

The Impact of Peep – a small-scale Tracer Study

Abstract

This small scale Tracer Study was to find out if mothers felt that attending Peep sessions as a baby had made a difference to children and their families as they entered secondary school. Potential participants whose children had attended at least ten sessions of “Peep for Babies” in 2001 were identified from Peep records. Sixteen names were randomly generated and contact was attempted using last known address and telephone number. Six mothers were contactable and five mothers were interviewed at home in 2013 using a semi-structured questionnaire. The interviewer asked about the mother’s experience of Peep and the effects they thought it had had on their own and their child’s development, learning and socialisation. The interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher and coded for themes. Seven main themes emerged from the interviews: the importance of singing; of books; of relationships; of socialisation; of the impact on relationships at school; of support for the mother and of adult learning. The findings were that mothers believed that attending Peep sessions as a baby and toddler directly encouraged two elements related to “school readiness”: early learning and socialisation. They also felt that it encouraged their own active interest in their children’s learning. The study concluded that a sense of membership and continuity in belonging to a Peep group with a defined membership and programme provided support and encouraged attendance. It also suggested that a community intervention that employed the same people in the same area over several years was at an advantage in recruiting reluctant parents.

Introduction

People (previously Parents’ Early Education Partnership) is an intervention that began in Oxford in 1995 and aims to contribute towards improving the life chances of children, particularly in disadvantaged areas. It works with parents and carers in order to improve the educational attainment of whole communities of children, especially in literacy, from their birth. The Peep programme focuses on how to make the most of learning opportunities in everyday life at home, working with adults about their children’s very early learning. Peep supports parents/carers in their relationship with their children so that children’s self-esteem and learning dispositions will be enhanced. Peep also promotes and supports parents’/carers’ lifelong learning.

Research rationale behind the Peep Learning Together programme

The Peep Learning Together programme was founded on evidence that the preschool period is important to children’s later development and that parents have an important role to play in that development (Hannon, P., Weinberger, J. and Nutbrown, C., 1991. *A study of work with parents to promote early literacy development*)ⁱ. Subsequent research has consolidated our understanding about the importance of the early years for all later cognitive and social-emotional development (Evangelou, Sylva, Wild, Glenny and Kyriacou, 2009)ⁱⁱ, the significance of parents (Blanden, 2006ⁱⁱⁱ; Desforges & Abouchar, 2003^{iv}) and of the quality of the learning environment at home (Goodman & Greg, 2010^v; Roulstone et.al., 2011^{vi}; Harris & Goodall, 2007^{vii}). This research shows us that it is the, seemingly, basic things which make a difference: a warm, responsive relationship with primary caregivers, a rich language environment with conversation, stories, rhymes and books, and opportunities for play that includes letters, words, numbers and writing. There is also evidence that parents’ interest in their children’s education and high aspirations for their future are important as well as parents’ conviction that they have a role to play in

supporting their children's education. These factors have a greater effect on later outcomes than social class or mother's educational background.

"...the quality of the home learning environment is more important for intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. What parents do is more important than who parents are" (Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford, and Taggart, 2004, p.11)^{viii}.

This evidence from research has led to policy developments which provide the context in which the Peep programme is now used. Consequently a recent report from the All-Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group (APPSSG) suggested that:

"...there are very practical things that parents can do with babies and children every day which can narrow that gap that are not directly linked to family income. These include: drawing their child's attention to names of things...singing songs and nursery rhymes; reading to children daily and cuddling them and showing them affection. However, too many parents do not know the importance of these simple actions on their children's life chances. Children's Centres have a key role to play in changing this...through giving parents the information, confidence and support they need to create a stimulating home learning environment..." (APPSSG, 2013, p21)^{ix}.

"Staff should support parents to play with babies and children in ways that encourage development – emphasising the benefits of talking to children and affectionate praise."

"Centres should provide...singing and story sessions which encourage parents to sing with their babies and children and promote the benefits of reading even to very young children".

"Centres should encourage parents to speak to their baby, particularly in affectionate tones, despite the fact they are not yet able to reply" (APPSSG, *ibid*).

Research into the effectiveness of the Peep Learning Together programme

The *Birth to School Study* (1998-2005)^x, a large-scale (n=600 children) longitudinal evaluation of the Peep Learning Together programme, established that Peep parents reported a significantly enhanced view of their parent-child interaction when their children were aged one, compared to matched parents from the comparison area. When the children were two years old Peep parents were rated significantly higher on the quality of their care-giving environment than the comparison parents. The Peep children made significantly greater progress than the comparison children in certain skills related to future literacy success: vocabulary, phonological awareness of rhyme and alliteration, letter identification, understanding of books and print, and writing. The Peep children also showed a significant advantage over the comparison children in their socio-emotional development when they were measured at five years old.

The Peep Tracer Study

We wanted to explore the long-term effects of Peep now that many of the Peep children are in secondary school. In 2013 we devised a small "Tracer Study" in which we interviewed five mothers of babies born in 2001 who had participated in the Peep programme.

Methodology

120 families of babies born in 2001 attended at least 10 sessions of Peep when those children were babies. We randomly generated an initial sample of 16 of these families for inclusion in the study. Of these only six were traceable and five agreed to be interviewed. We made 29 telephone calls, 16 visits and 2 text messages to find the families and to arrange the interviews. All but one of the original 120 parents were mothers, and as a result all five of the parents interviewed were mothers.

We drew up a questionnaire (see Appendix 1) to form the basis of a semi-structured interview that the interviewer recorded and transcribed. We carried out the interviews in the mothers' homes and they lasted between 19 and 53 minutes, with the average being 30 minutes. By chance, all five of the target children whose mothers were interviewed were girls, although a roughly even number of boys and girls made up the original list of 120.

Seven major themes emerged from a combination of the material in the transcripts and the aims of Peep (see Appendix 2). These themes are listed as headings in the Findings section of this report. The transcripts were reviewed to find brief quotations illustrating the themes.

I, the interviewer/transcriber, had been part of the *Birth to School* research team in the late 1990s and returned to work for Peep as a practitioner just over a year before the interviews were conducted in 2013. In setting up and conducting the interviews I did not attempt to hide my link with Peep. Although we worked hard to ensure that there was no bias in the selection of the interviewees, my position as a Peep employee could have influenced the mothers' solidly positive responses.

Findings

1. Understanding the importance of singing and rhyme for language and maths development

All five of the mothers talked about singing as being a key part of Peep, and four of the five also volunteered that they had enjoyed the singing. When asked what she liked best about Peep one mother replied:

"I think it was the singing...it helped x learn all her nursery rhymes quite early"

When asked whether she thought that her daughter's learning has been helped at all by going to Peep the same mother continued:

"Yes, definitely. She's very, very good at maths, and her English is good, same with my son, because they all start to learn with their nursery rhymes, to count"

This is what two other mothers had to say about singing in Peep sessions:

"The singing was the main thing I remember, and they were *mostly* educational songs with the alphabet and numbers, and I remember that distinctly, 'cos [the] kids used to really enjoy it"

"I loved the singing time, learned some really great songs from it, still remember some of them now that I might use on other smaller children"

2. Understanding the importance of books

Three of the mothers talked about books. They were asked what difference, if any, going to Peep had made for themselves:

“It’s made a lot of difference... they just read books nearly all the time, and I’m sure that’s because they started off when they were babies, getting an interest in books”

“I made the conscious point of having story time every night, so I read to them every night and I think it helped. And they ... borrowed books, book bags and things from Peep. They borrowed things, materials to bring home and I think that all helped with their development and also x does enjoy books”

“We always had books, but she ...would pick up the books and we had to read with her and she’d tell the story from a book. She didn’t necessarily want to read what it is, she’d just look at the pictures...and she still reads books now, always...she’s got a Kindle, so she downloads books onto that now, and so yes, she does, she still reads, really well”

3. Understanding the importance of relationships: learning and doing things together with your child can be fun

This was a theme in all five interviews, and three of the five mothers talked about “interaction”. The idea that spending time with one’s children in the pursuit of learning could be enjoyable had been new for at least two of the mothers.

For some mothers the emphasis was on what they actually got out of the group time in this respect:

“I think it helped me *bond* with my children, as well, really, it was that special time, where just me and x could get together and just have some family time on our own”

When asked what she liked best about Peep groups for herself, one mother replied:

“For me it was the singing and the interacting with the girls, I think....was really nice. ‘Cos it was just sort of like I suppose *our* time”

Another said:

“I learned to sort of look at them in a different way at Peep, you know I tried to sort of enjoy them, and watch them play...and it also helped me to relax a bit more with my children. I was quite stressed, and quite highly strung...”

This mother went on to talk about the emphasis on being positive rather than negative with your children; although she doesn’t use the expression she seems to be referring to self-esteem:

“It was all to do with praise and bigging them up, building them up in Peep...I wouldn’t say I was unaware of it but it was quite relatively new for me as a parent to feel that way and to be that way”

Another mother highlighted the significant difference between Peep and other groups that she had been to with her older children:

“It made you think about things in a different way because...with the older ones I never did...we just went to like a playgroup and they just went off and played and you just chatted with the Mums whereas with Peep you interact with the child”

Two of the mothers in particular spoke about practising at home what they had learned in the Peep group:

“I probably wouldn’t have been as *creative* with the children if I hadn’t gone to Peep”

This mother also said:

“...they gave you more tools to play with and more ideas...maybe I should count to ten with hula hoops on my fingers and eat them as I go along... I remember being taught how to make playdough...”

Another said:

“I loved the singing and I always used to do that at home, for the interaction as well, at home, and you know, they’re playing with toys and show them how to do it and play with them as well, not just plonk it in front of them and say, ‘There you go’ and leave it”

She continued:

“I found out what she liked doing, you know... when they reach the age and they [Peep] set out the play-dough and things at the table, she used to like doing that... so I knew that she liked to do arts and crafts, and I gave her those opportunities at home as well”

4. Child making friends, socialisation

This was important for all five of the mothers. When asked what she liked best about Peep groups one mother said:

“Teaching x to make friends with other children although she was so young. It was making her sociable from an early age”

On being asked what difference, if any, going to Peep made for her and her family, another mother replied:

“but also...for the children to interact with other children as well, that was really important.”

In reply to the same question a third mother said:

“She’s got good social skills....”, and when asked if there was anything the interviewer hadn’t covered she said:

“Don’t think so. ... I’m glad I done it, for myself and for her, and I think it’s made her a better person, as in, a learning and social interacting with other people...”.

Another mother’s reply to the same question was:

“I think...it’s made us interact socially quite well. When we meet new people we don’t have a problem with meeting new people and talking about children and getting along.”

5. Impact on relationships at school

Two of the five mothers had been bullied at secondary school but had gone on after Peep and worked in early years settings for at least two years. One of these mothers said of her own experience:

“I had quite a hard time at school, I didn’t socialise very well, I was an only child, my Mum still lives down the road, and I think because I had no brothers and sisters and there wasn’t Peep, I never went to nursery, I was stuck at home with my Mum and Dad till I was 5.”

Another mother had found going to nursery herself quite traumatic, but when asked how this had been for her daughter she said:

“She was fine with it by about the second and third week – she was quite quickly settled in because I think she’d already had the practice...you know, the sort of run up to it with the...you know, Peep...”

Another mother had this to say when asked if Peep had helped her daughter’s learning:

“..but certainly...when it comes to going to...Nursery and Year 1 the girls were in there, getting stuck in, yes and you know, I just think it gave them a lot of confidence.”

A fourth mother also thought that the experience in Peep when very young had helped later with early years schooling. When asked if her daughter had enjoyed preschool and playgroup and nursery she said:

“Yeh...she’s not crying or nothing going to school....if I remember rightly some sessions they would go off with one of the other leaders [*in Peep*]...and they would take them off and they’d do like a little activity with them and she never had any problems doing that.”

6. Support for the mother

All five of the mothers referred to Peep’s role in supporting them and enabling them to meet other mothers/parents. For two of the mothers this was particularly important:

“It was also *my* time as well, cos it was *my* time to go see other mums and dads and...you know...obviously the leaders were supportive as well, and you could go and have a chat and if you’d had a bad week...”

“I just felt like it took the pressure off me, it took the steam off the kettle for me for a little while.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s my ‘me’ time but it was time where you can...properly relax because you know your child’s in a safe environment anyway, and.....I just used to find it, the one escape through the week, although she was with me.”

“It was just nice to get away...”

It became clear from the interviews, that it was not only meeting other parents that mattered but also comparing notes about parenting, in order to normalise their own, sometimes difficult, experiences. When asked what difference, if any, one mother thought going to Peep had made for her and for her family, she said:

“For me it was getting out, because with having the *three* children it was a ...big deal about getting out, so it was nice to go out and see other children with other families ‘cos they who were in the same boat and things”

Two other mothers echoed this sentiment:

“It was just nice to give *me* a break for an hour as well, and to help me to feel less sort of cut off and isolatedI met other parents and you could sort of share each others’ sort of parenting skills and stuff. That was quite helpful.”

“... and I felt like I was the only one, so it was nice to sort of see that.....at least I’m not the only one.....”

“...I remember a lot of the social side of it that I did meet a lot of people through it and some I still keep in contact with now as well so it was just nice to meet other people with children of the same age and just have ideas of how to interact with your children as well.”

7. Adult Learning

All parents who participated in Peep were offered the opportunity to gain an Open College Network (OCN) accreditation, which involved filling in the “Diary Pages” in the Peep materials to record their child’s learning.

We asked the mothers if they had done any training since the Tracer Study child was a baby, and also asked about their reactions to the “Diary Pages”. The mothers had different reactions to this aspect of a Peep session; two of the mothers had so enjoyed learning about child development that they had gone on to work in early years, and one of them still did, but the other had gone back to her previous work. A third mother had wanted to train as a teaching assistant but this hadn’t been possible. A fourth mother positively disliked the idea of writing things down at Peep (it had been optional to do so) and a fifth had thought that the Open College Network (OCN) Certificate that could be gained by filling in the Diary Pages was not relevant for her:

“I think, from what I can remember, it was offered, and I think a lot of the mums took it up that didn’t have qualifications or were thinking of doing childminding or childcare or something like that, but with...the line of work *I’m* in and I’ve been to college and done *other* bits and pieces, I probably didn’t think it was applicable...”

One mother, who had been a hairdresser before she had her children and went to Peep, had since been inspired to become an early years worker. She had “got all the certificates and everything as well” and had even gone on and done Peep training. Volunteering in her children’s school had led to a comment from the head teacher, “You’re really good, have you ever thought about working with children?” As a result the mother did the “10-week entry-level to Teaching Assistant course” and got a job in the school, followed by “maths and English level 2”, “level 2 Young Children and Young People in the Workforce” to work in Early Years, and is thinking of Level 3 “at some point” as well.

Following her participation in Peep another mother had done several related courses, including Family Links and training as a Reading Volunteer.

Discussion

As mentioned earlier, recent research (such as that of Goodman & Greg^v, Roulstone et.al.^{vi} and Harris & Goodall^{vii}), emphasises the lasting importance of the home learning environment for later cognitive and emotional development. Our interviews with Peep mothers suggest that the messages that parents take home from a Peep group are those that the All-Party Parliamentary Sure Start Group would like them to take home, i.e. that it is beneficial to play with and talk to their babies and young children, sing with them and share stories and rhymes, and speak to them in affectionate and positive tones long before they are able to reply.

One mother spoke about a particular aspect of attending a Peep group that isn't covered by the other themes, and that is the continuity between one session and another as topics are worked on and developed over the term. When asked to talk about what she remembered about Peep she said:

“you made the effort to go as well, 'cos you wanted to sort of, carry on, 'cos I think from what I can remember, we did work through things week on week so.....yes, it didn't matter if you hadn't been there for the previous week, but there might have been something that was continuing on from that previous week, so you know, you did feel the compulsion to it, oh yes, I've got to go next week”

This seems to suggest a sense of membership and continuity in belonging to a Peep group with a defined programme that may not apply to an ordinary Children's Centre “Stay and Play session”. Is it possible that it is this aspect of Peep, that of belonging to a learning community, that enabled the mother who disliked filling in the Diary Pages to reveal that Peep had transformed her relationship with the teachers of this her fourth child? This child had gone through her entire primary school career “without a day off sick” and the mother spoke of her own changed attitude to school:

“I think 'cos you've.....been able to take her to a Peep session and been able to talk to other Mums and the people who are running it, gives you more confidence when they go into school, because it, it's sort of like a learning process as well, Peep, and in nursery and school, so you've got that more, when you will go and ask a question....whereas...with the others I didn't, so when you would go to like parents' evening you'd just sit there and not say nothing but with her...always ask questions...”

This mother was only persuaded to attend Baby Peep because she “knew the lady what was running it” – something that is more likely to happen with a community intervention that continues to employ the same people in the same area over several years. Peep seems to have made a powerful impact on the life of this mother and her child. The mother had never gone into nursery or school with her older children, and one could say that Peep not only prepared this little girl for school directly, but also contributed indirectly to her subsequent enjoyment of school by enabling her mother to take an interest in her daughter's learning.

This study indicates that attending Peep sessions as a baby and toddler directly encourages and enables children's early learning, facilitates their socialisation and develops parents' active interest in their child's learning; together these three elements make up “school readiness”.

It has to be remembered that this report is drawn from only five interviews, and it is hard to say how representative these five mothers are of the 120 who were exposed to Baby Peep in 2001. It could be said that these families are particularly stable, in that they were still living in the same houses twelve years later. On the other hand, it could also be argued that they are less ambitious than some other families who have moved away to more affluent parts of the region and therefore could not be contacted. All five children were attending state secondary schools in Oxford.

The mother whose interview was the longest had been very powerfully affected by her experience of Peep, and I will let her own words provide a fitting conclusion to this report:

“I learned to sort of look at them in a different way at Peep, you know I tried to sort of enjoy them, and watch them play, and you know, it was all just good stuff basically, keeping in the positive, and...then when I came back home I tried to keep it up, though it was difficult sometimes but they learned, they taught me a few tools, you know, and things to use, a few tips which was helpful, and the children loved music through play and the play through music and the nursery rhymes, and I did a lot of that at home because they tried to encourage you to do a lot of it at home, when you're changing their nappies and when you're doing things, just sing along to them”

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	Tracer Study Children				
	A	B	C	D	E
Father still resident	√	√	×	×	×
Mother working	√	√	√	√	√
Number of older siblings	1	1	0	3	1
Number of younger siblings	0	0	1	0	1
Twin	×	√	×	×	×
Attending secondary school in OX4	×	×	√	√	×

Appendix 1

What difference did Peep make to the children and families who took part in it?

Questions for Interviews

1. How much, if anything, do you remember about going to Peep groups?
2. What difference, if any, do you think going to Peep has made for you and?
Prompt: Did Peep help you understand more about/be more interested in your child's development?
3. (What did you like best about Peep groups?)
4. What did you like least about Peep groups?
5. Can you remember anything about ORIM? (Was it a useful tool would you say?)
6. Do you remember that there used to be a part of Peep sessions called *Talk Time*? How was that for you?
7. What about the Diary Pages? (Did you used to fill them in? Were they helpful at all?)
8. Did you receive the big Peep folders? (If so did you find them helpful or not?)
9. Did attend any preschool or nursery? (If so how was that experience for both of you?)
10. Which primary school did go to? What was that like for both of you?
Prompt: Did going to Peep make a difference to how you related to your child's teachers?
Prompt: What was your own experience of school like?
11. How is getting on at secondary school? (*Check which secondary school*)
12. Do you think that’s learning has been helped at all by going to Peep with you?
Prompt: Did going to Peep change the things you did with?
13. Have you done any training at all since was a baby? (If yes, what sort of training was that?)
14. Have you been employed at all since was a baby? (If so what kind of employment has that been?)
Substitute: Did going to Peep make a difference to choices you made for yourself?
15. Is there anything else that you would like to say about your experience of Peep and how it may, or may not, have helped you and?
16. Thank you very much for giving up your time for this interview.

Appendix 2

Peep's Programme Aims

1. to promote parents'/carers' awareness of children's early learning and development through making the most of everyday activities and interactions;
2. to support parents'/carers 'in their relationships with their children, so that the children's self-esteem will be enhanced;
3. to affirm the crucial role of parents'/carers 'as children's first educators
4. to support parents'/carers' in the development of their children's literacy and numeracy
5. to support parents'/carers' so that they can encourage the development of positive learning dispositions in their children; and to promote and support parents'/carers' lifelong learning

ⁱ Hannon, P., Weinberger, J. and Nutbrown, C. (1991) A study of work with parents to promote early literacy development. *Research Papers in Education* [online]. 6 (2). 77–97. DOI: 10.1080/0267152910060202.

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^{iv} Desforges C. and Abouchar, A. (2003) *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review*. Ref: 433. London, DfES Publications.

^v Goodman, A. and Gregg P. (2010) *The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment* [PDF]. York, JRF. Available from: www.jrf.org.uk [Accessed September 9th 2013].

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^{vii} Harris, A. and Goodall, J. (2007) *Engaging parents in raising achievement: Do parents know they matter?* Ref: RBWPP4. London, DCSF Publications.

^{viii} Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004) *Technical Paper 12, The final Report: effective pre-school education*. London, DfES Publications and Institute of Education.

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^x Evangelou, M., Brooks, G., Smith, S. and Jennings, D. (2005) *Birth to school study: A longitudinal evaluation of the Peers Early Education Partnership (Peep) 1998–2005*. Ref: SSU/2005/FR/017. London, DfES Publications.