

Puffin Community Nursery – The REAL Project and Working with Families

When the EYPP was recently introduced into Early Years settings, Alex Paterson, manager of Puffin Community Preschool, saw a potential opportunity for increasing engagement with all parents. Aware of research which consistently evidences parents as their child's first educator, and the influence of the home learning environment upon outcomes for children, Alex was determined to boost the level of parental engagement at Puffin, looking to close the attainment gap the setting had identified between children eligible for the EYPP and their peers. "I want to raise parents' expectations of what their children can achieve, and explore ways to overcome possible barriers to learning in parents' own lives," said Alex. "I'd like to move practice beyond the 'handouts and advice' approach to look at how true dialogue can be achieved, with realistic ideas and examples of practice," he explained.

At this time, whilst reviewing observations and records of development of children at Puffin, literacy was highlighted as an area in which a higher proportion of the EYPP cohort were 'emerging' or 'developing' as opposed to 'secure' in achieving expected levels of attainment when compared with their peers. This included choosing to handle and access books, showing interest in mark-making activities, developing control of one-handed tools and listening to stories with increasing attention and recall.

An Early Years Pupil Premium Consultation was undertaken with parents in written form. This included any concerns parents may have regarding their child's progress in Personal, Social and Emotional Development, behaviour, making friends, Physical Development or Communication and Language. It invited parents to circle areas of interest on a choice of home-learning activities including 'Get Ready for School' workshops, a book-sharing project between home and nursery, home visits by the child's key person and play sessions where nursery is opened up for parents to join in. It also asked for parents' suggestions regarding new resources the nursery might purchase to help their children 'grow and learn' or support their speech. Parents were asked to complete a tick-box language-checker to indicate their perceptions of their child's linguistic abilities, including attention span and understanding of simple questions/instructions. To include as many parents as possible, their views were also sought verbally and recorded by staff. This collaboration of staff ideas and parents' suggestions proved a useful way of guiding EYPP spending and began the process of parental involvement early in the project.

Alex organised room hire for professional development in the form of Raising Early Achievement in Literacy (REAL) training on a staff inset day. The aim of this was to increase staff knowledge and confidence in supporting parents to support their children's early literacy development. Alex also wanted to raise staff's expectations for children's early literacy skills and, in turn, parental expectations. This free-of-charge training event offered by the National Children's Bureau as part of a Department for Education-funded project, allowed for twenty participants, enabling Alex to offer a number of free places to other

"Reading is fundamental to the development of children and countless research shows the links between good reading skills from an early age and future success in life"

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settings thereby widening its impact. REAL training gave staff lots of ideas to share with parents including talking about books, 'book language', stories as starting points, different voices and sounds in stories, the importance of storytelling in the EYFS, noticing environmental print on walks, recording this with a camera, making collages of labels and logos and engaging bilingual parents in storytelling.

Reviewing parents' suggestions from the Early Years Pupil Premium Consultation, Alex concluded that Puffin should offer a series of workshops, on a weekly basis over six weeks, covering different areas of learning within the EYFS. The workshops are taking place in the nursery during afternoon sessions, using the facility of the side room for discussion with parents and the main room when parents join their children in play and use some of the ideas discussed. Topics include an Introductory Session, Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Communication and Language, Reading, Writing and Maths workshops, each linked to the theme of a children's book such as, 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar', 'Going on a Bear Hunt' and 'Peace at Last'. Alex wants to demonstrate to parents how, for example, maths activities can lead from a story. At the same time he has thoughtfully used children's books to link the Family Learning Programme with the REAL training which staff have undergone, giving the project a more cohesive approach. Parents will take part in discussion, become more aware of the importance of their role and the role of play in their child's learning, and be given lots of ideas for activities to engage in with their child using recycled or low-cost materials.



To measure the impact of this programme, Alex plans to ask parents about any differences which have occurred in the way they interact with their child and any increase in confidence, motivation or enjoyment which they have experienced themselves or they have noticed in their child. He may do this through a set of graded statements from which parents will select those which best describe their interactions with their children. Key person observations, of children eligible for the EYPP in particular, will be reviewed to assess any changes in attitudes or increased interest in literacy activities. He will continue to use the learning and development statements relating to Literacy and Communication and Language to monitor impact and anticipates using the 'group overview' function of Tapestry software to review the progress of his EYPP cohort in these areas. Alex has also updated Letters and Sounds assessments at the start of the project so that the impact of the project on children's engagement and progress in phonics can be measured too.

As a high proportion of the children leaving the setting to make the transition to Reception had were eligible for EYPP, some of Puffin's EYPP funding was used to take all 'leavers' to the Dome Theatre in July to see 'The Journey Home,' a puppet show by Little Angel Theatre Company. Alex was conscious of the very short time window he had in which to spend the funding attracted by these children, before they left nursery, and decided to provide them with an enriching, thought-provoking and fun, experience. Parent feedback was extremely positive, with children talking excitedly about the event and sharing their gifted copy of the book with their



families afterwards.



Alex has recently provided a similar opportunity for the children who returned to Puffin after the summer, including the remaining children eligible for EYPP. As part of their literacy development, he organised another theatre visit for the children to see a puppetry adaptation of Michael Rosen’s ‘We’re Going on a Bear Hunt’, by the same theatre company. “This time it hasn’t been such a rush to organise and we have had more time to plan ‘before and after’ activities, involving parents and generating better quality learning outcomes from the experience,” Alex explained.

Alex is working hard to reach out to the families of EYPP children who attend Puffin. However, he remains especially concerned for the disadvantaged children in Brighton & Hove who will *never qualify* for EYPP because their parents are not claiming the benefits they are entitled too, or are embarrassed about sharing information when they are.

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