



## EARLY LEARNING PARTNERSHIP PROJECT (OCTOBER 2006 -MARCH 2008)

### FAMILY ACTION\* – Newpin Family Play Programme

#### Introduction

One of the key aims of Every Child Matters is to “shift the focus from dealing with the consequences of difficulties in children’s lives to preventing things from going wrong in the first place.”

There is a wealth of evidence to show the positive impact on children’s development and future education when parents and carers engage actively with them through conversation, reading and play. A strong home learning environment will give a child lifelong benefits.

As part of the Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP) a consortium of nine voluntary organisations, Family Action was funded by the DCSF (Department for Children Schools and Families) to work with parents and carers of children aged 0-4 years to make the most of their children’s curiosity and appetite for learning.

Family Action delivered ELPP in three parts of the country: Sheffield, Southwark, and Swaffham in Norfolk, all areas where Family Action were already delivering family support services. Each organisation was to offer both a home visiting and a group work programme. FAMILY ACTION chose its Newpin Family Play Programme for the group work – we knew it was an effective programme and that we would be able to provide the necessary training to new workers.

Newpin Family Play Programme has been used by Family Action since 2004 as part of the family support services offered to families where there are mental health issues and/or difficulties in the parent child relationship.

#### Background and Local Context

Local authorities acknowledge the need for early intervention as crucial to all plans regarding children and families. For example, one of the strategic goals in Sheffield Children’s Plan is *“The creation of the capacity for earlier intervention, better prevention and the consequent reduction for demand in high need/statutory services”*. One of the key priorities in the Parenting Strategy is *“involving parents in raising levels of attainment at Foundation Stage, and in particular, the development of language skills in readiness for school”*.

In Norfolk, the CAMHS Implementation Plan 2007-2010 has the following desired outcomes for 0-4 year olds and their parents/carers:

1. Increased numbers of parents who have been identified as vulnerable in the ante-natal period feel that they are emotionally supported and are confident in their parenting abilities.
2. Increased numbers of parents/carers of pre-school children are capable of providing a secure, containing and reciprocal environment.
3. Increased numbers of children entering school with secure attachment, and relationships which support healthy development.

The Newpin Programme began in 1981 in Guy’s Hospital in response to parental isolation and depression. Continued evaluation has shown a significant improvement in parents’ ability to recognise and meet their children’s needs.

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\* Formerly Family Welfare Association (FAMILY ACTION)

The programme offers:

- An attachment based peer support model.
- Group play and learning opportunities for a parent/carer and child over a twelve week period.
- A positive experience of playing together for parent/carer and child.
- A group experience that is carefully structured to enhance attachment, raise parental self esteem, and improve the parent's ability to mirror their child's feelings.

Each programme is attended by between four and six parents, each with one child although extra children can also attend with help from a worker. The programme lasts for up to 12 sessions. Each session includes: an activity that encourages physical contact between parent and child, messy play, creative play, physical play and books. "Follow your Child" is also part of each session, activities are provided for the children and the parents are asked to allow their child to take the lead as long as it is safe.

### Service Delivery

The established 12-week Family Action Newpin family play programme can be adapted to the needs of a particular setting or a particular group. The following are some of the ways in which Newpin was delivered as part of the ELPP:

- As part of family support work in a centre that works mainly with families where there are specific difficulties in the parent child relationship, and/or an identified mental health problem.
- In Children's Centres where the staff had already identified families who were experiencing difficulties.
- To specific groups, for example; young parents, young care leavers who had children, women suffering from post natal depression, fathers and women from particular ethnic groups.

The groups were run in Children's Centres, Church Halls, Community Halls, a school and Family Action Centres.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that for most of the families who experienced Newpin it was as part of a programme of holistic family support. Sometimes this was offered by ELPP staff, other Family Action staff, or staff from another agency, or agencies. When more than one agency was involved a system of partnership working was established so that, with the families permission, staff worked together to ensure that families received a better service.

The main criterion for referral was that the family had at least one child under the age of four who was at risk of educational disadvantage. Often this was because their parents/carers had difficulty in providing them with the attention and stimulation they needed. This could be for a number of reasons and included the following:

- The child had a diagnosis of developmental delay.
- The child had a sibling /s with a disability.
- Mental health issues, including post natal depression.
- English was not the first language.
- Very young parents.
- Substance misuse.
- No/low income or debt.
- Domestic abuse possibly witnessed by the child.
- Children on Child Protection Register previous children made the subject of care orders.
- Poor housing.

- Rural isolation.
- Migrant or itinerant population.
- The family were not involved with universal services.

It was vital for ELPP staff to engage with families through outreach support in order to enable families to attend groups. Some of this work was done in partnership with other organisations. In order to make this possible training in the Newpin Programme was undertaken by Health Visitors, staff from Sure Start and Children's Centres as well as from organisations like Father Figures, Pre-School Learning Alliance, Home-Start, and Spurgeons Child Care.

### Outcomes

Perhaps the most useful way of capturing the success of the programme is by hearing what was said by some of those who were involved. That is, the parents, the staff, and some of those who referred the families. The children were mostly too young to offer a considered opinion but usually looked as though they were having a good time.

When parents were asked what they had found most helpful about Newpin these were at the top of the list:

- There were many advantages to being in a small group.
- It provided quality one to one time for parents and children.
- Parents developed new friendships and supported each other.
- The environment was relaxed and comfortable so parents and children enjoyed themselves.
- Parents could see that their children had increased in confidence and learnt new things.
- They experienced messy play in a safe environment.

### Parents Said:

*"Showed us practical things like using playdough and what my child was learning from it and how I was helping."*

*"Being able to watch my son interacting with others and playing with new things" "I liked the way the workers follow the child's lead and show interest in what the children do. It has taught me ideas of how to help my child. I liked the way we used the Lycra cloth and the different things we did with it. I.e. rocking, train ride"*

*"I found new ways to engage with her"*

*"It improved our communication and 1-1 time together"*

*"The programme encouraged co-operation and child initiative type play. It also gave plenty of ideas to take home and it was "FUN"*

### Staff Observed:

*"Parents found "follow your child" very difficult to start with. It fell into place during session seven. By session eleven some of the children realised that they were the lead."*

*"Games designed to encourage physical contact also caused some initial uneasiness but everyone gradually relaxed and enjoyed them."*

*"Working in a small structured group was very effective, having two workers meant that all the participants got enough attention."*

*"Parents became much more confident in their ability to initiate positive play and their discussions demonstrated their understanding of the value of this."*

*"A Mum saying, unprompted, that she wondered if spending a little time completely focussed on playing with her daughter would make her less demanding for the rest of the day."*

*"I observed a mother of boy, 26 months, and girl, 6 months, living in a Women's Refuge, realising she is doing things right. She now knows she is a good Mum,"*

Newpin groups are usually staffed by two workers. The Newpin group for dads was slightly different in that it was staffed by a male and a female worker and a great deal of consideration was given to the activities that would be enjoyed by dads. By the end of the sessions all the dads thought they had learnt a lot about the importance of play and had gained confidence in their ability as parents. Staff agreed with this, they also thought the combination of a male and female worker had been very effective in that the female worker was able to help those who were embarrassed by some activities and the male worker was better able to challenge unhelpful beliefs.

Referrals were made to the ELPP from a number of other organisations involved with families with children under the age of four. The following are examples of things they said:

*"Very helpful with particular family where mother was depressed. Helped mother to access services for her child... more trusting of support offered."*Speech Therapist

*"Positive contribution to the families I have referred, project staff have persevered with families with more complex social/emotional needs."*Health Visitor

*"Families are more confident, better able to deal with problems."*Nursery Teacher

*"I have found the families referred increasingly willing to engage with a variety of other services."*Health Visitor

*"They (family) seem to listen more to their children and appear more relaxed."*Pre-school worker

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The programme was seen as effective by those who took part: parents, staff, and other stakeholders e.g. other professionals who referred families into the service.

Parents liked it because they thought it improved both their own and their child's confidence, it showed them how children learn through play, improved their relationship with their child, and helped them make new friends.

Staff found it effective: they observed the benefits and where they were involved with the family outside the group saw how these benefits were being used in the family home.

Referrers also observed how the benefits of the group helped improve difficulties that had sometimes seemed intractable in the parent child relationship. They also considered the work of the Early Learning Partnership Project to be an effective addition to family support services for families with children under four years of age as demonstrated by the comments below.

*"It has provided an extra level we can offer families – particularly those who have been difficult to move forward."*Homestart Co-ordinator



*"The project has provided true early intervention and has had a significant impact on attachment and infant mental health."*Health Visitor