

# Parents as Partners in Early Learning

## Case studies

The Parent Champion project

### Barnsley

*'It's so scary to be a mum when you end up being inside your own home feeling like there's nothing outside your four walls! There is!'*

*Parent champion's diary entry*

Barnsley's Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) funding was used to recruit parent champions via the National Children's Homes (NCH) children's centre in Bolton-on-Dearne – one of the district's most economically-deprived areas. The parent champions worked alongside early years practitioners, showcasing a variety of PPEL-funded early years resources and activities to several groups of parents. They also devised and carried out questionnaire-based research into the use of nursery rhymes by parents attending Sure Start baby clinics. One of the aims of their work was to shed light on the barriers that some parents experience in getting involved with their children's early learning and using local services. The appointment of parent champions personalised the process and enhanced the engagement of all concerned: parents, children and practitioners.

department for  
**children, schools and families**





## Recruiting the Champions

The PPEL initiative was welcomed by practitioners in local services. Long-standing ambitions to see parents take a greater role in their children's learning coincided with the desire to develop some of the NCH Sure Start early years good practice into concrete resources that could be shared across Barnsley.

Six mothers from the local community – all of whom were already using services at the children's centre – were recruited as parent-champions for the project. Their reasons for getting involved were varied. Some wanted to build on courses they had already taken. Others saw that participation would be useful experience for jobs in early years settings – thereby broadening their range of future options.

## The programme explained

The parent champions were asked to work with small groups of parents at the children's centre and in early years settings attached to local schools. The parents in these small groups were finding it difficult to participate in local services and their children had specific communication difficulties. Alongside early years practitioners, the parent champions co-delivered a range of sessions, including:

- Play and Say: the use of objects, images and props contained in an activity bag, as well as advice to parents on developing their children's communication skills;
- Let's Move and Make Music: encouraging children's first use of a range of musical instruments and participation in rhyming and rhythm games;
- Sure Steps to Nursery: developing parents' understanding of their central role in their children's learning.

All three sessions became key sections in a PPEL activity file, each supported by its own box of resources.

Drawing on their own experiences, the parent champions were able to explain to other parents the benefits of getting more involved with their children's learning. They demonstrated to parents simple activities that they could do at home to improve their children's communication skills.

The parent champions also interacted with parents in health centres and baby clinics. Working with both individuals and small groups, they promoted the regular singing of nursery rhymes and songs and distributed copies of a nursery rhyme CD and wordbook. The parent champions devised questionnaires exploring the extent of parents' singing with their children, both before and after the distribution of the resources.

## A part of the PPEL team

The welcoming and reassuring environment of the children's centre rapidly enabled the parent champions to engage productively with a wide range of practitioners and other professionals. They were invited to play a full role in regular PPEL strategic meetings. Here they experienced their greatest growth in confidence, expressing their views formally in public – a major challenge for some at first. Attendance at the meetings allowed the parent champions to:

- refine the nursery rhyme questionnaire;
- debrief following their experiences of sitting in on the workshops;
- update the PPEL journal with written and photographic entries, as each setting was equipped with a camera;
- receive support and encouragement.

## Making an impact

The parent champions' learning journals demonstrate that their work encouraged initially-reluctant parents to engage with local services. This evidence was backed up by an external evaluation of the project.

The parent champions devoted considerable space in their journals to describe the positive behaviour demonstrated in the sessions. Children were quick to learn the routines and became increasingly confident in leaving their place to select items, talking about their choices and taking turns.

## Spreading the news

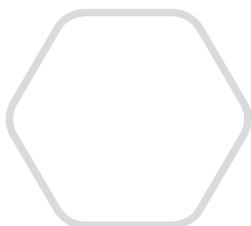
***'A lot of parents think they know it all – but they don't. I think this project is the best. I've learned how repetition is so important in a child's life and how quickly they do learn.'***

A parent champion's diary entry

The journal entries informed the formal evaluative work carried out by social policy research group the ICARUS Collective, which was particularly focused on the impact of the Sure Steps programme. The project featured prominently as part of local PPEL celebration events, and was highlighted at regional conferences. A full account of the parent champions initiative has also been published. As a result of the programme some of the parent champions have now enrolled in local authority teaching assistant training programmes.

***'This has been a huge opportunity for the local authority – a chance to refine and roll out what they know works, especially the centrality of play.'***

*Nikki Thornton, a children's centre development consultant*



The PPEL project highlighted the importance of parental involvement at a time when the authority's broader ambition is to move to a fully integrated service with the capacity and expertise to embrace multi-agency working.

### An embedded project

One of the most concrete legacies of the project is the PPEL practitioners' resource file, which has been distributed to settings across the authority and is also being marketed nationally by NCH.

The PPEL scheme is mentioned in the local authority's parenting and family support strategy and the early years strategies as a model of best practice. It has been showcased at appropriate local events for headteachers and practitioners. This has resulted in greater recognition of how the work of parent champions can help bridge the gap between parents and local services.

### Key findings:

- The parent champion role is highly effective in bridging the gap between parents and local services.
- One-to-one contact makes all the difference when recruiting parents to special early years workshops. Less personal invitations risk being misconstrued or ignored.
- Membership of the PPEL team and attendance at the strategic meetings enabled rapid development of the six parent champions.
- There is an ongoing need to recruit fathers as parent champions.
- Collaborative inter-agency work is central to this scheme.

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