

Parents as Partners in Early Learning

Case studies

Overcoming barriers to parental
involvement via heuristic play

Derbyshire

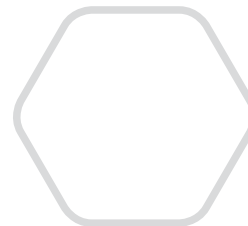
'This is our third visit, and Jessie just loves it. This is a chance for her to be really creative. She doesn't need anything else. Parents feel under so much pressure to spend fortunes on toys.'

Parent attending heuristic play session

Derbyshire's Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PEEL) funding was targeted at widely dispersed settings located in some of the county's most deprived areas. It was used to give parents, children and practitioners opportunities to experience, explore and evaluate heuristic play. Heuristic play is focused on groups of children, observed by their parents and practitioners, playing freely with a large number of different kinds of objects without adult intervention.

department for
children, schools and families





Taking the plastic out of play

In the late summer of 2007, PPEL leaflets explaining the principles of heuristic play were left with independent voluntary sector parent and toddler groups in some of the poorest rural communities in Derbyshire. The project offered to establish the heuristic approach, with guidance and support aimed at both group leaders and parents. A key element of the work encouraged parents to evaluate the experience in a variety of ways, becoming better versed in analysing the value of their children's play, and also growing in awareness of their own fundamental role in their children's early learning.

Seven baby and toddler groups were enrolled in the scheme. One of them operates out of halls adjacent to a children's centre, serving a Glossop estate. The following section describes one of the heuristic play sessions that took place at this group.

Pegs and tins and cones and wooden blocks and...

It is the third week of heuristic play, and the parents are describing the fun their children have been having, while the PPEL team prepares for this week's session. Several practitioners and a mother are interested to see if her two-year-old son will carry on arranging pegs around the edge of a big tin again. This has been his sole activity for the last two heuristic play events. These repetitive behaviours (schemas), which help children make sense of the world, are often evident in heuristic play sessions. Observing such behaviours and discussing them with practitioners also gives parents a deeper understanding of the nature and impact of heuristic play.

Despite the excitement of seeing friends and the scattered conventional playthings in the main room, many of the children are focused only on how to get into the heuristic play area. They gather at the sliding door into the smaller room where the sessions are run.

It's time to begin. The children rush for the large rug on which are strewn empty boxes and containers, wooden spoons and whisks, collections of building blocks, shells, corks and pine cones. This intriguing assortment of objects is enough to satisfy all of the children's needs without argument. Calm settles over the room as the children start to delve and explore. Heuristic play sessions are often very quiet, as the children swiftly become focused on what they are doing. Observation quickly reveals some children involved in highly-detailed and considered processes such as problem-solving and task-setting. The use of resources that they do not recognise as toys allows them to use their imaginations and think creatively.

Treasure baskets have been created for the babies. Each of these contains a collection of objects that babies can handle, suck and manipulate. Sitting with their parents, they quickly become totally absorbed by these intriguing textures and objects.

'Look at these children – play is hard work!'

Kate Young, Derbyshire early years coordinator

In the main room, meanwhile, primary ICT consultant Karen Krence works at the group's laptop and has distributed digital cameras to parents and practitioners so they can capture the activities the children tackle during the session. Each of the seven parent and toddler groups receives the same equipment and technical back-up, enabling parents to create scrapbooks recording important moments of their children's engagement and play.

'We have done this at home. My children have played with some rocks, tins and pegs. They are definitely more interested in objects that they think they shouldn't perhaps be playing with.'

Parent attending heuristic play session

Assessment

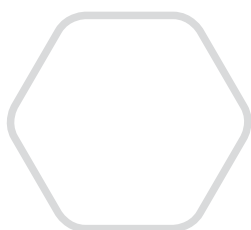
A comprehensive baseline assessment programme using questionnaires took place in each of the seven parent and toddler groups. This was followed up at the end of each heuristic play programme to establish the extent to which parents had progressed in their specific understanding of heuristic play and how their confidence had grown. As well as developing an understanding of the nature and impact of heuristic play, parents were also able to develop a broader understanding of how their children play and learn.

'For many of the children you see here, the main gain will be felt when they move into more formal settings, with their PPEL experiences captured in scrapbooks and their parents used to conducting meaningful conversations with early years practitioners.'

Sue Ricketts, Derbyshire senior adviser (Education Improvement)

Plans for the future

All those involved in the Derbyshire PPEL scheme agree that it has too much value to allow it to end after only one year. The long-term aim is to make the programme sustainable by spreading the practice through children's centres, while broadening the base of practitioners offering heuristic play, by training playworkers and equipping toy libraries. This process began in March 2008, with two showcase days that targeted all children's centres in Derbyshire and promoted the use of the approaches developed through the PPEL project.



Key findings:

- The importance of a simple idea – heuristic play is easy to grasp and highly inclusive.
- The challenge of working flexibly and innovatively within the constraints imposed by local authority procurement procedures.
- The only way to engage parents in PPEL principles is when their own self-confidence and self-esteem are raised.
- The importance of collaborative inter-agency working, in this instance, by engaging with parent and toddler groups, which are often forgotten by local and national educational initiatives, but which are direct providers of early years learning to children in isolated communities.

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