

NETHERTON PARK – ARTICLE PUBLISHED IN NURSERY WORLD RE TIME FOR TWOS PROGRAMME

Netherton Park Children’s Centre is a large Nursery School and Children’s centre situated in Dudley in the West Midlands. Its reach area captures one of the most deprived parts of the Black Country region; most of the children live in areas classified as being in the top 30% for disadvantage on IMD data, with a substantial number in the top 10% and 20% areas.

Unemployment rates are high and rising with the current economic downturn. Families are struggling socially with a variety of circumstances including poor housing, substance and alcohol misuse and domestic abuse.

The community that uses the centre has a rich, varied and vibrant heritage. It is a relatively stable group consisting mainly of families of white British origin, with a substantial minority [approximately 35%] of Urdu and Pashto speaking families from Pakistan.

The Centre has a long history of working successfully with families, from its beginnings in 1938 as a Nursery School, through becoming a Family Centre in the 1990’s and finally a Phase 1 Children’s Centre in 2004.

Increasingly our remit has been endeavouring to engage the most disadvantaged families through a variety of initiatives. One of these has been the provision of 15 hours free education and care for two year olds. In our area this is known as ‘Time for two’s’

From the outset, our local authority prioritised those children most in need by specifying they should not only live in areas of significant deprivation but should also have some element of social vulnerability as well as economic hardship.

We decided to offer each child four morning or afternoon sessions a week. Additionally, a package would be offered to parents enabling them to gain support in relation to parenting, positive relationships with their children, healthy eating and ways of supporting their play and development.

A very experienced early years practitioner coordinates the programme. Children access two and half hours of integrated care and education on four days of the week without their parents. These sessions are provided within our existing kindergarten day care setting.

We leave one day a week as non contact time for the ‘Time for twos’ coordinator. This enables her to attend to the large volume of Child Protection, Child in Need, SEN and CAF meetings inherent to the offer, without affecting quality for the children. It also ensures she has time to produce accurate, meaningful and high quality learning stories, assessments and reports.

The team work hard to ensure children access an excellent early years curriculum in a purpose built environment with free flow into an exciting outdoor area.

This is essential for the development of the children, as many live in flats or have limited or no access to outdoor play spaces. The children also have weekly sessions in our Forest School area, led by a qualified Forest School leader.

In this very favourable context children rapidly develop the social and emotional and language skills which enable them to fully participate in the group and lay a firm foundation for their future learning and well being.

We believe our children’s progress in this respect is better served by provision of shorter sessions spread over four days a week rather than taking the full 15 hours over just 2 long days as is currently being proposed. Our approach is supported by the findings of the EPPE Project 2003.

At the end of each session parents are encouraged to join the group for a Family Time which lasts 30 minutes. The family time includes a varied range of sensory and creative play opportunities, developmental movement play, nursery rhymes and songs.

In addition to the daily Family Time sessions, parents also have access to the Family Links Nurturing Programme, the Get Cooking course and a PEEP programme [Parents Early Education Partnership]. Where necessary, parents also have access to individual family support.

We are fortunate this year to have an Artist, Lorna Rose, working with children and parents across the Centre. Lorna has made a valuable contribution to the Family Time sessions using natural and recycled materials including clay and supporting children’s explorations in Forest School.

She has also undertaken workshops with parents to evaluate our services and listen to the ‘parents’ voice’ about how they felt the Time for Two’s programme was going.

Feedback from parents has been extremely positive and the group has been very popular with parents. They report a closer relationship with their child with one father saying:

‘She now knows how to play with things at home, like everyday stuff. It is really rewarding to come and spend time with my child – it has brought a closer bond between us.’

The Family Links and PEEP programmes have been equally well received. Parents feel they are more confident in how they interact with their children and have high hopes for them both now and in the future.

Some comments from parents include:

‘I am feeling more confident at everything and most importantly being a mum’

‘I’m learning so much more about my childhood and understanding how I got to where I am’

‘I feel equal to everyone – such a kind and lovely group made me feel valued’

We have tracked the first cohort of ‘Time for Two’s’ children who transferred to our Nursery School in September.

All of these children have made excellent progress. In fact this year we have seen the highest achievements ever made. Children’s progress in personal social and emotional development and communication language and literacy progress has been exceptional. We believe that the Time for Two’s programme has made an important contribution to this.

An equally important outcome has been the continuing growth in parents’ confidence and skills as first educators of their own children. They have come to see themselves as intrinsic to their children’s development and success.

It is our belief that our unique approach to the two year old offer has had the following beneficial effects:

- Children enter school having had more experience and opportunities for development
- Outcomes in terms of progress and attainment are generally higher
- The combination of family support, parental involvement and high quality integrated care and education makes a vital contribution to our efforts to ‘close the gap’.
- Children and adults are encouraged to work in partnership with peers and professionals

We appreciate that part of the reason for funding the free offer for two year olds is to help parents back into employment. However, in communities such as ours, we believe there should be a strong commitment to a collaborative offer of education, care and family support.

If we are to raise outcomes for children in disadvantaged areas we have to involve their parents and inspire them to want the very best for their child as well as offering them child care.

One parent describing how she felt about the group wrote:

‘They [the other parents] are lovely people – from different backgrounds-all probably wanting the same – the best for their families.’

We believe that the 15 hour offer for disadvantaged two year olds will not achieve this on its own.

Case study

Jamie and Fiona were referred to the Centre by social care due to home circumstances and domestic abuse. They were teenage parents with two young children. Both parents were really keen to engage and readily accepted the offer of a Time for Two’s place.

Freddie started the group and both parents became more involved with the end of session activities and attended Family links and Get Cooking. Freddie was discovered to have some additional educational needs and received early intervention for his behaviour and language difficulties

Jamie particularly liked the Family Time sessions because ‘they give me ideas of how I can encourage him to play at home’.

Fiona reports to feeling calmer and understanding that Freddie behaves as he does ‘because he is two rather than because he is being difficult’.

Now in our Nursery School, Freddie consistently expresses high levels of wellbeing and involvement and has made rapid progress in his development and learning. He is moving into his primary school with attainment in all areas of learning well in line with what is expected for a child of his age, and in some areas he is working at a level above expectations.

Dad has now found employment and Mum is looking to start volunteering with us once her younger child is in school