

South Belfast SureStart

An evaluation report of the ‘Reconnection and Transitions’ programme in the summer of 2020 (Paula Goldsborough - January 2021)

Context

2020 was a highly unusual year in the 20 year history of the delivery of Early Years services and programmes in South Belfast Sure Start due to the outbreak of the novel Coronavirus pandemic. As an organisation we have had to take stock of what we were doing and how we were doing it and respond innovatively to the different phases of the ongoing health crisis while trying to keep our children, families and staff as safe as possible. This evaluation focusses on one specific new programme we established in the summer of 2020 and the learning from that programme both as we continue to work within a global pandemic and hopefully for when we return to a more normal situation.

Early Years Services Prior to the Pandemic (September 2019-March 2020)

Our 4 Developmental Programmes for 2-3 Year Olds (DPf2-3YO's) commenced promptly with 48 children between the ages of 2 years and 2 months and 3 years and 2 months in September 2019. The 8 Child Development Programmes (CDP's) continued to offer a weekly age segregated session for a much larger number of children aged 0-3 years. One of the key priorities going into the year was to support Programme Supervisors and Assistants to adapt the play experience in these programmes to a more natural approach that would foster children's possibility thinking skills and develop their drive to explore 'what ifs?'. As part of this process plastic materials in the settings were reduced and practitioners introduced more loose and open ended materials.



- PHOTOS OF SETTINGS SHOWIN HOW THE CHILDREN ENGAGED IN PURPOSEFUL PLAY WITH THE LOOSE AND OPENDED MATERIALS AND THE SKILLS THE CHILDREN WHERE OBSERVED DEVELOPING:

TAKING RISKS - BUILDING PEER RELATIONSHIPS - DEVELOPING MOTOR SKILLS, BALANCING, SPATIAL AWARENESS AND COORDINATION - DEVELOPING COMMUNCIATION SKILLS THOUGH INTERACTIONS WITH THEIR PEERS - WORKING TOGETHER - PROBLEM SOLVING - MAKING CHOICES AND DECISIONS

“When there is no predefined outcome children’s wellbeing is fostered, as they learn to explore an environment that is not controlled by adults”

A significant issue in the autumn term was the number of staff changes due to some gaining promotions, others reducing their hours for family reasons or going on maternity leave. This presented some challenges within the setting as staff members developed new working relationships and created the dynamics of new teams. The Speech and Language Therapist returned from maternity leave in late October and had to quickly pick up on plans that had been somewhat put on hold for that period. Likewise, the Early Learning Co-ordinator returned from a long sickness absence to a phased return in mid-December. By early 2020 the staffing changes and returns were complete and things began to settle down. It was agreed that The Early Learning Co-ordinator could reduce her hours somewhat on a permanent basis and over the next months a job-share model was introduced so that by June 2020 the overall management capacity was increased to 42 hours per week – important given there are 30 Early Years staff spread over 12 different community premises. By March 2020 when lockdown happened new and returning staff were well settled into their roles and Early Years services were in a very positive place. With the support from the Early Learning Co-ordinators, SBSS Speech and Language Therapist and Family Support Team (in relation to working with parents) the Early Years services were delivering across a whole range of targets and developments including:

- 'Ready to Play'- a 4 weeks programme for parents of children entering a DPf2-23YO's in September/October delivered by Family Support Workers.
- Monthly 'Stay to Plays' (parents and children) in DPf2-3YO's
- Monthly visits from Librarians to DPf2-3YO's
- Christmas trips and parties in all settings
- Early Years Foundation Stage introduced by Senior Supervisor (who later became ELC job-share) to support observations and planning in DPf2-3YO's
- Senior supervisor and SLT also devised and started to deliver training for staff in CDP's to help develop their knowledge and skills when observing and planning. This enabled individual planning and environments that celebrated the diverse society that we live in.
- Incorporating 'Message of the Month' into Programmes and activities beginning to be embedded into all settings
- Hanen 'Learning Language and Loving it' training for more staff teams and increased skills within teams in conducting WellComm screenings of children.



In mid- March 2020 when lockdown happened there were over 300 children between to ages of 1 and 4 who were attending one of the Early Years services in South Belfast Sure Start.

The Lockdown Period

By the 3rd week of March it was clear that families and staff were getting increasingly anxious about the coronavirus pandemic and there was a noticeable drop in attendance in both Early Years and Parent or Parent and Child Programmes. The decision was taken to close all services after the St. Patrick's Day holiday on the 17th March. There was no time to prepare the children for this abrupt change to their normal routines and of course no-one knew how long the lockdown would last. The lockdown had a drastic impact on service delivery within SBSS and Early Years staff had to quickly develop new ways of working to support our service users. Staff started the process of keeping a connection with their families and children. Support was offered on an individual basis and Early Years staff linked in with Family Support Workers to ensure the needs of the families were being met. As well as an individual approach there was a whole organisational approach through the SBSS Facebook page and each setting set up their own WhatsApp groups for their families.

Individual support included:

- Financial support
- Practical advice
- Developmental support
- SLT support
- Antenatal support and signposting
- Emotional support
- Garden gate visits

Whole setting support:

- Weekly check in calls
- Weekly check in messages
- Zoom song and rhyme sessions
- Videos sent daily/weekly from setting staff including songs, stories and activity ideas. This was in line with the SBSS fb page and helped to keep some form of connection with the children in the setting should restrictions be eased, and children could return.
- Activity packs delivered by FSW and EY staff.
- Book start packs
- Transitional objects delivered to children to further keep some connections that had already been formed.

A child from the DPf2-3YO exploring an activity pack that was delivered.



Comments from mum included: ***“He spent over an hour playing with the dough”***

“All of them joined in” (a family of 5 of all different ages). ***It was good to get him off the iPad”***.

RECONNECTION AND TRANSITIONS PROGRAMME

Restrictions started to ease in June and SBSS senior management developed and implemented risk assessments, cleaning protocols, staff covid-19 inductions, an updated infection control policy and covid-19 information booklets for parents, all devised to help mitigate the risk of transmission. SBSS senior management decided that it was paramount to bring the children back who had abruptly left us in March as part of a 'Reconnection and Transitions' programme. Reconnection was vital to our children to establish the attachments and relationships that had been formed pre-Covid to enable the children to prepare for their transition into nursery. By reconnecting with our children, we were giving them a message that they are important, loved and worth our time, therefore increasing their self-esteem and enabling them to be available for learning and ready for their new adventure. In total 114 different children attended all, or part of the Reconnection and Transitions programme between July and early September 2020.

STEPS IN THE RECONNECTION PROCESS:

- Early Years staff started the reconnection process by conducting garden gate visits spending time at each garden or doorstep engaging with both the child and parent enabling relationships to continue where they left off. A big part of the garden gate visits was to give parents the chance to express any concerns, issues or ask any questions. This was vital in helping to reconnect and reduce any anxieties that parents may feel about their child returning to the programme.
- The next step of reconnection was 1-1 picnics with EY staff and the local FSW. FSW's sourced resources for this including bubbles, ball and picnic blanket. All families were given a food voucher so they could purchase their picnic.
- The final step in the reconnection prior to the children coming back into the programmes were 1-1 centre visits, meaning the child spent time back in the setting with the security of their parent being there. Parents filled out all relevant paperwork on this visit and the Supervisor explained how and why the play area was set out slightly differently, what we would continue to do as normal and what was expected from them.

These steps were vital in helping to secure those relationships with both the parent and the child because families had been together for 4 months without much contact from other family members or people, therefore some anxieties may have been felt.

Early year's staff and Family Support worker reconnecting with families at our picnics:





STEPS TO CHILDREN RETURNING TO THE SETTING:

- The sessions were initially divided into two groups to enable a calmer, more relaxed approach where EY staff could deliver a programme with an emphasis on emotional well-being. Smaller groups meant that practitioners could identify any specific support mechanisms that were needed.
- The small group worked well in all settings and after the first week or two the smaller groups were merged into one so that the children were reunited with all their peers whom they had not seen from March..
- Staff started the observation process to enable individual planning whilst gathering the information that was required for the transition reports to enable a current and true reflection of the child's interests, capabilities and needs.

Comments from parents included:

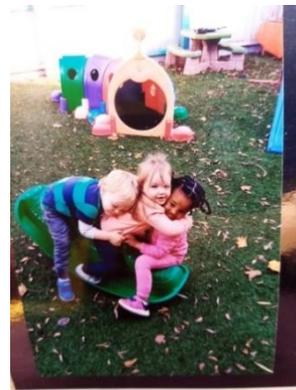
“Thank you for bringing my child back, it shows you care about him”

“I was really worried about her settling into nursery after being at home with me for so long, but I have no concerns now as she has settled right back in”

“I was nervous about sending my child because of coronavirus, but I feel ok now he has attended”

“If I could hug you right now I would. All morning all she wants to do is go to crèche. She really loves going to you guys. Thanks, so much for taking such care with her and supporting her learning and development. I really appreciate that she will get a final session. So many kids have not been able to do that with their settings. An incredibly grateful parent”

The 'Reconnection and Transitions' programme had several elements with an emphasis on sensory play to enable children to explore one or more of their senses. Sensory play opens the door for children to explore and recognise their emotions. The smaller groups meant that practitioners could help children to recognise these feelings and give them a label.



Displayed above is a snippet off some of our children in the Reconnection programmes. The photos demonstrate the delight on the children's faces as they reconnect and engage with their peers and practitioners to help achieve goals. The children look happy, settled and most importantly they are having fun.

Transitions:

Pre-Covid Alison Robinson ELC had offered nurseries a chance to work in partnership with SBSS to ensure when it was time for the children to move on to their next phase, they would have a wealth of knowledge about each child enabling a better understanding of the child's interests, strengths and capabilities. Alison highlighted the significant benefit this would have on our children by making the transition into nursery smoother because the nursery would reflect their individuality making it feel like a familiar setting. A few nurseries responded and Alison met with these nurseries to begin with. Unfortunately Coronavirus and lockdown meant that building relationships with these nurseries had to be put on hold.

Once lockdown restrictions eased and our 'Reconnection and Transitions programme' started Alison once again made contact with the nurseries to give them an overview of what we were doing and highlighted the importance of working in partnership due to the emotional impact lockdown may have had on our children and families. Supervisors made contact with nurseries to talk through transition reports and discuss any concerns they had. This was also a key approach to help the nurseries have planned environments that would interest the children and make transitioning easier for them.

FEEDBACK FROM A NURSERY TEACHER:

"You can tell the children who attended the reconnection programme, as they are just so happy and settled"

"The extra pair of hands has been great as it means we can give each child attention and we get to know the children better when its smaller adult-child ratios"

What went well?

- Half of the programmes were able to engage with the nurseries to enable a smooth transition for the children sharing and discussing transition reports.
- Taughmonagh DPf2-3YO's and CDP usually conduct a nursery starter programme but again due to Covid-19 it could not take place. The ELC Paula Goldsborough who is also the Supervisor in the DPf2-3YO's discussed with the nursery teacher a way to make the transition smoother for the children. They decided that the staff would spend a week in the nursery when they were settling in. This worked so well the staff stayed for a second week. It meant that the children had a familiar face whilst they got used to their new surroundings. The outcome of this was children settled quickly and parents expressed delight because their child had settled in so well.
- Another 2 settings conducted zoom meetings to discuss strategies that would support the children transitioning into the nursery.
- Another setting took the children on a walk to see their new nursery, again using the base of a secure adult to become familiar with their new setting.
- Transition forms were completed for all the nurseries with very current information.
- The 'Reconnection and Transition' programme was such a success we used the same approach with the children who were commencing our programmes in October 2020.
- Photo books were devised to help children become familiar with their new setting.
- Exit questions were completed with parents through 1-1 centre visits.
- There were no positive cases of Covid-19 amongst the 114 children, their direct families or the different staff teams.

What did not go so well?

- Half of the settings found it difficult to get the nurseries to engage; therefore staff were unable to share their knowledge on the children except through the written transition forms to help them tweak the environment and practice to reflect the uniqueness of the children transiting.
- Nursery starter programmes could not be expanded beyond the one setting.

One setting going on a walk to see their new nursery. The Early year's staff took photographs along the way and displayed them in the setting to enable the children to become familiar with the surrounding area and their new nursery.



Testament from Nursery Co-ordinator in Taughmonagh primary school,

“As Nursery Co-ordinator I strive for outstanding quality early years provision. One area where we have developed exceptional practice is through our relationship with the local Sure Start. Through working closely and building relationships we have developed a professional learning community which has led to whole school improvement. As a result of establishing close relationships with the sure start team we have become aware of the wonderful foundation they have created for our children and we are able to build upon this as they enter Nursery. It has helped with the transition process and has made not only the children feel secure and safe as they move into our setting but also the parents. Having the sure start staff in our setting in September this year had a positive impact with regards the settling in process. We gained valuable information and knowledge from the staff and the children settled very quickly. The sure start staff were also able to observe our practices in our classroom and will be able to implement some of these back in their own setting. It has been such a positive experience. The reconnection and transition programme was vital in fostering the children's well-being as it enabled the sure start team to reconnect with the children and ensured any information that was passed on to us was a true reflection of the child”.

Elaine Higginson.