

## **Time Out for Parents- Project Evaluation**

### ***Background***

The Time Out for Parents project falls under the Family Support Team element of the Sure Start programme that aims to facilitate team work with parents, parents-to-be and children to provide information, advice and support to promote independence, confidence and improving parenting skills.

The Time Out for Parents project provides this support through a structured training programme for parents across the Denaby Main and Conisbrough Sure Start area. The current course operates for a ten-week period through weekly two-hour sessions held within StoryBook House.

### ***Project objectives***

The project aims to deliver a structured programme of training for local parents, which is designed to achieve the following objectives:

***Objective 1- Improve the parenting skills of attendees.***

***Objective 2- Introduce or reintroduce parents to adult and community learning activity.***

***Objective 3- Increase the capacity and skills of local parents to support other parents across the Sure Start Programme.***

However no formal project appraisal documentation was evident and consequently there has been no clear statement of the objectives of the Time Out for Parents project. The project evaluation has highlighted the focussed nature of the project, but a clear statement of Objectives will ensure that the project maintains a focus on supporting local parents but also raises an awareness of the project through Sure Start statutory, community and voluntary sector partners.

### **Contribution to Sure Start Delivery Plan**

The Time Out for Parents project provides cross-cutting support to all four Sure Start Objectives but in particular to Objective 2, *'Improving Health'* and Objective 4, *'Strengthening Families and Communities'*. The Delivery Plan recognises the importance of ensuring families are supported in a proactive and innovative way that recognises the importance of understanding individual families needs. The Delivery Plan incorporates a range of Public Service Agreement (PSA) and Sure Start Delivery Agreement (SDA) targets attached to each broader objective, several of which have relevance for the Time Out for Parents Project (see Table below).

<b>Sure Start Programme Objective</b>	<b>Performance Target</b>
<b>Objective 1:</b> Improving health, In particular, by supporting parents in caring for their children to promote healthy development before and after birth.	<b>SDA Target:</b> Parenting support and information available for all parents in Sure Start areas.
<b>Objective 4:</b> Strengthening families and communities. In particular, by involving families in building the communities capacity to sustain the programme and thereby create pathways out of poverty.	<b>PSA Target:</b> Reduce the number of 0-3 year old children in Sure Start areas living in households where no-one is working by 10%.

Source: Sure Start Delivery Plan: Denaby Main & Conisbrough 2001

### **Linkages with partners and other Sure Start projects**

The project provides an example of joint working between the Workers Education Association (WEA) and Sure Start to provide training for parents across the Denaby Main and Conisbrough area.

There is less evidence however of links with other Sure Start project as several parents involved in the training indicated that this was their first experience of the programme.

There is a clear opportunity for the Time Out for Parents project to not only provide parenting skills and support for parents but also to signpost parents onto other elements of the broader Sure Start programme.

### ***Project operation***

The Time Out for Parents project is based at StoryBook house for one morning a week, operating between 9:15am and 11:15am. Parents are able to drop their children into the crèche facilities and then attend the training session based in the adjacent room. The training room is well equipped with presentational equipment that facilitates the professional delivery of the learning activity. However the relatively small groups attending the sessions (between 8 and 10 parents) ensures that the personal and informal element of the project is retained. This is a key element of the project design, ensuring that local parents who may have been detached from any learning process for a number of years can feel comfortable with the learning environment.

All the TOPS courses provide accreditation and are offered at various days and start times dependent upon the particular venue.

The project tutor introduces a series of discussion topics and tasks each week designed to stimulate discussion amongst the group and challenge existing attitudes to parenting and the needs of children. Topics are managed in a structured but informal way and cover a range of areas including:

- Identifying the needs and rights of a child
- Identifying the needs and rights of an adult
- Understanding equal opportunity issues with particular regard to behaviour
- Understanding the importance of self-esteem in the well-being of self and others
- Using praise and encouragement effectively
- Recognising the need for different communication styles with children
- Understanding the effectiveness of different parenting styles
- Effecting changes in their behaviour

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The sessions are delivered in a non-technical way designed to encourage parents to relate their own parenting experiences to some of the issues raised and also to review how to cope with future parenting demands.

The training programme enables parents to learn both generic parenting skills to support their child's development but also more individual learning outcomes where these have been identified with the tutor at the beginning of the course. This flexible approach encourages the group to learn together but also enables more individual needs to be addressed. Indeed respondents have indicated that this approach ensures that the training retains relevance for their personal circumstances and thus maximises its benefit in terms of raising parenting skills and supporting the child's development.

The parenting pack provided not only facilitates assessment by the tutor but also provides a re-usable resource for the parents. This enables parents to revisit some of the techniques learnt within the training session and thus maximise the impact of the project beyond the 10-week project period.

### ***Project targeting***

The project is targeted at all parents across the Sure Start area, although interviewees have indicated difficulties in encouraging fathers and teenage parents to attend. Indeed several respondents were unsure as to whether the project was open to other groups such as carers and grandparents from across the programme area.

There was clear support for a greater mix within the group to enable broader experiences to be shared and for members of the group to support each other. However it is clear that the project is limited by the number of parents that can access the session for each 10 week period and also the time and location of the sessions within the Sure Start building.

Respondents suggested that one option would be to devise the training to be more responsive to the particular group accessing the sessions, in recognition of the different challenges that may face fathers and teenage parents. However it was also recognised that this would lessen the 'mixing' element of the project and potentially reduce the effectiveness of the project in sharing areas and experiences. The production of a more

tailored programme responding to the needs of individual, 'hard to reach' groups, may however prove effective in bringing such groups in with subsequent mixing of groups once initial training and confidence building has been undertaken.

It was also suggested that the training could be provided from a range of locations across the Sure Start area. Indeed the WEA uses a range of facilities from which to deliver adult and community education. However it is recognised that there are a limited number of suitable venues that are able to meet the requirements for crèche facilities as well as providing adequate training / learning facilities. Indeed in several cases this may involve dropping children off at one facility only to access the training from another. This would lessen the appeal of the training to several respondents who cited being in the same building at their child as a key factor.

Whilst it is clear that different approaches are required to involve different groups of parents from across the programme area, increased choice requires more resources to fund provision from a greater number of sites across the programme area.

There appears to some only limited referral onto the project from other partner organisations within the Sure Start area. Whilst some respondents indicated referral through their health visitor, there are clearly a range of other statutory, community and voluntary organisations who could potentially signpost parents to the programme. However there are some difficulties associated with raising demand for local training that are unable to be met due to constraints on local resources. In addition it is also recognised that an expansion of the number of parents per training course may detract from the informal and personal nature of training sessions and thus limit the effectiveness of the training in providing support for parents to improve their parenting skills. Consequently there is a need to review the scale and delivery of the existing programme to determine how future provision can be accommodated and resourced across the Sure Start area.

***Beneficiary feedback***

Beneficiary feedback has been gauged through two primary routes, namely the Student's Learning Outcomes submitted by attendees and also direct feedback from a beneficiary focus groups held during one of the sessions.

Both sources of feedback provided strong support for the project and clear evidence that the project provides not only formal support for raising the skills of local parents but also informal, group support and a route into other Sure Start projects.

At the time of writing, the Time Out for Parents project has entered into its second ten-week session, providing support for an additional group of local parents. All parents from the first session reported that they had either achieved or were working towards achieving the intended learning outcomes discussed at the beginning of the course. Such learning outcomes incorporated both generic skills relevant to all parents as well as more specific outcomes desired by individual group members. This provides evidence that the project is able to both raise the level of parenting skills for all attendees but is also flexible enough to respond to more individual needs.

The feedback provided in the Student's Learning Outcomes forms can be allocated to each of the projects primary objectives as evidence that the sessions are addressing the key areas envisaged.

***Objective 1- Improve the parenting skills of attendees.***

*"The course has made me realise that we need time as parents and that the children have rights. And look at my children in a different way."*

*"My children have loved getting involved and my partner has took interest as we have discussed each week the different topics we have covered which has been really nice."*

*"I was amazed how well the simple behaviour chart worked..I will use this strategy again."*

**Objective 2- Introduce or reintroduce parents to adult and community learning activity.**

*“In the near future I would like a career in some area of working with children and this will be an excellent start on the right road for future learning and any other courses I take.”*

*“ I feel the course has enabled me to use my brain again and was nice to have time out with adults.”*

*“ I have thoroughly enjoyed attending the course and would be interested in attending any other courses on offer.”*

**Objective 3- Increase the capacity and skills of local parents to support other parents across the Sure Start Programme.**

*“It was great to leave the kids in the crèche and have a couple of hours to yourself and know they are only a minute away”.*

*“We, as a group, had a good laugh every week”.*

*“The course has enabled me to meet new friends and to share our experience of the way we bring up our children.”*

Respondents from the focus group session were equally supportive of the project and in particular emphasised the importance of having local crèche facilities available on site. Respondents suggested that this not only freed up the time of parents to get involved but also provided reassurance that children would be able to access the quality facilities available and would receive a high standard of care.

It was clear from the focus group session that each student has a slightly different motive for attending the session ranging from a desire to improve individual parenting skills, a desire to obtain a recognised accreditation for the session or simply a desire to

have to time out from the children to socialise and share experiences with other parents. Indeed this displays one of the clear strengths of the programme in that it is able to offer different things to different members and is flexible enough to accommodate a broad range of needs. Indeed, even the accreditation process is not compulsory and parents are able to attend simply to share experiences as opposed to completing the parent pack and associated tasks.

Respondents from both sessions indicated a desire to maintain involvement in subsequent programmes and continue to improve their skills through other learning sessions.

Several respondents indicated that the biggest step was attending the first session, as many had not been engaged in any sort of training programme for some time. Respondents also highlighted other barriers that they felt the project should address in future sessions, namely the possibility of Sure Start picking up parents and their children from their home address and also the provision of more courses at different times to attract more students.

As already highlighted earlier in this report, respondents recognise the difficulty in encouraging fathers to attend the sessions. Indeed respondents suggested that a lack of attendance was primarily due employment commitments (*"If my husband didn't work, he'd come"*) and cultural issues (*"It's not a man thing"*). Although such issues span across a range of Sure Start projects and activities it is clear that more sessions provided at times to suit working fathers and more pro-active promotion of the sessions to local fathers would assist in the process of involving this hard-to-reach group.

### ***Project Management***

The project is co-ordinated by a tutor from the WEA who has experience of delivering a range of training from a variety of settings. Crucially the tutor is also a parent, which not only provides credibility in the eyes of the students but also enables the tutor to complement the training with real examples gained from experience. All respondents commented on the crucial role the tutor has played in managing the project and ensuring that sessions are both informative and enjoyable.

It is less clear however how the project fits within the broader management structure of the Sure Start programme and in particular the interaction between the project and other Sure Start activities.

***Milestones and Outputs (as per appraisal/actual/variance/unexpected)***

As there is no formal project documentation for the Time Out for Parents project it is not possible to compare the project against any specific project milestones or outputs. Whilst it is clear that the project supports a number of PSA and SDA targets, it is more difficult to quantify the contribution of the Time Out for Parents projects to broader outcome objectives.

Each 10 week training session is able to accommodate up to ten parents, limited to ensure that the sessions remain manageable. A total of 15 parents have accessed the two sessions held at the time of writing. Whilst this represent a relatively small proportion of parents that could potentially benefit from this project across the Sure Start programme area, it does however provide capacity for more in-depth support as opposed to broader based support to a wider audience.

The key challenge for the Sure Start Programme is to ensure that there are a range of both in-depth and broader based projects to cater for the needs and aspirations of all parents from across the target area.

Although there is an imperative to minimise any adverse impact of local data collection and bureaucracy, there is however a need to ensure that the project has a clear rationale within the broader Sure Start programme with clearly defined project milestones and outputs to facilitate progress monitoring.

***Value for money (with appropriate comparisons if available)***

The WEA delivers the Time Out for Parents training from a range of other settings across the South Yorkshire area including local primary schools, Family Learning Centres and a YMCA Women's Centre. The cost of this provision varies slightly from location to location, however the standard course fee appears to be around £30.00 with reduced fees available for £15.00.

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The Denaby Main and Conisbrough Sure Start Programme provides funding of £10,000 to fund a minimum of 4 training sessions per week from StoryBook house, including the TOPS training. The tutor costs are covered by the WEA as a partnership with Sure Start. This cost can be compared with the cost of other WEA TOPS courses operating elsewhere across Doncaster. Assuming attendance of 10 parents per course, with a maximum of four 10-week courses per year, this represents a cost of £1,200 per annum (based on 40 parents at £30 standard course fee).

Given the £10,000 provided by Sure Start for four training sessions, the assumed cost of providing the TOPS training is approximately £2,500, again for a maximum number of 4 courses per annum. Consequently given that the cost of operating the course as provided by the WEA from other sites would be £1,200 it is difficult to see the value for money for the sessions provided at StoryBook house. This would suggest that the current provision does not represent good value for money for the Sure Start Programme. However it is recognised that this does not take into account any additional training and support provided by the project co-ordinator for other Sure Start projects, which may provide a clearer indication of the real value for money for the TOPS programme. In addition it is also recognised that increased attendance at the TOPS sessions would not incur any additional cost for Sure Start and thus would maximise the cost-effectiveness of delivering the sessions for local parents.

#### ***Lessons for the future***

It is recognised that the current Time Out for Parents project has only been operational since January 2003 and that more time will be required to generate interest in and demand for the course. There is a clear need for the TOPS project to undertake more active promotion work to raise awareness of the project and generate more demand from harder to reach groups across the Sure Start area. The WEA has experience of delivering TOPS training in other venues and the lessons learnt from these courses should be used to guide the development and delivery of further courses in the Sure Start area.

The current provision provides one model of delivery to support families and parents across the Sure Start programme, however further discussion will be required to assess

the feasibility of providing additional TOPS courses on an outreach basis and at other times / days to respond to the needs of different groups.

The feedback from the students involved in the course has been positive and would suggest that clearer next steps are required to ensure that parents wishing to continue with some form of training and educational are supported and referred to the relevant organisations, however there is a need to review the project costs in light of the relatively high costs per parent attending the sessions.

### ***Summary and recommendations***

Although its early days, the Time Out for Parents project appears to provide an excellent support and training environment for local parents, with positive feedback from the students with regard to the direct (raising parenting skills) and indirect (making friends) impact of the sessions.

Initially more promotion work is required to raise awareness of the project amongst the local community in Denaby and Conisbrough and specific barriers to accessing the sessions need to be addressed. In particular the project needs to determine the feasibility of delivering sessions from other venues across the Sure Start area to improve access and also encourage involvement from harder to reach groups. Although it is recognised that this may create difficulties in terms of accessing childcare, the project may need to consider how best to deliver both training and childcare from other suitable venues.

The project also needs to forge stronger links with other Sure Start funded projects, not only to stimulate cross referral between projects but also to learn from the experiences of other projects in engaging with harder to reach groups. The development of projects targeting fathers and those addressing the needs of teenage parents will be crucial and will need to link into the TOPS project.

The project needs to ensure that students are provided with a number of options at the end of the 10-week training period, either to access additional training and education

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provision, to support and mentor future students or to promote the TOPS training to their local peer group.

Finally the project needs to review the current costs and determine whether alternative sources of funding / delivery are feasible across the Sure Start programme area.