

# SureStart Evaluation Report

May 2018

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ETI: Promoting Improvement in the Interest of all Learners

*An evaluation of the effectiveness of Sure Start in promoting and improving the development of children's speech, language and communication skills to prepare them and their parents for the next stage of their learning and development.*

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The Education and Training Inspectorate  
Promoting Improvement

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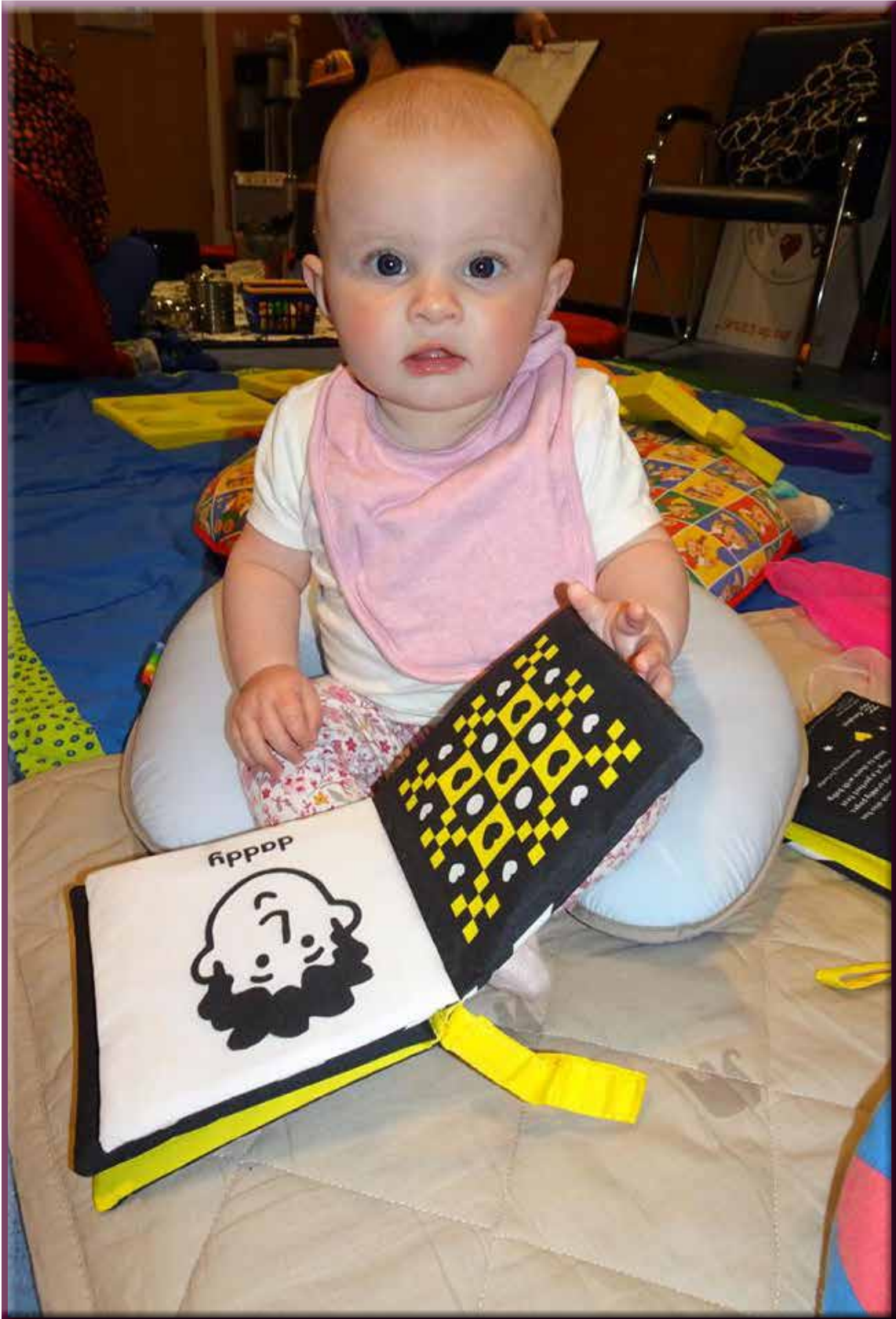


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## INTRODUCTION

The Department of Education (DE) funds and takes the policy lead for a range of early years education and development programmes including Sure Start. The Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) has responsibility for the 38 Sure Start contracts across Northern Ireland. It supports the strategic development, implementation and regional consistency in key areas of the Sure Start programme. Further information on the roles of the HSCB and the Child Care Partnerships can be found in Appendix 1.

Sure Start is a targeted programme for parents and children under the age of four living in the top 25% most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland. Sure Start was introduced in Northern Ireland during 2000/01 as part of the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy 'Children First'<sup>1</sup>.

The Programme was originally the responsibility of the (then) Department for Health Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS); responsibility for Sure Start transferred to DE in 2006.

DE invests just over £25 million per annum in Sure Start services across Northern Ireland. In 2017-18, at the time of this evaluation, DE allocated £24,965,000 to fund Sure Start in recognition of the importance of high quality learning experiences for young children, from the earliest stage, to help give them the best start in life and to support the key role parents have in promoting the learning and development of their children.

Sure Start projects deliver a wide variety of services which are designed to support children's learning skills, health and well-being, and social and emotional development. A summary overview of the range of first-hand evidence collected including the wide range of services observed to inform this evaluation can be found in appendix 2.

Learning to Learn - A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning<sup>2</sup> sets out the way forward for early years education and learning. Actions aimed at ensuring that every child can access high quality early learning experiences included a review of Sure Start and inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) for all DE funded early years services for children from birth to the age of six (0-6). Following the

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1 <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/articles/childcare-strategy>

2 A framework for early years education and learning - October 2013 | Department of Education

Independent Review of Sure Start commissioned by DE in 2015, it was recommended that the Education and Training Inspectorate evaluate the educational aspects<sup>3</sup> of Sure Start.

The ETI carried out an evaluation of Sure Start between January and March 2018. The focus of the evaluation was linked directly to one of the expected policy outcomes and a key aim of Sure Start projects, namely the improvement of children's language skills.

The evaluation was designed to explore how effectively Sure Start promotes and improves the development of children's speech, language and communication skills to prepare them and their parents for the next stage of their learning and development.

The evaluation findings are based on a range of first-hand evidence gathered by the ETI inspection team during visits to five individual Sure Start projects. The evaluation focus of children's language and communication skills was set within a broader context which form the key sections within this report. These include outcomes for children and parents; the quality of provision across a range of programmes for both children and parents; and leadership and management including links to the next stage of learning.

The ETI produced a set of key quality indicators which were shared with the projects and were used to inform each section of the evaluation. The evaluation guidance and key quality indicators can be found on the ETI website<sup>4</sup>.

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3 For the purposes of this evaluation the ETI have interpreted the term 'educational' as those learning and developmental experiences that contribute to positive attitudes, skills and dispositions for learning, preparing children for future success in school. These include the health and well-being of the parent and child, quality play experiences, language skills, social development and the home learning environment.

4 Evaluation of Sure Start by the Education and Training Inspectorate | Education Training Inspectorate

## CONTEXT

At the time of this evaluation by the ETI, a standardised and regionalised Speech Language and Communication model, introduced by DE and the HSCB was in the early stages of being implemented. The re-organisation of the speech and language therapist workforce had only recently been completed and a regional co-ordinator had been in place for 12 months. This evaluation provides a baseline position for aspects of their ongoing work. It is important to note that while the professional practice of the speech and language therapists was not evaluated directly, evidence of their effective deployment, management and contribution forms part of the evaluation and findings.

As Sure Start projects have evolved there has, until recently, been limited information or guidance provided from DE or the CCPs on developing a process for self-evaluation and, in particular, how to best demonstrate ongoing improvements in the quality and impact of their work.

At the time of the evaluation, a number of the projects were experiencing challenges in recruitment and staffing and had recent appointments into key roles, changes to staff and staff acting in temporary positions.

In June 2010, ETI evaluated and reported on the Sure Start Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds<sup>5</sup>; the findings reported here build further on that work. As the children attending the developmental programme account for a relatively small percentage of the total number of children eligible to use their services within any Sure Start area, it was considered important to have a broader overview of the quality of experiences and outcomes for all of the children and their parents.

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<sup>5</sup> Evaluation of the SureStart Programme for 2 year olds - Digital Education Resource Archive (DERA)

## SECTION ONE

### SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

#### Strengths

- In all projects there is evidence of general improvement in the children's speech, language and communication skills as a result of their participation in Sure Start.
- In all projects there is evidence that a diverse range of parents have improved confidence, skills and knowledge to support the development of children's speech, language and communication as a result of their participation in Sure Start.
- The early identification of delays in children's speech, language and communication is a strength of all of the projects evaluated.
- The specific expertise of the speech and language therapists adds significant value to the overall quality of the provision being provided directly to the children; and is building the capacity of parents and staff to support the children's speech, language and communication skills.
- The wide professional skills set within the teams, including health visitors, midwives, speech and language therapists, working alongside family workers and childcare staff contribute well to early identification of need, a joined-up approach and support pathway for parents and their children.
- The effective promotion of attachment, bonding and early communication skills between mothers and babies through a range of ante-natal programmes, contributes to foundations in which learning and development including speech and language can thrive best.
- An appropriately high priority is given to the planned use of music, songs and rhymes to support children's speech, language and communication development.
- The standardised Speech and Language and Communication model provides a helpful and systematic framework to guide the training and practice of staff in the effective delivery of speech, language and communication support to families in a holistic and integrated way within Sure Start projects.

#### Areas for improvement

- Almost all of the projects are at a very early stage of developing systematic and meaningful self-evaluation leading to improvement; they do not monitor and record consistently enough the quality of the provision and outcomes for the



children and their parents and use this information to evaluate their practice and inform future planning.

- There is often too low an expectation on the importance of parental involvement with their children, and in prioritising the development of the home learning environment and the parent's role as the child's first educator.
- The high quality learning experiences for promoting speech, language and communication skills being provided in the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds are not consistently reflected across other aspects of the services including the crèche facilities, which are too variable in quality.
- A majority of the childcare staff do not understand consistently enough how to fully implement and embed their training on speech, language and communication into their day-to-day practice with the children.
- There is insufficient communication and partnership working between Sure Start projects, pre-schools and schools.

## SECTION TWO

### OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN

There is evidence of improvement in the children's speech, language and communication skills as a result of their participation in Sure Start.

A key strength is the children's responsiveness to music, songs and rhymes, and their participation in physical movement across the full range of programmes supporting speech, language and communication development.



The babies and parents attending the range of programmes, including for example, baby massage and the Incredible Babies parenting programmes, are engaged fully; they are responsive to the key messages being modelled and presented. Parents are learning to make direct eye contact and use physical touch

and verbal cues to gain and keep the attention of their babies, who respond well to songs, rhymes and music through smiles, sounds and gestures.

Most of the children attending the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds are forming positive relationships with the staff and with one another and are progressing well in developing their independence, social and communication skills. They are increasing their word and picture



vocabulary as they explore books independently, listen to and enjoy informal stories told by the staff. They are developing well their fine motor skills and experiment with making marks using a range of materials, both indoors and outdoors. The children follow simple instructions, understand daily routines and engage purposefully with the staff. Those children coming with well-developed speech and play skills often take the lead during their own self-initiated role play and in doing so model communication skills to their peers.

The children, and parents when they attend, participate enthusiastically with the staff in singing, music and rhymes.

Such practice is evident across a wide range of both universal and targeted programmes for babies, toddlers and children up to the age of four years. The children are developing well their attention and their



listening skills, a sense of beat and auditory awareness as they listen and respond with body movements and use simple percussion instruments.

Children who have been identified with a language need receive a range of language support and as a result they are making progress in their ability to listen to follow simple instructions and to develop and use a range of vocabulary. They respond very well to the enjoyable activities; they are gaining confidence in giving oral responses within the smaller groups led by the speech and language therapist. Early identification of need and more rapid access to specialist intervention is having a beneficial impact on children's progress in overcoming speech, language and communication difficulties and delays.

## SPEECH AND LANGUAGE SUPPORT

Three children attend an intensive four week programme, led by the projects speech and language therapist; their parents are also present to learn from the strategies modelled by the therapist.

The children listen attentively and respond well to the visual timetable showing a variety of motivational activities which are well matched to the children's interests. Each smiling and happy child is greeted by name, and the children are given time to listen and respond to the activities. The speech and language therapist emphasises and models for the parents: the need for, time to listen, time to catch (the sounds), time for the post box, time for the box of toys, then the song and finally the reward sticker. The children listen very attentively to distinguish between sounds and are attracted to the interesting toys and actions associated with the sounds. The parents take their lead from the speech and language therapist and are encouraged to participate fully. During the nursery rhyme time, the speech therapist encourages the children to say the rhyme, "Little Bo Peep" and the parents are involved in helping the children to keep the rhythm of the beat. The parents are provided with helpful follow-up work to do at home and are made aware of the importance of the activities in helping to develop pre-reading skills.

The outcomes for those children attending crèche facilities are too variable in quality.

In discussion, a small number of pre-school leaders provided positive feedback to the inspection team on the successful transition of children who had attended the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds. They reported better social, listening and communication skills among those who attended the developmental programme as compared to those who did not. This ETI evaluation has limited evidence overall on the extent to which the outcomes for children attending Sure Start benefits their next stage of learning in pre-school and school.

## SECTION THREE

### OUTCOMES FOR PARENTS

The very good relationships built between the parents and the staff team promote well the parents' confidence to participate in the programme and to seek the advice and support of the staff. There are positive outcomes for the children and parents who participate and individual case studies collected by the projects demonstrate clear benefits and outcomes for individual children and their families, especially those with complex needs.

There is evidence that parents gain improved confidence, skills and knowledge to support the development of their children's speech, language and communication. Parents understand key messages such as: the negative impact of using a dummy on speech development; behaviour strategies linked to choices and consequences; the use of changing time with a baby as chatting time; and, the importance of reading books and stories from an early stage. In

addition, parents report benefits to their own health and well-being, social inclusion and attention to self-care, which impacts positively on their capacity to support their child's developmental needs and promote their positive dispositions for learning.



## SUPPORTING THE PARENTS ROLE

Following an intervention session with a small group of parents and children, time was set aside with the parents for a recap and review of their learning with the speech therapist:

The enthusiastic parental responses included their understanding of the importance of “sitting face-to-face with the child, singing nursery rhymes and sharing books” to develop language and communication skills. The outcomes for the children were carefully documented through the regular assessments by the speech and language therapist, and shared with the parents and the staff working with the children across other programmes to promote an integrated and collaborative approach.

The breast feeding support groups and other activities aimed at parents and babies are supported well by parents. For many this is the starting point in their use of Sure Start and parents they may move on to participate in further programmes which are signposted and supported by specific team members.



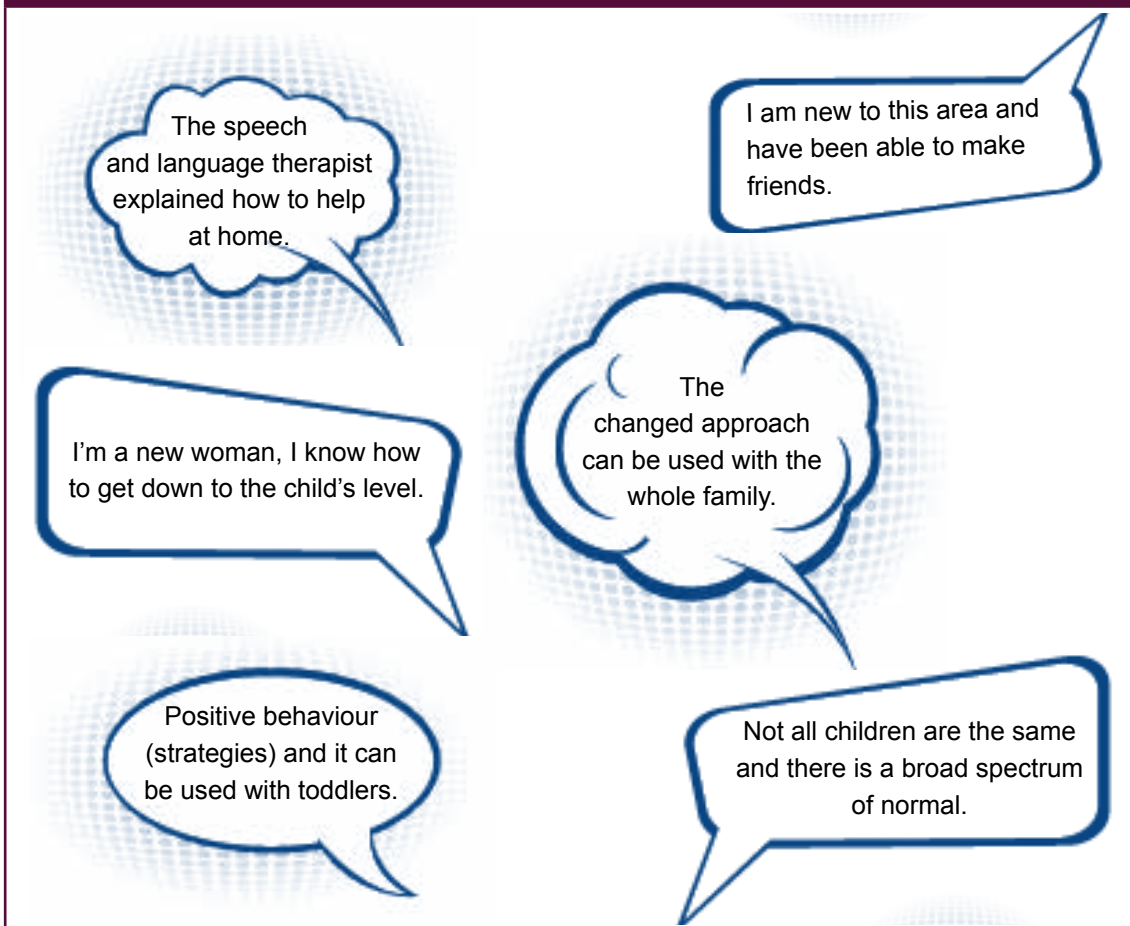
Overall, there is insufficient analysis being undertaken by Sure Start centres of the qualitative and quantitative data being collated to demonstrate the full extent of the positive outcomes for parents and the outworking of the agreed ‘Progressive Universal’ model.

Those participating in programmes represent, at times, a relatively small percentage of the eligible families within the catchment area of the Sure Start projects. It is unclear, in some projects, whether those parents attending are those who would benefit the most from the services being provided.

While a number of projects are beginning to target the inclusion of fathers and male workers more successfully, fathers, male caregivers and male staff are under-represented in the activities of all of the projects visited.

The amount of participation of parents attending the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds is too inconsistent to optimise positive outcomes for them and their children.

### What did parents say they had learned?



## SECTION FOUR

### QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR CHILDREN

In most of the programmes observed, the staff plan good quality, enjoyable experiences that promote effectively the children's speech, language and communication skills.

The staff provide a quality learning environment with suitable resources to support speech, language and communication skills across most of the programmes. The projects are accommodated in either purpose-built or adapted facilities or within community buildings, including local libraries. While the use of community buildings has advantages of accessibility for parents, there are limitations and challenges to overcome in relation to the size of rooms and suitability.

In almost all of the Developmental Programmes for 2-3 Year Olds, the staff provide an attractive and stimulating language-rich learning environment both indoors and outdoors. The high quality natural and authentic resources, displays at child height of photographs of family members, books and age and stage appropriate equipment, stimulate the development of the children's speech, language and communication skills. Ways of providing high quality language-rich play experiences needs to be shared across the projects to ensure quality experiences for all children and not just those attending the Developmental Programme.



#### LEARNING ENVIRONMENT TO SUPPORT LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

In moving to new inner-city accommodation the staff were set the challenge of developing a central courtyard outdoor play area within a set budget. They carried out their research and approached a landscape gardener who worked closely with them to design a bespoke area that was age and stage appropriate for the children.



This courtyard area is an integral part of the well-planned daily play programme and provides very good opportunities to cater for the children's physical, social and language needs. The area is enhanced with the addition of many interesting natural and authentic items. These help to arouse the children's curiosity and interest throughout the year and provide very good opportunities to introduce and build on language and communication. The layout and organisation of the area is flexible in its arrangement and provides the staff with ample space and time to engage in quality interaction with the children and join in their play.

The early identification of delays in children's speech, language and communication development and subsequent referral and support is a strength of the projects. The integrated approach between those carrying out home visits, child care workers and health professionals, combined with immediate access for advice and guidance, facilitates early planned intervention. A child and their parent can access advice and support more immediately through the speech, language and communication support being provided in the Sure Start project. The early identification and easy access to the specialist speech and language support available within a Sure Start project has a positive impact on maximising outcomes for these children.

The quality of the interactions between children and the speech and language therapists and other health professionals is of a consistently high quality. The wide range of suitable resources, props and strategies used during sessions engages the parents and children well to draw their attention and gain responses from them.

Sessions led by the speech and language therapists are well-planned and implemented effectively.

As the sessions led by the speech and language therapists are often only a small percentage of the children's whole experience of Sure Start, it is important there is a more consistently joined-up approach to the planning of experiences among all staff across the programmes. There is inconsistent reinforcement of messages for parents



and for children to practice the vocabulary, language and communication skills being promoted in small groups within the larger group sessions.

## A JOINED UP APPROACH TO SUPPORTING LANGUAGE

A target group of children were followed-up in the play programme by the speech and language therapist. She joined in the play activities reinforcing language development and modelling, for the staff, the importance of the adult's clear speech and the use of language which is matched well to the needs of the children and to their stage of development. The focus on the promotion of the children's self-initiated play and at the same time the skilful staff interaction to promote the children's attention and listening, are positive features of the speech and language therapist and the staff working together to add value to the children's language development.

The quality and appropriateness of the training for staff and the overall planning for the children attending almost all of the Developmental Programmes for 2-3 Year Olds, leads, in most cases, to a consistency in the quality of learning experiences and in the early identification of language delays and other developmental needs. The staff are not consistently skilled in planning to meet these children's individual needs and interests more specifically. Discussion with the staff often revealed a lack of their full understanding of how to use their knowledge and assessment of the children to plan appropriately for their next stage of learning.

Overall, the effective tracking of children's progress and the use of this information to inform future planning is at an early stage of development in all of the projects visited. Staff in the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds frequently use a commercially produced speech and language assessment tool recommended and provided by the CCPs to baseline aspects of the children's speech and language development. In a small number of projects the staff reported a lack confidence in the use of this particular assessment tool or were too dependent on it as the only means of tracking progress. The quality of Individual Education Plans (IEPs) in place for children identified as a result of assessments, and the understanding of the child care staff about how to use them to bring about improvement for specific children, requires further development. The individual plans are often not specific or measurable enough and do not contain sufficient clarity on the actions to be taken to guide the staff. In the best practice, evident in a minority of the projects evaluated, the staff have a shared understanding and use assessment in a meaningful way to evaluate their practice and plan how they will move the children on to the next stage in their learning and development.

There is at times, a misunderstanding of the guidance from DE on the importance of focusing on improvement for the children, regardless of the assessment model used by a project.

While the staff in all projects are being provided with opportunities to access a range of training in a variety of recognised approaches and programmes for the development of speech and language, they do not have sufficient time and guidance on how to select, embed and implement their training fully, as relevant to their particular area of responsibility.

Almost all of the staff delivering the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds are skilled in observing; waiting and taking their lead from the children as they participate in activities with them. They model language and role play well, refer to books and introduce ideas in age and stage appropriate ways. In a minority of practice observed, the staff missed opportunities to promote language and learning and did not manage the organisation of the day or the contact with parents effectively enough.

In the best practice, there is a clear rationale for, and careful monitoring of, the use of crèche facilities; for example, to provide respite for vulnerable families, or to enable parents to attend a variety of useful parenting or educational classes. The play experiences and staff interactions with the children provided in the crèche facilities are too variable in quality. There are too many missed opportunities to reinforce key messages with parents and engage with the children effectively enough to support their speech, language and communication skills.

They are impeded at times by the challenges which the staff face in providing for a wide age range of children and the high turnover of different children attending. The staff require further guidance and support to plan more effectively to meet these challenges and maximise the impact of their services on outcomes for children and parents.



## SECTION FIVE

### QUALITY OF PROVISION FOR PARENTS

The importance of valuing and supporting the role of parents in their own child's learning and development is embedded as a central principle within the concept and design of Sure Start projects. The universal nature of the provision within the targeted areas avoids stigma for parents attending the services and contributes to parents and children from a wide range of social backgrounds learning from one another. It does also, however, present challenges in ensuring the services are being accessed by those who will benefit from them the most within the catchment area and on how to meet the needs of vulnerable families living just outside the catchment areas. DE has provided additional guidance "Sure Start - Meeting Exceptional Need outside Catchment Areas" on how to address this ongoing concern for families most in need.

A key strength in all of the projects visited is their inclusive and welcoming ethos, based on respectful and supportive relationships, creating a climate in which parents feel valued and welcomed. This is an important foundation on which staff build to move parents towards services that will make a positive difference to their child's developmental outcomes.



## PARENTAL WORKSHOP

In a parental workshop session a group of mothers came together to listen to the speech and language therapist provide information on practical tips on supporting their child's language and communication skills. Most of the mothers used the crèche facility to enable them to attend the session. They were enthused by the session and talked about the approaches they had been trying at home which had been highlighted at the previous session.

One parent expressed a particular concern about how to prepare her child to attend an Irish Medium pre-school. The senior leader, who spoke some Irish herself, was able to provide some helpful advice. Another mother confidently explained the approach she was taking as she also had an older child in an Irish Medium primary school.

The range of specific programmes and workshops for parents are implemented effectively and incorporate a strong focus on the importance of parents supporting their children's speech, language and communication skills, alongside the development of the children's physical, social and emotional development.

There is effective communication between the parents and the Sure Start staff. A good range of high quality information is provided for parents which gives helpful advice and guidance on supporting their child's speech, language and communication at home. These include, for example, resource packs, newsletters, digital applications, information sheets and digital records of words of songs and rhymes. In the best practice, feedback is sought from the parents, through a range of suitable means, to confirm the extent to which the advice is being implemented. In these examples, parents talk about changes to their behaviours, routines and lifestyle which are impacting positively on their children's learning and development; including their children's speech, language and communication skills.

In the best practice, the staff seek actively the views of parents and use this information well to improve their services.

## INVOLVING FATHERS AND MALE CAREGIVERS

A project reviewed the involvement of fathers and identified a significant shortfall in their attendance. They organised opportunities to consult with the fathers and learn what the barriers were. Using this information they restructured the content and timing of the programmes being offered and specifically targeted father figures. As a result the participation of fathers increased from 1% to 11% attending their sessions. Individual needs were also identified and services tailored to meet the parent's particular circumstances through, for example, home visits to support a father (during a period of family trauma) and to develop play and communication skills with his baby and toddler.

The speech and language therapists add significant value to building the capacity of parents to support their children's speech, language and communication skills. They deliver and support a range of programmes to model strategies and deliver key messages focused on speech, language and communication. Targeted support is delivered, when appropriate, with small groups of children and with children and their parents and also through making themselves available for advice and referrals. Their visibility and accessibility to parents contributes to early identification of need and to the parents understanding of how to help to support their child from the earliest stage.

The dissemination of the skills of speech and language therapists to staff throughout the projects is not yet developed fully to maximise their input and impact.

Levels of registration, participation and retention of parents are too variable across projects, and between the different geographical areas located within individual projects. While increasing numbers of families may be registered, it does not mean that they are participating.

The programmes focusing on support for mothers and babies are well attended by parents. Working parents reported that universal community-based programmes for parents and children together, enabled them to fit attendance in with their own working patterns. There is, at times, less consistent support for parents with children aged one to two years of age. One of the projects, in recognition of this, has already begun the process of reviewing more strategically the potential journey of a family through Sure Start services from aged 0 to 4 years of age.

Parents value highly the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds and in all projects this aspect of the provision is almost always oversubscribed. However, the

programme does not place a strong enough emphasis and expectation on parental involvement, in line with DE guidance. Too often this is limited to parental attendance at one session per month



and in one project this was only for one hour a month. Insufficient work has been done to emphasise, plan effectively and monitor this aspect of the work; limiting the opportunities to build parents capacity to support their own child's speech, language and communication skills.

The most common approach of parental engagement in the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, where all parents are expected to attend at the same time, is often not practical for the space and the staffing levels available. There is insufficient clarity on the purpose of the sessions and limited meaningful planning to encourage the participation of the family in the child's learning and development. This results in too many missed opportunities to enhance the skill of parents in supporting their own children's learning and make positive changes within their own home learning environment. This aspect of the work needs to be reviewed and improved to make it more fit for purpose.

There is too much variability in the skill and confidence of project staff to support parents in helping their child's speech, language and communication skills. The wide variation in the qualifications and experiences of staff and lack of specific training in how to best support parents are all contributory factors. Those staff holding higher level qualifications are generally more confident and skilled in working successfully with the parents to support their role.

There is too much variation between projects in the number of health professionals within each project. While all projects had a speech and language therapist, the number of health visitors and midwives varied from none to four within the staff team, leading to inconsistency of practice and inequity in the skills and expertise available. Project managers report difficulties in recruiting such staff.

Parents benefit from a range of home visits to facilitate registration, provide valuable one to one support for individual parents and children with an identified need, and to discuss the progress of children who attend the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds. There is inconsistency between the projects in the planning, rationale and purpose of home visits and limited monitoring of the quality and impact of the visits is carried out to ensure they are the best use of staff resources and are proportionate to risk.





## SECTION SIX

### LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

Sure Start projects have many different levels of leadership and management. Each project has a project manager/co-ordinator, chairperson, team leaders, a lead and accountable body and is aligned to one of the five CCPs. For the purpose of this evaluation the focus was on the leadership and management involved in the day-to-day operation of the projects visited. This included the project manager, chairperson and staff who held responsibility for a specific team within the project or took the lead for an aspect of the work.

The managers and their teams are enthusiastic and confident about the value of the work they do to support families and young children; there is less clarity about how they can best demonstrate and measure the impact of their work on families and young children.

The leadership and management work in an integrated and collaborative approach to manage effectively the day-to-day operation of the programmes being provided. Regular review meetings focus on a joined-up approach with both their own team and community health professionals, to identify and plan how to best meet the often complex needs of individual families. In the projects, where they are available, a wide range of professionals including health visitors, midwives and speech and language therapists work closely with the child care workers and home visiting teams. Their range of skills and the specific knowledge contribute to a holistic approach to identification, sign-posting and well-targeted support for parents. In the best practice, the support is provided with a clear plan on how to support the parent towards the next positive step for themselves and their child; a few projects are beginning to explore ways to measure this progress.

Roles and responsibilities, lines of communication and accountability within projects are complex. There is a very wide variance between projects in the breadth of staff qualifications, roles, titles and responsibilities. As projects have expanded and new guidance has been developed, these have provided new challenges to overcome; job descriptions, staff training and levels of expertise have not always kept pace with these changes and are too inconsistent across projects.

Almost all of the projects visited are not yet recording and tracking effectively enough the outcomes for the children to measure the impact of their work. There is insufficient clarity on who is responsible within each project for monitoring and evaluating the

quality of the different aspects of the provision and the impact on outcomes for children and parents.

All managers can cite a range of real challenges they face in engaging families including, for example, transport in rural areas, accessing suitable premises within a geographical area and a very complex range of social, health and mental health issues within families. The leaders and managers who have been most successful in overcoming some of these barriers need to be identified and have the opportunity to share this practice with others.

Recruitment issues and staff absences have resulted in ongoing challenges in the deployment of staff into temporary roles and responsibilities for several projects. There is variation in how effectively leaders and managers plan for the recruitment and retention of the parents and children who are most in need of the Sure Start services. In the best practice, managers consult with parents, assess the needs effectively, identify groups of parents or geographical areas that are underrepresented and plan strategically to make improvements.

The professional lead of the speech and language therapists employed to work within the projects is a strength and contributes to building staff capacity in promoting children's speech, language and communication. Their work is at differing stages of development reflecting, in part, the length of time a therapist has been working with a particular project. As the regional model is rolled out, this work should be built on further to become more streamlined and embedded into the projects.

The extent to which specific training for speech and language is optional or compulsory for staff and evidence of the impact the training is having on their day to day practice varies within projects. While it is positive to note that staff have access to training, too many types of training are being delivered without sufficient follow through to ensure it is understood and implemented effectively on a day to day basis. Overall, the processes for monitoring and evaluating the quality of the provision and the impact of the support for speech, language and communication skills across the project are underdeveloped.

Information on all areas of development, including speech and language development, is transferred consistently to the feeder pre-schools for children who attend the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, but not for those attending other programmes. A small group of pre-school leaders interviewed provided positive feedback on the children who had attended the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds; reporting improved social, listening and communication skills in the children who had attended the programme in contrast with those who had not.

Overall, however, there is limited evidence across the projects of effective enough links between Sure Start projects and the next stage of learning and development for the children and their parents. There is significant room for improvement in developing more effective communication through an area-based strategic approach to link the children's progression in learning and support for all families between Sure Start, pre-schools and primary schools. While a guidance document on partnership standards was produced in 2016 as a framework to support self-evaluation and achieve excellence in partnership working, there was limited evidence of it being used to promote partnership working between Sure Start, pre-schools and schools.

Most of the projects are at a very early stage of developing systematic and meaningful self-evaluation leading to ongoing improvement. Further guidance needs to be agreed and developed to help staff identify more systematically and consistently their own strengths and areas requiring improvement against a suitable range of criteria and how to take appropriate actions to bring about that improvement.

## SELF-EVALUATION LEADING TO IMPROVEMENT

A programme manager was not content with the way crèches were being used. Having taken time to research relevant research and theories of practice, she brought her findings to the management group and requested that she be allowed to have a 'root and branch' overhaul of the service. A business case and development plan were created to plan the way forward and, as a result, changes were made with clear criteria to ensure the crèche facilities would be used to best effect. For this project it included changes to the timing and location of the crèche facilities and a clearer rationale for how and why they were being used. Overall, the project manager evaluated the changes as making a better use of the funding provided and in enabling more mothers being able to access the Sure Start services.

In the best practice, managers take the lead in developing a culture of continuous review and reflection among the whole staff to gather relevant evidence and make changes to bring about improvements in quality and outcomes. Leaders and managers need to evaluate any model of self-evaluation that is introduced to ensure it is leading to improvement in quality and outcomes and is not becoming a bureaucratic exercise.

Following the review of the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, support specialists were put in place to support the staff within the programme. The

consistency of the quality across most of the Developmental Programmes for 2-3 Year Olds is in part due to the guidance and training provided for the staff regionally through these support specialists. Having established a consistent approach, this role now needs to be reviewed and developed in conjunction with the role of the projects own early years co-ordinator to ensure quality across all of the programmes.

Leadership and management place a high emphasis on keeping children and adults safe. All of the projects demonstrated their commitment to relevant staff training and procedures for safeguarding children are in place. In a small number of projects improvements were discussed with the staff including, for example: monitoring the implementation of procedures for safe access when using community buildings; inconsistency in how they share information about safeguarding with parents; and, including real-life scenarios when training staff.

## SECTION SEVEN

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations have relevance for those providing leadership and management to Sure Start at all levels. The HSCB, DE, CCPs, lead and accountable bodies, project managers and team leaders need to identify which aspects of the recommendations they hold responsibility for, how to address the areas for improvement identified and how they will monitor the improvements being made in quality and outcomes.

The leadership and management at all levels within the projects need to:

- develop more systematic and effective processes for monitoring and evaluating the quality of provision, in order to identify and disseminate best practice and ensure consistently high quality learning experiences and staff engagement to promote the children's speech, language and communication skills;
- place a higher emphasis on the importance of parental participation in the programme with their children, particularly for fathers and within the Developmental Programme for 2-3 Year Olds, and in prioritising the development of the home learning environment and the parent's role as the child's first educator; and
- ensure the childcare staff understand how to fully implement and embed their training on speech, language and communication into their day- to-day practice with the children.

The CCP managers need to:

- provide further advice and guidance on how effective partnership working can be developed between Sure Start projects, pre-schools and schools; and
- provide further advice to project managers on how to interpret and implement more consistently the guidance provided by DE.

DE and the HSCB need to:

- review the role of the support specialist to ensure that this valuable resource is being used to best effect; and

- develop further guidance to support Sure Start managers on how to evaluate the effectiveness of their project, identify their strengths and areas requiring development and how to use this information to inform action plans and bring about further improvement.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this evaluation indicate there is much to celebrate about the work being done within Sure Start to promote children's language and communication skills. Sure Start projects are a much needed and valued resource within the communities they serve.

The projects evaluated show evidence of: improved language skills for the children; early identification of developmental delay; better access to services; enhanced parenting skills; and, integrated delivery of services.

There is no room for complacency as an increasing number of young children continue to enter both their pre-school and primary one year with poor language skills, often with associated social, emotional and behavioural difficulties which create barriers to their learning. Sure Start is well-placed within communities to make a significant contribution to address these barriers to learning. The project staff, CCPs and those involved in leadership and governance at all levels should build on the many strengths identified within this report and use the findings to reflect on how they can improve further their effectiveness. Almost all of the projects visited provided very positive feedback on the value of external evaluation and identified areas that their teams would reflect on and improve as a result of the feedback provided by the ETI.

Appendix 1

**THE ROLE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,  
THE HSCB AND CCP MANAGERS  
IN RELATION TO SURE START**

The Department of Education (DE), the Department of Health (DoH) and the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB) work collaboratively to support the strategic development of the Sure Start Programme and to deliver the agreed outcomes and effective implementation of the Sure Start Programme.

DE is responsible for securing and allocating Programme funding and together with the DoH, and the HSCB ensures that appropriate accountability and governance arrangements are in place to safeguard the use of public money allocated to deliver the many Sure Start services.

The HSCB delivers the operational aspects of Sure Start on behalf of DE. Working closely with the 38 Sure Start projects the HSCB role includes the management and oversight of funding provided by DE which HSCB allocates to the 38 Sure Start projects.

The five CCP Managers (Officers of the HSCB) work with the five Childcare Partnerships within their respective Health and Social Care Trust (HSCT) areas in Northern Ireland. The CCP Managers work closely with the Sure Start projects supporting the development and implementation of the Programme and delivery of services to families and children in Sure Start areas.

## SUMMARY EVIDENCE BASE

The evaluation report is based on the following first-hand evidence from five Sure Start projects.

Sample visits to:

- Twelve Developmental Programmes for 2-3 Year Olds;
- Seven groups focusing on antenatal care, parents and babies including baby massage, baby yoga, Incredible Babies, breast feeding support and hypno birthing;
- Four workshops for parents including parenting classes, computer class and child development workshop;
- Eight programmes sessions for children and parents together including universal parent and toddler groups, rhythm, rhyme and story times; and
- Seven sessions providing targeted support for children or children and parents together to develop play, speech, language and communication.

Meetings and discussions with:

- Project leaders and managers;
- Allied health professionals including speech and language therapists, mid-wives and health visitors;
- Team leaders such as family co-ordinators and room supervisors;
- Focus groups of parents and incidental conversations with parents attending sessions; and
- A sample of pre-school leaders.

Reading documentation including:

- Policies and procedures;



- Sample planning, observations and assessment for programmes being delivered;
- Projects' own evaluations of programmes;
- Case studies;
- Projects' own feedback from parents;
- Business plan;
- Completed self-evaluation form;
- Completed safeguarding form; and
- Information for parents.

## EVALUATION METHODOLOGY

Five Sure Start projects were selected to represent one from each of the five geographical Sure Start areas and to reflect projects set in both rural and urban locations. They also took into account a range of the lead and accountable bodies and Child Care Partnerships.

The project received two weeks advanced notification of a formal two day visit as part of the evaluation followed by up phone call from the Reporting Inspector to discuss and confirm the arrangements.

A team of two inspectors and one Associate Assessor visited each project over a two day period. Each project manager received oral feedback at the end of the visit.

Documents providing guidance on the evaluation model were prepared and made available on the ETI website at <https://tinyurl.com/Eval-Sure-Start>

- Guidance for the Evaluation of Sure Start 2018
- Key indicators for the Evaluation of Sure Start

Managers were asked to complete and email a data capture form in advance of the visit, provide a link to a confidential questionnaire for staff and to complete and retain the self-evaluation form and a safeguarding pro-forma provided or use an alternative of their own choice.

During the two-day visits the inspectors gathered a range of first-hand evidence which was used to provide oral feedback to each project and collated to inform the main evaluation report.

Appendix 4

**LIST OF SURE START PROJECTS VISITED AS  
PART OF THIS EVALUATION**

Strabane Sure Start

Colin Sure Start

East Belfast Sure Start

Clogher Valley Sure Start

Coleraine Sure Start

The Education and Training Inspectorate would like to thank the projects that provided the photographs from their settings which are used within this report.

## THE VIEWS OF THE PROJECTS ON THE INSPECTION PROCESS

Project managers and their teams were invited to reflect and comment on the inspection process. There were six returns, representing three projects, from a range of staff including project managers, acting manager, speech and language therapist, early learning co-ordinator and a parent and family co-ordinator. The following are a summary of their comments.

All of the staff agreed or strongly agreed that:

- The inspection team conducted themselves in a professional and courteous manner.
- The Sure Start team intend to make changes as a result of the feedback provided.
- The oral feedback provided was informative and useful to the staff team.

Almost all of the responses, agreed with the following statements. Two responses reported they did not know.

- The self-evaluation form helped staff to review our own strengths and areas for development in advance of the evaluation visit.
- The safeguarding pro-forma was helpful as a tool to review our safeguarding arrangements.

Almost all of the staff agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements. There was one disagreement about each of these statements.

- The information provided in advance of the ETI visit was relevant and communicated clearly.
- The information and guidance about and about the evaluation provided on the ETI website was informative.

While most of the staff agreed with the following statement, two team leaders disagreed that:

- The preparation required for this inspection was reasonable.

In written comments the most helpful aspects of the visit by ETI were described as:

- Confirmation of what we do well and recognition of the excellent outcomes for the children and families. (3 responses);
- Identification of a number of areas of work and organisational issues worth consideration.
- Identification of clear objectives and quality measures for areas of our work, a useful benchmark for areas of our work not inspected by external organisations before.
- The team were respectful of the issues and concerns families and children have in this area.
- The preparation beforehand and the safeguarding pro-forma were useful.
- The self-evaluation process was a great reflective team exercise as a whole team approach.
- The inspectors were very honest and thorough so a whole picture of Sure Start was evaluated.
- It helped us to reflect on our practice and so do some self- evaluation as a team
- The team were constructive in their help and advice.
- It was a very useful exercise to reflect on our work and consider areas that need developed, without the pressure of ETI we would not have done such an in-depth evaluation of our work.

The least helpful aspects of the visit were identified as:

- Not enough notice given.
- Two weeks is a quick turnaround, a lot of work but not unhelpful.
- The process was stressful but not unhelpful.

- The period beforehand felt stressful but that dissipated over the two days.
- Lack of community-based early years experience within the inspection team leading to a lack of consideration of the context of our families.
- The focus of the inspection was not borne out in practice, there was more focus on the 2-3 year old programme and some questioning was delivered in a way that was demoralising.

The length of time for the visit was described as:

- Appropriate, sufficient (2 responses);
- Adequate, ok, hard-going to showcase everything over two days but any longer would have been difficult.

Projects report plans to do the following differently as a result of the ETI visit:

- Record outcomes for parents as an early year team.
- Review the tools to support the family support team working with their families.
- Continue to develop planning and observation tools.
- Review policies with suggestions made,
- Review all policies and procedures and continue the self-evaluation process.
- We have made a comprehensive list of action points resulting from the visit including updating some policies and procedures, how groups and services measure quality, promoting some areas of service and identifying training for some staff.
- Build further on our existing discussions about planning, observations and outcomes.
- Consider how I evaluated my universal work and gather evidence of parent and staff views.

Suggested improvements to the evaluation process included;

- More time to prepare for the evaluation (2 responses).

- Written feedback to reflect and share with the team.
- More feedback from the parents on the impact Sure Start has made to their families.
- Include someone from a community-based early years experience background and an understanding of child-led and experiential play as a team member.
- The focus of the evaluation should be stuck to.
- Consult with the individual project about which day to visit in order to see the full timetable of programmes.
- This was a very positive process and inspectors were honest about being on a learning curve, ETI should continue to gain a greater understanding of Sure Start and the crèche services in particular.
- Nothing (2 responses), it was a very positive process.

This feedback will be used to inform a review of the evaluation process and in planning for future evaluation work.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FROM THE CONFIDENTIAL STAFF QUESTIONNAIRE

A total of 121 staff responded to the questionnaire. The staff included leaders and managers, childcare workers and allied health professionals.

The responses were highly positive about all aspects of the work of the staff. Almost all staff agreed or strongly agreed with almost all of the statements.

The written comments reflected the staff's positive views on the following aspects of their work:

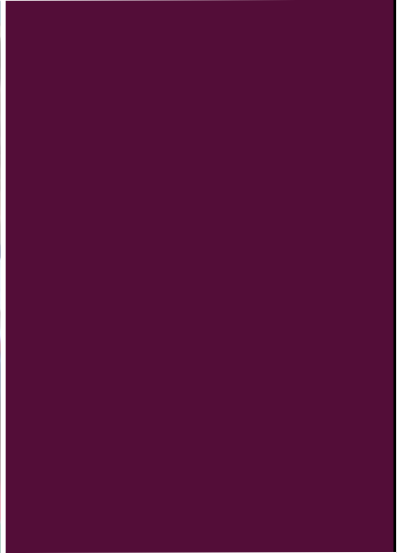
- effective partnership with parents;
- the importance of ante- and post-natal care;
- the high level training in speech, language and communication;
- the holistic and interdisciplinary team work approach;
- age and stage play-based learning;
- highly qualified staff; and,
- working with parents with high level of need.

A small number of comments also indicated less satisfaction with the following aspects of their work:

- extra home visits for parents based on home learning and how to implement this in their home environment;
- stronger links with local pre-schools;
- additional support for parents to assist learning;
- inconsistent leadership over several years;



- staff doing extra work, due to backfilled posts, to cover and deliver the business plan; and
- a lack of space for children to explore.





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## **SureStart Evaluation Report**

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May 2018

