

Baby and toddler groups

Parents, Early Years and Learning: Practice example

Setting up open access 'stay and play' sessions for parents, babies and toddlers is one way to begin sharing messages about learning and development, and build parents' confidence as educators of their own children, from their very earliest days.

St Anne's Stay and Play Group, Colchester meets twice a week between 10am and 12pm during term times, and on some mornings during the holidays when older siblings are welcome to attend. About 60 families are registered, and about 25 to 30 0-4s attend each session accompanied by about 20 adults.

Helen Fraser, who runs the group, recognises that parents are central to their children's learning and development, so she encourages all parents to join in activities with their children.

At every session there is a focus activity, such as collage or messy play. Helen and her helpers encourage participation and explain the purpose of the play to parents. There is, of course, no pressure to join in. If children are not interested, they can go straight to the alternative play activities of their choice.

Healthy eating is also promoted, with a snack at each session and cooking activities. Sessions finish with physical play, singing and dancing – again, for those who want to join in. This offers an excellent opportunity to emphasise and model the importance of song, rhythm and rhyme in young children's development.

There is always a safe baby area with toys and recliners for babies to sit and watch the world around them – a comfortable space for parents just to be with their baby.



Groups for parents, carers and their babies and toddlers have a variety of names, e.g. Stay and Play, Baby and Toddler, and Parent and Toddler. They may have different names but they are all groups for parents and carers who stay with their babies and toddlers during a session. Most groups are self-financing, depend on low fees (often less than £1.00 per session) and are run by volunteers.

Could you:

- set up a baby and toddler group as part of your service?
- lend books as part of a stay-and-play session or accompany parents to enrol at the local library?
- print song and rhyme sheets for parents to take home?
- design simple activity sheets: 'How to make playdough'; 'How to use a treasure basket'?
- set up a toy library service as part of the group?

There is also a distinct book area, where children can choose their favourites to look at. Parents are encouraged to read to children who often cuddle up for a story or two (or three or four).

Helen believes it is essential to make sure that all parents feel really welcome. When a parent and child come for the first time, Helen spends time with them and introduces them to other parents and children to help them feel at home and begin to forge relationships.

A number of friendships have developed in the group and some group members choose to meet outside – either for some supportive 'adult-only' time together, or with their children present so that both adults and children can socialise.

There is an attractive booklet for parents, which tells them everything they want to know about the group. There is also a table at the door for leaflets with information for parents. Specialists from health and education services are invited to the group so that parents have the opportunity to talk with them about key issues.

Helen also feels that parental input into how the group is run is central to the group's success, so there is a monthly 'Parents Have Your Say' meeting as well as ongoing feedback from parents in the group.



“I like the group because it is both structured and friendly.”

The Pre-school Learning Alliance provides guidelines and materials to support and extend good practice in running baby and toddler groups. You may be able to get more information from a development worker in your locality or by visiting the Pre-school Learning Alliance website: www.pre-school.org.uk

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