



Southwark – Aylesbury Plus

**Evaluation  
Best Start for Babies and Toddlers**



Report July 2003

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## **Best Start for Babies and Toddlers**

### **Overview of Sure Start Aylesbury Plus and evaluation**

The Sure Start Aylesbury Plus programme is now in its third year of operation, and an ongoing process of monitoring, feedback and reviews has ensured that the services delivered to families with children under four have been refined, amended and adjusted so that they meet the stated and evolving needs of the community. The result is that the services provided are well used by a representative section of the Sure Start community.

Having established services that are both popular, ie meet a perceived need, and which help to contribute to a range of Sure Start targets, a specific evaluation project was considered to be necessary to identify the particular elements within a range of services which ensured their success.

This report focuses on the evaluation of the Best Start for Babies and Toddlers programme, delivered by the London Language and Literacy Unit, one of the range of voluntary sector agencies within the Sure Start Aylesbury Plus partnership. The evaluation was undertaken in association with Cordis Bright Ltd.

## **What is Best Start for Babies and Toddlers?**

The London Language and Literacy Unit, a family learning organisation based at South Bank University, delivers the Best Start for Babies and Toddlers service. The sessions provide a range of creative activities for parents/carers with their babies and toddlers. There are three separate groups:

- Best Start for Babies (0-12 months)
- Best Start for Toddlers (1-2 years)
- Best Start for Toddlers (2-3 years)

The sessions are divided into a number of sections:

- (i) Parents participate in a creative activity – making books, toys, cards etc while the children are looked after in a crèche.
- (ii) Guest speakers are invited to present on a variety of topics, eg child development, sleep, nutrition, suitable toys, health and safety etc.
- (iii) Parents and children come together at the end of the session to participate in a joint activity, eg using play dough, singing etc.

There is also the opportunity for participating parents to join the 'Peachers' training (ie parents as teachers). The Best Start for a parent who has undertaken this training facilitates Babies session.

## **What Sure Start Targets?**

The Best Start service contributes towards the national Sure Start targets which require programmes to:

- Ensure that 100% of children have access to good quality play and learning opportunities
- Reduce the number of children who need specialist speech and language support by the time they start school
- Provide parenting support and information for all parents

### **How did we evaluate?**

On-going research was conducted between March and June 2003. Sixteen local parents volunteered to act as community surveyors, conducting face-to-face interviews using a questionnaire of approximately 20 minutes duration.

The questionnaire was compiled through consultation with a number of key people, including facilitators, the Sure Start team and, crucially, parents/carers who attend the sessions.

Training was provided by Cordis Bright to standardise the approach and techniques and to ensure that surveyors felt comfortable with the methodology.

## Summary of results

**100% of parents and carers who responded are satisfied with the service**



The key reasons identified for its success are:

- The social opportunities provided by the sessions
- The opportunity to participate in creative activities
- The information topics

***The key impact of the service seems to be the opportunity to meet other parents and the learning and skills gained through the information sessions.***

***The ethnic mix in the Best Start groups shows a representative ethnic profile for the Sure Start Aylesbury Plus area.*** There was a majority (64%) attendance of Black British – Afro-Caribbean and African, which is slightly higher than the 50% representation of these communities in the Sure Start population as a whole. There were lower attendance levels for White British and Asian ethnic groups.

***The most popular session is the 0-12 months session.*** However the small sample sizes of the older groups do not allow for any valid deduction as to why this is the case.

***Opportunities exist to expand the training provided by the London Language and Literacy Unit through increasing awareness of the courses.***

## Who attends the sessions?

A total of 14 parents attending one of the three Aylesbury Plus Best Start services were surveyed. This was a random, snapshot sample from the total of approximately 50 families who attended the Best Start sessions over the course of the 2002-2003 year.

The sample comprised 50% Black British - African ethnic group, 14% Black British - Caribbean and 14% White British. This is a fairly representative reflection of the ethnic profile within the Sure Start area. The full breakdown is shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Ethnic Profile**

<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Black British - African	50%
Black British - Caribbean	14%
White British	14%
Bangladeshi	7%





### Which sessions are most popular?

Attendance rates at the three Best Start sessions show that the session for younger babies (0-12 months) is most popular. This breakdown is detailed in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Which sessions do you attend?**

Best Start Session	Percentage
Best Start for Babies 0-12 months	68%
Best Start for Toddlers 1-2 years	14%
Best Start for Toddlers 2-3 years	21%

### How often do you attend?

Frequency of attendance at the Bookstart sessions is very high

- **71%** of respondents attend every week
- **14%** of respondents attend every other week
- **21%** of respondents attend occasionally
- No respondents stated that they 'rarely' attended.

**How did you hear about the Best Start sessions?**



Most of those attending (**57%**) had heard about the sessions through their Health Visitor.

<b>How parents/carers heard about the Best Start service</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Health Visitor	57%
Sure Start Team/ Office	29%
Poster/ Leaflet	21%
Friends/ Neighbour	0%
Speech and Language Therapist	0%

### What first attracted you to come to the sessions?

When examining the incentive for attending the sessions the main reasons were:

- **71%** - to get further stimulation/company for the children
- **57%** - to meet other mums

Interest in creative activities and art was ranked as the third most popular reason for attending. This breakdown can be seen in Table 4 below.

What first attracted you to come to the sessions?	Percentage %
To get stimulation for my baby/child	71%
I wanted to meet other mums	57%
I was interested in creative art/activities	50%
I wanted help to understand my baby/child	21%
I knew somebody else who comes	14%

## What do you most like about the sessions?

**A large majority – 86% - said that what they liked most about the sessions was meeting other mums**

The aspects that were most liked about the service directly reflected those that contributed to making the service a success. These were:

- The social aspect
- The creative aspect

**Table 5: What do you enjoy most about coming here?**

What do you enjoy most about coming here?	Percentage %
Meeting other mums	86%
The art/craft activities	71%
Seeing my child play with other children	43%
Making things with my children	43%
The presentation/ information slots	29%
The crèche	14%

**What makes the service so successful?**

The survey indicates a number of factors that contribute to the success of the service, ***the key factor being the social aspect for both parents and children.***

**Most Important Factor – *meeting other parents/carers and children***

- **57%** initially attended the session in order to meet other mothers
- **86%** stated it was the aspect they most enjoyed about coming to the sessions
- **71%** said that they attended for the children to have extra company/stimulation

**Second Most Important Factor - *the creative opportunities***

- **50%** said they attended initially because they were interested in the creative/art activities aspect
- **71%** also stated that this was the aspect they enjoyed most in attending the sessions

<b>What makes the sessions successful?</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Friendly, welcoming atmosphere	79%
The activities and materials provided	64%
The topics for presentation are good	64%
Tutors/ teachers are good	57%
The venue	50%
The crèche	14%

These results show that it is not just the ‘technical’ aspect of the sessions which is important, but also how important the ‘human’ aspect is, ie the ‘friendly, welcoming atmosphere’ clearly plays a large part in contributing to the success of these sessions.

## Learning within the sessions

***Child development sessions were clearly considered the most useful, with 43% of parents and carers stating that they were the 'most useful information sessions'.***

Other sessions considered useful were healthy eating, creative sessions, smoking cessation and homeopathic sessions. These were considered the most useful by a much smaller percentage of the sample, all rated by 2% or less.

## Practical Application of the Learning

**93%** - an extremely high percentage - felt that the learning, skills and knowledge from the sessions had very real practical application for them.

Much of the application is in terms of child development, creativity and speech and language. Specific comments are shown in the box below.

### **How have you been able to make use of what you have learnt from these sessions?**

#### **Knowledge Development**

- *To share the knowledge to learn and write other members of my extended family*
- *Using what I have learned to help my son to develop*
- *Looking after baby well and learnt how to cope with them*
- *By applying the things I have learnt to my son*
- *Building on what I have learnt by using it at home and further reading*
- *I have put the information about how, when and what to feed my baby into every day use with my children, and I think the information of first aid is invaluable*
- *I am already a child minder, it just built on what I already knew*

#### **Speech and Language Development**

- *I now play with my child concentrating on creative play and speech development*
- *Play with my daughter more creatively, speech development*

#### **Creativity**

- *I have learnt to teach my child and keep them engaged in useful activity instead of watching telly all day*
- *Knowing how to use natural toys and reading book*
- *I make use of cereal boxes and cardboard boxes so I don't throw them away. I understand these can be used to make game cards, flash cards, puzzles etc. I learnt a lot*
- *Sharing ex-Use of toys made by myself at the session and use other resources without spending a lot of money*

## Impact of service on parents

The greatest benefit of the service felt by parents was the opportunity to meet new people (86%).

A large impact was also felt in terms of understanding child development and learning new skills.

The breakdown is shown in Table 6 below.

**Table 6: What do you feel are the most important things that you have gained from the sessions?**

Benefit to parents	Percentage %
Meeting new people	86%
Learning about child development	71%
Learning new skills	64%
Spending time with my child	43%
Building self-confidence	36%
Producing something I value	36%

## Impact of service on the children

The Best Start service was also considered to have a large impact on the children. The key benefits received by children were the social and creative aspects.

A detailed breakdown of responses is in Table 7 below.

**Table 7: What do you think your children get from the sessions?**

Benefit to children	Percentage %
Opportunities for new games/ toys/ stories	86%
Making friends with other children	79%
Change from being at home	71%
Gets them used to other people	50%
Opportunity to speak/ hear English	7%



## Training opportunities

The awareness of the training opportunities available through the London Language and Literacy unit was relatively low at 43%.

Of those who were aware of the training, only 50% had taken up the opportunity (3 respondents). The reasons stated for not taking it up, in equal measure, were:

- Not ready for it just now
- It doesn't appeal to me
- I don't know enough about it

Of those who decided to take up the training opportunity the key reason stated was to increase learning - *'just to learn basic skills'*. Only one respondent stated that it was for the benefit of the children - *'because it is important for every child to be exposed to creative activities and learning'*. One respondent also stated that they wanted *'to do a course in child minding so I think this could help me a lot'*.

Whilst numbers currently accessing the training opportunity are fairly small, there is an opportunity to develop the service:

- **57%** stated that they might take up the training opportunity at some other time
- **14%** stated 'maybe' they would take it up at some other time.

## Any suggestions for change?

71% of respondents suggested changes they'd like to see for the Best Start service.

These suggestions reflect the very positive feeling parents and carers have about the service, focusing mainly on having more of it available, ie in terms of more time, and/or larger physical space.

### Are there any changes that you would like to see to the Best Start sessions?

#### Duration

- *More time*
- *More time for mums / carers to be available for discussion or share experiences*

#### Space

- *A slightly bigger room*
- *Bigger space for mums in the venue*
- *More space at the child minding centre and a bigger play area for the kids*

#### Others

- *More topics*
- *Safety considerations e.g. gates to keep the children contained because the kids could wander off*
- *Fresh fruits*
- *Parking spaces for parents attending their session and block booking of parking spaces for visitors*

## Satisfaction with the service

The Best Start sessions show **100% satisfaction** with the service, ie

- 64% are 'very satisfied' with the service
- 36% are 'satisfied with the service'



***This is a very high level of satisfaction, indicating a high quality service.***

## Conclusions

1. The service is extremely successful, with 100% of parents and carers questioned saying that they are satisfied with the service
2. The main motivating factor in attracting parents and carers to the groups is the social aspect, both for themselves and their children
3. The fact that the service is delivered by a Family Learning organisation, with objectives to meet Sure Start targets is irrelevant to parents
4. Although learning outcomes are stated as a welcome and satisfying aspect of the service for both parents and children, they are not a major motivating factor in attracting people to the service
5. The importance of the facilitators/tutors and the atmosphere created are clearly as important as any 'teaching' that occurs, with 79% of parents and carers saying that it was the 'friendly, welcoming atmosphere' which made the sessions so successful
6. While certain aspects of the service have been enormously successful, it is also clear that the training aspect of the service needs to be promoted in a different way. A relatively small proportion of parents and carers appeared to be aware of the training opportunities on offer. They might also need ongoing encouragement and support to take advantage of the opportunities when they feel ready and able to do so.

## **Recommendations**

1. For the Sure Start Aylesbury Plus programme, recommendations or changes suggested by parents and carers focused on increased opportunities and/or space for more of the same, reflecting the extremely high levels of satisfaction (100%) with the service
2. For new services or projects setting out to deliver any set outcomes such as learning opportunities for both parents and children, the needs of parents and carers need to be taken into consideration, eg, as in this case, the apparently overwhelming need for socialising opportunities and the opportunity to provide resources and activities not normally available to individuals in their homes.
3. The importance of finding the right organisation and facilitators/tutors is also highlighted by this evaluation, who are willing and able to provide what parents and children want, as well as delivering Sure Start targets