

Sure Start - The Ocean Estate

An evaluation of the 'Training for Life' course - December 2002 - March 2003
- a personal development programme for mothers of young children.

Prepared by : Focus - Education Training & Management Consultancy

Submitted to: Sabes Sugunasabesan - Sure Start Programme Manager

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Executive Summary

Training for Life was a ten week programme intended to increase the confidence and self esteem of young mothers with a view to them considering further training or entering employment. Here the scheme is evaluated against Sure Start's objectives and for its intrinsic value, regardless of intentions, for those who took part. It was found that the participants had benefited considerably and that objectives had been largely met. Reservations about a particular aspect of the course content have been expressed, and some of the practical arrangements were found to be inadequate. Recommendations address these issues and suggest adjustments for improvements in future similar schemes.

Introduction

Training for Life, a life skill and IT training organisation, was commissioned by Sure Start on The Ocean to design and deliver a programme which would enable mothers with small children to enter into or return to the world of work. This initiative was a significant addition to Sure Start on the Ocean's various projects addressing the four Sure Start National objectives.

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

The focus of the Training for Life initiative was on an aspect of Sure Start Objective 4, i.e. 'strengthening families and communities' by enhancing the self esteem and employment potential of women with young children.

In the proposal for delivering an eight week training programme, the following objectives were outlined by the training organisation:

1. To explore the issues in relation to being able to work.
2. To undertake a personal development programme focused on issues of self -confidence and self -esteem including the contribution that health and fitness can make to well being.
3. To increase familiarity with and understanding of the world of work and to formulate outline aspirations in relation to a possible role within it.
4. To become familiar and more confident with the use of ICT and to use Training for Life's community on-line, as a vehicle for learning, information and contact.
5. To identify a workplace mentor related to aspiration.
6. To prepare an action plan related to a planned progression into employment once the training sessions are completed.

The Programme

The programme, planned for eight weeks of two three hour sessions each week, ran over 10 weeks to allow for events which interrupted the sixteen sessions. Two Sure Start staff were designated to support the programme. Their role was to recruit, interpret, and promote Sure Start objectives and the Passport to Learning scheme. One of these staff attended each session to support both participants and tutor in the ongoing activities.

A copy of the programme is attached to this report as Appendix 1

Women were recruited by home visits by Sure Start workers, Drop-in sessions for mothers and young children held at the Sure Start base on the Ocean Estate, and by word of mouth. Two 'taster' sessions were held in December. About 12 attended the taster sessions, a consistent group of 6 with a seventh attending intermittently, attended from the second session of the programme.

The participants were introduced to 'Passport to Learning' an adult Record of Achievement scheme being piloted in Tower Hamlets. They were expected to complete a portfolio recording their learning during the course. This aspect of the programme was the responsibility of the Sure Start workers. They spent some time each session encouraging a systematic documenting of individual learning, using the prepared format of the Passport to Learning folder.

Methodology

Six Sessions were observed during the last 3 weeks of the scheme. Informal conversations took place during this period with participants and the course tutor. Structured interviews were conducted with the 6 consistent participants, the tutor and Sure Start support staff. [questions in appendix 2]

The Careers Guidance officer provided feedback after giving individual careers guidance interviews to five of the participants.

Observation

The earlier sessions, which were not observed, had clearly been effective in establishing a good supportive group feeling. The programme does not give details of the sessions, but they dealt with personal and life skills using active exercises, and during the computer sessions introduced word processing, use of the Internet and Email.

The observed sessions covered preparation for interviews, preparing CV's, writing covering letters, completing Application Forms and Goal setting. Throughout, the need for a positive attitude, reminders about techniques for assertiveness, were reinforced. Strategies for dealing with possible negatives in the application/interview process were discussed, eg. ' ... I have not had experience of ... but *I have done* ...'

The tutor used question/answer, general discussion, 'talk & chalk' [flip chart] and role play. The group were very attentive, took notes and were very responsive. They were cautious but not inhibited and helped each other if meanings were unclear or they had difficulty expressing their views.

Interview Techniques - Overall good general advice was given but public sector procedures needed addressing [see Course Content]

Letter Writing - The tutor stressed the importance of sending a covering letter with CV's, targeting the job for which they were applying [see Course Content]. The group appreciated the chance to develop letter writing skills, seeing this as generally useful. They would have liked, however, the time to practise and get feedback.

Goal Setting - This was very good and engaged the group, it would have been useful to have the time to experiment with this individually and share within the group. Fortunately every participant took up the offer of an hour long interview with the careers adviser. This uncovered ambitions not disclosed during the course, [see interviews] and provided the opportunity to find out about practical steps which could be taken to pursue goals.

IT Skills - This was a first chance for some to use a computer. By the time of the observed sessions most members of the group could access their documents from floppy disc, open and send Email and some were beginning to find Internet web sites that interested them. They had been working on their CV's in earlier sessions and were now putting them onto disc, dealing with format, seeking help with accuracy and finding their way round the computer.

Preparing CVs - In earlier sessions the development of a CV by each participant had been used to identify strengths and weaknesses, skills, achievements and aptitudes. Now they served as a focus for applying word processing skills, motivating the pursuit of accuracy and an attractive document, a real task to undertake, not just an exercise.

The tutor had a good rapport with the group, she had a quiet humour which they appreciated and was extremely reassuring and encouraging. She offered to act as referee if necessary, and said that they could ring her if they wanted help with an application or interview.

Interviews

The interviews were geared to elicit responses relating to the evaluation specification but allowed for more general discussion so that the participants might provide additional information which would be of use in assessing the value of their experience and could be taken into account when planning future courses.

Responses from course participants were very similar, this is an overview of the responses to each area discussed with any significant comments quoted.

Publicity / Expectations

The first questions about why they had chosen to come on the course and if it had met expectations, did not get the detailed responses which might have been helpful. None seem to have seen any written publicity about the scheme, but had been told about it at the Sure Start Drop-in, or heard by word of mouth from members of the parents forum. Expectations were therefore undefined, but the offer of introduction to computers was sufficient for them to attend a 'taster' day. One participant speaks very little English, she stated that she had come 'for the experience', the implication was that anything and everything she joins in is useful. Her positive attitude ensures that this is the case.

Asked how parents outside this immediate Sure Start 'word of mouth' circle might be reached, one group member suggested advertising future courses in school newsletters or bulletins.

Asked why so many who first attended did not return, it was generally felt that probably 'family responsibilities' prevented attendance, one said that the first meeting had been 'fun and really interesting' she was sure that no-one would have been deterred by what had been presented.

Skills / Knowledge gained during the course

All participants said that the programme had been enjoyable and interesting and that they had learnt a lot from the experience.

Asked to be specific about their learning, IT skills featured in all responses and most said they had gained knowledge about getting a job and preparing for work. Asked what was most important to them and what had been the 'best things' about the course, brought the following responses :

IT skills [all], use of Email was particularly mentioned by some.

Four mentioned preparing for work - in general
Two mentioned interview skills
Two mentioned writing skills
Two assertiveness and
Two the opportunity to meet people.

Raising self esteem

All stated that they felt more confident, some believing they would feel more able to question or complain [when asked the prompt question].

All wanted to continue to train, some know that they need additional ESOL classes in order to be eligible for more advanced courses. Though two stated that they were not ready to consider employment yet [one because of her children the other because of limited language] all, long term, feel positive about working. During the course the sort of work the group expressed interest in and seemed to realistically have expectations of getting was based in the community and for the most part revolved around children - jobs in child care, teachers assistants, toy library assistants etc. or for one or two community education e.g. running beadwork classes.

At the end of the course all the group made appointments to see a Careers Guidance Officer. They each had an hour long career interview with her. She explored their previous education and training, interests and aptitudes. With a little encouragement to be more ambitious, three or four of the participants recognised that it was not beyond them to pursue careers outside this sphere, teaching, interior design and the police were seriously being considered.

Most were advised to improve their English. The officer saw this as the only real barrier to their progress. She believed the Training for Life programme had made a big difference to the way the women saw themselves. She is following up training opportunities for them.

Possible changes

The pace was generally considered a little fast, not giving time to practise things like letter writing or to set their own goals / targets and work on a plan to achieve them. A little more time or perhaps a shift in emphasis may have created time to consolidate learning. More time on the computers would also have been appreciated.

Delivery and Support arrangements

The delivery was informal but professional. When asked if they had any difficulty understanding, all the participants stated that if ever they did have difficulty the tutor was 'easy to ask'. She was described as 'open'.

The food was considered very good by some, others considered it good but would have liked some variety, perhaps sandwiches one day each week, one or two of the group thought it should be healthier, less oily. One stated 'it was good, and it was free' implying that perhaps the question should not be asked, inviting complaint was unnecessary.

The venues were considered adequate, though the small room was preferred to the hall on Tuesdays, and one stated that the computer programmes should be more up to date, and another that the computers were sometimes unreliable [no access to the Internet some days].

All expressed satisfaction with the creche, and most stated that they could not have considered the course without one, even if they did not use it every session.

All but one participant said that they understood everything said and could read all the documentation provided. However most acknowledged the need for additional language support if they were going to go further.

Interview with Course Tutor

The tutor was generally positive about the achievements of the programme but felt strongly that the venues had not been conducive to learning, especially the IT suite which was never fully functioning. She also believed that the lunch was a distraction and needed to be simplified and the time taken shortened.

She was concerned that the extent to which objectives relating to IT skills were met was limited due to the inefficiency of the equipment, but otherwise felt that all objectives were met except for the intention to arrange mentoring.

The tutor will submit her own report to Sure Start management.

Interview with Sure Start support staff

The two Sure Start workers explained the Passport to Learning scheme. They have ensured that the course participants have recorded their learning experience, this process has helped to consolidate their learning.

The Sure Start workers were crucial in recruitment to the course, using existing contacts and their knowledge of the community to bring women to the 'taster' sessions. During the course sessions they ensured that participants were able to understand the tutor, helping with group work exercises, providing examples and ideas. They were also important in supporting the tutor to aid understanding in terms of language, culture and the Sure Start organisation.

The workers believed the essential course objectives had been met. They felt that the women had become more confident and assertive, they now recognise that they have strengths and what might be possible, 'they know what's out there' and have plans to pursue further training with a view to getting work.

Some of the women have become involved in the Sure Start parents forum and others have suggested they might be considered for voluntary work for Sure Start. The workers stated that the women now ' .. come up with ideas, .. take the initiative, .. volunteer to do things'.

Asked what factors might have hindered the delivery of the course, the Sure Start staff felt that having two different venues was not helpful. The fact that there were times when neither of them were able to be present was not good, in future they intend to ensure consistent Sure Start support. They acknowledged that lunch was time consuming but felt that it was important to provide adequate refreshment if the course is run at this time of day.

Interview with Careers Guidance Officer

The Careers Guidance Officer was very impressed by the women and felt that the programme had had considerable impact on them. She endorsed the participants positive response to the tutor. They had expressed their enjoyment of the sessions and talked about their perception of their learning and greater self awareness. She believes that they have much potential, they are motivated and 'full of hope'. She believes there are many women in similar circumstances to these who would benefit from training programmes offered within the community, focusing on their needs.

Outcomes

Referring back to the original objectives :

1. Issues in relation to being able to work were explored.
2. A personal development programme focused on issues of self -confidence and self -esteem was undertaken. The health and fitness aspect was not observed nor mentioned in interviews, though it could have been dealt with in earlier sessions.
3. Understanding of the world of work was increased and aspirations to a possible role within it were achieved.
4. Participants did become more confident with the use of ICT, use of Training for Life's community on-line was not possible due to the unreliability of the internet connection.
5. Mentors were not arranged, the trainer felt that there was little interest in pursuing this, most of the women already had many commitments and were reluctant to commit time to anything else.
6. Progression into employment was discussed and planning took place in interviews with a careers guidance officer.

The programme was undoubtedly useful in raising self esteem and awareness of personal skills and abilities and the opportunities that could be available. This was both observed and confirmed by the participants during evaluation and career interviews.

The participants all left the course with a CV which will be useful in itself for job or future training applications. It also serves as a summary of their life history and achievements, which can be drawn from when completing application forms. It can be used as a tool for looking to the future, identifying gaps and possibilities, and goal setting.

All participants benefited from the opportunity of the introduction to computer skills, for most this was a first chance, for one or two it was a chance to build on very limited experience. One was concurrently attending an IT course, but was glad of this course to supplement her learning and practise.

The length or structure of the course did not allow the depth or detail that would sometimes have been useful.

The participants were very happy with the tutor. Her demeanour was ideal.

Course Content - some concerns

As stated above the value of the experience provided by the programme is not in question. What the interviews cannot reveal is the appropriateness of the strategies advocated for these particular participants. This would only become evident to them when they attempt to get work, or if they are exposed to other models of recruitment.

The sort of work in which the group expressed interest and seemed realistically to have expectations of getting, was based in the community and for the most part revolved around children - jobs in child care, teachers assistants, toy library assistants etc. or for one or two community education e.g. running beadwork classes.

Unless it was addressed early in the course, the particular nature of public sector recruitment was not specifically referred to, and in the sessions observed which dealt with interviews and application forms, the guidance given was not appropriate.

The examples of jobs [mentioned above] used in discussion, would invariably be local authority appointments [or voluntary organisations which, by virtue of their funding arrangements, are usually obliged to conform to public sector recruitment procedures], yet potential employers were usually referred to as 'the company' rather than 'organisation' or 'authority'. Also, there was no reference made to the requirement for CRB disclosure for work with children or vulnerable clients. It may have been useful to look at a disclosure form and discuss the issues involved.

The most frequently asked questions [appendix 3] used for discussion and interview role play, focus on the applicant rather than the job - most of the examples would not be permissible within public sector procedure. It could be important for a job seeker to know this so that they do not get drawn into disclosing personal circumstances or discussing past experiences which are not relevant to the job. They also need to know that it is legitimate to make a complaint if an interview pursues personal rather than professional information.

Participants were told always to include a covering letter which should state how one's experience and skills match the job. While this is necessary if application is by CV, a covering letter would not be given to a short listing panel when application is by form, all supporting details must be included in the form. In the [very brief] session dealing with application forms participants were told that in the supporting statement they must demonstrate how they meet every aspect of the Job Description and Person Specification. Normally organisations provide guidance on completing forms, these specify the need to give evidence showing how the applicant meets the criteria in the Person Specification, the Job Description is not for this purpose.

For role play purposes useful questions could have included questions about awareness of Equal Opportunities issues and strategies for promoting Equal Opportunities's, [for example - children's books and toys reflecting a range of cultural backgrounds, posters and information pamphlets featuring people from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and published in most commonly spoken languages], and questions which draw on their experience in relation to the sort of work sought [such as 'how might you encourage a shy or distressed child to feel able to talk to you?'].

It would be useful for course members to see a set of job documentation and the notes for guidance for completion of the form, a typical pack from Tower Hamlets could be used.

Some public sector employers now use a series of questions relating to the criteria, usually competency linked, an example of this method might also have been useful.

Additionality

Two participants are now members of the Sure Start on the Ocean management board as representatives from the parents forum. There has also been an identifiable impact on the wider community. Other participants from the course and also some members from the parents group have started showing interest in being involved in the work of Sure Start.

Recommendations

Students cannot be expected to self assess their own language skills or employability. Future courses should include a diagnostic element at the beginning to determine individual learning needs so that they can be helped to

find additional support in order to capitalise on the opportunities offered in a Training for Life course. [appendix 4]

Ways in which the programme can be publicised more widely need to be explored, community organisations and services could be used to enter a wider network, the content and advantages of the course need to be presented in a pamphlet, and possibly on posters, and made widely available.

Course content, aims and objectives, intended learning outcomes, and assessment / evaluation procedures, need to be documented in some detail by the training provider and agreed with Sure Start. Without this, publicity and personal recruitment cannot be targeted, nor the course 'sold' with conviction. Sure Start needs to vet, and if necessary veto, course content, if it is to ensure the appropriateness of what is offered.

Sure Start staff need to provide consistent ongoing support within the programme, to help with interpretation if necessary, to encourage completion of the Passport to learning portfolio and to monitor the progress of the whole scheme, remembering the focus on Sure Start objectives.

Public sector recruitment needs to be specifically addressed. More time needs to be spent on application forms stressing the need to meet criteria on the Person Specification, and how this might be done. The significance of essential criteria for shortlisting purposes should be explained and examples of the ways person specifications may be presented and coded provided. For interview practice the common questions used need to relate to the sort of jobs they are considering eg - tell us about your experience relating to this job, general questions about Equal Opportunities issues etc.

All participants were ready for more training and were disappointed that there was nothing planned that they could move on to. Short follow-up courses in a range of specific skills which are useful within the family and community, as well as building a skills bank to improve employment opportunities, could be offered. Courses such as letter writing, keyboard skills, minute taking, community leadership, eg. committee procedures, local government structures, voluntary organisation funding etc., and School governor training.

Work with children requires training in First Aid. Even if a qualification cannot be achieved at this stage, basic First Aid training would be an advantage in most employment situations and could enhance applications for training, it would be invaluable in the home and would increase a parent's confidence. Taught in English with the aid of an interpreter it would be a vehicle for language learning. Recognised bodies could be approached to find out if a qualification can be awarded in a language other than English, if a course could be conducted and assessed through an interpreter. First Aid training would be most appropriate for Sure Start to offer, it would have direct benefits for the health and safety of children and a family would feel empowered by the sharing of First Aid knowledge.

More opportunities for developing IT skills and possibly learning keyboard skills were seen as priorities by both participants and staff, either within a future programme or as an additional course. Access to computers in the participants own time was also something to be pursued.

While it is important to suggest caution in dependency on programmed spell and grammar checks, as these students were operating in a second language it might have been useful to have the computers set on auto check, as this would have provided indicators of the need to check for accuracy.

The tutors concern about the venues and IT equipment, and about lunch being a distraction and taking too much time out of the session, needs to be taken into account when planning future programmes.

Summary of Recommendations

- Devise a realistic marketing and recruitment strategy
- Provide appropriate venues, including a reliable and up to date IT suite
- Cut lunch, have a short break with simple refreshments
- Make public sector recruitment procedures central to job application and interview sessions
- Participants should be provided with a course handbook and relevant handouts written in Plain English
- Consider Increasing the duration of the course from 10 to 15 weeks
- Offer a range of short follow-up courses in specific skills [especially to explore the possibility of First Aid training]
- Find ways of providing additional opportunities for developing IT skills
- Offer a more advanced personal development / introduction to work programme for those who complete a first level course and for those who are ready for a more challenging experience
- Training providers should be required to submit detailed course documents with aims, learning outcomes and assessment procedures.
- Ensure consistent support from Sure Start staff during the programme

Appendix 1

PROGRAMME

cont.

Evaluation Interviews

Questions for participants

1. Why did you choose to come on the course / what attracted you to the course ?

[appropriateness of course as described, relevance of publicity/outreach]

2. How well/ to what extent did it meet your expectations/needs ?

[How realistic the objectives as described / how effective the course content/delivery, how flexible the course / adaptable the tutors to respond to needs as presented]

3. What [specific] skills have you learned or developed during the course ?

[need to be measured against course content/objectives]

4. Has the course enabled you to increase your knowledge/understanding?

[in what areas? measure against content/objectives]

5. Are there changes you would make to the course, what would you like to have done ?

6. Having done the course do you feel more confident/assertive in other situations ? can you give an example ? [prompt with eg of Drs, social workers, teachers]

7. Were you happy with the care your child/children received ? [suggestions]

8. Were refreshments suitable/adequate ? [suggestions]

9. Were the venues comfortable to work in / easy for you to get to ?

10. Was the pace of course too fast / too slow / just right, for you ?

Questions for tutor

1. Can you give an overview of what took place during the programme ?
2. To what extent were your objectives met ?
3. What do you think the women have gained from the course ?
4. What factors helped you to deliver the programme effectively ?
5. What factors hindered the effective delivery of the programme ?
6. Can you identify any outcomes, which were not planned for, that were achieved by the programme ?
7. If you were to run the programme again what would you do differently ?
8. If Sure Start runs a similar life skills programme what suggestions would you make regarding its design ?
9. What would you recommend the participants do next ?
10. Why do you think there was a considerable drop in numbers after the first session ?

Questions for Sure Start support staff

1. What was your role in the programme ?
2. What was/is your understanding of what the Training for Life programme is about ?
3. What do you think the women have gained from the programme ?
4. What factors, in your view, helped in delivering the programme effectively ?
5. What factors hindered effective delivery ?
6. Can you identify any 'added value' in respect of the programme ?
7. If a similar programme were run in the future what would you like to see done differently ?
8. Do you think there needs to be any change in your role in future similar programmes ?

Twenty most commonly asked questions - Tutor handout for interview
role play exercise

[Generally these questions would not be considered good practice and most would
not be permissible in public sector recruitment]

cont.

Appendix 4

Assessing individual learning needs.

Sure Start is considering building diagnostic interviews into the 'taster' days. Possible approaches to this were considered during discussions.

It will be important to stress to the interviewee that they are wanted on the course, these questions are to find out how to make the sessions as useful as possible for those who take part.

The tone in which the questions are asked must be one of interested enquiry, reassuring where there is anxiety. If an applicant suggests they feel inadequate they must be reminded that this is exactly the reason why the programme is for them.

Possible questions for potential participants

Have you ever had a job ? What did it entail ?

Have you had any training ? What did involve ? How long did it last ?

Do you have any qualifications ? [Talk about their significance]

Did you do any exams at school ?

What did you enjoy most / least at school ?

What did you consider your best / worst subjects ?

The training programme will be conducted in English, do you think you might want some help with language during the sessions ?

Do you have any special interests or ambitions ?

What do you hope you might achieve by coming on a course such as this ?

Can you write two or three sentences describing how you would like to see yourself in ten years time ?

If concern is expressed about writing in English a preferred language could be used, the interviewer can then ask about experience of writing in English and establish if there is a lack of confidence or if English has not been learnt as a written language.

Throughout the discussion the interviewer will be assessing the level of language support that might be necessary and whether supplementary ESOL training should be sought. The interviewees previous experience and aptitudes can be fed into the pool of background information which can help inform the planning team, having an impact on course content and the level at which it is pitched. Special interests, hopes and ambitions can be drawn upon to provide examples, to demonstrate the relevance of activities and maintain motivation.