

**In what way does a Sure Start
programme help to develop closer links with parents?**

Carlisle South Sure Start

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Disclaimer

I certify that all materials in this submitted work which are not my own have been identified and that no material is included which has been submitted for any other award or qualification.

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Abstract

This study investigates how one early years establishment has sought to develop closer links with parents. I chose this topic because I feel it is vital that early years practitioners seek to establish close links with parents and I wanted to investigate further the issues of parental involvement in an early years setting.

The main aims of my study were to find out how Sure Start South helps to develop closer links with parents, which methods have been most and least effective, and how parents feel about the service which Sure Start Carlisle South are providing for them and their families.

My study took the form of a case study, consisting of interviews with parents involved in the Carlisle Sure Start South programme and members of staff.

The findings of my study tentatively suggest that Sure Start Carlisle South help to develop closer links with parents in a variety of different ways and that some of these ways have proved to be significantly more effective than others.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Working with parents is an important element of effective early years provision. This is reflected in the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*:

“When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on the child’s development and learning,”

DfEE/QCA, 2000, page 9.

Therefore it is vital that practitioners seek to establish close links with parents. In this special study, I shall investigate how one early years establishment has sought to develop closer links with parents. In doing so, I shall consider how successful they have been and what they might do to further improve links.

I shall now define some of the terms I will be using. For the purposes of this study, the word *parents*, refers to mothers, fathers, legal guardians and the primary carers of children. By the term *practitioners*, I mean all of those who work with children in an early years setting. Finally, when I speak of *the programme*, I refer to the Carlisle South Sure Start initiative.

In my experience, as a student teacher on placement, as well as a crèche and nursery worker, establishing strong links with parents can be both difficult and time consuming for both practitioners and parents. Yet it can also be rewarding and beneficial in the long-term, for the child, the practitioner and the parent:

“young children achieve more and are happier when early years educators work together with parents,”

Whalley, 2001, page 8.

Therefore, I felt that it would be useful for my professional development, to investigate how one establishment has gone about developing links with parents.

The early years establishment on which I base my study is part of the Sure Start Programme. It is based in Carlisle and is called Sure Start Carlisle South. It serves the areas of Harraby, Upperby, Botcherby and Currock (see appendix 1). Sure Start Carlisle South has not been established for very long. It came about when Carlisle City Council and its associates (see appendix 2 for a list of the key associates), determined a need for government support in various areas of Carlisle following the governments drive to tackle child poverty and social exclusion. When the Sure Start Programme was proposed by the government, following the comprehensive spending review of 1998, a partnership was set up in Carlisle in an attempt to secure some of the allocated funds. The partnership consisted of representatives from various agencies and was led by Carlisle City Council. A delivery plan was then submitted by the partnership, to the Sure Start Unit in London and permission was granted by the government for the plans to go ahead, in November 2001. Harraby was highlighted by the government as one of the areas which were most

in need, in the country, with its high rates of child poverty and deprivation. Upperby, Botcherby and Currock, were three further areas of Carlisle also determined by the government as areas of need. Sure Start Carlisle South has therefore been established to address these needs. The funding has come from 'round four' that is the fourth phase of financial support to identified areas of need in the government overall target to establish over 500 Sure Start centres by 2004.

I was keen to base my study on *this* establishment in particular, rather than another one, as I have worked for Carlisle Sure Start as a crèche-worker for five months. During this time, I have been given the opportunity to research and address my increasing personal interests, in working with parents, by talking to staff and parents and in my informal observations. I feel I have gained an insight into many areas of a Sure Start programme. My special study provides an exciting opportunity for me to find out more and to investigate further the issue of parental involvement.

I hope to investigate how Sure Start Carlisle South has sought to develop closer links with parents. My study will consist of a case study of Sure Start Carlisle South, with interviews of staff and parents. From this I hope to determine how far Sure Start Carlisle South has been successful in developing closer links with the families it serves within the community.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

In the Plowden Report, the Central Advisory Council for Education stated that:

“Parents’ involvement should be a key feature of any high quality early years provision”

Central Advisory Council for Education, 1967.

Since then, parental involvement in early years provision has become an increasingly significant part of the government's agenda. It has been the focus of much research and discussion - so much so that some early years establishments have devoted years of time and effort to developing closer links with parents. I shall now discuss some of the literature that I feel is relevant to my study.

I found the website for the national Sure Start programme a useful source of information (www.surestart.gov.uk). In the evaluation section of the site I read about what people within the Sure Start programme have discovered so far, in relation to developing closer links with parents. As yet there is no evaluation documentation available online for the Sure Start Carlisle South Programme. Yet the documents *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, 2001, and *'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start'* 2002, contain findings from nationally based evaluations of Sure Start services. They were both relevant to my study and enlightening.

'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On', 2001, shares the results of a study which was aimed at finding out how parents were benefiting from being involved in their local

programme. The study consisted of 59 questionnaires, completed by parents using Sure Start services. The report suggests that the feedback received from parents was positive, stating that 88% of the parents were satisfied with services for young children and families provided by their local programme. It also indicates that a number of positive factors have come out of the parents involvement with Sure Start, including there being **'now more for them and their children to do'**, and **'more and better quality childcare facilities'**. Parents stated that they value the support and advice they receive from Sure Start, the opportunity to meet more parents, and **'most felt that their child will be different in five years time having benefited from Sure Start, particularly in their children being more ready for school'**. Furthermore many felt that their own and their child/children's confidence had increased as a result of becoming involved.

From reading this report, I came to the conclusion that a range of fruitful things have come out of being involved in a Sure Start programme, for the parents involved in the study and their families. Yet do reports such as this one give us a full picture of the features of involvement of parents in a Sure Start programme? West and Wenham, 2002, in the article 'Un-Sure Starts?' (pages 32 – 37) raise some interesting questions about the findings indicated in the document *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, 2001. They criticise Sure Start's approach to evaluation, calling it **'dominant'** and state that Sure Start **'are heavily reliant on quantitative methods and may fail to do justice to the complexity of parental experiences and their reflections on the projects impacts on their lives'**. They go on to argue that biographical or narrative based evaluations carried out over a longer duration are more reflective of the real impact of a Sure Start programme on parents, such as the evaluations they carried out on two projects in Kent.

In defence of the report *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, I feel that it is important to recognise that each study is carried out for a different purpose. The purpose of *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, 2001, was to find out how parents were *benefiting* from being involved in their local programme one year on from its establishment, not to consider *'the complexity of parental experiences'*. It focuses accordingly on the positive and perhaps does not give readers a full picture of the issues of parental involvement within a Sure Start programme; yet it does address the key question that it intended to answer. There are other studies which have been carried out by Sure Start programmes, available to view on the Sure Start website, that ask different questions of the service that is being delivered by programmes, one of which I shall later discuss.

West and Wenham, 2002, challenge the reader to look beyond the suggestions made in *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, 2001, and consider a different stance on parent's experiences of becoming involved in a Sure Start programme. In the article, they state that the evaluations of the projects in Kent indicate that parents often feel **'stigmatised'** because they live in an area labelled by the government as **'deprived'**, and that this has proved to **'put people off'** having any involvement with Sure Start. Parents involved in the study also told how they were **'initially suspicious of Sure Start against a backdrop of short-term schemes, coming and going, promising much, delivering little, and consulting even less'**. They also admitted to being **'cynical'** because of the

'poor quality of public services', and *'concerned that professionals were preoccupied with other people's agendas'*. These findings highlight the key challenges which some Sure Start programmes have come up against and have made me aware of the sort of challenges that the Sure Start Carlisle South programme might be facing in trying to develop closer links with parents. They suggest that while some parents are benefiting from being involved in Sure Start programmes, they may not be reaching the parents who opt not to become involved, yet who may indeed benefit from involvement. I feel that this is an important issue, as in my work with Sure Start, I have become aware that the goal is to involve *all* parents who might benefit from that involvement. This goal is common to all programmes, as Eisenstadt confirms:

"Sure Start has always been intended to reach the parts that other initiatives and services do not reach, to ensure that all children in disadvantaged areas get a good start in life,"

Eisenstadt, 2001, page 10.

Eisenstadt (2002, page 23) also highlighted one common difficulty for programmes to be *'accessing population data from health agencies'* in their attempts to reach all families within their remit. This indicates that the challenge of getting all of the families involved who may benefit from involvement with Sure Start is even greater for some programmes. Eisenstadt went on to emphasise the need for programmes to keep in close touch with schools, local shops, and specialist community support organizations in order to address this issue and *'to ensure that these families are not missed'*.

I found it significant that the West and Wenham article only refers to how parents *felt* about Sure Start when they first became familiar with the organization, and does not reflect how parent's feelings have changed or developed as their involvement with Sure Start had matured. In contrast to West and Wenham's article, Inman's recordings (June/July 2002, page 8) which were taken at a Sure Start conference, describe parents perceptions of Sure Start when they first became familiar with the organization, *and* reflect how parents feelings towards Sure Start have developed. It looks at some of the initial reactions, including some of those detailed in West and Wenham's article. Then it goes on to state how parents have grown in confidence as a result of being involved on a management board and how staff at one programme have *'managed to turn round the initial negative reactions by constantly asking for feedback from parents'*. Inman also reveals that one of the key challenges highlighted by staff members at the conference was trying to *'sustain the enthusiasm of parents and carers while they wait for services to get underway'*, attributing this delay to the time taken for government planning and building decisions to be made. Therefore, Inman does not hide that fact that programmes are subject to a range of challenges. Moreover, she confirms that programmes are putting strategies in place to tackle these challenges, and reveals that some of these challenges are being overcome.

'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start', 2002, is a summary of the first national evaluation report on early experiences of implementing Sure Start programmes, based on a postal survey of 118 programme managers. The purpose of this study was to find out

about the experiences of setting up and implementing a local Sure Start programme and *'to develop indicators of effective practice'*. Programme managers were the participants of this study rather than parents, as in *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, and the evaluations made by West and Wenham on the projects in Kent. This indicated to me that a different stance would be likely.

The key findings of this study reveal that parent involvement in Sure Start programmes is ***'generally high'***. It states that an average of five parents are represented on the management board of each programme involved in the study yet that only half of these programmes have fathers on the management board. Eisenstadt in a report which details her response to this evaluation, highlights that:

'It is important that parents are enabled to participate in meaningful ways and in real decision making [on management boards]'

Eisenstadt, 2002, page 23.

This suggests that the challenge is not only to involve more parents on Sure Start management boards, but also to ensure that this involvement is not merely 'token involvement'. By this I mean that programmes must ensure that a certain number of parents are present on a management board not because Sure Start policy requires that they be. But that parents are enabled to participate fully, that their voices are heard and they play a significant role in decision making.

'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start', 2002, states that on average, 16 different methods are being used to publicise Sure Start services and to get parents involved, and that ***'the most popular of these'*** include: social events, written publicity in public places, home visits by health visitors or midwives, local press coverage, through voluntary organizations and parents support groups. The report also states that three quarters of programmes are providing new childcare places, and 90% have, or are in the process of making links with local education institutions to encourage parents to take up training or education. This indicates that childcare and training are important incentives for parents to get involved in some programmes.

The key challenges for programmes, highlighted in the report include joining up and working ***'in partnership with other agencies and providers'***, working in multi-disciplinary teams, ensuring families know about Sure Start and have access to services, and increasing the numbers of fathers represented on the management board. I became more aware of the issues of working in partnership with other agencies and providers by reading Inman's article about working in partnership with general practitioners (February/March 2002, page 10). Inman points out that it makes sense for Sure Start programmes and GP's to work together to meet common goals, however GP's heavy workloads mean that there is little time available to them to get involved. She warns that:

"there is a danger that Sure Start will be seen, as another unnecessary distraction from their core business,"

Inman, February/March 2002, page 10.

The article suggests that working together with GP's is a key challenge for many programmes. In my opinion, it is likely that programmes face similar hurdles in working with other agencies and services, as in my experience, oversized workloads and negative staff attitudes to the prospect of change are common to many work places.

In this chapter I have considered the findings of a range of studies. These findings have differed, yet I have found them all informative and have learned about the kinds of issues that may feature in the results of *my* study. No two Sure Start programmes are the same – they do not have the same community, families, or staff, therefore I do not expect any of these findings to mirror my own. Yet I look forward to comparing my findings to them in chapter six. In the next chapter I propose to describe the design of my study.

Chapter 3: Design of the Study

I shall now describe how I went about carrying out this special study. At the beginning, I felt that the most important thing was to design a study that motivated me, so that I would engage with it and make the most of the opportunity. Therefore I gave the title of my study careful consideration and finally settled on:

'In what way does a Sure Start organisation help to develop closer links with parents?'

I began by thinking about the areas of my course that have interested me the most. I also thought about the areas and issues that have particularly interested me on school placements, and in my work in nurseries and crèches. I made a list of these, and I cut this list down by deciding which of these ideas appealed to me most, and which were the most practical. It soon became apparent when all my ideas were on paper, side by side, which would both motivate me and be practical.

I met with my tutor to discuss my initial ideas. My plan was to evaluate the effectiveness of partnerships between providers of early years education and care. My tutor and myself agreed that my initial ideas were promising, yet the title of my study at present was too broad and needed more of a focus. In order to refine my ideas, I had to determine where in particular my interests lay within the spectrum of *'partnerships between providers of early years education and care'*. I decided that I was most interested in how early years education and care providers work with parents. This was not so difficult a decision to make, as having worked with parents as an officer for the Child Support Agency, and then as a student teacher on placement, as well as a crèche and nursery worker, I had a keen and growing interest in how educators can work effectively with parents. Therefore, this was a natural point of focus for me.

Next I had to decide where I would collect my data. My recent involvement with Sure Start Carlisle South had nurtured my interest in working with parents, so it seemed appropriate to focus my study on this particular organisation. Therefore my special study

became a case study of Sure Start Carlisle South. At this point I was satisfied that my special study was going to be interesting, motivating and focused.

Now that I had my title, it was time to discuss my proposals with the Sure Start Carlisle South team. As Robson states in *“Real World Research”*:

“Any proposals you make for carrying out the enquiry will benefit from some real world exposure by discussing your suggestions with ‘stakeholders’,”
Robson, 2002, page 1.

I felt that it was my duty to discuss my proposals with the Sure Start Carlisle South team, as my actions were going to effect them. I was pleased to receive a positive response. The team was very keen for me to go ahead with my plans and investigate how their programme seeks to develop closer links with parents. They saw it as an opportunity to evaluate their current practice – an activity that they view as essential to the programmes growth and development, yet difficult to find the time for. At the next Parent Support Group meeting, the Parent Support Worker asked the parents if any of them wished to be involved in the study and informed them about what this would entail. Many of the parents expressed interest in taking part in my study, and I arranged to meet them at the end of the next Parent Support Meeting.

In the meantime, I drew up two separate lists of questions – one to ask the parents, and one to ask the staff in the interviews I would be conducting with them (see appendix 3). I met with my tutor so she could look over the list of questions and she confirmed that they were appropriate.

When I met the parents at the parent support meeting at Harraby Community Centre, I briefly spoke to them as a group about my study and their part in it. There were eight of them at the meeting, and all eight were willing to be interviewed. I interviewed the parents individually, and in private, in a room which was free from distractions, in the community centre. I recorded the dialogue using a dictaphone, and each interview lasted no longer than ten minutes. Immediately after the interviews, I wrote transcripts of the dialogues, while they were still clear in my mind.

After this I arranged to interview three members of the Sure Start team. First of all I interviewed the Programme Manager, at the Sure Start office at Petheril Bank School. Subsequently I returned to interview the Parent Development Worker and then the Health Worker. The three interviews took place again, in a private room, with no distraction. They took longer than the interviews with parents, ranging from half an hour to an hour and a half in duration. I wrote transcripts of the dialogues and furthermore wrote a summary of findings for parents and staff. I did this to give parents and staff some feedback, and to recognize and show value for their participation in my study. Alongside of this, I read a range of books, journals, and magazines, to find out about other peoples thoughts and findings on the development of closer links with parents.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Every method of research has advantages and disadvantages for its use. Therefore, in order for my research to be as effective as possible, I had to determine which method would be the most appropriate and the most useful for *my particular study*. As Robson states:

“the research strategy or strategies, and the methods or techniques employed, must be appropriate for the questions you want to answer,”
Robson, 2002, page 80.

In this chapter I shall discuss the methods of research that I chose to use, and explain why I chose them.

My study took the form of a case study. Before I came to decide on this approach, I read a range of books that critically reflected on the key research methods. From this I became aware of the negative factors that can sometimes be associated with case studies. For example, in Basseys’ discussion of case study (1999, page 34), he reflects on the views of Yin, which include the idea that case studies ***“take too long and they result in massive, unreadable documents”***, and that there is often a ***“lack of rigor”***. I recognize that these things may be an issue for some researchers involved in carrying out a case study. However, I would argue that some of these potential difficulties can be overcome, as they posed little problem in my case. Admittedly, my study *could have* drifted away from its focus and down other avenues of interest at times, because it was difficult for me to resist the temptation to ask irrelevant questions. Yet I took extra care to remain focused and kept the central question at the forefront of my mind.

Furthermore, I believe that the fact that my study consisted of a case study made it *more* focused and rigorous. Originally I had considered looking at how links are made between early years practitioners and parents, *in general*, without the use of a case study. Yet it became clear that this enquiry was too widely based, impractical, and unmanageable in the specified time and wordage constraints. Edwards and Talbot state that:

“Case study allows you to look at processes and interpretations and to dig below the surface,”
Edwards and Talbot, 1999, page 10.

I agree with this statement because the use of a case study enabled me to explore an issue in a specific setting *in depth*, rather than just skim the surface of an area of enquiry too wide to do justice to.

By setting myself targets in which I would complete different parts of the study, I was able to manage my time effectively. Therefore I did not feel that the study took *‘too long’*. I found the guidelines for wordage set out in the college study guidance booklet helpful, as they encouraged me to make my writing as succinct as possible. The structure

and style that I have adopted make the document easy to read too, therefore, I do not feel that my study is any way *'massive'* or *'unreadable'*.

The case study consisted of interviews with eight parents involved in the Sure Start Carlisle South programme and three members of staff. At first I considered using questionnaires as a method of research for my study, rather than interviews. However, I came to the conclusion that by conducting interviews I would get more quality and in-depth information. With interviews, there is a greater response rate to questions (Edwards and Talbot, 1999, page 100), and you can gain greater understanding of responses through additional questioning: delving further in a search for greater meaning. As Robson states:

“Face-to-face interviews offer the possibility of modifying ones line of enquiry, following up interesting responses and investigating underlying motives in a way that postal and other self-administered questionnaires cannot,”

Robson, 2002, page 272.

Questionnaires can give a good picture of the surface elements, yet they don't get *below* the surface (Edwards and Talbot, 1999, page 85), and I felt that I needed to get below the surface in order to answer the title question as effectively as possible.

Another reason why I decided that questionnaires were inappropriate for my study, was because I was aware that not all parents might have the reading and writing skills necessary to complete a questionnaire fully and without support. If parents had support from another person in filling out the questionnaire this might influence what was written, and therefore effect the quality and validity of the information. As Shaffer states:

“Investigators must also hope that the answers they receive are honest and accurate and are not merely attempts by respondents to represent themselves in a favourable or socially desirable way,”

Shaffer, 1999, page 13.

Alternatively, if they did not ask for help but needed it, this would also limit the response given. Interview enabled me to adapt my questions and language for individuals, so that no participant was at a disadvantage, and made reading and writing skills irrelevant.

Sensitivity and confidentiality were key concerns for both the Programme Manager and myself. Asking personal questions and opinions, and for personal information, could cause many of the participants anxieties and discomfort, and even feelings that they are 'on show' or being 'tested'. I agree with Edwards and Talbot when they state that:

“It can be an unwarranted intrusion into the lives of others,”

Edwards and Talbot, 1999, page 57.

If interviewees felt this way, would their answers be reliable? Therefore the validity and reliability of my evidence could be put into question. Naturally, I did not wish to cause

undue distress to interviewees either. Therefore I had to make sure that parents and staff members trusted me and were as comfortable as possible in taking part.

Having worked as a crèche worker for the programme, parents and staff ‘knew my face,’ had regular contact with me and some trust had been established. This trust was valuable, and I built on it by reassuring the participants of confidentiality before the interview, by being honest and clear about my aims and intentions, and by showing that I was listening to them and interested in what they had to say. Shaffer values such an approach:

“[interviews] are particularly useful when the investigator emphasizes to participants that their responses will be confidential and/or challenges them to report what they know about an issue, thereby maximizing the likelihood of a truthful or accurate answer,”

Shaffer, 1999, page 13.

The booking of private accommodation for each interview was vital to ensure confidentiality. I also needed quiet - so that my dictaphone was able to pick up transcripts, and so that the flow of each interview was uninterrupted. Using a dictaphone to record the interviews meant that the interviewees were subject to some discomfort, however, I alleviated this somewhat by keeping the dictaphone out of the eye of the interviewee, expressing my own aversion for it being there too, and explaining its purpose. The transcripts took a long time to write up, yet I felt that using a dictaphone was essential to ensure accuracy and detail in my study, and were necessary so that I could:

“attend to the direction rather than the detail of the interview and then listen intently afterwards,”

Bassey, 1999, page 81.

I am in no doubt that the methods that I used to conduct my study were the most appropriate for the question that I wanted to answer. The evidence for this is in the findings of my study, which I shall now present.

Chapter 5: Statement of Results

I shall now present the information that I found out from my interviews with parents and staff at the Sure Start Carlisle South programme.

When and how did the parents first become involved in the programme?

- Five of the eight parents became involved when the programme in 2001, when it had just been established, therefore they had been involved for eighteen months. They became aware of the programme from a letter which was posted out to them. This contained a questionnaire inquiring about their interests, and an invitation to a fun-day.

- Two parents heard about the programme through its presence in the community. One had been involved for eight months after finding out about the programme through a Sure Start play-worker, who was doing an activity at her local parent and toddler group. The second knew about the programme through being employed at Harraby Community Centre (where many of the programmes initiatives have been based). She became involved six weeks prior to my interview.
- One parent became involved six months prior to the interview, after reading an advertisement in her local newspaper.

How do the parents feel about the service that the programme provides?

- Three out of eight parents were satisfied with the service provided.
- Five felt that the programme does not *yet* provide them with the service they would like, however they believe that progress is being made towards this.
- Six were frustrated at the pace of change and development (these parents had been involved for a longer period of time than those who did not comment on this).
- Three parents identified communication as a problem.
- Three parents stated that the contribution made by the programme is inconsistent among the target areas (the four areas which the programme serves – Harraby, Upperby, Botcherby, and Currock).

How do the parents feel their children have benefited from becoming involved in the programme?

- All eight parents believed that their involvement with the programme has benefited their child/children in at least one way.
- All eight parents told me that their child/children have enjoyed spending time in the crèche, the day-trips and the activity and information days.
- Six felt that their child/children have benefited from the opportunity to interact with other adults and children.
- Four felt that their child/children have become more outgoing and confident.
- Two felt that transitions to other settings for their child/ children have been easier as a result of their involvement.

How do the parents feel they have benefited from being involved in the programme?

- All eight parents felt that their involvement has had a positive impact on their lives.
- Five said that their self-confidence has increased.
- Four were particularly pleased with the opportunities for further education and training.
- Two commented on the friends that they had made.
- One stated that being able to talk to people '*in the same boat*' has been particularly useful.
- Four felt that the programme has made them aware of '*the opportunities that are out there*'.

In what ways do the team try to develop closer links with parents?

The interviews with staff showed that the programme seeks to develop closer links with parents through:

- The 'Parent Development Worker' (who has specific responsibility to recruit new parents).
- The welcome pack (that goes out to all parents at the primary visit via the health visitor).
- Offering "carrots"- incentives such as free refreshments or a free child photograph.
- Providing crèche cover for meetings and training.
- Encouraging parents to take training and employment opportunities.
- Involving parents in the decision making process, from deciding what they want to opt into, to the selection and recruitment of staff, to sitting on the sub-group or executive committees.
- Asking what *they* and other people in *their* community want and need.
- Regular information, including newsletters and leaflets.
- Open days, summer activities, jobs week, the healthy family fun day, day trips.
- Taking into account the whole of the family, not just the under fours.
- Working in partnership with other agencies and organisations including community midwives and health agencies so they can '*spread the word*' about the programme.
- Going out into the community to existing services, including to child health clinics, parent and toddler groups.

Which of these ways do staff feel are most effective in making links with parents?

- All 3 members of staff believed that '*word of mouth*' has been one of the most effective ways of communicating with parents and that impersonal methods have been the least successful so far, such as leaflet-dropping and posters.

- *'informal ways of communication'*, going out into the community to existing services, and home visits, were also highlighted as effective means.

What are the key challenges that the team now face in improving links with parents?

- communication
- working in partnership with other agencies and organisations
- obtaining information from other authorities
- getting more people involved in decision making at executive and sub-group committee level
- ensuring that *'we don't fragment families, friends and communities'*
- *'making sure there is something else being delivered when that child gets to four'*.
- *'being visible within the community'*
- doing as much in one part of the community as another
- for parents to *'continue to have a say'*
- getting more parents involved

How does the programme seek to meet these challenges?

Initiatives put in place in an attempt to meet these challenges include:

- the welcome pack
- getting more parents involved in decision making by encouraging parents and offering them training
- returning to those parents who at first seem uninterested in the programme
- working at making contact with parents who have not heard of the programme
- evaluating and consulting continuously
- having a *'vision to include all of the community in some of the things'*
- keeping in mind that we should be working as partners all the time
- providing *'more opportunities and activities'*

What do the staff see as the main benefits in developing closer links with parents?

- parents being empowered to become *'more autonomous, and have influence in their own lives'*
- parents feeling that they are not alone and recognising that other people have the same problems

- seeing '*people enjoying life, enjoying their children*'
- developing closer links with parents is vital to the '*sustainability of the programme*'
- parents know best what is wanted and needed in their area
- raising of the profile of the programme
- improved relationships within the family
- increased opportunity for parents to find employment

In the next chapter I shall discuss the issues that have arisen from these findings.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In this final chapter, I shall look closely at the findings of my study and discuss the key issues and patterns that have emerged. I shall also compare my findings to that of other people, as outlined in chapter 2 – my review of literature.

My findings show that Sure Start Carlisle South seek to develop closer links with parents in a variety of different ways, as highlighted in my statement of results. They also reveal that some of these ways have proved to be significantly more effective than others.

From my results I found that Sure Start Carlisle South try to develop closer links with parents by using some 'common and conventional methods' and some other methods which tend to be more revolutionary. The methods which I call 'common and conventional' are the ones which I have seen used in the past by other organisations who need to develop links with people, and are therefore ones which I anticipated may be used, by Sure Start Carlisle South. The 'common and conventional methods' which Sure Start Carlisle South use include inviting parents and their families to activities and events through formal advertisements, offering incentives to becoming involved and keeping parents up to date with changes and developments through regular information. My findings show that these methods have proved effective for Sure Start Carlisle South in getting new parents involved, as three quarters of the parents I interviewed became involved in the programme after reading some form of written advertisement – either a letter or a newspaper advertisement. This indicates that Sure Start Carlisle South have found formal advertising to be the best approach towards getting more parents involved in the programme.

Yet the interviews with staff at Sure Start Carlisle South did not indicate that this was an accurate reflection. In contrast to these results, *all* of the staff felt that impersonal methods such as formal advertising have been the least successful in developing closer links with parents. This led me to consider whether the figures were misleading in any

way. Subsequently, I decided that it would be more accurate to conclude from my findings that the formal advertising of Sure Start Carlisle South and its services in a letter or a newspaper advertisement, *was* the most effective method of getting more parents involved in the *early stages* of the programmes existence. I came to this conclusion because, when looking again at my findings, I recognised that all but one of the parents who became involved after reading some form of advertisement have been involved with the programme since it was first established in 2001. I also noted that most of the parents who became involved after this became involved through a different means.

My findings show that, as required by the Sure Start Key Principles (see appendix 4) Sure Start Carlisle South work with other agencies and organisations, and try to be visible in the community by getting involved with existing services. One reason they do this is to develop closer links with parents. One member of staff told me in her interview that she felt that the '*informal ways of communication*', such as going out into the community to existing services, and home visits, are best. This argument is supported by the fact that two of the parents whom I interviewed became involved in the last eight months, after becoming aware of Sure Start Carlisle South through its presence in the community. I find this significant, as it reflects how the programme has developed from relying largely on formal approaches for getting parents involved to becoming more reliant on 'spreading the word' more informally and personally. Inman's article (February/March 2002, page 10) and '*Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start*,' 2002, highlighted that working with other agencies and organisations is both important and challenging for Sure Start programmes. Therefore perhaps the challenge of working in partnership with other agencies and organisations has meant that this approach towards getting parents involved in the Sure Start Carlisle South programme is only beginning to demonstrate its true potential.

I also found it significant that one of the eight parents became involved after reading a newspaper advertisement in the last six months. This suggests that the formal methods are still relevant and can still be effective, yet alongside more personal approaches.

I was surprised when my results appeared to indicate that more parents have become involved in Sure Start Carlisle South as a result of formal advertising than by any other means. I had expected this approach to be useful, yet not so much more so than other, less formal methods such as going out into the community to talk to people 'face to face'. I thought that if many parents felt stigmatised, suspicious, cynical and uninterested in Sure Start, as indicated in the West and Wenham article, 2002 (pages 32 – 37), then it would take more than a letter or advertisement to influence them to change their attitude and want to become involved.

Letters and advertisements are impersonal and formal, and need to be acknowledged, therefore I felt that parents who had no interest in becoming involved with Sure Start would be more likely to ignore them than more personal attempts to get them involved. Yet it would be ridiculous to suggest that *all* parents feel the way that West and Wenham indicated they do, towards Sure Start. In my experience some parents have positive initial attitudes towards Sure Start and its services and others do not, and therefore some parents must be easier to reach than others. Significantly, the parents who became

involved after reading a formal advertisement indicated in their interviews that they had a positive attitude toward Sure Start to begin with. So perhaps a formal advertisement is enough to spur those parents on for whom preconceptions about Sure Start are not an issue, yet for those parents who are harder to reach maybe something more is needed to convince them that it is a good idea to become involved. Targeting those parents who are 'hard to reach' was highlighted by staff as an area which Sure Start Carlisle South needs to focus on, yet this is a national problem too, as highlighted by Eisenstadt:

“Every programme needs to think about how to reach all children in the catchment area,”

Eisenstadt, October/November 2001, page 10.

This is unsurprising, as I would expect every programme to deal with some parents who are easier to recruit, and others that are more difficult to reach.

When I asked the staff which methods are most effective in getting more parents involved, they all agreed that '*word of mouth*' is the most successful. I found this interesting as none of the parents whom I interviewed had become involved in the programme after hearing about it from another person who had been involved. Yet I would expect those parents who feel '*cynical*' about Sure Start and '*put off*' getting involved (West and Wenham, 2002) to be more likely to become involved after hearing about the their local programme in a positive light from a friend or family member than by any other way. Furthermore, I know that I myself would be more likely to become involved in a programme like this one if I had heard about it through someone I know and trust rather than if I had saw it being advertised formally and had not had contact with anyone involved. I think that the fact that Sure Start Carlisle South has not been in operation for long is perhaps the reason why this is not currently one of the key ways in which parents become involved. Therefore I feel that '*word of mouth*' may become one of the most effective ways of getting more parents involved in the Sure Start Carlisle South programme in the future.

When interviewing staff about the different approaches towards developing closer links with parents used at Sure Start Carlisle South, I was impressed to hear that many of the approaches were more revolutionary than I had expected. By this I mean that many of the approaches used by Sure Start Carlisle South seek to *enable* parents to become involved/more involved rather than just invite them to become involved, and leave the things which prevent parents from being able to become involved for parents to deal with. For example Sure Start Carlisle South provide crèche cover, training, make parents aware of opportunities, and take into account the whole family - not just the under fours. My interviews with the staff found one of the key aims of the Sure Start Carlisle South programme to be to empower parents to be '***more autonomous, and have influence in their own lives***'. Therefore it is not surprising that Sure Start Carlisle South seek to develop closer links with parents in this way. Going back to my review of literature, Eisenstadt stated that:

“Sure Start has always been intended to reach the parts that other initiatives and services do not reach, to ensure that all children in disadvantaged areas get a good start in life,”

Eisenstadt, 2001, page 10.

Therefore, in adopting an approach which seeks to enable parents to become involved, I feel that Sure Start Carlisle South endeavour to ***‘reach the parts that other initiatives and services do not reach’***. They also seek to provide a service that is accessible to *all* parents and families, as is required of all Sure Start programmes (see Sure Start Key Principles in appendix 4). The *‘Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start’*, 2002, indicates that many other programmes similarly provide childcare and make links with local education institutions to encourage parents to take up training or education. Therefore Sure Start Carlisle South is not alone in making what I would class as a revolutionary step. I found it interesting that half of the parents commented that the Sure Start Carlisle South programme makes them aware of ‘the opportunities that are out there’. This was not identified by any of the parents involved in the studies discussed in my review of literature. This suggests that Sure Start Carlisle South prove to be making positive progress towards empowering parents to become *‘more autonomous, and have influence in their own lives,’*

In my review of literature, I noted that Eisenstadt states that:

‘It is important that parents are enabled to participate in meaningful ways and in real decision making’

Eisenstadt, 2002, page 23.

My findings show that the staff at the Sure Start Carlisle South programme recognize the importance of enabling parents to participate in decision making. They foster links by consulting parents as much as possible, and by involving them in the decision making process; from deciding what want to opt into, to selection and recruitment of staff, sitting on sub-group and executive committees. As one member of staff highlighted, *‘it is easy to tell people what you think they need’* but the parents are the ones who live in the Sure Start community and therefore they know best what they and other people in their community want and need. Therefore by continuously consulting parents and inviting them to be involved them in the decision making process, the service provided is likely to be more appropriate and effective. It does appear though, that however much parents are consulted and invited to take part in the decision making process, this does not mean that all of them will take this opportunity. The staff at Sure Start Carlisle South identified that getting more parents involved at decision making at executive and sub-group level is a challenge - a challenge which they share with many other programmes according to *‘Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start,’* 2002. Perhaps more parents will feel they are able to become involved in the future, as my findings show that Sure Start Carlisle South intend to *empower* parents to be able to participate in meaningful ways on management boards through training and encouragement.

My findings show that both parents and their families have found great benefit from becoming involved in the Sure Start Carlisle South programme. All of the parents interviewed stated that their involvement with Sure Start Carlisle South has had a positive impact on their lives and the lives of their children. More than half of the parents stated that their own and their children's confidence had increased as a result of their involvement with the Sure Start Carlisle South programme. I feel that this could be partly due to the way in which parents and their opinions are valued at Sure Start Carlisle South. Significantly, this had been identified as a benefit by many parents in *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, 2001, too, this suggests that other programmes treat parents in a similar way.

Three out of eight parents said they were satisfied with the services for young children and their families provided by the Sure Start Carlisle South programme, and five felt that progress was being made towards meeting their expectations. I feel this is a positive response as no parents were found to be dissatisfied. Yet it does not appear to be as positive as the findings of *'The Impact of Sure Start – One Year On'*, 2001, in which 88% of parents said they were satisfied. However, I feel that it is important to consider the reasons for which parents said they were not fully satisfied in my study (see statement of results). Inman, June/July 2002 (page 8), pointed out that the pace of change and development is a key challenge for many programmes, as unfortunately programme managers have little control over the time it takes for government planning and building decisions to be made, therefore I feel that this problem is largely inevitable. Many of the other challenges for the in developing closer links with parents identified by staff, were similar to those found in *'Early Experiences of Implementing Sure Start,'* 2002. For example, obtaining information from other authorities, getting more people involved in decision making at executive and sub-group committee level, and getting more parents involved. Communication, and consistency amongst target areas are issues which can be addressed at a more local level and I feel it is significant that staff identified these as challenges in developing closer links with parents. This indicates that staff are aware of these issues and are seeking to deal with them.

In the future I would find it interesting to return to Sure Start Carlisle South to find out how things have changed and developed. I would be fascinated to find out whether the more revolutionary methods of developing links with parents have become more effective than the 'common and conventional' methods.

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Appendix 2. Partners' Charter

We are committed to working together in the Carlisle South Sure Start Partnership to help achieve the aims set out in this Delivery Plan.

By committing ourselves in this way and by encouraging others to do likewise, we will play our part in ensuring that the key elements of the Partnership Vision are achieved to the continuing benefit of the Sure Start Carlisle South community.

<u>Partner</u>	<u>Signature</u>
Carlisle City Council.	
Cumbria County Council.	
Parents Support Group	
Carlisle and District Primary Care Trust.	
Eden Valley Primary Care Trust.	
Carlisle Council for Voluntary Services.	
Cumbria Early Years Partnership.	
North Cumbria Health Action Zone.	
North Cumbria Health Authority.	
North Cumbria Mental Health and Learning Disabilities Trust.	
Carlisle College.	
East Cumbria Family Support Association.	
Employment Service.	
North Cumbria Acute Hospital NHS Trust.	
Connexions Cumbria.	
Cumbria Learning and Skills Council.	

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Questions asked to staff

How does the programme seek to develop closer links with parents?

Which of the ways of communication have been the most successful with parents so far? (Why might this have been?)

Which of these ways of communication have not been so successful? (Why might this have been?)

What challenges do the team now face in improving their communication with parents?

How do you seek to meet these challenges?

What at the moment do you see as the main benefits of the programme establishing closer links with parents?

Questions asked to parents

When did you first become involved with the Sure Start programme? (And how?)

Do you feel that Sure Start provide you with the service you would like? (Why?/ Why not?)

What positive things for your child have come out of your involvement with Sure Start?

Do you feel that your involvement with Sure Start has had a positive effect on *your* life?

Appendix 4: The Sure Start Service Delivery Agreement
(www.surestart.gov.uk)

Sure Start Key Principles

- a. co-ordinate, streamline and add value to existing services in the Sure Start area
- b. work with individual families, including mothers, fathers, extended family members and other carers in ways that build on their existing strengths
- c. promote the participation of all local families in the design and working of the programme
- d. be culturally appropriate and sensitive to particular needs
- e. avoid stigma by ensuring that Sure Start services are of a high quality, relevant to local needs and accessible to all local families
- f. be based on evidence of what works and adopt a rigorous approach to evaluating results