

'READY FOR SCHOOL' - THE NURSERY PROJECT

A joint initiative between Willowbrook School, Sure Start Exeter and Wipton First School

RATIONALE

At Willowbrook school, we had become increasingly aware of the social isolation of many children, and the high proportion of children requiring intervention for behaviour, emotional and social difficulties. In addition, analysis of the PANDA data showed that children's performance in English was in the bottom 5 % nationally. For these children, a significant contributory factor to their social exclusion and poor performance was their inability to communicate effectively.

The NFER baseline data from 2001 confirmed that on entry into reception levels of PSD, language and literacy were significantly below the national average, showing no child above the 50th percentile in any area. 47% of children were unable to attain any score in Speaking and Listening.

The school has already worked hard to address this deficit with older children by running several groups focussing on speech, language, communication and social inclusion. However, we recognised as a staff that it was crucial to intervene earlier in children's development in order that children come to school ready to engage in an age appropriate way with the school curriculum and their peers.

Willowbrook school is sited within a Sure Start area, and already had a productive working relationship with the Beacon Heath Sure Start Centre. This led us to thinking about how we could work together in a more focussed way to address these issues jointly at an earlier age. The key components being an holistic approach to improving children's communication skills and PSD, and working in partnership with parents to increase their involvement.

A meeting was convened with the Educational psychologist, members of the Beacon Heath Sure Start team including a Speech and Language Therapist, joint agency team, and school staff.

A joint bid for funding was successfully submitted through the Joint Agency Team and other stakeholders, and planning began for the next stage of the project.

Delivering the Project - Year 1

The project had 3 elements. The first focussed on the Nurture groups for 2-3 year olds at the Sure Start Beacon Heath Centre. The second element was centred around Willowbrook nursery. The third element was around involving parents in their child's development across the 2 settings.

1) The Nurture Group provides a 'stepping stone' to nursery for up to 12 2-3 year olds. This group gives children the experience of separating from their parents and building positive relationships with other care givers, boosting their confidence and self esteem. The group bases their work on Highscope pre-school principles, to encourage both children's independent active learning and their language and communication. This group was already staffed by Sure Start Family Workers and childcare workers.

A learning support assistant (LSA) from Willowbrook School joined the nurture groups as an extra numary worker. She worked closely with the speech and language therapist with a particular focus of developing children's language and communication confidence. She was able to do this as she did not take on a key worker role and was therefore freed from other responsibilities.

2) The Special Needs Co-ordinator, the Sure Start Speech and Language therapist and the LSA met to create a battery of activities to informally assess the levels of functioning of the nursery children. These assessments covered both expressive and receptive language, and the basic concepts that a child would need to be able to access the foundation curriculum.

Once the assessment data was collated, it was used to identify five broad developmental levels; level one being the most basic of concepts and level five taking a child to a point where they would be ready to engage with the foundation curriculum.

Once the nursery children had been informally assessed the LSA could begin to engage the children with an enriched language curriculum targeted to their specific needs. Initially this was done in small groups using games and play. It soon became apparent it was more productive to follow the lead of the child in their own play and activities within the nursery setting.

3) The family worker has spent a day a week in nursery, as an extra numary worker, supporting children in their play, learning and language development. She used the Pen Green Early Years Research Centre 'Parents Involvement in Children's Learning' (PICL) model, which was also taken into the nurture groups, to work in partnership with parents for their children.

With Parent's permission, she has taken a video of their children involved in activities and play. She invited parents into school to share the videos, increasing parents involvement and support in their children's play and learning in the nursery, learning from parents about their child and building a shared language between parents and staff around their children's development and needs. Parents can choose sequences of stills of their child to print off and keep.

Beyond this her role has developed into a broader remit around children's well being. Parents have been able to access her help on a range of family issues, if needed, in a way that has been flexible and informal at point of delivery. Where appropriate she has been able to follow through family support and links to other agencies. Through outreach she has engaged harder to reach families promoting value of the nursery and supporting their child's attendance.

Evaluation at the end of year 1

Both qualitative and quantitative data have been used to assess outcomes.

Quantitative Data.

Informal screenings appear to show a substantial improvement in the number of children using language and communication in a more age appropriate way.

Assessment according to the developmental levels

	Start	1 year
level 1	50%	0%
level 2	22%	6%
level 3	22%	17%
level 4	6%	6%
level 5	0%	72%

This improvement was backed up by the formal screening of 3 representative children using standardised scores using Hebden & White standardised score.

Name		Use of Language		Understanding of Language	
		CA	H+W	CA	H+W
Child One	Dec 2002	3.11	2.6	3.11	3.0
	Dec 2003	4.11	5.0	4.11	4.0
Child Two	Dec 2002	3.5	3.0	3.5	3.0
	Dec 2003	4.5	5.0	4.5	5.0
Child Three	Dec 2002	3.6	2.7	3.6	2.1
	Dec 2003	4.6	4.6	4.6	5.0

CA = CHRONOLOGICAL AGE

H+W = HEBDEN AND WHITE SCORE

Although according to our own levels, children have demonstrated significant progress, a selection of children were followed up and re-assessed using the Hebden and White developmental progress charts so that standardised scores could be obtained.

The above table shows that children have made significantly better than expected progress.

Qualitative Evaluation.

Children with specific speech and language difficulties are identified much sooner and are referred for speech and language therapy if appropriate. Parental take up of initial assessments at the Speech and Language therapy clinic in Exeter has improved, due to the links with the Sure Start Speech and Language therapists.

Parents and children have responded positively to continuity of staffing across the settings ie the Family Worker & the LSA. This has supported transitions from the Sure Start Centre to nursery. Nursery staff and parents report that children have a more confident start to nursery, settling in quickly.

There is more shared language around children's development which has helped parents and carers to engage in the education process more confidently. This has encouraged a stronger staff/parent partnership with an improved parent perception of nursery and school. Staff knowledge gained from multi-disciplinary working has increased enormously. Everybody is contributing to and learning from individual's specialisms.

This project, whilst a universal service, also helps to identify vulnerable children using a multi-disciplinary approach and further support can be accessed to prevent long term disaffection in education.

Training and Rollout

The positive outcomes from the first year created interest from the stakeholders, and we were asked to replicate the project in a new setting. This would enable the stakeholders to see if the successes achieved were particular to our setting, where good relationships were already

established, or whether the key components could be successfully transferred .

It was decided to roll out the programme to Whipton School nursery and Sure Start centre. This was a comparable community setting, without an existing nurture group or family worker involvement in the nursery. In addition, the nursery had already identified a significant proportion of children with delays in their communication and social interaction, and were keen to look at alternative ways of supporting both children and nursery staff.

The PCT, the Dfes and the Hele Trust provided some extra funding for the roll out, and Sure Start and the two schools were also willing to absorb some of the additional staffing costs. Once funding was agreed the roll out began.

Establishing a Shared ethos :

Within Sure Start, there already exists a common and embedded ethos that recognises the role of parents as their children's most enduring educators. We use the Pen Green Early Years Research Centre PICL Programme to look with parents at their child's development. 6 key concepts we work to and share with parents are:

- holding and containment
- attachment
- well-being
- involvement
- pedagogical strategies
- schemas

These concepts had already informed the nurture group and the role of the family worker at Willowbrook Nursery, and it was important that the Sure Start workers were able to replicate this in the roll out.

Because communication and social interaction were such key concerns for the two nurseries, we felt it was important to establish a shared understanding about adult- child interaction and language development, and to give staff the opportunity to explore and develop ways of working in these areas in more depth.

The Sure start Speech and Language Therapists had recently become accredited Hanen Trainers for the Early Childhood Educators/Teachers Programme (Learning Language and Loving It) , and it was decided to offer this to all staff involved in the project.

This programme involves :

- 8 x two and a half hour training sessions (these were held as twilight sessions over two terms)
- videotaping of all participants in their settings following each training session, with video feedback sessions with the Speech and Language therapist.

This child centred programme addresses :

- the importance of teacher - child interaction in creating enriched , interactive language-learning environments.
- interaction and language expansion strategies which can be used to help both children with language delays and reluctant communicators, and also to extend more able children.
- Approaches which promote children's social skills and early literacy skills

As a result of the training, the staff, who come from different settings and professional backgrounds, now feel 'joined up' in their approach and feel part of a cohesive multidisciplinary team.

Whilst the training was ongoing, we began the roll out at Whipton starting with the setting up of a Nurture group, using exactly the same model. This included a member of the nursery staff working in the nurture group. When the children had completed their first term and were ready to start nursery, a Sure Start family worker began her involvement in the nursery linking with parents.

We are now just coming to the end of the second term of roll out. The roll out is fully operational. It has been embraced by the Whipton Sure Start Centre and families involved and is becoming established in the Nursery.

Evaluation at end of Year 2 January 2003-December 2004

(Roll out starting in April 2003 Nurture Group

September 2003 Nursery)

Quantitative Evaluation.

Assessment according to the developmental levels - Willowbrook School

	Start	1 year
level 1	38%	
level 2	31%	
level 3	23%	
level 4	8%	
level 5	0%	100%

Early indications from the 2nd year informal screening at Willowbrook Nursery suggest that Sure Start and the Nurture Groups are having an impact, in that fewer children are coming into nursery at Level 1. This impact is continuing throughout the nursery with all children having reached Level 5 by the end of the year and being ready to engage socially and academically at school. It is our intention to now follow up a sample of the 2nd cohort with the Hebdon & White screening.

Comparative Data

The NFER baseline was unfortunately withdrawn nationally, so that we were unable to generate comparative data. We then looked at alternative assessments which would give us standardized data, and we decided to use a combination of three standardized Speech and Language assessments :

- Reynell Developmental Language Scales - verbal comprehension
- Pre-school Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals (Expressive Language)
- Renfrew Bus Story (spoken narrative)

These were administered by the Speech and Language Therapists on all the children starting in the two nurseries in September 2004, during the Autumn term. Although this was very time consuming, it was felt to be a very valuable tool to establish hard data for this intake of children, which can be re-administered as a way of measuring progress later in the school. Initially the aim was also to screen children on entry into nurture group, but this proved very difficult due to time constraints. However, we are aiming to undertake this in the spring term.

These tests will be re-administered on the same children across the two sites between November 2005 and January 2006, to provide standardized measures of the children's progress after one year. This will be repeated for all the new intake of children as the project continues.

Qualitative evaluation

At this point in year two, the qualitative feedback from the Whipton roll out mirrors the positive feedback from the staff and parents at the Willowbrook project. In order to evidence this in a more formal way, we are undertaking parent and staff written evaluations at both sites.

A year on at Willowbrook the qualitative evaluation described at end of Year 1 has been sustained and the project has become well integrated. Regular reflection on the project has led to existing systems being refined and further systems being developed. Children with significant communication difficulties are identified earlier, and have benefited from improved transition into mainstream schooling, and a new system for hand-over has been developed.

In addition, a new system has been developed for the school's pastoral care coordinator to link with the Sure Start Family worker, to support the transition of children with additional needs and their families and to stay as a point of contact for them whilst they remain with the school.

The Learning Language and Loving It Training has its final session in December 2004, and will be evaluated by all the participants using the Hanen Final Evaluation format.

The use of video feedback with parents in the Nurture Groups at both sites has been extended with positive feedback from parents.

Through the project we have collected video material that demonstrates some of the key principles underlying the project. We are in the process of archiving this material for use in providing training and support for staff and parents. This could be used in further rollout of the model.

The existing funding of the project runs out in April 2005. We are hopeful that on the basis of the positive results seen to date that

between Sure Start, the Schools and our stakeholders we will be able to continue to April 2006 when further hard data will be available.

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