

## Let's play together

**Highfield Children's Centre, Chorley, Lancashire** has created a project called Let's Play Together. It is a programme that provides parents/carers with opportunities to experience activities that will promote their child's play and learning. While the sessions are generally Centre based, they can also be delivered at home.

The programme aims to promote parents' awareness of children's very early learning and development through making the most of everyday activities and interactions on the basis that 'Together we can make a difference.'

A very simple questionnaire, designed in conjunction with parents, informed the planning and timing of the sessions.

Planning and preparation reached out to all parents, especially the most excluded families within the community. These included a group of Asian women attending the Children's Centre, young mums engaged with the Youth Service and Connexions, homeless people, fathers/grandfathers and male carers.

The programme runs for nine sessions, on a weekly basis, and is open to all parents of young children within the area. Each session has a structured plan and lasts for around two hours. A crèche is provided to enable parents to participate.

Each week a particular aspect of children's play and learning is taken as a focus. Within the group, parents have the opportunity to experience

activities, develop an understanding of the ways in which they can promote their child's development and share their thoughts and feelings.

Parents are given advance information about the focus for a session. Planning, with clear learning outcomes, is displayed on a large poster. All the resources used are everyday materials and examples are provided of ways to stretch children's thinking through simple learning experiences at home.

During the following week parents are encouraged to try out activities, adapting and extending them to suit their individual child.

A session on communication focused on listening carefully to sounds in the environment. Parents encouraged their children to listen, talk about and imitate sounds. This included a trip to a local farm park. After the session, parents suggested taking children to a local tunnel so that they could hear echoes. They took a camera with them to capture the experience.

All families have an A3 scrapbook that is used to tell the story of their child's 'learning journey', showing how they engage with the activities – and these are added to each week. Records are kept using photographs, observations, paintings, early writing and drawings. These provide clear evidence of the child's play and learning as well as giving the child, parent and practitioner the opportunity to recall their experiences and celebrate learning together.





The Centre adapts its approach to suit individual parents. One child, with additional needs, has visits at home twice a week. Other families can also be visited at home, if workers feel it will help to build confidence and gradually encourage them into a group.

The programme so far has involved 33 parents including those who attend the 'Jelly babies' group for children from birth to 18 months, others from the 'Little Acorns' group of children aged 18 months to three years, and 10 fathers from the 'Men behave Dadly' group.

Feedback from the original questionnaire resulted in several parents expressing an interest in helping to deliver some sessions. This has proved to have a significant impact in strengthening their confidence.

Initially, some parents were unsure of their ability to engage with the programme. However, they are now making observations such as:

*“Being part of this project has helped me in my confidence. I’ve made good relationships with staff and other parents. I never thought I would be able to stand up in front of people and deliver part of the training, but with support from the staff, I will do it.”*

*“It was really helpful to have the poster on the walls, which breaks down the session telling us the learning outcomes for us and the child.”*

*“It has really helped me bond with my child.”*

*“It’s a good chance for dads to show mums they can do it as well.”*

The sessions have a high level of attendance – families remain committed to the programme. Staff at the Centre feel this is because they have worked hard at consulting families about what they would like. They get to know their families well and take a gentle, step-by-step approach to involvement. The sessions are practical and lively – and the fact that some parents get involved in the delivery helps to maintain a welcoming, inclusive atmosphere.