

Parents' story sack and video group

Footprints Children's Centre in Bristol set up a parents' group to make and use story sacks. The idea came from the parents' forum and from individual parents during parent conferencing.

The group meets once a week and is supported by a lead teacher, a speech and language therapist, and an early years practitioner.

Parents who might welcome, and benefit from, some extra support to build confidence in helping their children learn are invited to join the group. Some have children in supported daycare or have been identified through the common assessment framework process.



The centre staff are introducing an approach based on the Pen Green Loop* across the centre. This involves combining observations from practitioners and from home in order to identify each child's individual interests, learning patterns and strengths, and planning future learning together with parents.

This model is used in the story sack groups. It was felt that making and using story sacks together in a mutually supportive environment would help parents develop the skills and knowledge to make learning fun, enhance their children's speech and language skills and develop parents' confidence in making and sharing observations.

Planning the project

The centre planned for parents to come to the centre weekly over a period of 10 weeks for a variety of activities, including using and making story sacks. Practitioners model the use of the sacks with

children and illustrate how this could encourage and extend language development and foster a love of books. They also discuss the benefits of using real objects to tell children's stories.

Videos of individual children playing at the centre are also shown and discussed. This encourages parents to observe and play with their children at home and bring back their observations for discussion at the next meeting. Practitioners show how learning can be extended from the story sack to enable children to explore their own interests and schemas.

Parents are encouraged to observe at home and record their child's play. They can use a range of methods to record these observations, including photos, video,

voice recordings, journals, or talking while practitioners scribe.

Working closely with parents

It was clear from the beginning that building on existing relationships would be vital. As well as already knowing the child, key persons at



the centre know the families. This has enabled sessions to be planned and introduced in a sensitive way to ensure that individual families' needs are met. Practitioners knew that some parents, for instance, felt more comfortable attending if other parents they knew were invited too.

Time and flexibility

Being flexible has made the project accessible to more parents – one-to-one meetings have been arranged with some parents who have not been able to come to the pre-booked sessions, which take place in the morning.

After a couple of sessions one practitioner was concerned that some parents felt left out because they worked and were unable to attend. It was decided to put a big poster up by the entrance of the centre. Parents can now sign up to help make resources in their own time or take a story sack home.

The group has created welcome time for parents to relax, socialise and build confidence. One parent noted: *'It's a bit of quiet time away ... to chat with other parents. You can forget about other things.'*

What have parents got out of it so far?

'After just three sessions we noticed an increase in confidence in how parents relate to staff and vice versa. The parents are beginning to open up and talk about their children's learning at home.'

Although initially there was a little reluctance from parents to take a story sack home, they are now keen to do so and some have taken photos of their children using the sacks and chatted about the experience at the next meeting.

'Parents are really gaining in confidence – taking the lead. Many have been involved in planning the next week's session!'

More information about training at Pen Green is available at www.pengreen.org or by phoning 01536 443 435.



*See PEAL Practice example – Sharing observations with parents – The Pen Green Loop.