

# Parents as Partners in Early Learning

## Case studies

Reaching out to parents –  
the Way We Learn project

### Newcastle-upon-Tyne

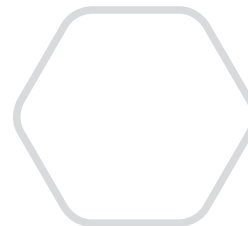
*'Thanks to you all so much for delivering such a fun, interactive and thought-provoking course. Finding out about different learning styles has been fascinating. I now realise the importance of offering my three-year-old a wide range of opportunities to explore and make sense of his little world using his sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell in order to maximise his learning potential.'*

*A parent's feedback following the PPEL Way We Learn course*

Newcastle's Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) funding was used to develop and deliver a five-day Way We Learn course aimed at parents from some of the city's most disadvantaged communities. Newcastle's University of the First Age (UFA) team was ideally placed to take on the PPEL initiative, as a result of its pioneering work with parents, schools and the local authority. The success of the course was proven by a wide range of assessment and evaluation approaches, which revealed evidence of significant gains for parents, children and practitioners.

department for  
**children, schools and families**





## The Way We Learn – a range of settings

The five-day Way We Learn course was adapted for four settings – a mix of three children’s centres and a teenage parents’ unit – catering to some of the city’s most disadvantaged communities and groups. A wide range of parents (mostly mothers) were involved.

***‘Who the participating parents were, was carefully gauged. We asked schools, children centre staff, health and social care professionals to identify those parents they felt might be most at risk of non-engagement.’***

*Phil McBride, school improvement adviser*

The course offered a variety of exercises, including learning styles, mind-mapping and the relationship between mind and body – all geared to making parents more attuned to their children’s cognitive processes. Another key part of the PPEL project was the inclusion of practitioners at each setting, so that the courses gained long-term in-house champions.

In two cases, the PPEL project enabled the UFA team to return to parts of the city where they had recently provided practitioner and parent training. This gave the team an opportunity to measure the continuing local impact of previous initiatives.

## The Way We Learn – working with teenage mothers

A course run for pregnant teenagers and schoolgirl mothers demonstrated how the programme could be adapted and run to meet the needs of specific groups of parents. At the introductory meeting there was clear potential for a lack of interest from the group, but by the third week it was hard to imagine this coolness had ever existed.

Week three of the course featured a hands-on introduction to baby massage. While young mothers worked with their babies, mothers-to-be used life-like dolls to mirror the exercises modelled by a specialist trainer visiting the children’s centre. Throughout her workshop the trainer offered positive advice about parent and baby eye-contact, conversation and the value of song. She stressed the needs of babies, including their right to choose whether to be massaged, and explained to the group that with a little perseverance baby massage can become a soothing tool that strengthens the bond between parent and child.

***'Here the emphasis is on plenty of practical activities, and lots of resources being on offer. Today the girls will be taking away everything they need to create a sensory treasure sack for their babies.'***

*Judy Waddle, UFA consultant teacher*

As part of the course every girl was loaned a digital camera. The UFA consultant teacher remarked that this 'provided the project with a powerful assessment tool'. At the start of each meeting the girls handed their cameras to ICT consultant Louise Thompson, so that by the afternoon new images capturing their home-life and parts of the day's session were available for the teenagers to add to the Baby's First Book which each of them were compiling.

***'The books are a first positive step in getting the girls reading to their children. It is also an ideal means of capturing mums practising activities they have learned on previous PPEL Way We Learn days; providing key evidence of engagement and behavioural change.'***

*Judy Waddle, UFA consultant teacher*

Evidence from the group's personal learning diaries and evaluation interviews revealed significant, positive shifts in the attitudes and confidence of the young mothers. They felt more knowledgeable about how to use a wide range of resources with their children, to support their learning and development.

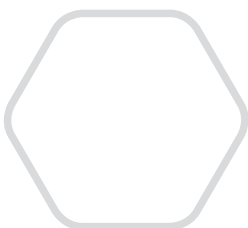
## **The Way We Learn – emerging impact**

An assessment scheme, including interviews and questionnaires, was devised to capture parents' views at both the start and end of sessions. The evidence captured reveals parents using a far more sophisticated vocabulary when describing their children's learning and the impact of their involvement. Parents also commented that they knew more nursery rhymes and songs by the end of the course.

***'It was noticeable how parents became more candid about their involvement with their children between our first asking them and subsequent conversations'***

*Dee Teasdale, UFA consultant trainer*

The evidence indicates significantly improved parental understanding of how children learn and a broadening in awareness of how to make the most of everyday opportunities for learning, such as sorting the washing and going to the shops. Evidence from practitioners and settings revealed greater engagement with settings and activities both by individual parents and by parents and children together. Parents described their use of a broader range of activities with their children at home and improvements in their children's learning and social skills.



## The Way We Learn – long-term benefits

For the parents immediately touched by the project, there have been many long-lasting benefits such as becoming aware of their key role in supporting their children's early learning. The Way We Learn courses provided an excellent opportunity for practitioners to flag up and enable access to additional services for those in need. Practitioners involved with the programme have refined their understanding of how children learn. They are keen to facilitate effective engagement between parents and children and thereby secure the long-term benefits of enhanced child learning and social skills. Evaluation evidence revealed greater engagement in children's centre activities by target parents and parental take-up of the Way We Learn course has continued to grow. At a strategic level, lessons learned from the PPEL project have informed the development of the city's parenting strategy.

### Key findings:

- Engagement with the least involved, most reluctant parents is challenging and time-consuming, but the long-term benefits for children, parents and practitioners are considerable.
- Flexibility – the importance of adaptable courses.
- Groups such as pregnant teenagers and young mothers are, once engaged, interested in learning explicitly about how their children learn. There is no call for diluting messages for this audience.
- The importance of collaborative inter-agency working and the need for long-term service engagement with target parent groups.

### For further information contact:

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