

A group of diverse children and adults are smiling and holding hands in a circle against a green background. The group includes a young boy in a blue shirt, a girl in a yellow shirt, a girl in a green shirt, a boy in a red shirt, a girl in a pink shirt, a girl in an orange shirt, a girl in a light blue shirt, and a boy in a green shirt. A white circle with a black border is overlaid on the center of the group, containing the text "Working together with children and families in the community" in red, bold, sans-serif font.

**Working
together with
children and
families in the
community**

This article examines the contexts of the stay-and-play sessions developed for parents/carers to attend with their children, which I studied in my dissertation. The findings of this case study research have given me the opportunity to understand our weaknesses in my setting and they have been helpful to understand changes to implement in my practice. This article engages in reflections about how we, as early years practitioners, can provide parents and families with a quality service within the stay and play room, to support children and families.

Developing partnership and engaging with parents and families is a key tool in building stronger communities to create better foundations for children's future success (Petrovic *et al*, 2019; Epstein *et al*, 2019; Spry-Hartley, 2010). But, surprisingly only a few studies in the UK have research on the importance of supporting families within the stay and play sessions. Thus, this article seeks to show the importance of providing varied opportunities to all children through supporting parents/carers to engage with their children in the stay and play sessions.

Parents play a key role in children's lives and the research report on the 'best practice in parental engagement' (DFE, 2011a) argues that engaging parents has a significant impact on children's learning. Not only this, Winston and Chicot (2016) emphasise the significance of parents and carers having a strong bond and attachment with their babies and young children. They sustain that children who are deprived and neglected from being provided with a rich environment with stimulating experiences maybe impacted on their first few years of life causing the brain to shrink. Hence, the research studies of Winston and Chicot (2016), Gilmore *et al*, (2018) and Weinert *et al* (2016) emphasise the importance of babies and young children being supported in their first few years of life as this impacts on them later on in life.

Studies also show the importance of the practitioner's role in aiding families to engage with their children (Sammons *et al*, 2015). This can be done through providing them with information, advice and guidance (Sammons *et al*, 2015) and if need be referring them to relevant services (Sammons *et al*, 2015). The practitioner within the stay and play room is a key actor with various responsibilities. The practitioner must ensure to provide all families within the community with multi-agency support through an integrated provision of services (Sammons *et al*, 2015)

as it is vital that parents along with their babies and young children are offered support and advice to develop strong foundations for children's future success.

I start by presenting what the concept of stay and play means and its impact on children's learning and development. This is followed by a discussion of the importance of supporting disadvantaged children through working together with parents and other practitioner to ensure we help in narrowing the gap between the advantage and the disadvantaged. This is vital to help babies and young children who have fewer opportunities at home. Then, I discuss home learning and the importance of working together with parents and carers to support children's learning and development at home. Lastly, the impact of fathers' involvement on children's learning and development is addressed, and how practitioners can support their engagement. Through the discussion and conclusions, practitioners may find useful the evidence discussed.

Stay and play

In 2005 stay and play sessions began to take place, where *Sure Start Children Centres* were established by the government to provide integrated services to families and support vulnerable individuals, for example, single parents (Johnson, 2011). Stay and play is an informal drop-in session for children and families within the community (Gov., 2013). It takes place in a Children Centre where parents attend with their children. The sessions are free to access by all children and families who are living in a borough (Gov., 2013). The stay-and-play sessions is defined as any centre delivering play activities for parents and carers to attend with their children to engage in play activity together (Gov., 2013). The sessions should provide high quality, stimulating and challenging activities for all children from new-born to five years during term-time and till eight years during holiday periods. The environment should be welcoming and support parental involvement in children's learning through practitioners having discussions with parents about their unique child (Gov., 2013). The practitioners should role model good practice of engagement and provide parents with support and advice when needed (Sammons *et al*, 2015). This is an essential opportunity for ensuring early help identification of children's additional needs are recognised and supported. Early help is providing the children and family with support as soon as a difficulty has emerged. The NSPCC (2019) highlights early help is an essential tool given to provide children and families with

the support that is needed to support children to reach their full potential and provide them with a better quality of life at school and home. Research of the 'families in need supported by children centres' show ninety percent of families who are in need have been helped and supported by Children Centres (Gov., 2014).

However, the aims and delivery of the sessions differ among the various settings, as each setting delivers their session in their own unique way. For example, Spry-Hartley (2010) mentions Alberta Parent Link Centre's offers stay and play sessions for children and families two to three times a week. Moreover, Tower Hamlets offer stay-and-play sessions to families four days a week (Local offer, 2020) whereas Hackney offers the stay-and-play sessions five days a week (Learning Trust, 2020).

Within my Children Centre, we aim to help children and families through the stay and play sessions for them to achieve better outcomes through providing them with a stimulating environment for them to access. We focus on supporting our target families who are the disadvantaged children. According to House of Commons Education Committee (2019), disadvantaged children are children who are eligible for free school meals or looked after children who are in care or were previously in care. Children who are eligible for free school meals are those who are in full time education and their parent and carers are on benefits and income support (Gov., no date). Whereas, looked after children are children who was in care by the Local Authority for more than 24 hours and are also known as children in care (NSPCC, 2020). They may be living with foster carer, residential children's care home or a residential setting (NSPCC, 2020).

As a Children's Centre, we focus on supporting these disadvantaged children to reduce inequalities between the children in need and their peers (Long and Bolton, 2015). The recent OFSTED report (2019) emphasises the importance of narrowing this gap. However, for this to occur, the children must be provided with quality education to help support and extend their learning. The research study of Siraj Blatchford *et al* (2011) shows that disadvantaged children who went to high quality provisions were able to achieve high academic levels, narrowing that gap. Moreover, the Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY, 2012; Cited in: Parliament, 2017) findings shows that high quality provisions support children's holistic development including their confidence, creativity and curiosity which is crucial for not only school life but after school life as well. The provisions have

supported children's social and cognitive development, supporting to narrow the gap between the least and most disadvantaged children.

Sammons *et al*, 2015; Needham and Jackson, 2012; Johnson, (2011) suggests stay and play sessions are to engage disadvantaged and vulnerable families . However, Pote *et al* (2019) claims vulnerable and disadvantaged families may be hard to reach as they may be more unaware of the free services which they can access. Having said this, the research of Fowler *et al*, (2013); Hindman and Morrison, (2011); and Cooper, (2011) emphasises the importance of outreach programmes which are undertaken to engage disadvantaged and vulnerable families (Fowler *et al*, 2013; Hindman and Morrison, 2011; and Cooper, 2011). Hence, it is crucial for early years practitioners who work in the stay and play room to engage vulnerable and disadvantaged families. When we reach disadvantaged and vulnerable families, we are able to support them and refer them to relevant services for them to access to help support them in developing stronger foundations for children's future success (Sammons and colleague, 2015).

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project findings discuss the positive impact on supporting children's learning and development through attending the stay-and-play sessions (Sure start, 2004). Furthermore, the research 'studying the effects of Children Centre' (Sammons *et al*, 2015) shows some impact of the stay-and-play sessions on children's behaviour, cognitive and health development.

Children Centre's provide support to reduce health inequalities through having a range of health professionals accessible but also providing activities to support the health of children and families through sessions like Family Yoga and Bouncy Castle. Sammons and colleagues (2015) discuss the impact of Children Centres on the mother's health. The research results showed the mothers who used the services in the Children's Centre had improved results on their mental health outcomes and were in contact with other professionals such as the Health visitor. Hence, the Children Centre's provide a wide range of professionals that the families can access and practitioners support families through referring them to the relevant services. Sammons and colleagues (2015) shows practitioner working together with other professional appears to support children and families on various aspects such as children's behaviour, parental distress and language delay.

However, the number of Children Centres is dramatically reducing due to the cuts to social expenditure by the Conservative government, causing risk to many disadvantaged children. For example, the article of Butler (2019) shows how the Local authority spending cuts have caused 20% decrease in the number of children attending children's services. This has caused difficulty for Children Centre to reach out to families within the community, making it difficult to support new parents and parents to access early help support.

This shows the importance of the stay and play sessions supporting children and families through providing them with quality services and working together with parents and carers to support each unique child. However, the Children Centre's are also impacted due to the cuts of social expenditure by the government.

Home Learning

The home learning environment is the learning environment created at home which becomes the context in which children learn and develop. Smees and Sammons (2018) argue the home learning environment supports children's development in the early years which has a positive impact on them later in life. Children are able to learn and have various experiences through their everyday life and activities, understanding the world through the context of the family. This links to Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological model (1989) arguing that there are many elements which impact on children's personalities, culture, identity and their understanding of the world. For example, the home environment and the school environment are two environments influencing children's understanding and their self-identity (Bronfenbrenner, 1989. Cited in: Keenan *et al*, 2016). This shows that children do not develop by themselves but are influenced by the context they are in. Moreover, Vygotsky's (1978) theory on the Zone of proximal development also shows that the child is supported and influenced by the adult through the adult stepping in at the correct time to help the child in learning something new and prevent the child from giving up.

My research study findings supported my colleagues and I to learn about the importance of supporting families on home learning activities. Through the research, we were able to realise we were not providing parents with activity suggestions they could do at home to further improve children's learning.

But what makes a good home learning environment? The National Children's Bureau and other charities worked together to research on the Home Learning Environment and in the research document 'Home matters' they argue the importance of parents engaging in 'meaningful activities' that supports a child to think and talk to stimulate the child's mind, supporting a child's mind (Home matters, 2018, p.2). Through the research findings, it is shown the activities that have a significant impact on the children are activities that support a language rich environment such as going on a trip to the library, reading books together, exploring with print, singing songs exploring with other children (Home matters, 2018). Practitioners could support parents in this through working closely with parents to support children's learning at home. For example, supporting a child through having a book library for the family to borrow and return. This can also support disadvantaged families (Sammons *et al*, 2015) and encourages children to read books (Reading agency, 2020)

Foster and colleagues (2016) raise the importance of both parents involvement in supporting children's learning at home. They argue that when both parents are included in children's learning; this supports their foundations for future success, impacting on gaining higher attainment levels. Thus, practitioners must work together with parents through listening to parents, as they know best about their children's needs and interest. They must work with them to providing them with information, advice and guidance on activities they could do to have an enriched home learning environment for children and extend their learning (Education Scotland, 2019). For this reason, Practitioners need to engage in a reciprocal approach with parents to support children's learning and development.

When both parents are involved in children's learning there is an increase in academic achievement (Nitecki, 2015; Hakyemaz, 2015; Epstein, 2010, 2019). Not only this, the study of Sheridan and colleagues (2017) who have studied the effects of parental involvement on children's behaviour, have pointed out that when parents are involved in supporting children to develop their social-emotional competence, this lowers challenging behaviour. This shows it is crucial for Children Centre's to work together with parents through engagement and having continuous dialogue with between parents and practitioner, asking how activities went and what they could do next?

The challenge for practitioners

My research dissertation was able to make me realise improvements we could make within the stay-and-play room. Although my study showed that the adults were role modelling good practice, we could have provided the families with activity suggestions that they could do at home to continue the child's learning. For example, if a child is beginning to draw letters in their name, an activity suggestion could have been provided of tracing letters, dot-to-dots, environmental prints and mark making. Mark making is not just writing letters and text but the marks children make are unique to them and should be supported through extending their learning and this helps children to develop language, imaginations, creativity and fine motor skills. Bradford and Wyse (2019) research findings show when children are interested in mark making and creating marks, their interest should be followed and supported as children create marks and have meanings for the marks they make, hence the practitioner and parents should work with parents to support them in creating marks

Through my research, I spoke to my team and told them about the importance of providing parents with information on activities they could do next with their children. We implemented this within our practice and felt we were engaging families more and being able to support them through providing parents with individual activity ideas they could do at home with their children, depending on their needs, interest and level of development. For example, a child is interested in the story of the Three Little Pigs, activity suggestions could be provided of creating props for the Three Little Pigs through making the animals using wooden spoon craft to help the child to begin recalling parts of the story.

Taggart and colleagues (2015) underline that the better the quality of the home learning environment, the better impact this will give on children's future success. They mention having this quality home learning environment supports children's early speech, language and communication skills as well as their social, emotional and cognitive development. The Department for Education (2011b) research report also mentions that when parents were provided with individual activity suggestions, they were more engaged in supporting children's learning. This is implemented in my setting stressing what we know in relation to child development: that every child is unique and has their own needs and interests, hence individual activity suggestions are crucial to support children's learning and development and help each child have the best possible outcomes.

Overall, this section has shown the importance of providing parents with home learning activity suggestions during stay and play sessions as this will have an impact on children's learning and development.

Father involvement

The involvement of fathers is crucial in the early years (Lamb, 2010., Potter and colleagues, 2012., Sarkadi and colleagues, 2012., Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2010). Lamb (2010) argues that when both parents are involved in children's lives, children have the opportunity to interact with two people who use different vocabulary, behaviour and parenting styles, supporting children's cognitive development. Moreover, Sarkadi and colleagues (2012) consider that father involvement impacts on children's positive behaviour and enhances their intellectual and cognitive development. They analysed twenty-four studies on the effects of father involvement on children's development and their research findings conclude if practitioners and parents work together effective father engagement could occur to help support children's development. For example, their research findings show that father engagement seems to better outcomes of reducing behavioural problems in boys whilst enhancing the child's cognitive development, not only this, father engagement also seems to improve the psychological problems in young woman. This shows the benefits of not only the child but also supports the mother. Similarly, Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans (2010) found that the involvement of fathers helps children's language and communication development. On the whole, these studies on father involvement support the positive impact that father involvement has on children's learning and development.

Furthermore, Potter and colleagues (2012) undertook a research project over nine months to engage fathers from disadvantaged families in children's early education. Moreover, through their research findings they gathered the importance of retention, whereby once the fathers were engage, practitioners must ensure to keep involving the fathers for them to engage for a long period of time rather than a day or two.

My research study showed me that seven of the parents mention the role of the father should be the same role as the mother. However, they claim fathers may not attend the stay and play sessions due to having the traditional idea of fathers working and mothers taking care of children being still prevalent. In this sense, the research has enabled me to also realise that the sessions provided are more mother

oriented and may be more inclusive to fathers if activities are more welcoming for them. Potter and colleagues (2012) call this 'hook and male specific activities' (potter and colleague, p. 216) and their research findings shows they were able to engage more fathers through the male specific activities especially going on bus trips.

Tekin (2012) claims many early childhood institutions' are not welcoming and engaging to fathers, hence there are numerous issues that are impacting and preventing the involvement of fathers. Therefore, within the stay and play sessions, we noticed that there were only a few fathers attending the sessions. Thus, we are planning to implement father inclusive activities to help fathers in engaging in stay and play sessions with their children to support their learning and development.

Throughout this article, I have made a case in favour of engaging families, including fathers, in stay and play sessions through providing them with quality services. We raise the importance of providing stimulating home learning environments and how my research dissertation has allowed me and my colleagues to realise how we can improve on this within our setting.

Long and Bolton (2015), Siraj Blatchford et al (2011) and the OFSTED Report (2019) emphasise the importance of providing support to disadvantaged children to narrow the gap in their performance, compared with their peers. Supporting parents and families to create richer home learning environments is fundamental to work in partnership with them to support children's learning and development in all areas. Nitecki's (2015), Hakyemaz's (2015) and Epstein's (2010, 2019) argue that parental involvement impact on children's academic achievement. I also discuss how the fathers' role in supporting children's learning and development through providing more father inclusive activities.

My understanding of their findings and my engagement in the case study research in relation to my practice has impacted my workplace to ensure children and families within the community are being supported effectively. This research has impacted on my professionals practice as I will be able to apply my knowledge to practice and ensure we are working together with parents and supporting them through providing them with advice and suggestions on home learning activities. I will also be able to provide more male specific activities to engage more fathers within the stay-and-play sessions. This shows through researching I was able to reflect on my practice and recognise our weaknesses to now develop them into strengths.

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