



Early Explorers

An evaluation of integrating partner professionals in child health clinics to support parents with their children's development from birth based on the Peep Learning Together Programme

Key findings

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Overview

The Peep Early Explorers project uses integrated working between health and early years education/ family support to improve the breadth and depth of support offered to families in supporting their children's development. Peep-trained practitioners work alongside health visitors in child health clinics to engage parents in supporting their child's development through interaction and exploratory play. Practitioners share information with parents about how their children develop and learn so that parents can use this knowledge in the everyday things they do at home. Working in the child health clinic offers opportunities to engage with families who make infrequent use of other services; families can be offered a place at a Peep group or one-to-one support at home, as well as information about other local services.

Early Explorers – a preventative, integrated approach

The early postnatal period offers a golden opportunity to engage with parents, working together to support, and to build confidence and connections, with people and services within the local community. The Early Explorer clinic provides a more relaxed environment, in which parents may be inclined to linger and to build relationships with practitioners and other service users.

In an influential report Field (2010) states that 'nothing can be achieved without working with the parents'. This intervention offers a unique opportunity to meet and forge relationships with parents in a non-stigmatising, non-threatening environment. The use of a universal approach allows for vulnerable and unsupported parents to be identified, and then offered targeted services such as the Early Explorer group.

It is well understood that poor mental health status in childhood has long term consequences, with reduced chances of employment or higher education, and an increased risk of criminality. An initiative such as Early Explorers appears to offer parents the opportunity for better mental health for both themselves and their infants, at a time when motivation to change may be high. Economic studies are beginning to provide evidence of the cost-effectiveness of preventative services which provide compelling arguments for investing in preventative programmes.

Early Explorers evaluation

The Early Explorer practitioner role can be assumed by any Peep-trained practitioner working in a child health clinic, such as a nursery nurse or children's centre outreach worker. In this research project the Peep practitioners were employed directly by People (the charitable organisation). The research focused on the development and introduction of Early Explorer clinics in two areas of Oxford and surroundings. Views amongst practitioners and managers were predominantly positive, with agreement that Early Explorer clinics offer an opportunity for statutory and voluntary sector services to work together to maximize opportunities to promote the health and wellbeing of infants and their families. Service users (families) were uniformly happy with Peep practitioners being a central part of the clinic, and with whom they reported learning, enjoying and increasing their understanding about their infants.

Research project aims

This two year research project comprised two phases:

Phase One (April 2009 – March 2010)

- a. review of the existing literature on integrated working in order to provide Peep managers with an enhanced understanding of integrated models of working and how to implement these in different contexts;
- b. data collection from key stakeholders to explore perceptions about how the roles of the practitioners from health and early years are integrated and the effectiveness of Peep practitioner and health visitors' joint approach to families in two 'Early Explorers' clinics;
- c. delivery of training sessions aimed at developing the ability of Peep staff to monitor and evaluate their core activities.

Phase Two (April 2010 – March 2011)

Recommendations from Phase One were used to inform collaborative planning with Peep staff, health visitors and children's centre staff for Phase Two, in which Early Explorers were established in two new clinic settings. The findings were used:

- to help teams think beyond the set routines of their own disciplines, towards working as a supportive professional community;
- to enable joint consultation and complementary planning, to understand better families' needs, relevance of activities and routes of referral to services.

What were the main Outcomes?

1. Effective joint working for professionals:

a. Promoting positive infant mental health and development

Peep practitioners work alongside health visitors in the child health clinics, sharing with parents information about how their infants develop and learn.

'They complement our service and I feel we complement Peep's service. I find when I do clinic that some Mums come just to come to Peep which I think is wonderful and we have been able to introduce parents to the concept of Peep, something that they didn't even know about. You know they were unaware of the need to communicate with their baby, even though they were not verbally communicating back so you know, it's been a revelation to some Mums....just how important it is to stimulate your baby.' (*Health visitor S2*)

'The health staff offered us space on the clinic notice boards, as another way to share simple information with parents/carers about things to do at home with their child - treasure baskets, playing with empty boxes, sharing black and white books etc.' (*Peep practitioner N*)

b. Reaching those most in need; identifying and supporting vulnerable groups

'We've lost the communities, the extended family. So many people are operating in isolation being parents and struggling, you know... a lot of people are completely unaware of actually what it can be like to live with a child, what that reality is and when you've got nobody locally to support you.... There's us, the health visiting service, but having Peep has been marvellous.' (*Health visitor S*)

‘Contact in the clinic enabled us to support vulnerable parents with their emotional health by putting them in touch with other services in the area, like OXPIP counseling, ESOL classes and Children Centres.’ *(Peep practitioner N)*

c. Building relationships, trust and confidence with families

Peep practitioners were described by health visitors as being ‘a real asset’ in the child health clinic and it was suggested that their presence creates a ‘more social and interactive environment’. Health visitors have noted that some parents use Early Explorer clinics specifically to visit the Peep practitioners. A health centre nursery nurse noted that having parents stay longer in the clinic often helps health practitioners understand in more depth what is going on in their lives:

‘I think because the parents are there for longer if you’re a parent and feeling down then they’ll come over with a persona saying ‘well I need to look bright I have to put a face on’. And when they would come in just for clinic, just have a weigh, that’s a short amount of time to keep that face on. But if they’re coming in to Peep I think they kind of... their emotions come out a bit more and therefore the opportunity to be able to see how they really are is there more.’ *(Nursery nurse N1)*

d. Delivering an enhanced service through integrated working with a complementary agency

Health visitors and Peep practitioners felt their roles in Early Explorer clinics were complementary with positive benefits for parents and infants. The Early Explorers clinics were reported by all stakeholders (health visitors, Peep practitioners and families) to feel more relaxed and less stressful, with families being occupied in meaningful activity. Integrated working has been successfully achieved with co-located services working well together. Moves towards a true partnership have emerged over time through the development of familiarity, trust and an increasing appreciation of the benefits offered by a voluntary sector organisation delivering a complementary service.

‘Working in the clinic was challenging, especially at first when we didn’t know much about health visitors’ work load, their work style and basically knowing them as health professionals. We were going to their work place so it was not easy to suggest or create activities quickly. There was also fear to over load health visitors’ work with those families who were bringing more health problems as those (Asian) families had opportunity to talk in their own language. I spent a lot of time and work on helping families and health visitors to understand cultural differences and languages and making strong connection between myself, health staff and families.

But on the other hand, working with health visitors and other health staff in the clinic was a real learning experience for me. They were focused on health-related issues which I had little idea about, especially problems in the child’s early life and physical development. But also I felt the health staff had little time to talk to families about child’s learning through talking, listening, singing and play. I felt health visitors and Peep practitioners really needed to work together in the clinic. So together we all had a weekly opportunity to meet and learn through each other experiences and skills. At the end of the project I felt that working together we were able to

help families on bonding and attachment, and early support to stimulate the child's brain by sharing stories/books, making routines and day to day talking and listening together with their child. I valued our triangular relationships in the baby clinic between families, health staff and Peep practitioners.' (Peep Practitioner N)

'It's good to be accepted as one of the team, and to get a different perspective on families. There's been a useful 2-way flow of information to share with families. We've all been able to reinforce messages about the value of tummy time, black and white books etc. Peep staff have also kept up-to-date via health staff with the latest health information about feeding, sleeping etc.' (Peep Practitioner H)

2. Engaging families (who access services infrequently) in supporting their children's development:

a. Promoting maternal mental health; supporting parents that they may support their infants

'They tick the box of hovering on the edge of depression all the time. Very very anxious and possibly totally unused to small children and what you can do or should do or shouldn't do. And if they disappear out into the middle of nowhere and because they're not finding it fun, they won't join groups and they don't go to NCT meetings or whatever... and then you pick them up three or four months down the line... they can be really very low indeed and quite isolated. And actually Peep are offering something to that group of women that we didn't have anything to offer them before.' (Health visitor N2)

b. Offering a unique opportunity for practitioners to meet and forge relationships with parents in a non-stigmatising, non-threatening child health clinic environment that is accessed by most parents

Using a universal approach, vulnerable and unsupported parents can be identified and directed toward more targeted services such as the Early Explorer group and other provision.

'More vulnerable families do come to clinic, they are not regular attenders to clinic but they do come, say for a vaccination and that's when we can direct them to Peepand Peep is so approachable and non-threatening that we have actually engaged some of our more difficult and harder to reach families in with Peep. So I really think that it's a harmonious relationship that benefits the mother and child.' (Health visitor S)

c. Encouraging informal social engagement in the clinic, increasing parental confidence and reducing social isolation

'Yeah. It [Early Explorer clinic] is nice. It made everything a bit more relaxed in there. Normally it's just you go and don't really talk to each other unless you know them anyway. But with them there everyone seems to talk to each other.' (Parent L)

'Had three mums yesterday who were exchanging numbers by the end of clinic. They're all from different countries. ... by the end of it they had bonded enough to exchange numbers to meet up.' (Health visitor N1)

'And it just felt so good to have that kind of nurturing experience with parents who for whatever reason were finding it difficult to be confident in play, either because they didn't have any experience of play or because they were so worried about doing the right thing. I think we get a lot of that here. Parents who are so keen to do it right, they're so anxious, that actually relaxing and just *being* is quite difficult for them.' (Health visitor N)

d. Parents reported spending more time in the clinic when the Early Explorers practitioners are there, learning new skills and having a better appreciation of infant development.

'Because the very first time when I walked in there, there were two other babies and [Peep Practitioner] was showing them like books, baby books and those bottles with shiny stuff in it with glitter and so on. And they were so like very... curious what's there and so on. So I just went wow that's really good. I wouldn't think about that. Because [x] is my first child and to be honest with you I didn't know what to do with her. Like how to play with her and what to show her, how to develop her thinking.. you know...stimulate her brain. I do remember she was quite...crying... and [Practitioner] showed me the movement, how to calm her down, it was really good, I took a lot from the group and the approach of [Peep practitioners].' (Parent M)

e. Providing a stepping stone from the drop-in clinic to an Early Explorers group

The weekly group, held in a separate room, enabled families and practitioners to focus in more depth on any issues raised by parents, in particular relating to interaction and learning through exploratory and imaginative play.

Here are the reflections of one mum who built up a relationship with the Peep practitioner at the clinic, and agreed to attend the Peep Early Explorers group if escorted by the practitioner. The following describes her reaction to the group, her surprise and relief at not being judged and not being told what she *should* be doing, and the impact on her daughter and herself in terms of enhanced confidence and social interaction, and enhancing infant mental health by understanding infant development:

'And I just thought, I'm going to go in there and everybody will judge you because all your baby did was cry... just going to say 'well, have you fed her, have you done her nappy, have you done this...?'. And that's what you used to get from people walking round the shops.

But it didn't bother nobody. And I thought Oh my god [laughs]! I'm in a place where nobody's staring - because all she does is cry.... Because I didn't know what to expect at first.... But then when we went to the first class they had duvets down and things, with treasure baskets. And when they actually start singing the children are just... it's amazing sort of thing to them. Their little faces [laughs].... she loved it!

She cried a lot for the first five months and then when we seemed to go to Peep she came out of her shell a lot more. She was more calm. More willing to be more patient in doing things. And she used to have trouble socialising, because I don't know many people with children her age... but she was gone....

It was always calm and they always got parents talking to each other. Because when I first went I thought Oh nobody will want to talk to me because... but no, they sit down and they introduce you and everything. And when we have the group discussion it was more that you feel like you've known people for a long time... we talked about the textures and things and how they help children learn and everything like that. It's... I don't know how to word it really.... you feel more confident when you know you're not the only one going through what you've been through sort of thing.' *(Parent L)*

f. Offering 1:1 support in the home for families identified in the clinic by health visitors and/or Early Explorers practitioners

Here are the reflections of a mother with two children aged 4 and 1 years old, whose father was in jail. She had four sessions at home, then went on to join a group. The mother could not speak English well, she was isolated and depressed, and said that she mostly spent time with her children without interaction and play.

'This home programme changed my life. I felt I was somewhere lost and this gave me support to trust myself and each week I learnt new games and ideas and slowly I started learning to believe I and my situation could change. Now I am beginning to understand my children. I did not know how language develops, reading stories, singing poems and just talking could make a big difference in our lives. Dual language books like 'Little Beaver and the Echo' made a huge impact in my isolated life. Peep songbook and CD also reduced my loneliness. I did not know that music and play could play such a positive role in your soul. Making playdough, playing with treasure basket objects and drawing on paper, going out with my children gave lots of happiness to my children and learning to me. I listen to my children's voices now, and my own too. I would like to learn the English language as well as driving for me and for my children's mobilisation.' *(Parent J)*