

Summary of the Toy Library Evaluation

Introduction

The evaluation of the Littlemoor Sure Start Weymouth & Portland (SSWP) service is part of the overall research and evaluation strategy of the Sure Start programme that aims to examine the effects of Sure Start programmes for children, families and communities.

This report describes the findings from an evaluation of the Littlemoor Toy Library which was established in February 2003 as a joint venture between SSWP and Littlemoor Sure Start parents. The report is presented in two phases as the service underwent a change in what it was providing for families; Phase 1 describes the findings from data collected from the parent volunteers running the group and from families using the service. Phase 2 shows how families, volunteers and Sure Start project workers felt about the service once changes had been made.

Evaluation Plan

An evaluation plan was developed by the research team in consultation with the parent volunteers running the group and the Sure Start Evaluation Working group. Information was collected using a variety of methods which included focus group and individual interviews with parents, Sure Start workers and volunteers. Self completing questionnaires were used in both phases by parents who used the service, parents who had stopped using the service and with Sure Start playworkers. Observation of the group was also carried out over a three week period during phase 2 and children who attended the group were asked to take part in the evaluation by placing a borrowed toy in a smiley or a sad bin on return.

Key Findings

Phase 1

- 22 questionnaires were completed by mothers using the toy library with their child. The majority were very satisfied with the service and felt that a wide variety of activities and learning opportunities were provided, especially the craft and activity table.
- Although the borrowing of toys was initially high, numbers of parents taking a toy home decreased steadily over the first year due to reasons such as not knowing how to borrow a toy, unaware of a catalogue showing the toys and unsuitable choice for their child's age group.
- Families had the opportunity of socialising with other parents, spending time with their children in a play and learning environment and able to access information and advice from SSWP project workers about their child's development.

- By the end of the first year parent volunteers had begun to find the commitment and responsibility of running the group quite difficult. Volunteer fatigue was evident. Reasons for this included, feelings of being undervalued, lack of communication with SSWP around training issues, misunderstanding about roles and responsibilities within the group and a general lack of motivation.
- Meeting Sure Start objectives: It was clear that the toy library service was beginning to meet Sure Start targets, especially within Objective 3: Improving the ability to learn and objective 4: strengthening families and communities.

In September 2004 the Littlemoor service was renamed Play Time 0-4 with more of a focus on providing a stay and play group than a toy library. Changes in parent volunteers occurred and a number of meetings were held with SSWP to plan and develop the service. The evaluation team attended a meeting to feed back findings from phase 1 and volunteers used these findings to help reshape the new service.

Phase 2

- Observation findings showed that SSWP playworker input was very important to parents and children enabling a variety of different activities to be undertaken. Mothers especially liked the fact that they were learning new skills and able to feel more confident in playing with their child.
- A big improvement in how parent volunteers interacted with families, particularly new mothers and children to the group. A relaxed and welcoming atmosphere was noted by both users and SSWP workers which helped cultivate social interaction between parents and safe, fun play for children.
- The toy library resumed by the third week of the relaunch with toys being displayed and positively encouraged by volunteers. Toys were being borrowed by the majority of users on a regular basis.
- The craft activity table facilitated by a SSWP playworker was again very popular with children and mothers.
- A more open and supporting relationship between parent volunteers and SSWP was apparent. Regular meetings and the ability to feedback has ensured that communication has improved and led to a happier atmosphere at the group, which has had a knock on effect to users of the service, ensuring that local families who use the group enjoy the experience.
- As well as meeting objectives 1 and 4, the Littlemoor service has begun to work towards achieving objective 1: Improving social and emotional development by producing a strong social network at the group for all the family.

The way forward

It is clear that the toy library is meeting the needs of those families who are using the service. However, further evaluation of all play and learning opportunities in the area needs to be undertaken to discover ways to engage all families with pre-school children in the Littlemoor area into the Sure Start programme.

Increasing the numbers of parent volunteers is essential for the future of the group. Encouraging new parents to help with organisation and getting more involved in all SSWP activities will further enhance the service and strengthen the community. SSWP need to continue to provide support and guidance to volunteers on a regular basis.

Effective partnership working needs to be further encouraged. The toy library has shown how a multi-disciplinary team can work well together to provide support, good play and learning opportunities and access to other family services.

The Littlemoor Toy Library has come a long way. This evaluation has shown how a service can learn from its mistakes and develop strategies to improve its delivery to the community. The parent volunteers along with SSWP were able to look at the findings from phase 1 of the evaluation and make changes to the service based on what local parents had experienced. Findings from phase 2 of the evaluation has validated that these changes have resulted in the group offering a better service for parents and children in the Littlemoor area.