

Parents as Partners in Early Learning

Case studies

Breaking down barriers with
inspirational storytelling

Haringey

'Inspirational – I must go to tell a story.'

Haringey parent

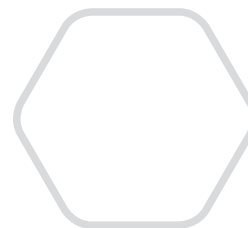
*'I can confidently say that I have never encountered anything
as exciting and inspirational as this in my 30-year career.'*

Jennie Bloom, children's centre foundation stage teacher

Haringey's Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) funding was used to sponsor workshops aimed at traditionally less involved parents and community practitioners seeking to assist disadvantaged families. These workshops, led by professional storyteller Katrice Horsley, had a widespread, positive impact on both parties. Parents described improved interactions with their children and their children's increased confidence in personal storytelling. Practitioners have incorporated ideas from the sessions into their activity planning.

department for
children, schools and families





Silent beginnings

Katrice Horsley's inauspicious start in life, including a period as an elective mute, formed a key part of the introduction to her PPEL parent and practitioner storytelling sessions in Haringey's early years and primary settings. This openness helped to make the workshops accessible for parents facing challenging circumstances and who lack confidence in themselves as storytellers.

'What she emphasises is that it's in our power to create our own stories. The way she explains this is very moving and clearly has a significant effect on people.'

Veena Sharma, PPEL coordinator

From taster to workshop

Veena Sharma first came across Katrice's training sessions in 2004: 'I have long wanted to bring this experience to the borough – the PPEL project gave me that opportunity.'

In order to ensure that this had as much publicity as possible, taster sessions were offered over a week. These were highly successful and gave rise to more than 40 practitioner and parent workshops – producing very high numbers of participants and champions.

Many elements – all of them fun

The sessions emphasise the importance of body language, sound, repetition and rhythm in making storytelling both engaging and memorable. This is demonstrated by extremely physical renditions of some of the tales. Participants are told the day's tale and then challenged, working in pairs, to retell it to each other – first in under a minute and then in just 30 seconds.

This ice-breaker sets the tone for an interactive session, one that will demonstrate a variety of simple suggestions for both animating and capturing storytelling with children. A particularly compelling technique is the use of pieces of cloth and other objects to lay down the key elements of a tale along a simple piece of rope.

'There is nothing offered that would require expensive equipment or highly-specialised training. Parents and practitioners should leave feeling these are experiences that they can and want to reproduce with their children.'

Katrice Horsley

Permission to play

This approach is deliberately unself-conscious. Through a constant flow of jokes, self-deprecating humour and madcap creativity, it emphasises the fact that everyone has the freedom to make fools of themselves, to take risks and to play. This element has proven extremely powerful for participants.

No 'dumbing down'

These sessions are underpinned by demonstrations of the developmental relevance of the actions used by the storyteller. Conversations with parents and practitioners are filled with information about sequential thinking and multi-sensory learning styles. Participants leave the workshops with a deep understanding of the importance and relevance of the interactive storytelling.

Creative assessment

Evaluation strategies are highly creative, reflecting the weakness of relying on written appraisals alone, particularly for those whose literacy skills in English may be limited. Simple target-setting approaches are used. Participants place symbolic representations of, for example, pace (a speedometer) and style (shoes) on a simple dartboard, capturing their feelings in ways that are both direct and honest.

'At the end of each session, I have a strong idea myself of where the greatest impact has been felt, be it in developing literacy or parents' self-confidence.'

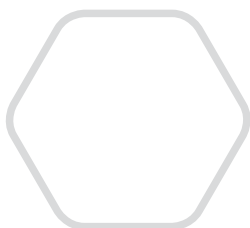
Katrice Horsley

Emerging impact

Information gathered from the distribution of 600 evaluation postcards to participating parents and practitioners has revealed the emerging long-term impact of the programme. Parents reported that they now tell stories more frequently to their children at home, incorporating ideas gleaned from the programme. Somali and Kurdish mothers in particular have engaged more with courses and are making and distributing storytelling props to other parents. All parents described improved interactions and bonding with their children. Parents, teachers and practitioners also described how children have become more confident in their own storytelling.

The storytelling legacy

The workshops, school assemblies and classroom-based sessions reached over 7000 children, as well as more than 700 parents and practitioners in primary schools, children's centres and the local authority's professional development centre. It is anticipated that storytelling workshops will be regularly run within Haringey, and settings across the borough are keen to use physical storytelling skills as part of Continuing Professional Development programmes for staff and courses offered to parents.



The project was promoted at a local early years conference in March 2008 to which parents and practitioners were invited. Training sessions will continue to contribute to key literacy strategy and early years professional development events in 2008 and 2009.

'These training sessions have touched so many lives, and the positive ripples they have set up will carry on benefiting the borough, with no exaggeration, for years to come.'

Veena Sharma

'In the end, the most sustainable thing about this work is the fact that storytelling is a fundamental part of every culture. It is a tool which requires no special equipment or great expertise, and which feeds directly into children's imaginative landscapes.'

Katrice Horsley

Key findings:

- The value of giving the project the flexibility to form partnerships with outside providers – bringing in professional expertise.
- The value of storytelling as a mechanism for encouraging creative talk between parents and children, and developing children's emotional resources.
- The universal importance of storytelling across cultures and the capacity storytelling has to build bridges between individuals from very different backgrounds.

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