

# Parents as Partners in Early Learning

## Case studies

Building effective partnerships –  
the Letters and Sounds project

### Kirklees

*'I have never done any active listening at home, but the other night, putting my child to bed, we heard an owl and talked about it for ages.'*

*Experience described by a parent during one-to-one conversation with a PPEL action research practitioner*

Kirklees targeted the Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) initiative at developing practitioners' skills in engaging with parents – particularly those from traditionally less involved groups, in this case Kirklees' South Asian communities. A parallel goal was to create stronger links between children's learning in early years settings and in the home environment. Both objectives were achieved through special events, including workshop-picnics promoting the principles of the Letters and Sounds approach. These events also provided a recruiting ground for parents willing to take a fuller part in developing and refining a set of Letters and Sounds training resources.

department for  
**children, schools and families**





## Two questions

The Kirklees PPEL project addressed two fundamental questions:

- How do you create better communication between home and school settings?
- What skills and knowledge can we give parents to help them understand and support their children's language development?

***'The questions highlighted the need for a clearer understanding of the responsibilities early years practitioners have for breaking down barriers with parents.'***

*Kay Davies, Kirklees Early Learning Service senior advisory teacher*

Groups of practitioners from three economically-deprived areas were invited to chart the planning and impact of the different bridge-building processes. The research also aimed to identify and record lessons learned about how early years settings might make effective links between children's home life and activities taking place within settings.

## What are the barriers?

To understand how they could improve their practice, practitioners considered the barriers to parental involvement. One thoughtful response was expressed by a children's centre coordinator:

***'It has always been my feeling that the majority of parents want the best for their children, and it is the professional's responsibility to raise the parents' consciousness about what they already do as a starting point.'***

## Planning big events

Picnics were the central focus of the PPEL project, based on the premise that sharing food is an ideal ice-breaker. Careful thought was given to making these gatherings as easy for parents to attend as possible. At the children's centre, a Saturday morning was chosen for the Letters and Sounds picnic, with invitations going out to entire families. In contrast to this, another picnic, held at a Huddersfield primary school, was scheduled for the beginning of the day, to coincide with the time when parents brought their children to school.

Another key consideration was how to communicate with families about the events. While school picnics could rely on parents being around as part of their normal routines, attendance at the children's centre picnic was a concern. Its eventual success owed a great deal to the efforts of workers, who followed up the printed invitations with one-to-one conversations with parents and a last-minute telephone ring-round. This direct and personal encouragement was deemed a crucial factor in families' decisions to attend.

## Raising consciousness, enjoying picnics

The picnics provided a great opportunity for practitioners to dispel parents' doubts about the educational value of play and the need to forge links between school activities and family life. Each picnic showcased imaginative and fun Letters and Sounds activities. Among the most popular of these were:

- sing-alongs – parents were then given recordings of the music to help them practise singing with their children at home;
- a box game, which helped children match a phoneme on the top with an object inside;
- listening diaries with which parents and children could discuss and catalogue all the sounds they hear in and around their homes.

At the children's centre picnic parents and children were able to try out a wide range of Letters and Sounds activities that included writing the first letters of their names in henna hand-decorations, playing musical instruments, and making noisy jewellery and rain-shakers.

## Making an impact

At each event detailed notes were taken, recording parents' views – an exercise that enriched practitioners' understanding of how the resources might be adapted – and also measuring parents' willingness to try out at home what they had seen and done at the event. At one picnic, the value of older siblings helping their younger brothers' and sisters' learning was highlighted.

The research component of the project, whereby practitioners worked with individual parents, enabled the development of detailed case studies. This work revealed some significant breakthroughs for individuals. One mother's view of learning was greatly altered:

***'Now I know that he doesn't have to just get it right or wrong. We can do this together at home... There should be more meetings like this.'***

The PPEL work in Kirklees has confirmed the importance of practitioners developing a more collaborative model of working with parents, despite apparent barriers to such engagement. The project has built up the knowledge and experience of both practitioners and parents. It has helped build clear foundations for future contact and relationship-building with parents and extended families.



## Ensuring sustainability

Kirklees local authority considers the Letters and Sounds materials and training – enhanced with case studies and parent insights – as a long-term example of good practice. This means that the benefits of the PPEL project will continue long after the scheme's formal funding ends.

Findings from the PPEL project have been shared with local headteachers and setting managers at key meetings. The project is well placed to prompt a borough-wide strategy supporting settings and practitioners to engage parents in their children's learning, and this priority will be included in the authority's Early Years Outcome Duty Plan.

## Key findings:

- The need to challenge perceived barriers to parental involvement.
- Breaking down these barriers can be achieved with imagination, flexibility, and the careful timing and promotion of events.
- Recognising the parents' desire to participate in their children's learning, even if they do not normally engage with local services.
- How activities can achieve the transition to home if adjusted for accessibility.
- The impact of listening diaries as a way of encouraging active listening at home.
- The potential of family learning and extended schools provision in making links with parents, as well as the traditional school routes.
- Practitioners must discover and value what parents actually do at home and use it in the classroom.

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