

Parents as Partners in Early Learning

Case studies

The Early Learning Mentors project

Tower Hamlets

'Parents are doing a fantastic job helping their children, but they don't always realise their own importance.'

Jill Jeyes – PPEL Senior Early Learning Mentor

Tower Hamlets' Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) funding was used to create a team of early learning mentors (ELMs). The team worked with a carefully selected group of potentially under-achieving boys and their parents from a wide range of settings, including children's centres, nurseries and schools. The work focused on supporting the boys' communication and emotional and social development. The project exemplified excellent monitoring and evaluation and demonstrated the kind of strategic thinking necessary to embed and extend good practice.

department for
children, schools and families





A positive context

Tower Hamlets has a good track record in identifying and tackling obstacles inhibiting parental involvement in children's early learning. The borough's PPEL project was carefully considered and developed as part of its overarching parental strategies.

'We decided to focus resources on boys in need of extra support and their parents. The gap between boys' and girls' language and emotional development is apparent early on, so it made sense to use the PPEL initiative to develop a highly-targeted response to this issue.'

Jo Freeman, strategic manager of Tower Hamlets' children's centres

Recruiting and training the PPEL practitioners

A team of nine early learning mentors (led by a senior mentor) was recruited from a group of experienced nursery nurses. They already had a strong commitment to working with parents and wished to extend this aspect of their practice. The ELMs underwent an intensive period of training, not only in outdoor play and Tower Hamlets' own Parents Matter approaches and practice evaluation but also in the application of the Leuven assessment scale. This tool is a means of assessing and comparing the well-being and involvement of young children through structured practitioner observations. The training has also created a body of expertise among this group of practitioners that they will continue disseminating after the PPEL project formally ceases.

Recruiting the children

The ELMs were deployed in children's centres across the borough and a number of their associated early learning settings and schools. In each location, it was expected the ELMs would take on a caseload of some three or four children and their parents.

The ELMs spent the first period of their work observing larger groups of children. The final decisions about which boys to include in the PPEL project were based primarily on these observations and associated Leuven scale evaluations. The ELMs also took into account discussions with the permanent staff at the settings.

Exemplary benchmarking

At the start of the programme the children's levels of language and social and emotional development were carefully evaluated. Their parents' understanding of the importance of their involvement in their children's learning was also assessed. The evaluation process was designed to give a voice to both the adults and young boys – the latter sometimes through drawings or photographs. A common thread was a desire among parents to be more involved, but this was hampered by worries about the value of their contributions and the educational benefits of the kind of play their sons seemed to prefer. Outdoor active play was not as highly regarded among parents as more obviously studious indoor activities.

'Through one-to-one conversations it was also possible to allay parents' doubts and ascertain a great deal of their feelings about their children's learning.'

Cassie Daems, ELM

The mentoring process

The mentoring included group and one-to-one support. Among the successes that the ELMs achieved was the promotion of small boys' superhero play – involving the boys in making capes out of bin-liners and using them in their outdoor play. Parents consequently developed a better understanding of the value of this sort of play for their children.

In parallel with the child-focused mentoring, the ELMs also made strenuous efforts to engage with parents and to model their importance as partners in their children's learning. Ensuring that they were able to meet at times that suited parents' busy schedules was challenging but rewarding.

The learning journey

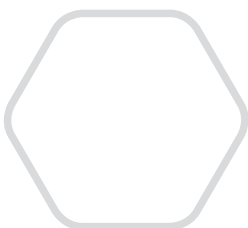
In order to embed a thorough evaluation process, the ELMs kept track of the progress their children and parents were making. Every four weeks they carried out further detailed observations, based on the original Leuven scale. They were also asked to choose one parent-and-child pair to form the basis of a detailed case study. 'I opted to make an eighteen-year-old mum and her two-year-old the focus of a study,' explained Cassie Daems. 'She found getting out and about with her little boy a challenge, mainly because of the disapproval she sensed around her.' As well as boosting this parent's confidence by accompanying her on a number of outings, Cassie was able to encourage her to keep a photographic record of her son's play. The early learning mentors now plan to gather the case studies together into a single publication to form part of the broader dissemination of this project across the local authority.

'At this stage it is anecdotal, but there have been clear improvements in some of the children I have been mentoring. When we started, some were not talking at all. Often they were quite withdrawn indoors, but they changed outside, becoming more confident and communicative. It has been important sharing these breakthroughs with practitioners.'

Cassie Daems, ELM

A broader enterprise

As well as the focused mentoring, the ELMs have worked hard to extend their influence by setting up groups and events promoting the importance of active and outdoor play. Care was taken throughout these meetings and events to use equipment, such as plastic bottle skittles, that parents could easily make and use with their children at home.



Equipping for the future

The Tower Hamlet ELMs have left many legacies. In the face of natural objections from both parents and practitioners about outdoor play in winter, some have used PPEL funding to build up stocks of appropriate cold- and wet-weather clothing in children's centres and their satellite nurseries and schools. In one children's centre the ELM was consulted by the design team before a reconfiguring of the outdoor play areas. Her suggestions, including the provision of sheltered areas, will greatly extend the possibilities of outdoor play for children using the centre.

The impact of the PPEL scheme should continue to benefit children and parents beyond the formal end of the project, due to the systematic incorporation of the good practice into the authority's early years practitioner training. Part of this will include the videoing of a number of activity sessions led by the ELMs, which will be gathered into a training film.

Key findings:

- When recruiting ELMs it is important to ensure that they are committed early years practitioners who have excellent knowledge and understanding of how to work with children and their parents.
- The importance of engaging parents and children in one-to-one conversations – clearly a challenge given everyday pressures, but a crucial stepping stone to capturing parents' views, including the heartfelt desire among most to be involved in their children's education.
- The importance of careful benchmarking and continuous monitoring.

Additional points to note:

- The importance of early planning and clear coordination through an effective inter-agency PPEL reference group.
- The value of involvement of senior managers across the local authority, including managers from both health and voluntary sectors.

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