers to the groups if they are anxious about attending for the first time.

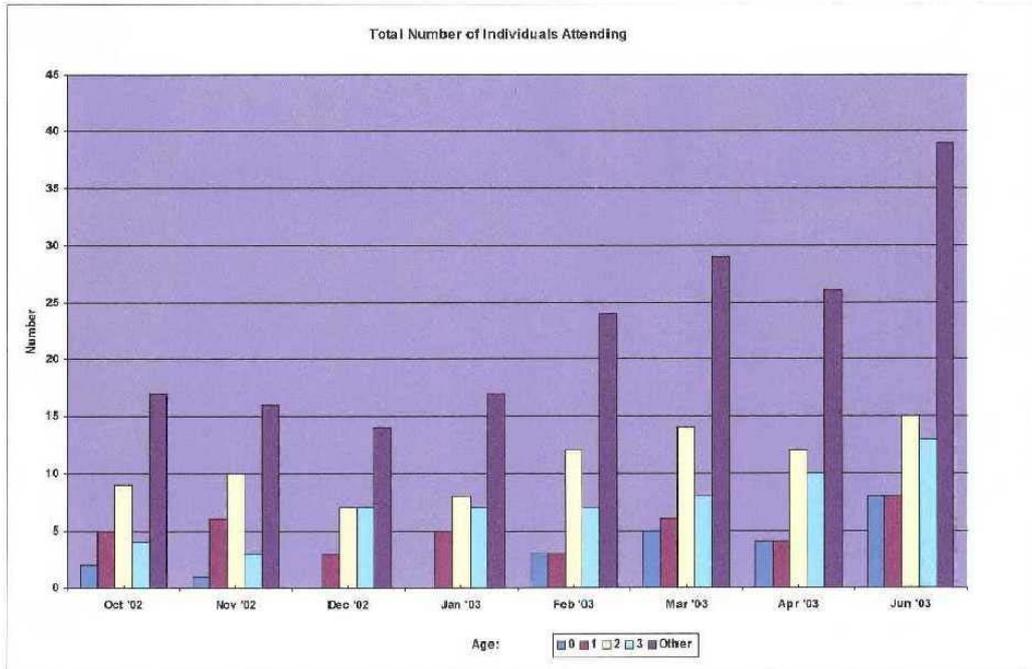
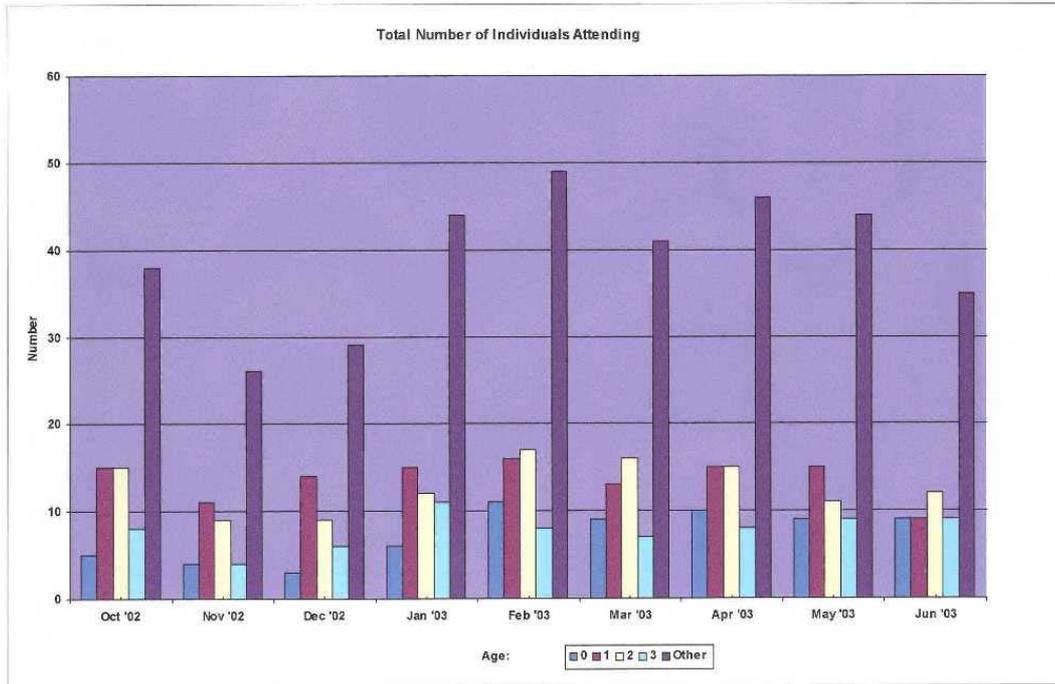
A number of experienced workers are available at the sessions to offer advice, support and generally be there to chat with families and play with the children. This includes the Project Worker Health and Project Worker Information and Libraries.

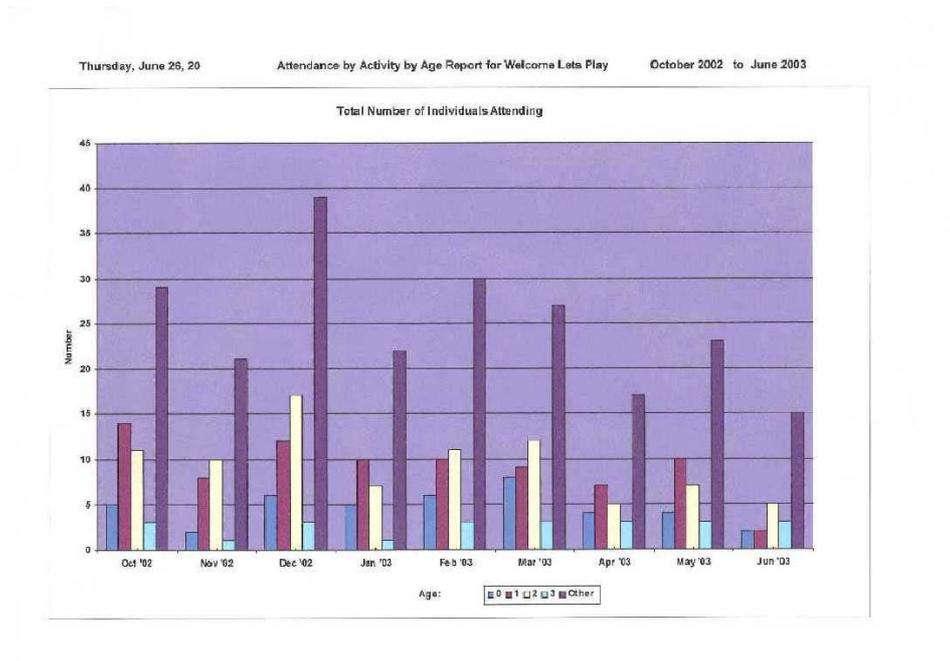
Sure Start has recruited some of the well established mums to train and become Parent Buddies, who help to welcome new families and support the Early Years Workers in the running of the busy sessions.

There are special groups and services that parents can access for children who may need some extra support, which includes the Speech & Language Worker. Parents can refer themselves and their children to these services or referrals may be made from the community Health Visitor or other professionals working in the area. There is strong collaborative working within the Sure Start area, which offers a cohesive service.

Sure Start Bournemouth now has a total of 327 families registered and many of these are regularly attending the variety of services that are offered, both for parents with their children and for parents alone. The following graphs show attendance at the Let's Play Groups from October 2002 to June 2003. The graphs show the numbers of under ones, two year olds, three year olds and parents/carers who are attending the sessions at the Let's Play together (Thursday), Let's play together (Monday) and the welcome to Let's Play.

The Early Years Team has worked extremely hard to provide good quality play and learning opportunities for children along with support from the whole Sure Start Team. For a look at a typical working day of the team see 'A day in the life of our Early Years Workers' at the end of the report.





Purpose of the study

The aim of this evaluation was to find out how parents/carers who attended the Let's Play parent and toddler groups felt about the sessions, their experiences of the groups and to discover if Let's Play was making a difference to the lives of parents and their children. The evaluation also hoped to find out if the Let's Play groups were reaching the Sure Start objectives outlined in the Sure Start Bournemouth revised plan, 2002-2004.

Sure Start objectives

1. Improving social and emotional wellbeing
2. Improving health
3. Improving children's ability to learn
4. Strengthening families and communities

Preparation for the study

Information letters and consent forms were distributed to all parents who attended Let's Play prior to the research. Parents were given the opportunity to ask questions about the evaluation and withdraw at any time. The Early Years Team and the Sure Start Project Workers were familiar with the evaluation plan and were available to parents to answer any queries leading up to the questionnaires being distributed.

Methods used

A self-completing questionnaire was used in this evaluation. The questionnaire consisted of three sections:

- Section A - General details, which included questions about age, employment and living arrangements.
- Section B - Using Lets Play, asked about how parents heard about and accessed the groups.
- Section C - Has Let's Play made a difference? This section consisted of a series of statements about whether attending Let's Play had made a difference to their child's behaviour and their own lives.

A copy of the questionnaire is shown at the end of the report.

A questionnaire was given to every parent/carer who had been attending any of the groups for at least four weeks.

It was agreed by the Evaluation Working Group that a researcher would distribute the questionnaires at the beginning of each of the three parent and toddler sessions and be available for any queries whilst parents completed them. This method of distribution was repeated for two weeks in order to obtain as many users of the service as possible.

A total of 50 questionnaires were completed Table 1 shows the numbers of returned questionnaires from each of the sessions.

Table.1

	Completed Questionnaires
Let's Play Together - Heathlands	15 (30%)
Welcome to Let's Play	14 (28%)
Let's Play Together - Moore Ave	21 (42%)
Total	50 (100%)

Although all questionnaires were completed, this represents a snap shot over a two week period. Registration data shows that more parents/carers attend Let's Play overall.

Parents with more than one child attending the sessions were asked to fill in an extra sheet for section C.

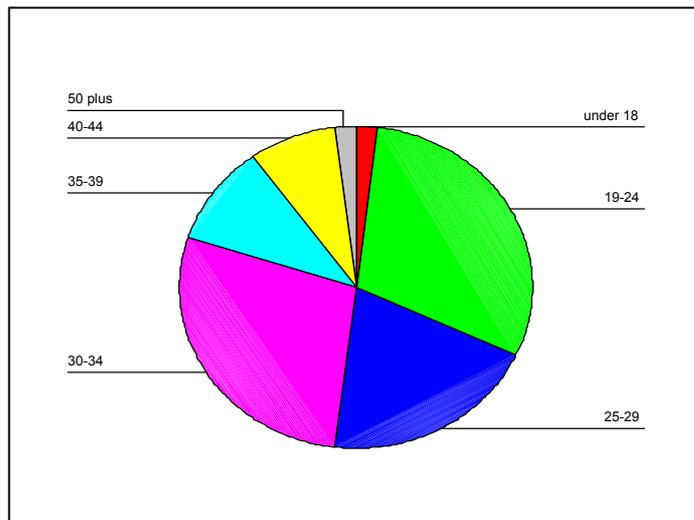
Parents were asked to give their postcode in order to find out if Let's Play was being accessed by parents outside of the Sure Start area. Forty-nine responded to this question, with only two living outside of the area.

Findings

General details

Forty-seven of the parents who responded to the questionnaire were female and all but one was the parent of the child (one grandparent). The ages ranged from under 18 to 50 plus, with the majority aged between 19 and 34 (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Age of parents attending Let's Play.



There were no real differences in the ages of parents attending a particular session except that there were more parents in the 35-44 age range attending the Welcome to Let's Play session at Moore Avenue on Monday morning. Findings also show that more parents attending this session had three or more children which could account for the older age group.

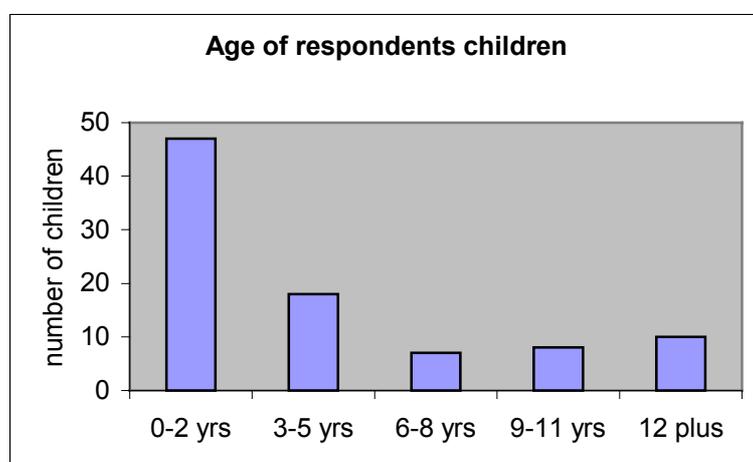
Three quarters of the respondents stated they were looking after the home, with nine in part-time work and three parents working full-time. Table 2 shows how many children there are in each family.

Table 2

Children in family	Number of parents
1	27 (54%)
2	11 (22%)
3	8 (16%)
4	3 (6%)
5	1 (2%)
Total	50 (100%)

Figure 2 shows the ages of respondents' children. The average age of a child attending the groups is two years.

Figure 2



Thirty parents (60%) reported that they lived with a partner, with four living with an adult relative. Fifteen (30%) were single parent households.

Parents were asked if they or their child had any special needs. A small number of parents reported their own special needs, which included hearing difficulties and dyslexia. Children's special needs included speech and language difficulties and social and behavioural problems. Some parents also had concerns about their child's eating habits.

Parents were asked about the contact they and their children had with other professionals before they started going to Let's Play and if that had changed since attending the group. Table 3 shows that consultations with professionals, such as Social Workers, Health Visitors and the Education Psychologist had reduced since accessing Let's Play for both parents and children. Interestingly, contact with the Speech & Language service had increased which could be due to the introduction of the Speech & Language project worker at Sure Start. Consultations with the GP had not changed.

Table 3.

Professional	Before attending Let's Play		Since attending Let's Play	
	Parent	Child	Parent	Child
Social Worker	3	1	0	0
Health Visitor	12	20	4	7
GP	9	7	9	7
Education Psychologist	-	1	-	0
Speech & Language	-	3	-	4

There may be other variables, apart from Sure Start that impact on these lower figures. Further research needs to be carried out to discover why contacts are changing.

Accessing the groups

As Table 1 on page 4 indicates, attendance at the different Let's Play sessions on the days that the questionnaire was distributed was fairly equal, with 42% attending the Moore Avenue session on a Thursday. However, parents were asked to indicate which sessions they regularly attended and results show that nearly half of the parents accessed more than one session (table 4). These sessions being the Lets Play Together at Heathlands on Mondays and the Thursday Lets Play Together at the Sure Start Centre.

Table 4

Sessions attended	Number of parents
Monday - Moore Ave	8 (16%)
Monday - Heathlands	8 (16%)
Thursday	11 (22%)
Mon-Moore & Thursday	11 (22%)
Mon-Heathlands & Thursday	12 (24%)
Total	50 (100%)

It appears that many parents enjoyed accessing more than one Let's Play and comments in the questionnaire showed that parents wanted extra sessions at both sites with different times being offered, for example, some parents indicated that an afternoon session would offer more choice.

Parents had the chance to describe any negative feelings about the group and the only issue that was raised was the fact that sessions were sometimes very crowded, which generated high noise levels and a very hectic environment. One parent explained:

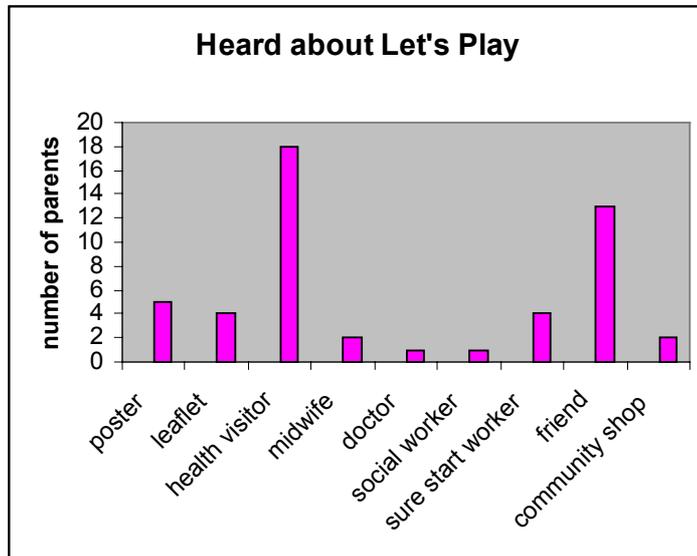
'Sometimes not enough space for all the children, feels a bit confined' Parent

It is clear that the Let's Play Together groups have become very popular with Sure Start residents and this has meant that the groups are busy and often at capacity. Sure Start Project Workers are aware of this and have had to limit attendance purely for safety reasons. Progress is being made in offering an outreach service and linking with other Parent and Toddler groups in the Sure Start area to expand the whole play and learning service. One parent felt that limiting places to Sure Start residents only should be enforced and that people should not bring friends and their children to the groups. However, it is evident that over 90% of users of the Lets Play service are from the Sure Start area.

Parents were asked how they first heard about the group. The most popular way of finding out about Lets Play was through the Health Visitor, followed by being told about it by a friend. Initially the Community Health Visitor told parents about Let's Play. Now there are a number of different professionals who are aware of the service and are spreading the word. Other members of the Sure Start Team, such as the Midwife, Sure Start Home Visitors, Project Workers Health and Libraries and Information have regular contact with new parents and play an important role in

talking to parents and telling them about all of the services offered at Sure Start. Figure 3 shows the different ways in which parents found out about Lets Play.

Figure 3



Most of the parents had been attending Lets Play between six and twelve months. The majority of parents (82%) walk to the Lets Play session, with only nine parents (18%) travelling by car. This indicates that the venues are accessible for parents with children in the immediate Sure Start area.

One of the initial criteria for all Sure Start programmes was that services should be within 'pram-pushing' distance. It is clear from these findings that having the sessions at both Moore Avenue and Heathlands, Let's Play Together is meeting this criteria for a large proportion of Sure Start residents. However, it is unclear whether residents from the Paddington Grove area are accessing the service. Further research would identify this.

Registration data, however, shows that some parents from Paddington Grove are accessing the service and do actually walk to the sessions, often with friends who they have met at Let's Play. Also, the Sure Start Home Visitors, who play a very important role in Let's Play, offer an limited outreach service to areas further away such as Paddington Grove, which includes fun days in the area, picnics and providing information and support to parents about all the services on offer at Sure Start.

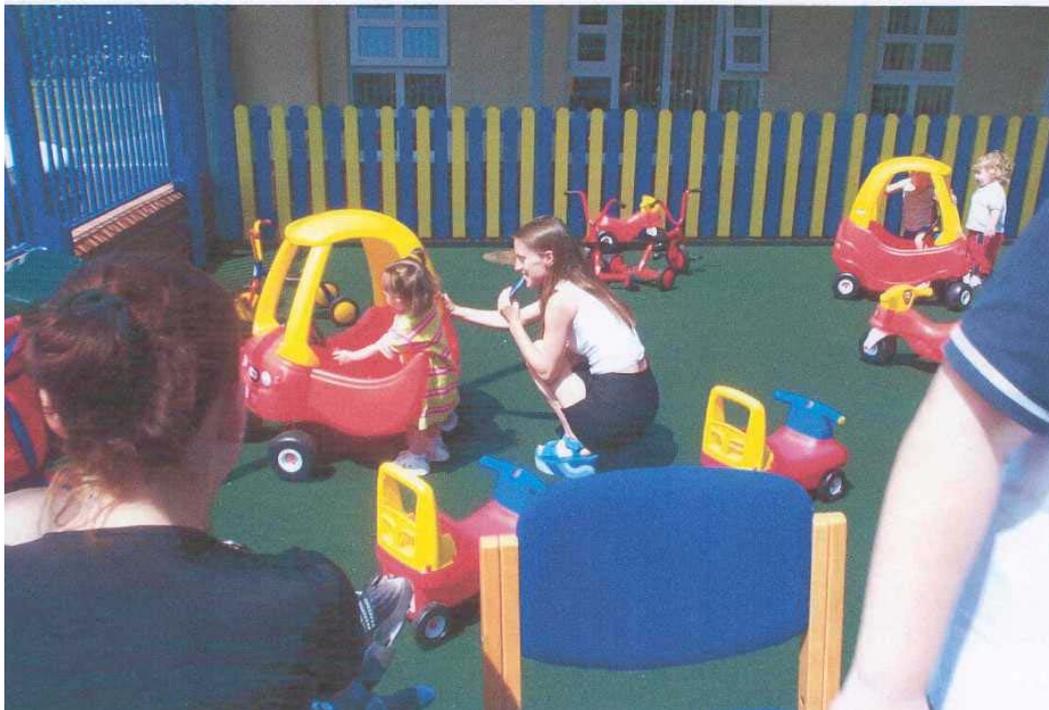
Findings show that over half of the parents who go to the Lets Play sessions do not attend any other groups with their child. However 19 respondents stated that they did access other groups such as alternative parent and toddler groups run by either schools or the church, local recreational groups or other Sure Start groups which included the Opportunities Group, the Toy Library, the West Howe Breastfeeding Support Group and the Parents Forum.

Other Sure Start project workers and the Sure Start Home Visitors have been increasingly involved in supporting Let's Play, by working alongside families,

providing information, support and advice. They are also involved in referring to other groups or courses when needed, for example, parents with an interest in art, computers or health for personal development. Also, groups such as stop smoking, stress and relaxation, and baby massage have been very popular groups for parents who have heard about them through Let's Play.

The Early Years Team also play a vital role in befriending parents and providing information about all the other services available at Sure Start. The relationship that forms is one of mutual trust and is empowering, enabling parents who would otherwise not have these opportunities to access many different activities. Some of these activities are with their children, but, just as importantly, groups are available which parents can access for their own personal development and have a crèche facility provided.

The next three questions in this section were aimed at finding out if parents were satisfied with the group overall and with the quality of the toys and also if they felt the group was meeting a need for local parents. Findings indicate very high satisfaction with all of these, with 94% of parents very satisfied with the quality of the toys, 96% very satisfied overall and 96% of parents believing that the Lets Play Together Group was meeting a need for local parents and their children.



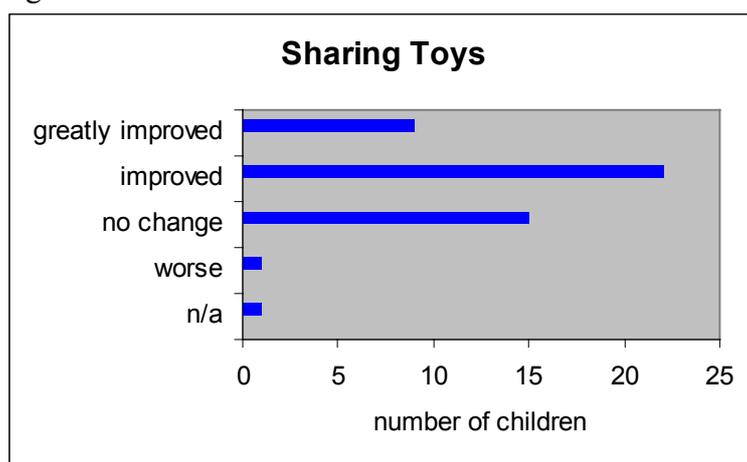
Making a difference

Children's behaviour

The last two sections in the survey aimed to discover if parents felt that the Lets Play sessions had made a difference to their child's behaviour or had had any impact on their own lives. It was clear from the findings that parents believed their children had benefited from attending the Let's Play sessions in a variety of ways. A total of 48 parents answered this question about the differences Let's Play had made to their children and the following figures show how these parents felt their children's behaviour had changed since attending the sessions.

The majority of parents felt that their children were able to socialise with other children and other adults more effectively and share toys in a much more positive way. Figure 4 shows that 62% of parents who answered this question felt that their child had either greatly improved or improved at sharing their toys with other children at the sessions.

Figure 4



Parents described the quality and range of toys as excellent and felt that they were very fortunate to have access to a service which provided a variety of activities and learning opportunities which they could do with their children. Activities such as painting, sticking, water and sand play were described as some of the best things about Let's Play because they were often very difficult to do at home and parents said these were activities which they wanted to be able to do with their child.

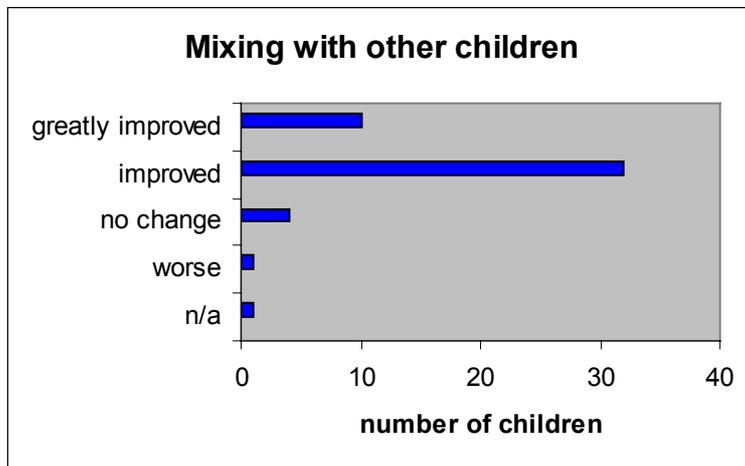
Parents also mentioned how good it was for their children to be able to play with toys that they did not have at home and felt that their child was benefiting from the wide variety of educational toys and activities. One parent explained:

It's the chance for my child to play with different toys and games and to mix with other children and adults in an environment away from home. Parent



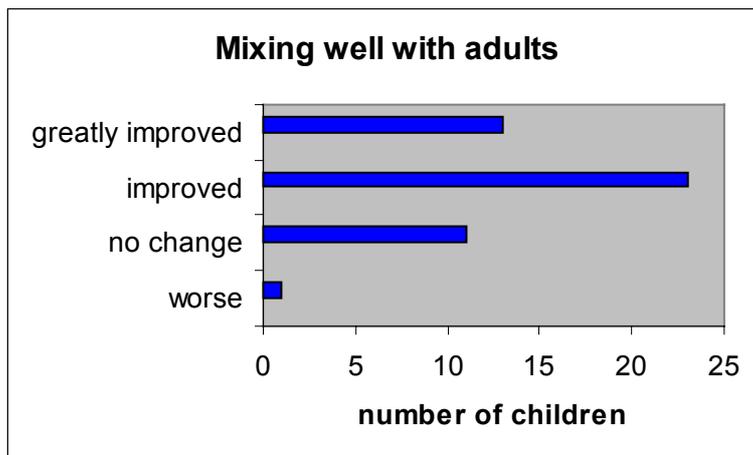
Figure 5 indicates that 42 out of the 48 (84%) who answered this question believe that since attending Let's Play, their child's ability to mix with other children has either greatly improved or improved.

Figure 5



Parents also felt that their children were better at mixing with other adults at the sessions, 72% having either greatly improved or improved (figure 6). Parents described the friendly, welcoming environment as having a positive effect on their children which made it much easier for them to socialise with others. Also the fact that many of the activities were organised in small groups, enabled children to join together and experience new activities with others. One mum explained that her child had really '*come out of her shell*' since going to the sessions and that it was a real struggle to leave at the end.

Figure 6



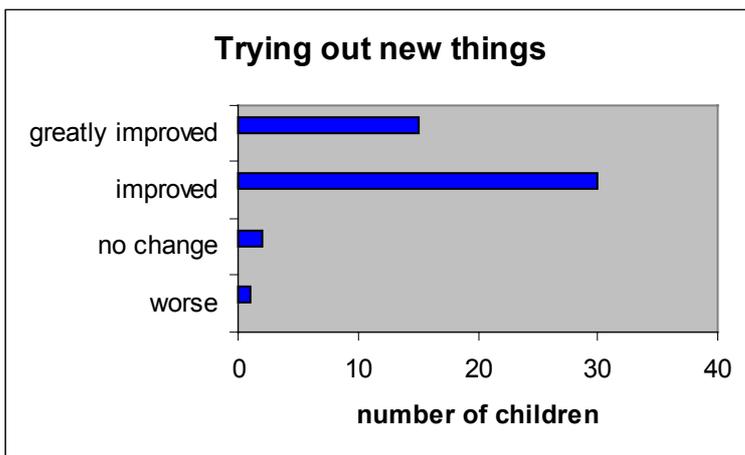
Many of the parents felt that one of the best things about Let's Play was the fact that both they and their children could meet others away from their normal environment. They explained that it was important to them that they could socialise with other local people who had similar needs to themselves and many new friendships had been formed.

It gives my child the chance to play and learn with other children and stops the boredom of being at home everyday Parent

It gets us both out of the house Parent

According to the parents, 90% of the children had improved at 'trying out new activities' (figure 7).

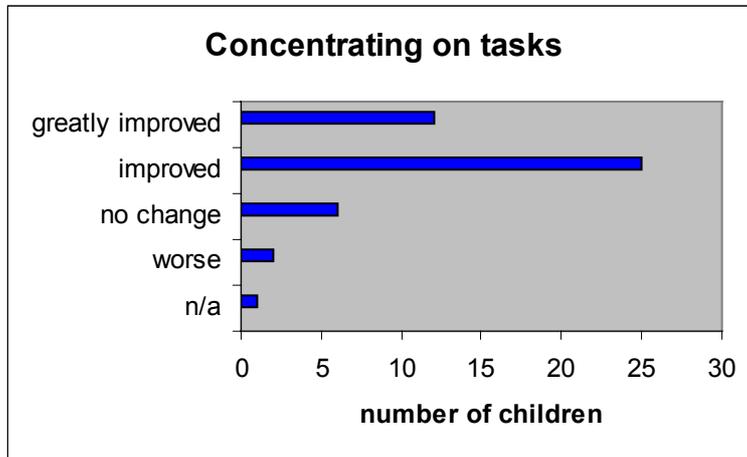
Figure 7



Once again, parents expressed positive feelings about the way in which Let's Play enabled their children to play with a wide range of toys and experience new activities. Their children played with different toys to those they would normally play with, joining in a variety of activities which were new to them and generally getting involved in all aspects of the Let's Play session.

The ability of their children to concentrate on tasks was also felt by parents to have improved since attending Let's Play, with 74% of those who answered this question stating that their child had either greatly improved or improved in the way they concentrated on a particular activity (figure 8).

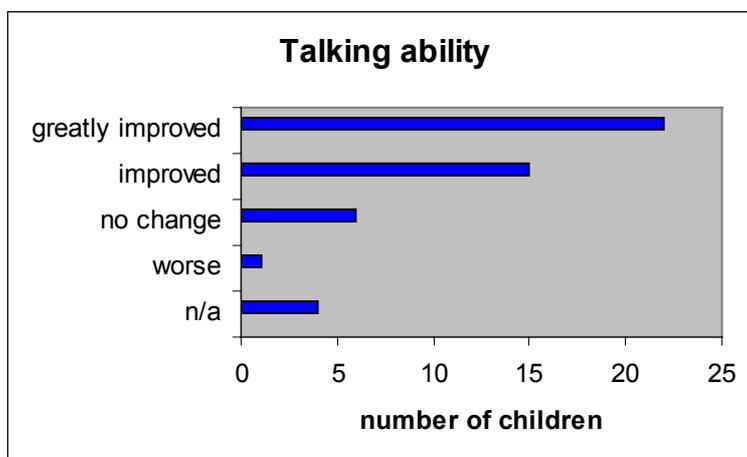
Figure 8



The aim of Sure Start nationally is to ensure that children start school better equipped to progress. Early indications from the Let's Play Early Years Team and from informal discussions with local schools show that children who have attended the Let's Play groups are making the transition to school easily. However, further research is needed to find out how Sure Start children are integrating into school and whether projects like Let's Play are contributing to this transition.

The final question about children's change of behaviour since attending Let's Play was about their talking ability. Parents were asked if they felt their child's speech and language had improved since going to the sessions. Findings show that 22 out of 48 responses (44%) believed their child's speech had greatly improved and a further 15 (30%) had improved (figure 9).

Figure 9



Mixing with others and listening to others is something the Early Years Team adhere to. They plan many activities which enhance these skills, such as song time, where all parents and their children sit together and sing fun type action songs. A song book is produced from this and parent's take it home and carry on this activity. Activities where there is a lot of interaction between adults and children are encouraged as well as a regular sit down time for a snack and a drink which encourages children to talk to each other and to adults.



If any problems about speech and language are noticed by either the Early Years Team or by the parent raising concerns, there is a process which is followed where the Team can contact the Sure Start Speech and Language Worker who will follow up each child and provide support, advice and additional professional help when needed. In some cases the Early Years Team will provide individual speech and language support to children in their home.

Parents were asked to say what the best things were about Let's Play for their children. The most frequent answer was the way all the children were able to play together and make friends with other children. Friendly approachable staff and a safe environment were also very important to parents and above all every parent who completed a questionnaire mentioned how Let's Play was a fun place for their child. Two parents described how they felt about the group:

My daughter thrives on coming here and I feel she is safe and happy Parent

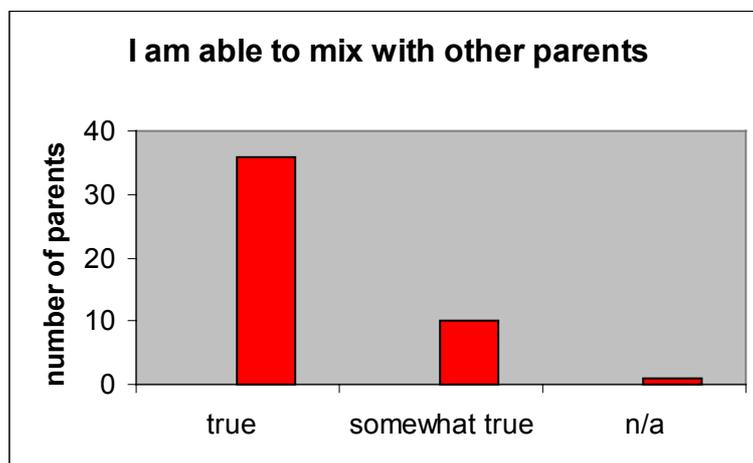
The quality of Sure Start has made my child's life more full. The whole thing is of a high standard Parent

Impact on the lives of parents

The final part of the questionnaire asked parents to indicate if Let's Play had made any difference to their own lives. Respondents were asked to state if they felt the statements were true, somewhat true, not true or not applicable to them in the context of Let's Play.

The need and importance of the social and emotional support provided by partners, friends, families and neighbours is well documented in the literature on personal development and social integration. Having somewhere to go and meet others was extremely important to all of the parents who participated in this study. Figure 11 shows that 72% of parents felt they were able to mix with others at the Let's Play session. They were also asked if they were able to join in and chat with other parents and if it was easy for them to make friends. Over 90% of respondents indicated these statements as being true or somewhat true.

Figure 11



The majority of parents (82%) agreed that they could relax at the sessions as they knew their children were happy. This made socialising with others easier and contributed to the fact that parents returned to Let's Play week after week.

Feelings about the staff at Let's Play were very positive. Comments such as being friendly, welcoming and approachable were often given by respondents. Many parents explained that the staff were good with the children. One mum felt that it was important that familiar staff were seen at both venues.

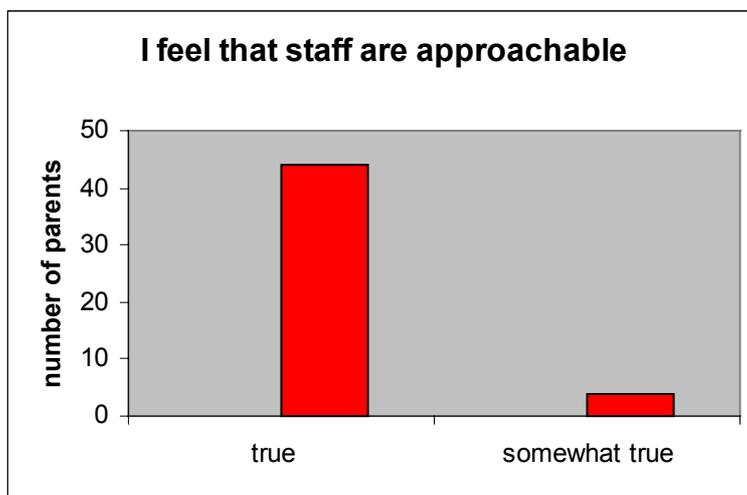
The Early Years Team believe that parents, although quiet and reserved at first were soon able to relax and get involved in the activities carried out at the sessions. Observation by the researcher at the groups indicated that mums took part in many of the planned activities and helped the Early Years Team by clearing toys away, making drinks and preparing snack time.

It is clear that parents believed that Let's Play was a service geared towards families and participation and not a group entirely run by professionals. One parent explained:

The staff are so friendly and easily approachable. My social life regarding friends has greatly improved. It's improved both our lives immensely Parent

Figure 12 shows that out of the 48 parents who answered the question about approachability of staff, 44 (88%) believed this to be true and the remaining four parents indicated it was somewhat true.

Figure 12



This, combined with being able to relax and also feeling confident to talk about any worries (figure 13) shows that parents who attend Let's Play are happy with the Sure Start workers who facilitate the sessions.

Figure 13



Parents were asked to indicate if they felt they were coping better at home and if their relationship with their partner and child was better since attending Let's Play. Table 4 shows the number of parents who felt these statements to be true.

Table 4

	True	Somewhat true	Not true	Not applicable
I am able to cope better at home	16	18	7	6
My relationship with my children is better	25	13	2	8
My relationship with my partner is better	14	4	10	19

Some parents felt that their relationship with their partner had not changed as a result of them attending Let's Play. One of the aims of Sure Start Bournemouth is to involve more fathers by changing the times and days of activities and making them more accessible, for example, holding activities on a Saturday. This flexible use of existing resources would encourage families to use Sure Start services together and in turn may have a positive effect upon the relationships within the family.

Some parents commented that one of the best things about the group was that it gave parents a break from childcare for a short while. Even though they were still with their child, the session allowed them to watch their children playing and enjoying themselves while they could have a chat with other parents. This break was also seen to have a knock on effect which helped parents cope with the rest of their day.

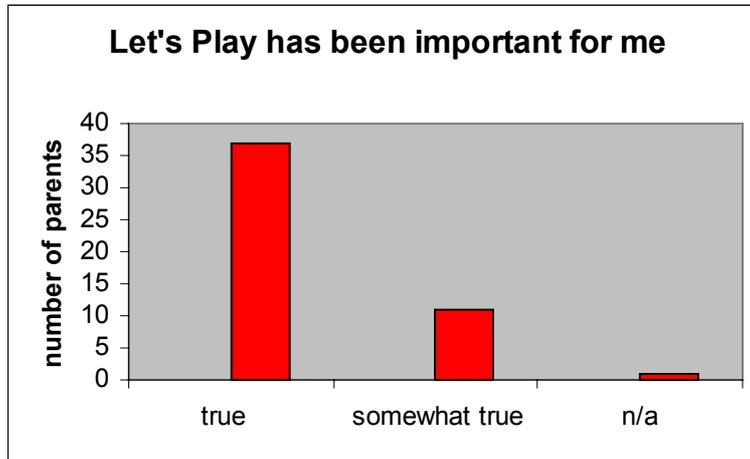
Parents were asked to reflect on how they felt since attending Let's Play and if they felt good about themselves. Figure 14 shows that 42 out of the 47 who answered this question believed this to be either true or somewhat true. Many parents described how they had felt more confident, enabling them to make new friends and feel included within their local community.

Figure 14



Finally, parents were asked if they agreed with the statement that Let's Play had been important for them. Figure 15 shows that 37 out of a possible 49 (74%) believed it to be true and 11 (22%) somewhat true.

Figure 15



Parents were given the opportunity at the end of the questionnaire to comment on Let's Play generally and to make suggestions for any extra activities that they would like to see at the sessions. Many parents felt that the sessions were fine just as they were. However the following list shows some of the comments received by individuals.

- Extra Services**
- More reading and songs as a group
 - Preparation for school/structured learning
 - Music session using instruments
 - Learning the alphabet in a fun way
 - Group activities
 - Pottery
 - Outings
 - Extra sessions *
 - Respite facility *
- * More than one parent made these suggestions

It needs to be made clear that the suggestions above are from individuals who may not attend all of the sessions and may be new to Let's Play, as most of the extra sessions wanted are already provided in all of the Let's Play sessions. The respite facility was suggested by a number of respondents, which was explained as being a service offered for parents to leave their children in a supervised crèche and use that time for themselves. Sure Start do run a coffee hour regularly at Healthlands which provides a short respite facility enabling parents to meet and chat with others from their community while their children are able to play in the crèche facilitated by the Early Years Team. This service was suggested at one of the Parent Forums and promoted by the Sure Start Home Visitors.

Conclusions

The success of Let's Play Together

The findings from this evaluation show very high satisfaction with the Let's Play Together Parent & Toddler Group by all of its users. Parents were extremely positive about the quality of toys, the environment and the Sure Start workers who facilitated the sessions. The group is informal, with an emphasis on social support and friendship as well as providing a caring and informative environment for children. Parents are encouraged to take an active role in the running of the groups and are willing to get fully involved in all of the activities that are planned.

Babies and children play through all their waking hours wherever they are. This includes at home, in nursery settings and in a variety of community settings. However, parents believe that their children have benefited particularly from attending Let's Play Together, both in the way that they play and socialise with others. Speech and language improvements were reported by many parents and it can be concluded that the Let's Play sessions give children the opportunity to develop their speech in an informal environment, with the support of a highly qualified team.

Children are not the only ones who have benefited from the groups, it is clear from this study and from talking to the Early Years Team that Let's Play has made a difference to the lives of parents. The groups have become a social network for many of the parents, providing a much needed place to meet others from the community, develop friendships and offer on going support. Parents are also being given the opportunity to become more involved in the running of the groups and to participate in other services. Training has also been provided with a long-term view towards employment.

Meeting Sure Start Objectives

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

Let's Play Together sessions are delivered by a multi-skilled team which comprises the Early Years Team, supported by a range of other workers. This 'one-stop shop' or integrated model allows parents and their children access to, for example, the Project Worker Health, the Project Worker Libraries & Information, the Speech & Language Worker, the Midwife and Project Worker Groups and Volunteers as mentioned previously in this report. It not only gives Let's Play Together sessions 'added value' in terms of what they can offer but also means that there is a gateway to other services and agencies.

Moreover, it can be concluded that Let's Play Together is meeting many of the National Sure Start targets, especially Objective 3, Improving Children's Ability to Learn. It is clear that the sessions are providing a high quality environment which gives stimulating and enjoyable play. The quality of toys and the physical space are excellent. This, together with a dedicated and experienced team of workers, ensures that children receive a high standard of play and learning opportunities.

Language skills are being improved along with identification of children with special needs. Early referral to the Speech and Language Worker and the opportunity for children with special needs to be visited at home by one of the qualified Early Years Workers ensures that this target is being met.

The presence of the Sure Start Project Worker Libraries and Information at the Let's Play sessions ensures that parents and their children are being encouraged to participate in reading, using the library and the toy library. Regular story-telling takes place at the sessions and the Project Worker is available to offer advice and support to parents who have any worries about their child's educational development.

As already highlighted above, Let's Play Together has become an important place for parents to go with their children to meet others who have similar needs and where friendships begin. Therefore, it can be said that Objective 1 - Improving Social and Emotional Well-being is being met by the Let's Play service to a great extent. The group encourages the early bonding of parents and their children by providing an environment where they can play and learn together. The findings from this study also show that these skills are being transferred to the home.

The Let's Play Together group is also contributing to Objective 2 - Improving Health by providing information and advice on hygiene, for example hand washing before eating, and guidance on safety in the home. The presence of the Project Worker Health allows mothers to ask for child-care advice as and when needed, for example, breastfeeding problems or stopping smoking with the added opportunity for parents to arrange to talk to the Sure Start Midwife.

The peer support which exists within the groups is an important factor in strengthening families and communities (Objective 4). In addition, Let's Play Together provides training for interested parents. It can be concluded that bringing families together in this way will have benefits for the community as a whole.

The way forward

It is clear that Let's Play Together is meeting needs for those parents who are actually using the service. Other parents of pre-school children may not be using the service because it is not what they want or they may not use it because they do not know about it. The way to answer the question of why they are not accessing Let's Play Together would be to evaluate all play and learning opportunities throughout the area and look at ways to engage the more 'hard-to-reach families'.

The question of capacity needs to be raised. Due to the popularity and success of the current service, the groups, particularly the Moore Avenue Thursday session, often

reach capacity. This indicates that the service is meeting a much wanted need in the local community and again could be one of reasons why other parents in the Sure Start area have not attended the group.

The suggestions by parents for extra sessions and different venues could be something for the Sure Start team to consider in order to meet demand and provide a service for those who live further away from the existing provision. There are, however, a number of implications for Sure Start including finite resources and staffing sessions over weekends, etc.

In addition, it has always been the aim to support and develop existing services in the Sure Start area and not to replace them. The Sure Start Team already have plans in place to achieve this by giving grants, support, advice and training to other Parent and Toddler Groups in the area. The aim of this is to expand and facilitate the development of what is already available, ensuring that there are good quality play and learning opportunities throughout the Sure Start community. Providing information about the integrated model of service provision at Let's Play Together will go some way towards the overall aim of all Sure Starts which is to mainstream the way they work.

Further research into the play and learning opportunities for Sure Start residents and their children under four could be a way to discover the extent and quality of existing provision and how Sure Start provision compares to what parents want. The local evaluation team within the Sheffield Foxhill & Parson Cross Sure Start Programme decided to look at all Sure Start children's opportunities to play, the quality of those opportunities and the factors affecting play. By doing this the team were able to identify a number of areas of weakness in provision for children in the area.

Many new initiatives are planned resulting from the success of the Let's Play Together groups, including training for parents in child-care with the aim to provide parents the opportunity to work in child-care at the proposed Neighbourhood Nursery. Increased Outreach work by the Early Years Team is planned for families who live further away from the existing Let's Play, once again by supporting the development of existing groups and by organising activities in the areas.

It is clear that the Let's Play Together Parent and Toddler Group is providing a much needed play and learning opportunity for children in the Sure Start area as well as being an important resource for parents enabling them to meet other parents from their community. The evidence from this evaluation will be reported to the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership and contribute and inform the development of a Preventative Strategy for all of Bournemouth's children.

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A Day in the Life of our Early Years Workers

8.45: Arrive at Heathlands, prepare Play Room, choose appropriate toys for the ages and stages of the children we are expecting at crèche.

9.15-10.15: The doors are open! We welcome parents into crèche and settle the children in.

For the next hour Luisa spends her time at the craft table, sticking, painting, printing, cutting and colouring with anyone who wants to join in! This is a good opportunity for children to develop their creative skills.

Meanwhile, Hayley plays in the home-corner, encouraging lots of imaginative role-play. (She loves her pretend cups of tea and cakes!!)

When the babies get tired, Leslie is there to rock them off to sleep (ssssh!)

Diane is enjoying the 'soundtracks game' with a group of children on the big cushions. This game encourages lots of listening and new words! Di also keeps her watchful eye on the rest of the Play Room.

10.15: Tummies are rumbling, it must be time for juice and toast! Hayley pops off to the kitchen to prepare our snack, whilst Luisa takes everyone on a toilet trip. Lesley and Di then help the children tidy up and sit ready for toast.

10.30: The children have eaten all the toast and we grab the wet wipes to clean sticky faces. They are now ready to use up some energy. This is our time for physical play, either in the garden or inside with the tent and tunnel. Once we have made the area safe, the children are free to enjoy some energetic play as we all supervise them.

11.00: Time to wind down for story and singing! Di is busy preparing children's work so it's ready for them to take home, while Hayley is on her hands and knees tidying up.

Luisa encourages the children to sit quietly and listen to Lesley read a story. We love "I won't bite", it's our favourite! Then everyone joins in for a good old sing-song.

11.15: Time for children to be collected. We chat with the Mums, Dads and carers about how the children have been in the session. Everyone then goes off home with their lovely craft work and their soiled nappies (oops sorry!).

The Early Years Workers then grab a quick coffee before tidying and cleaning the Play Room (if we're lucky we get a choccie biccie too!).

12.30: We all gather over at Moore Avenue to meet up with Angie, our Manager, who has been busy at her desk all morning, organising courses, liaising with other professionals and working on the computer.

1.00-3.00: Once we have recharged our batteries over lunch, it's time to prepare for 'Let's Play! Our

time there is spent working as a team, chatting with parents, promoting children's development through play and generally having eyes in the back of our heads, making sure there is a friendly and safe learning environment for all.

3.00-3.30: All hands on the deck as we clean the toys, tidy and sort out the Play Room (another cup of coffee is needed now while on the go!!).

3.30-4.30: We all meet again with Angie to plan and share ideas about the next topic. We have to think of toys and activities to encourage all areas of children's development.

4.30(ish): Time to go home and relax!

Being an Early Years Worker is so rewarding as we have the opportunity to build positive relationships with families. It is very special when a child gets to know you, or says your name for the first time. Also seeing the children grow and develop here at Sure Start makes it very worthwhile.

Luisa & Hayley



Early Years Team from left: Luisa, Diane, Hayley, Angie, Lesley

**'Let's Play Together'
Parents & Toddler Sessions 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. Post Code: _____
4. Employment details: (tick one box)
- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| Looking after the home | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Part-time working | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Full-time working | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Other | <input type="checkbox"/> |
5. How many children do you have? _____
6. Age of children (please write in age)
- | | | | |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 st child | 2 nd child | 3 rd child | 4 th child |
| _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
7. Do you and your child (children) live with:
- Partner Adult relatives Other adults No-one else
8. Do you or your child (children) have special needs?
- | | | |
|-------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| | Yes | No |
| You | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Child | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
9. If 'Yes' would you mind telling us what these special needs are?

10. Ethnic background

White	<input type="checkbox"/>	Chinese	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black - Caribbean	<input type="checkbox"/>	Black - African	<input type="checkbox"/>
Black - other	<input type="checkbox"/>	Indian	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pakistani	<input type="checkbox"/>	Bangladeshi	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other (please write in) _____			<input type="checkbox"/>

11. Did you or your child see any of the following people on a regular basis BEFORE coming to 'Let's Play Together'?

	You	Your child
Social Worker	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health Visitor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doctor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Educational Psychologist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Behavioural Support teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Speech & Language Therapist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please state) _____

12. Do you or your child NOW see any of the following people on a regular basis?

	You	Your child
Social Worker	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health Visitor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doctor	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Educational Psychologist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Behavioural Support teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Speech & Language Therapist	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please state) _____

SECTION B - USING 'LET'S PLAY TOGETHER'

13. How did you FIRST hear about the group? (please tick one box)

Poster	<input type="checkbox"/>	Friend	<input type="checkbox"/>
Leaflet	<input type="checkbox"/>	Library	<input type="checkbox"/>
Health Visitor	<input type="checkbox"/>	School	<input type="checkbox"/>
Midwife	<input type="checkbox"/>	Community Shop	<input type="checkbox"/>
Doctor	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (specify)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Social Worker	<input type="checkbox"/>	_____	
Sure Start Worker	<input type="checkbox"/>		

14. Which sessions do you attend?

- | | |
|--|--------------------------|
| Monday 'Welcome to Lets Play' (Moore Ave) only | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Monday (Heathlands) only | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Thursday only | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Monday (Moore Ave) & Thursday | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Monday (Heathlands) & Thursday | <input type="checkbox"/> |

15. How long have you been coming to 'Let's Play Together'? _____

16. How do you usually travel to the centre?

- Walk Bus Car Other

17. Do you attend any other groups or centres with your child? Yes No

18. If yes, please state which ones. _____

19. Overall, how satisfied are you with the 'Let's Play Together' Parent & Toddler Group?

- very satisfied satisfied neither satisfied or dissatisfied
dissatisfied very dissatisfied

20. How satisfied are you with the quality of the toys?

- very satisfied satisfied neither satisfied or dissatisfied
dissatisfied very dissatisfied

21. Is this group meeting your needs as a parent of a child under 4?

- Yes No

22. If you answered No to the above question can you tell us why?

SECTION C - HAS 'LET'S PLAY TOGETHER' MADE A DIFFERENCE?

23. YOUR CHILD

We would like to find out if 'Let's Play Together' has made a difference to your child/children's learning and play opportunities.

If you have more than one child attending the group you may like to fill in a separate page for each child.

Please tick the box which is closest to how you feel about your child's behaviour.

Age of child _____

	Greatly improved	Improved	No change	Worse	Not applicable
Sharing toys with other children	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Mixing and playing with other children	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Concentrating on tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Expressing how they feel	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Looking forward to going to school	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Getting along well with adults	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Seeing tasks through to the end	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Controlling temper tantrums	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Able to try out new things	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Crying if left by you	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Talking	<input type="checkbox"/>				

24. PARENTS

We would also like to know if attending 'Let's Play Together' has made any difference to you. Please tick the box which is closest to how you feel since you have been going to the group.

	True	Somewhat true	Not true	Not applicable
I am able to mix with other parents	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can talk about any worries or problems	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel that staff are approachable	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I feel good about myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can relax, knowing the children are happy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am able to cope better at home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
It is easy for me to make friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I can join in and chat with others	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My relationship with my children is better	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
My relationship with my partner is better	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
'Let's Play' has been important for me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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

25. What are the best things about 'Let's Play Together'?

26. What are the not so good things about 'Let's Play Together'?

27. Are there any other activities you would like in the sessions?

Thank you very much for completing this survey