

## **The family experience of Bookstart Corner**

An evaluation of Bookstart Corner

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

This is a report on family experiences of Bookstart Corner, a learning and literacy programme for parents and carers with children between approximately 12-24 months. It is offered through children's centres to those who they feel will benefit from this additional support and guidance. The programme is designed to involve 4 home visits and is based around a pack of materials developed and supplied by Book Trust to the centres. Since its inception in 2012, there have been three evaluations of the Bookstart Corner programme. This report represents the first qualitative case studies of the programme, reporting on seven families' experiences of taking part in Bookstart Corner, its impact upon them, their engagement with literacy and their child's literacy learning.

## A summary of findings

Accepting the limitations of making any generalised recommendations based on a case study approach, across the studies it was evident that the development of a trusting and enjoyable relationship between the practitioner and family enabled the parents and children to engage with the Bookstart Corner resources. To achieve this, practitioners needed to be skilled in adapting the resources to the context and the children's and parent's interests, so that if the children were not always engaging with the materials as their originators had intended, this did not stop them participating usefully in the social learning context. It was also evident that parents:

- were generally interested in and satisfied with the Bookstart Corner materials, usually having particular favourites which reflected what the child had most engaged with
- valued being introduced to new resources and facilities
- valued the social experience of the sessions, both for themselves and their children
- were eager to learn from someone they felt was more knowledgeable than themselves about children and children's learning
- felt that the practitioners were skilled in what they did and they learned from watching them interact with their children
- had made small changes to their practices and interactions in the home, but small as these were they recognised they were valuable
- tended to pick up on and use practices with which they were already comfortable
- generally had high levels of awareness about how to support their child's learning that coincided with professional notions of best practice, but also had personal beliefs about social practices and child behaviours which in some way conflicted with professional notions of best practice
- had very different views on digital literacy and the use of technology
- wished to have more sessions with practitioners, though where these should take place and their format was less clear.

More tentatively we can suggest that parents:

- identified challenges when moving venues once a pattern of home or centre attendance was established
- identified development in their own practice but there was little indication that this transferred to other members of the family who didn't take part in the programme

- felt, in some small way, after experiencing Bookstart Corner, that they were more confident or thoughtful about what they were doing with their children or were encouraged to try something new
- noted that their children's interest or behaviour in relation to the learning situation and some aspect of reading, drawing or communication had altered across the lifetime of the programme, even though this change could be very small
- did not always associate change directly with the programme, but saw it as part of an ongoing process of growing up
- can have an ongoing resistance to certain practices, particularly if they cause lifestyle challenges
- often framed their concerns about home practices as being a consequence of child behaviour or development or wider family constraints
- came to see previously unnoticed strengths in their children across the lifetime of the programme.

Our ability to make recommendations is limited to making suggestions to inform future discussions. Book Trust can regard the Bookstart Corner programme and materials as the start of a relationship with families, which provides a framework for further exploring and developing parental practices and children's literacy learning. We would suggest Book Trust further consider:

- the value of using broad theoretical frameworks such as The Learning Stair and ORIM in relation to such a short-term programme where any changes are likely to be very slight and cannot be reliably attributed to that programme
- the influence of the programme on family members beyond those participating in the sessions, for example considering how to encourage the involvement of siblings and grandparents in supporting literacy activities
- how they can encourage and facilitate children's centre staff to work with and support families beyond the remit of particular programmes, so that the development and understanding of literacy is increasingly seen as an ongoing aspect of the children's centre's role
- how to draw upon the different technologies and communication approaches which children experience and which reflect the diverse priorities of families and learning situations; thereby encouraging a focus upon the possible impact of a wider range of literacies.

## **Methods**

The study took place between January and March 2015, exploring the experiences of 7 families from London, Hertfordshire and Surrey; 2 from an urban setting, 3 from a suburban setting and 2 from a rural setting. These 7 families were involved with 5 different children's centres and included 8 children. Each case study was developed from a preliminary telephone interview of about half an hour and an observation of between 2-4 of the sessions, followed by a 20 minute discussion. At the end there was a debrief interview of about 45 minutes. The pre- and post- interviews followed a protocol agreed with Book Trust and took the form of responsive, extended conversations (Rubin and Rubin 2004). The observations of the sessions used the in-the-picture (ItP) method (Paige-Smith & Rix, 2011), with the researcher maintaining a research journal, and an end-of-programme discussion with each practitioner. In addition, practitioners offered written observations of their own, adding further perspectives to the data. As soon as data became available analysis was undertaken in a

process based on grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss 2008), enabling a thematic analysis of the data.

## **Findings – The five case studies**

### **Case Study 1: Modu and Halima supported by Sarah**

Halima was interested in having Bookstart Corner visits because she was concerned that although she was trying to introduce activities at home, her son, Modu, was not responding as she had expected a young child would. Halima was aware of the importance of modelling reading and writing for Modu, however he was often not willing to let her read in front of him. Halima was hoping to gain insight from an experienced professional, and felt confident that the sessions would go well, particularly as Modu had already met the practitioner, Sarah. Halima and Modu received three Bookstart Corner visits at home whilst the final session involved a trip to the library. During the home visits Modu chose to engage with activities on his own terms. Sarah appeared more willing to accept Modu's need to be mobile than Halima, who wanted her son to be co-operative. Sarah dispelled Halima's concerns by consistent reassurances, so that Modu's individual responses become less of an issue. As the visits progressed he did occasionally engage in a more conventional way with the books from the pack and would often stop to listen and move to the songs and make marks with the crayons from the bag. Halima picked up on the effectiveness of Sarah's patient approach and became more involved in successive visits. Flexibility in the Bookstart Corner sessions was important for Halima, and though she found the overall experience of receiving Bookstart Corner valuable, no single element stood out for her. She was very clear that the sessions had had a positive influence on her interactions with Modu generally and recognized a change in Modu's approach to communication with her.

### **Case Study 2: Chloe and Sylvia supported by Wyn**

Sylvia took part in Bookstart Corner with her daughter Chloe because she wanted to do as much as she could to support her early learning and language development. The parents were already doing a lot to nurture Chloe's enjoyment of reading, but they were very aware of the family potential as role models and though they felt that they were having a positive influence, they also felt they could do more. Sylvia was hoping that the visits would introduce new ideas for them and enhance her skills and confidence as a parent, but was apprehensive about Chloe's response to new people in unfamiliar situations. The practitioner, Wyn, quickly dispelled Sylvia's apprehensions, partly because they had met previously at the centre, partly because Chloe engaged with her from the outset and partly because the sessions were open-ended and child-led. Chloe particularly engaged with the Bookstart Corner bag, making emptying and filling games an integral part of each visit. Sylvia gradually responded more openly to Wyn's modelling of engagement with Chloe and the way the resources were used. She was especially drawn to music activities and planned to introduce more singing and rhymes with her daughter. Sylvia valued the frequency and regularity of the visits, but Chloe took a little time to settle at the start of the final session when they moved to the centre. She thought there was a good balance between repeated activities and the introduction of new resources and that materials were well connected with those activities. She felt her confidence had increased and that although she was doing the right things, she could still do more. At home they were making more effort to provide mark making activities and did not see Chloe grabbing the pen in a such a negative light. They also felt that over the period of visits Chloe's language and communication had further progressed.

### **Case Study 3: Kelly and John, supported by Trish**

Kelly was interested in receiving the Bookstart Corner visits to help her focus on early literacy activities with her son, John. She recognised that he did not have the same interest in books that his sister had had at the same age, that he was reluctant to sit for any length of time and loved to be active. Kelly was very keen for John to develop more of an interest in books, which she saw as a central part of their family life. The children's centre delivered the programme in a slightly different way, combining some sessions and holding one at the centre; the sessions were also disrupted by poor weather and holidays. John showed some interest in the resources but he mainly engaged with his own play pursuits. There were moments in both home sessions when he was drawn to the activities, and the *Dear Zoo* book became one of his favourites at home. Kelly worked closely alongside the practitioner, Trish, during the sessions, sitting next to her on the floor, enjoying the chance of one to one interactions with John. She picked up on Trish's practice of introducing actions and animal noises to gain John's interest in a book and noticed his preference for board books. Kelly found the overall experience of the sessions enjoyable and useful, gaining a clearer idea of different ways of engaging him with books, but felt the session at the centre with other children did not work so well. She had acquired different books for him and these had encouraged him and his sister to play together. She also felt that John was becoming more responsive and more expressive and that she was more aware of his ways of communicating and increasingly confident in sharing a book with him.

### **Case Study 4: Lara, Kieran and Cassie, supported by Heidi**

Cassie was not sure what benefit she hoped the sessions would bring her twins, Lara and Kieran, but she felt that it was good for children to look at books and to be excited about them. Cassie felt a family can do a lot to help with reading and writing, and having taken part in the programme with her first daughter, she read with her. However reading with the twins happened inconsistently in the house and there was a concern about them using pens. When communicating, Kieran relied on gestures and sounds whilst Lara had a few more words. The twins did not engage with the practitioner, Heidi, in the first session, busily getting on with their own activities, but gradually interaction developed, so that by the third session the twins were playing with the toy fruit associated with the activities and engaging for short periods with the finger puppets and books. Cassie noted this engagement too and was surprised at them clearing up after the last session. She really enjoyed the sessions and felt the twins in their own ways looked forward to them too. She found it useful to go through Bookstart Corner a second time, because it refreshed her memory, encouraged her to try activities and provided her with experience of different approaches. She noted too that the children became more interested in looking at books across the course of the sessions and that to her surprise Kieran had looked after his copy of *Dear Zoo*. However Cassie was still reluctant to read to the twins, doubted their interest in listening to her and was still not comfortable with activities which were messy. Despite this she had been encouraged to sing with them more and intended to do more activities with them when she felt they were ready.

### **Case Study 5: Zara and Ned, Jasmine and Maddy, and Jamilla and Donna supported by Dora**

All three parents in the group sessions felt Bookstart Corner was an opportunity to look at books and that in some way their child would benefit from being part of a group. They also shared high expectations of the service they would receive from the children's centre, through the practitioner, Dora. All of them read with their children, who loved books, and recognised the importance of their own involvement. The sessions took place within the

nursery and children's centre, and only one family missed one of the sessions due to ill health. Ned was much more active than Maddy and Donna, dashing around enthusiastically, often playing with electronic equipment in the room. This limited what could be achieved in the first session, but all those involved still enjoyed themselves and Jamilla identified that she could make wider use of rhyming in the home. In the second session, Jasmine began to take a more proactive role and the two children who attended engaged with the book bag in a way they had not with previous activities. It was evident that across the sessions Ned increasingly focused on the intended activity for longer periods and that Donna, who had separation anxiety according to her mum, gradually separated from her. Zara particularly liked the stories and rhymes that were part of the sessions, whilst Jamilla appreciated the collective nature of the sessions and hearing ideas from other parents. Jasmine felt she learned little that was new, but was enthusiastic about the experience and how it had encouraged Maddy to participate. The parents noted in particular that their children enjoyed *Dear Zoo* and the book bags, and how careful they were with them. All had used the finger puppets at home. Additionally Zara now used more rhymes and Ned was more attentive to book content; Jamine was more aware of her use of words and activities and had tried to moderate her dislike of messy play; and Jamilla had made a sand tray, felt she had learned some valuable lessons and was particularly taken with her daughter's increased interest in drawing.

## **Introduction**

### ***Overview of the study***

This study aimed to explore seven families' experiences of Bookstart Corner. This four-session programme is described as a 'programme to help families that need extra support to develop a love of stories, books and rhymes'. It is intended as a home-based programme and is delivered by children's centre staff, providing free resources for the family and enabling centres to enhance their existing work with families and to offer new outreach opportunities within their local community.

The study was undertaken in the early months of 2015 and involved interviews, observations and discussions. Through these the study team explored with families the benefits and challenges of Bookstart Corner and their enjoyment of the programme. It considered their views on how the programme influenced their self-confidence, knowledge and skills, as well as family interactions and involvement with literacy activities. It also sought to engage with the child's perspective of the sessions to better inform the wider discussions around parental experiences of the programme.

This report presents five case studies based upon these families' experiences, which provide a rich picture of their involvement. It also explored themes which emerged across these case studies providing a limited insight into Bookstart Corner programmes as delivered by children's centres generally. It was evident that all these families found the programme to be useful and enjoyed the materials on offer, but all those involved engaged with it in very different ways. The key to the success of the programme appeared to be family relationships with the children centre staff and the capacity of the staff to respond to family situations.

### ***Background to the study***

There is a long research history which shows that exposure to print and pictures at an early age is linked to better reading comprehension and increased enjoyment in later years (e.g. Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997). The child's experience of reading and writing is best served if it is part of their everyday family lives, shared with their parents, siblings and extended family members. There are strong cultural and linguistic differences between families however that result in very different family uses of books and other written texts (e.g. Drury, 2007, Gillen & Cameron, 2010).

Bookstart Corner is a learning and literacy programme designed for babies and children of 12-24<sup>1</sup> months, developed to support families who for a wide variety of reasons are less likely to introduce their children to books and reading. It is offered through children's centres, helping them to meet their range of priorities, often integrated with other kinds of centre activities to create a link to the breadth of resources and support services they provide. The programme is designed to involve 4 home visits: 'making time for rhyme'; 'the Bookstart

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<sup>1</sup> There is a degree of flexibility to this age-group targetting in cases where it is felt that the family could still benefit from the programme



Corner pack'; 'fun with finger puppets'; and 'the importance of mark-making'. Since its inception in 2012, there have been three evaluations of the Bookstart Corner programme. These have explored practitioners' experiences of the programme and the impacts of the programme upon families' reading behaviour and attitudes. There has been a quantitative survey of parents' experiences but no qualitative case studies have yet been produced to explore in detail the specific family experiences of the Bookstart Corner programme. This research report provides these detailed case studies. It reports on an investigation of the parents and carers experiences of taking part in Bookstart Corner and the impact the programme has had on the family.

### **Research Methods**

The study took place between January and March 2015, exploring the experiences of 7 families from London, Hertfordshire and Surrey; 2 from an urban setting, 3 from a suburban setting and 2 from a rural setting. These 7 families were involved with 5 different children's centres and included 8 children. The initial aim was to find 5 families who were associated with at least 3 centres, however many centres we contacted either delivered Bookstart Corner across too long a period for the time-frame of the study, did not have any families beginning Bookstart Corner to fit in with our tight schedule, had concerns about family willingness to participate or were undergoing organisational change which precluded centre involvement. It was also evident that many families and centres liked the delivery of the programme not in the home, as was originally intended, but in the children's centre and frequently as a group activity rather than individually. A number of reasons were given for this:

- It was a centre response to parental preference for a group experience
- It was a more efficient use of practitioner time
- It gave the family a strong introduction to the centre and its other activities.

It was therefore agreed that four individual families experiences in the home would be examined alongside three families attending one group session.

Each case study where possible was developed from:

- a preliminary telephone interview of about half an hour
- observation of the programme sessions - each session followed by a 20 minute discussion
- a debrief interview of about 45 minutes.

Appendix 1 shows which sessions were attended, where they took place and when observation and interviews took place.

The pre- and post- interviews followed an interview protocol agreed with Book Trust and which drew upon the ORIM framework (Hannon & Nutbrown, 1997) and the Learning Stair<sup>2</sup> model. These interviews took the form of responsive, extended conversations (Rubin and Rubin 2004). Not all issues were explored with all interviewees to similar depth and breadth nor did they follow a prescribed order. The interviewer used the protocol to guide the questions but sought to have a relaxed and engaged discussion, enabling deeper exploration of issues which mattered to the parents. The research found some parents to be more confident in discussion and more forthcoming than others. These interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis.

The observations of the sessions used the in-the-picture (ItP) method (Paige-Smith & Rix, 2011). The ItP approach involves the researcher:

- taking photographs of the children during play, interactions and formal activities
- making observations using a first-person narrative
- using the photographs and narratives to inform informal, recorded discussions with the family following the observation session

In reading the case studies it is important to realise that the first person narrative is not assumed to represent 'the child's truth'. The aim of making notes as a first person narrative is an attempt to be a more effective and attentive observer and listener, enabling discussion about the child's choices and decisions during interactions and play. These discussions involving the parents and child took place after the Bookstart Corner sessions. Photographs were taken with a small tablet to capture what the child was focussing on or interested in during their play and were looked at by the family, the child and the researcher as part of the discussions. On some occasions the children engaged with the images, on others they were more interested in the gadgetry or in their ongoing play, but along with the researcher's observations the photographs supported an exploration of the parent's and child's responses to the session. The researcher also maintained a research journal, recording his experiences of the sessions and his shifting understanding of the family experience. This journal was further informed by a series of end-of-programme, recorded discussions with the practitioners involved in the session. Three practitioners offered some written observations of their own, which added further perspective to the analysis.

The data collected was analysed in a process based on grounded theory (Corbin and Strauss, 2008), so that discussions and notes informed the questions and discussions in subsequent meetings. The transcripts of interviews, observations and discussions were then thematically analysed at the end of the research period, providing the basis for the five case studies presented in this study and the overview of findings which comes after them. All names have been anonymised.

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<sup>2</sup> This model was used in Early Home Learning Matters by the Family and Childcare Trust. The first use of the tiered terms within the model seems uncertain but its earliest citation would appear to be Shapiro (1966) who used them in relation to library visitors.

## **Case Study 1: Home visits – Modu and Halima supported by Sarah**

### **At the beginning**

#### ***Introducing Modu and Halima***

Halima was interested in having Bookstart Corner visits for herself and her son Modu because she was concerned that although she was trying to introduce shared reading, writing and drawing activities he was not responding to these as she had expected a young child would. Based on her own education in Gambia, she felt that developing early literacy skills were important. Modu, who was 2 years 4 months old, had no brothers or sisters and lived alone with his mum. The centre had identified an issue with his hearing. He enjoyed play when he could be on the move, particularly scooting his ride along toy. Halima said that he did settle to watch his favourite children's television programmes and would also stop to listen to music when it was playing around the house. She usually tried to look at a picture book with him at bedtime but often he did not show a great deal of interest in this and would push her away. At other times he would take a picture book away from Halima as soon as she started to read the words to him and would often then spend some time studying the pictures on his own. Halima therefore felt that Modu was not quite ready to share books or stories regularly with her.

Because Modu was very interested in pens and pencils Halima tried to provide opportunities and resources for him to draw and mark make at home. He sometimes wanted to scribble, make circles and scratch with his crayons on paper but his mum noticed that he preferred this to be a solitary activity. She was aware that he often preferred to manipulate and carry around bundles of pens without wanting to use them for mark making.

Halima used singing to engage Modu as she noted that he was particularly attentive to a whole range of music:

Yeah I sing, I sing him all the time he's in the pram, 'they going to school, going to school, going to school', he love that song when I do it he would open my mouth, he would start, put his hand in my mouth and open it to sing again. (First interview with Halima)

She often whispered or talked closely in his ear to talk to him, either in her first language Wolof or in English. Halima found that he really enjoyed this and often vocalised in response to this way of communicating. However she was concerned about his overall language development particularly his understanding of the things that she said to him and the way he only used a few sounds to express himself.

Halima was aware of the importance of modelling reading and writing for Modu. However he was often not willing to let her read in front of him and would take books away from her. Similarly if he noticed her writing he would usually want to have the pen himself. Halima allowed Modu to play on her mobile phone because he liked to press the buttons and then hold it up to his ear as if making a call.

Looking ahead to the home visits Halima was confident that the sessions would go well particularly as Modu had already met Sarah, the practitioner who carried out the Bookstart Corner visits, at the centre's group for two year olds. She was especially looking forward to gaining another person's perspective on how she was trying to support her son's learning:

Maybe things can change because everybody have your own mentality and maybe I'm doing something which is not right, Sarah can tell me that, if not, if how you have to do. (First interview with Halima)

## **The Home visits**

### ***Following Modu's agenda***

Halima and Modu received three Bookstart Corner visits at home whilst the final session involved a trip to the library together. During the home visits Modu chose to sample the activities that Sarah offered on his own terms and in many ways he determined the direction and flow of the sessions. Sarah herself reflected that possibly the variety of activities prescribed from session to session did not allow Modu to settle more readily and perhaps more repetition would have been appropriate. However the visits were characterised by an acceptance and accommodation of his more physical and sensory exploration of the books and resources:

I sit on the floor with the pens. I move them and roll them. I put them together to make shapes on the floor. I pick one up and shake it. I take off a top and put it back on again. I stand and move around. (Observation of Modu written in the first person)

Sarah appeared more willing to accept Modu's need to be mobile than Halima who, particularly in the early visits, seemed to sense that she needed to take on the responsibility of ensuring that her son was co-operative. The possibility of Halima feeling under pressure in the sessions was dispelled by Sarah's consistent reassurances and the reasons she gave for following Modu's agenda:

I again explained that this was ok and that eventually he would choose to come to look, as he was interested as he kept looking towards our direction. (Sarah's notes after the first visit)

Modu's individual response to the activities during the sessions seemed to become less of an issue for Halima as the visits progressed perhaps because she saw that he did occasionally engage in a more conventional way with the books from the pack:

I take the bears from the woman and drop them on the floor. The woman reads to me about a brown bear. I sometimes look across at the book. I hold the book. I turn the pages and the woman reads. (Observation of Modu written in the first person)

She also noted that he often stopped to listen and move to the songs that Sarah sang as well as occasionally making marks in the drawing book with the crayons from the bag.

### ***Halima's involvement in the visits***

Halima was also quick to pick up on the effectiveness of Sarah's patient approach and by the conclusion of her second visit had noticed that:

Sarah is like um, always tried to try and talk to him. Yeah and to try and sing with him and then have some fun with him all the time. (Interview with Halima after the second visit)

She became much more involved in successive visits, progressing from leaving the room for periods of the first session to observing more closely on the second and then joining Sarah on the floor with the toys in the third week. However Halima's experience of the home visits was not only dependent on her increasing awareness of the format or her developing interest in the activities. Other factors such as family visitors being present, Modu's health, his sleeping pattern and her variable shift work, all set each visit in a different context for her. Despite these variable circumstances Halima did not feel the sessions were intrusive or disruptive and she 'wished that Sarah could come every week'.

Flexibility in the Bookstart Corner sessions was therefore important for Halima to support the development of a positive relationship between the practitioner and parent. Such a non-critical relationship between Halima and Sarah was a positive platform for discussions around improving the home learning environment. As the sessions proceeded Sarah was able to suggest that Modu's toys could be more available for him and that greater access to paper to draw on could avoid problems with drawing on the walls. In turn Halima felt encouraged to try to make these changes.

## **Reflecting on the Bookstart Corner sessions**

### ***Experiencing the sessions***

Halima found the overall experience of receiving Bookstart Corner visits to be very useful although there was no single element that stood out for her: 'I can't mention only one thing, I think everything is helpful for me'. She had found having ideas for activities to try out between visits valuable particularly the singing games in which she made up her own songs. Also the attention to practical advice in the sessions had enabled Halima to readily put certain changes in place, for example making toys or drawing paper more available for Modu. She felt that the final visit to the library had been useful as it introduced both herself and Modu to the facilities. She had joined the library during the visit and borrowed a book on children's communication difficulties. She intended taking Modu there again because she felt 'very comfortable' in the surroundings and thought it might be an environment in which he could be encouraged to sit with her and share some books.

### ***The impact of the sessions***

Halima was very clear that from her perspective the Bookstart Corner sessions had had a positive influence on her interactions with Modu. This was beyond the areas of early reading and literacy development. She felt that they were now playing together constructively as he was more settled and less inclined to throw toys around. She also recognized a change in Modu's approach to communication with her. He had begun to bring objects to her and make sounds when he wanted something as well as stop and look at her when she called his name. Halima linked these developments in the quality of their interactions to the sessions with Sarah even though the visits only accounted for a small part of Modu's experiences over this time. Additionally she talked in much more positive terms about his communication skills than at the outset of the visits noticing that he was 'trying to say little things' and 'not talking but he's doing sounds'.

Halima reflected less fully on the influence of the visits on her awareness of the importance of books as part of her developing interactions with Modu. She recognized that this was something that she would develop overtime and did notice that he often looked at the *Dear Zoo* book. However on the library visit she felt it more appropriate to borrow DVDs for Modu as she believed he would respond more readily to such materials. In earlier sessions Halima had expressed concern that Modu often explored books by waving them around and could tear them in his play. This possibly informed the choice that she made.

By the end of the series of visits Halima recognised that she was trying to carry out early literacy activities with Modu and that she wanted to do more. Before receiving any visits from Sarah she had been worried about what to do 'every day and night'. However now the Bookstart Corner sessions had given her ideas about the best way forward and the confidence to start by 'just doing things with him, doing things he likes'. Halima also highlighted the importance of Sarah's personal support and how this connection would encourage her to continue to use other provision at the children's centre.

## **Case Study 2: Home visits – Chloe and Sylvia supported by Wyn**

### **At the beginning**

#### ***Introducing Chloe and Sylvia***

Sylvia agreed to take part in Bookstart Corner with her daughter Chloe because she wanted to do as much as she could to support her child's early learning and particularly her language development. Chloe was just under 2 years old and her parents had noticed that she had recently begun speaking a lot more by repeating words and expressions that they used. She enjoyed active, energetic play with cars and prams amongst her favourite toys. She also frequently chose calmer activities especially looking at her books.

Sylvia and her husband were already doing a lot to nurture Chloe's enjoyment of reading. They ensured that their daughter's books were readily available to her within the house in a familiar drawer which she could open herself. Sylvia also saw restricting Chloe's access to the television or her mobile phone as being important in maintaining the home as a learning environment. They were very aware of their potential as role models for Chloe and recognised that family involvement was extremely important in nurturing a child's interest in early reading and writing:

I feel like at home you can model a love of reading. I feel that modelling is so important at that age and also...yeah, you can-you're supposed to be your child's, your young child's like favourite people. It should be like a fun activity that you can do together I think you can just really erm...develop their love for reading ... not so much, maybe, teaching them how to read, well you can do that too but you know what I mean. (First interview with Sylvia)

In being both keen readers and regular library users, Sylvia felt that they were having a positive influence on Chloe. She also recognised that reading was a shared activity and that the interactions between parent and child were important. Chloe would actively involve her parents by bringing her books to them to 'ree' (read). She would also sit next to them and help turn pages if they were reading. Bed time stories with Dad were part of the routine but Sylvia and Chloe often looked at picture books together throughout the day. However Sylvia felt less confident and accommodating in supporting Chloe's mark making or introducing rhymes and singing into their play.

#### ***Anticipating the visits***

Sylvia felt that as a family they could do more to support Chloe's early reading and writing even though they were already doing a lot of activities in this area. They were hoping that the visits would introduce new ideas for them to develop Chloe's enjoyment of books. Sylvia also hoped that participating in Bookstart Corner might increase her skills and confidence as a parent. She had seen some of the materials used in Bookstart Corner and was interested in how the puppets and singing would be used. The fourth Bookstart Corner session was planned to take place in the children's centre to help Chloe to familiarise herself with the room that she would be attending as part of a weekly group. Consequently Sylvia was looking forward to seeing how Chloe responded to this visit because at her nursery she usually chose to play in other areas rather than the book corner. Despite looking forward to starting, Sylvia was also apprehensive because she was unsure about Chloe's response to new people in unfamiliar situations.

## **The home visits**

### ***Settling in***

Sylvia's early apprehensions about the Bookstart Corner home visits were quickly dispelled after the first visit with Wyn, the practitioner who was working with her and Chloe. For Sylvia two factors were key in shaping her positive experience. Firstly Chloe's enthusiastic response to Wyn and the activities that she brought along. This shifted from some reticence on the first visit to being 'a lot more comfortable' and ready to 'just jump into it'. Sylvia reflected that knowing Wyn from sessions at the centre prior to Bookstart Corner beginning had supported such an effective transition. She felt that for Chloe, the novelty of seeing someone she knew from a different context in her own home engaged her interest from the outset.

Secondly the open-ended, child-led nature of the sessions was something that Sylvia highlighted as underpinning the success of each visit. After the first session she commented that 'It's been relaxed - but we're not like 'we need to sit down now and read this book' or anything like that'. This revealed both her sense of relief and her initial uncertainty about the fine detail of what Bookstart Corner would involve.

### ***Following Chloe's agenda***

The flexible structure of the sessions readily accommodated Chloe's drive to shape the activities during all the visits. The Bookstart Corner bag that Wyn brought with her was often the focus of Chloe's interest and attention as she set out her own play agenda from the first visit:

I keep the bag on my arm. I open the bag and look for a bear. I throw the bears into the air. I empty the bag onto the floor - everything falls out. I look into the bag. I say 'all gone book.' I pick up the zoo book and the leaflet. I rub my nose. 'Oh no', I say. I put the book and other things into the bag. I shake the bag and carry it on my arm. I say 'duc' to the woman. I drop the bag. (Observation of Chloe written in the first person)

It was important for Chloe that such emptying and filling games with the bag became an integral part of each visit and were skilfully interwoven by Wyn into the play. An observation of Chloe's interactions during the final session shows how following the child's lead had developed into more collaborative activities involving both Wyn and her Mum:

I come back with my bag. I say, 'Oh no'. The woman says, 'What's in your bag?' Mummy opens my bag. I put things in my bag. Mummy and the woman sing a song. They sing about the crab nipping my thumb. Mummy says 'Ouch' and I jump and laugh. (Observation of Chloe written in the first person)

### ***Sylvia's role in the sessions***

Sylvia recognised that in the first visits she took on the more passive role of observer. She said that she was taking the opportunity to watch her daughter respond to other people, an opportunity which as a prime carer she was rarely afforded. She also referred to herself as not being as creative as professionals 'like Wyn who works with children' which possibly underlies her initial reluctance to be an active partner in the sessions. As well as gradually



responding more openly to the way Wyn modelled engagement with Chloe, Sylvia often identified key points that she learned during visits:

When Wyn was saying 'oh you could change some lyrics to go with whatever' - I was like...'oh yeah, like how come I didn't think of that', I'm just not that creative. (Interview with Sylvia after the second visit)

The resources that were brought along to each visit also made an impression on Sylvia especially in the way that they were used. She felt that the finger puppets were 'really cool' but noted that they meant more to Chloe because they related to the book characters or to the songs that they were singing.

The role of music during the home visits had a clear impact on the way that Sylvia developed play activities with Chloe between the visits. After each session she planned to introduce more singing and rhymes with her daughter and was keen to encourage her husband to add this element to his repertoire:

My husband does not, he should though. I'm going to tell him...'you should sing with her', but what they do do - sometimes they put music on and they dance in the kitchen...Chloe loves to dance. (Interview with Sylvia after the third visit)

Sylvia noted that being introduced to the songs was also a key learning moment for Chloe. This was because she was subsequently able to join in more actively at a music and movement group that they attended together which used some of the same material. This clearly added to Sylvia's motivation to develop this aspect of the family's interactions and play.

## **Reflecting on the Bookstart Corner sessions**

### ***Experiencing the sessions***

For both Sylvia and Chloe the experience of receiving the Bookstart Corner visits was enjoyable from a social perspective. Sylvia felt that the sessions provided her daughter with additional opportunities to engage with a practitioner with whom she already had a positive relationship from her attending the children's centre. Sylvia also welcomed the opportunity to develop her relationship with Wyn particularly as it provided more time to discuss Chloe's development in detail. Taking part in the sessions was also motivating for Sylvia because it re-assured her that she was doing her best to help her daughter. The frequency and regularity of the visits was also seen by Sylvia to be appropriate, especially as it enabled Chloe to quickly adapt and settle into the routine each time. This continuity was interrupted for them both as the final session was held in the centre, making Chloe initially unsure how to respond in a room she was used to using as part of group play sessions:

I think that's why she wanted to go outside because normally you can just sort of come and go...so she was a little bit like...'what's this, why can't I go outside?' (Final interview with Sylvia)

Perhaps with this experience in mind Sylvia suggested that Bookstart Corner should be extended to six or eight sessions, with the final group of sessions taking place at the centre.

Sylvia felt that the style of delivery of the sessions encouraged participation because it mirrored her own approach:

You know if she really doesn't want to read, I don't force her... and I felt like she-it was child led, which is more or less what she's...used to so I was happy with that. (Final interview with Sylvia)

For both herself and Chloe there was enough of a balance between repeated activities from week to week and also the introduction of new resources and games. Sylvia did find the bag useful to keep the materials together although keeping track of some of the smaller items like the finger puppets in a busy home environment could be a challenge. The connections made between the materials and the activities during the visits were seen as a strength.

### ***The impact of the sessions***

Sylvia's overall impression of the sessions was that they had increased her own confidence because of the professional reassurance she received that she was doing the right things. She felt that as a family the visits had highlighted that they could still do more but that they would do so with a clearer understanding of the connections between using books and other early literacy activities:

I sort of thought it was more just reading and I focussed on that and since then, like I said, I incorporated a lot more of the singing and the trying of - well you know making marks. I didn't really see at the time how those were linked with language and literacy so that was really good for me I think and for Chloe obviously. (Final interview with Sylvia)

So although the frequent shared reading activities within the family had remained the same, there were indications that using songs and rhymes were also becoming a larger part of the routine. This was prompted by Chloe's developing interest in songs and her increasing attempts to involve her parents in joining in such activities:

She starts singing songs or she starts doing the actions and at first I'm like 'oh my goodness, what's she doing, oh my God she wants me to sing, you know, the little crab or whatever' but she's very...yes she initiates it. (Final interview with Sylvia)

The message from the sessions that drawing and mark making was an important aspect of early literacy had made an impact on Sylvia. She acknowledged that they were now making 'a concerted effort' to provide Chloe with such activities. She also talked much more positively about Chloe 'always' trying to grab a pen when she saw her or her husband writing, and described this in the context of wanting to copy the parent as a role model. However managing Chloe's motivation to write still appeared to be an issue for Sylvia despite the discussions with Wyn during the Bookstart Corner visits. She was still concerned about 'what happens when you leave your pens out' and Chloe being tempted to draw on any surface around the house.

The most significant impact of the sessions for Sylvia and her husband was that they coincided with further progress in Chloe's language and communication. They noticed that Chloe began to name specific books that she wanted, particularly at bedtime, so adding another new dimension to an activity they valued highly:

She put them back and then said 'no bunny...cat.' She wanted this specific book we have called Kisses her Little Kitten but I thought 'oh my goodness' like it was

her first time really saying 'this is not the book that I want', 'it's this one. (Final interview with Sylvia)

## **Case Study 3: Home visits – John and Kelly supported by Trish**

### **At the beginning**

#### ***Introducing John and Kelly***

Kelly was interested in receiving the Bookstart Corner visits to help her focus on early literacy activities a little more with her son John, who was 22 months old. John enjoyed active play especially with cars, trains, trucks or things that had wheels and could be moved along. He used words like 'mum', 'dad' and 'bye' and also liked to experiment with making sounds when he was playing. John's mum, Kelly, said that because they were a 'big book family' they were trying to get him more interested in reading and listening to stories at home. However at the time John preferred to be 'up and about' and 'doesn't really have the patience to sit down for very long'. Kelly had noticed that he sometimes stood close to her when she was reading herself or when she was sharing a book with Penny, his sister, but these tended to be fleeting moments. He was also more willing to share a book after his lunch time nap when he was relaxed or with his grandparents at their house.

John did have some favourite books which he would find himself and then sit to look through. These often contained pictures of cars or trains and had moving parts such as lift up flaps that seemed to hold his interest. Kelly had noticed that when he was engaged with a book then she could sometimes join in with him and they could read together. However she felt it was a question of being sensitive and taking his lead rather than making demands on him to share stories.

John was showing some interest in mark making and wanted to use the pen if he saw someone writing. He did watch his sister drawing and would briefly copy her actions, making marks alongside her before moving onto something else. Kelly said that John also liked to explore crayons by chewing them and really enjoyed using his markers at bath time as part of his water play. She felt that it was important for him to experiment and explore to encourage his reading and writing but did not see technology as making a positive contribution to his learning at this stage.

#### ***Anticipating the visits***

Kelly was very keen for John to develop more of an interest in books because she saw reading as a central part of their family life:

I've always, you know, envisaged having a massive library when I finally get my own house, full of books and I'd like, you know, him to be a part of that. (First interview with Kelly)

She recognised that he was not showing the same interest in books that his sister Penny had done when she was the same age. Therefore engaging him in early literacy activities would be less straightforward. She also admitted that she tried to do things to introduce books and mark making but that the pressure of busy family life could make this commitment difficult to sustain.

Kelly had not had much time to talk with Trish, the practitioner who carried out the visits, about what the Bookstart Corner sessions would entail. However she had picked up that they would involve looking at books together and some one-to one activities. She hoped that with Trish's support on the visits they might be able to encourage John to settle with a book more readily and was keen to see how Trish would respond to her son's level of activity. Kelly was therefore looking forward to the visits without being over confident that they would have an immediate impact on John's engagement with reading activities:

I mean, you know, it's worth a try, in-in (sic), you know every way, shape or form, everything is worth a try. If it works, then that's fine, if it doesn't work, at least we tried. (First interview with Kelly).

### ***The home visits and group session***

John and Kelly received two home visits from Trish because this particular children's centre combined the first two Bookstart Corner sessions. Between the two home visits they attended a sensory story group at the children's centre called 'Creative little characters'. This group session for two year olds, their siblings and parents usually followed completion of the Bookstart Corner home visits. However because the second Bookstart Corner session was delayed due to snow and a half term holiday, Kelly decided to take John and his sister to the group in the interim.

### ***Key moments for John***

Kelly felt that John was more involved in the first home visit than the second because he had not had a lunchtime sleep when Trish came for the second session. On both occasions he showed an interest in some of the Bookstart Corner resources and activities although for much of the time he kept himself busy with his own play pursuits. However during the visits he sometimes chose to be or was encouraged to be close to his mum and Trish, who sat next to each other on the floor. For Kelly this small level of attention and curiosity from John was a clear sign of his overall enjoyment of each session.

During both home visits there were key moments when John was drawn to some of the resources that Trish was showing him. On the first visit he immediately joined the two adults when he saw the *Dear Zoo* book and showed that he wanted to share looking at this story with them:

The woman has a book. She reads it and I sit on mummy's lap. I reach for the flap. I look under the flap. I look at the cover. I turn the page. Mummy and the woman help me to look at the book. I am careful with the flaps. Mummy helps me turn a page. The woman reads the story. (Observation of John written in the first person)

By the time of the second home visit this particular book had become one of John's favourites and Kelly had noticed that he had decided to get it out when Trish arrived for the session. On this visit John was engaged with the crayon and drawing activity more than any other. Significantly he chose to join the adults to play and make sounds rather than take them to his own space:

Trish opens a book for drawing. I choose a crayon. I make a mark with another crayon. Trish says 'Beautiful'. Mummy says 'Keep going'. I take the crayons from Mummy. I play with the crayons. Trish says 'purple'. I say 'ee-paa-tee'. I look at the crayons. I take the crayons from Trish. I put them in the box, Trish counts 'one, two,

three, four, five. I say 'iee'. Trish says 'clever boy'. I get excited and say 'ee-ee-ee'.  
(Observation of John written in the first person)

Kelly felt that John was encouraged to share such moments of play because of the intimacy of individual home visits: 'I think it helped that it was just us...it's, it's special for them isn't it, for them to be focussed on - he enjoyed the individual attention'. John certainly decided to operate differently in the group session he attended. During this his focus was on the water and foam play activities rather than the collective story or group singing. In this environment Kelly noticed that 'he just wants to go and play, he doesn't want to sit and do what he's supposed to'.

### ***Kelly's involvement in the visits***

Kelly found that the home visits allowed her to spend more individual time with John, which was one of her reasons for agreeing to take part in the Bookstart Corner sessions. She reflected that she usually had to share her attention with John's elder sister and so she was keen to take the opportunity to be fully involved in the visits. She worked closely alongside Trish during the sessions, choosing to sit next to her on the floor and often supporting the shared activities. John usually chose to sit on his mum's lap when a particular book or toy that Trish produced caught his interest. From being closely involved Kelly felt that she could both enjoy the chance of one to one interactions with John as well as 'have the opportunity to observe, the opportunity to step back'.

Kelly also took ideas from each visit that she wanted to try on her own with John. She picked up on Trish's practice of introducing actions and animal noises to gain John's interest in a book. She also noticed that he explored board books much more readily as he could handle them more effectively. Between the visits Kelly worked on adapting some ideas that Trish had suggested, to great effect:

We haven't tried singing because he shows little interest and this is not part of our routine. We have started playing CDs to him and he has started dancing. (Interview with Kelly after the second visit)

## **Reflecting on the Bookstart Corner sessions**

### ***Experiencing the sessions***

Kelly felt that taking on the extra commitment of receiving the visits had been the right thing to do in terms of 'trying everything' to support John's development. She had found the overall experience of the sessions both enjoyable and useful. Working with Trish had provided the opportunity for her to observe how John responded to a different person and to try new activities. She commented that this had allowed her to step back and learn more about his capabilities. She also found the time for personal interaction with her son that the sessions provided particularly rewarding. Kelly agreed with Trish that some of the activities had worked well particularly the introduction to the *Dear Zoo* book, which had become a favourite for John. Kelly also thought that other resources, such as the bear book, the puppets and the crayon pack had been very appropriate to engage John during the sessions. Watching Trish during the home visits had also given her a clearer idea of different ways of engaging him with books.

For both Kelly and John the inclusion of a session at the centre with other children did not appear to work so well, although Penny, her 3 year old daughter appeared to get a great

deal from attending. In the final interview, comparing John's response during the last home visit to his involvement in the group, she reflected 'if we were in a session he wouldn't be sitting here like this, he would be all over the place'. This led Kelly to conclude that 'definitely home sessions are good for children, especially like John'.

### ***Impact of sessions***

Although Kelly provided ready access to books at home for John and his sister Penny, she noted that, since the sessions, she had been thinking more about the particular types of material that engaged his interest. She noted that introducing books involved play and other activities as well as reading stories. Consequently she had acquired books that also contained toys and found that John was drawn to these. Kelly also found that the novelty of these books had encouraged Penny to become more involved in playing with him and they were now looking at books together:

Both of them seemed to have turned a corner. I walk in and she'll be sitting there reading a book to him and stuff. (Final interview with Kelly)

Kelly saw the development in the quality of the children's interactions to have coincided with the period over the past few weeks when John had become both more responsive and more expressive:

He makes a lot more noise now and he's more vocal with everything that he does... even with his toys, you know, he'll sit there and try to make them talk to each other and things. (Final interview with Kelly)

She did not attribute these developments directly to Bookstart Corner but she did recognise that the sessions had made her more aware of his ways of communicating. She felt that she had also become more skilled at recognising how to engage him in shared reading more successfully:

So a book like this I might not read it to him because it is quite long...but I'd point things out like, you know like 'where's the drum?' (Final interview with Kelly)

Kelly reflected that this had increased her confidence a little in attempting to suggest sharing a book with John. She was now trying to do this every night rather than when John allowed her to join with him in looking at a story of his choosing.

Overall Kelly recognised that she had always tried to do activities to help John learn but she was still keen to try to do more. She believed that the impact of her involvement in the Bookstart Corner sessions had helped her feel clearer about how to support his development:

Obviously with John I don't have that choice, I have to do these things otherwise he won't...he won't progress so it has given me the confidence to do what I need to do. (Final interview with Kelly)

## Case Study 4: Home visits – Lara, Kieran and Cassie supported by Heidi

### At the beginning

#### *Introducing, Lara, Kieran and Cassie*

Cassie was not sure what benefit she hoped the Bookstart Corner sessions would bring, but she felt that it was good for children to look at books and to be excited about them. Her twins, Lara and Kieran were 23 months and had an elder sister, Tina, who was 5. Cassie and Tina had taken part in Bookstart Corner a couple of years earlier. Cassie tried to read to Tina each day, but otherwise there was very little reading done in the house. Cassie described herself as a self-taught reader, who did not have the time or opportunity to read for pleasure; she described her husband as being dyslexic, noting that he could hardly read and did not write at all.

The twins loved to play with various large and small soft animals (particularly Lara) and plastic ride-on toys (particularly Kieran), with a large dinosaur and garage being favourites. Cassie talked about how the children enjoyed pulling all their toys out, and noted that while Lara loved to play with her dollies she was often having to battle with her brother. They enjoyed role playing together though, particularly with their elder sister. Kieran had glue ear<sup>3</sup> and did not speak, making gestures and a few sounds to communicate. Lara had asthma, but was 'getting on a lot more' saying some words, 'but not enough'. The twin's parents focussed on saying words with the children and getting them to try to say them back. The twins had not 'really got any books yet', though Cassie noted that Kieran liked pop up books. Cassie talked about how they had got rid of Tina's books because they did not expect to have more children, though she suggested they did keep some. They also had special family books and books from Cassie's childhood which Cassie read to Tina. She did not like the children to read these themselves because they were expensive. The elder sister had some books of her own too, 'that she can destroy if she wants to'. It was clear that they would like to get some more books, but they did not receive any at Christmas.

It was noted that the television was on in the background for the home sessions and that the children enjoyed TV, which they watched a lot. Kieran was sometimes allowed to play with Tina's iPad and was interested in electronic devices. They shared an interest in pictures and images, and when they went out Kieran particularly liked to point to objects (such as trees and cars) in the environment. The family did not get out much partly because of the expense, but also because of practical difficulties; Cassie mentioned, for example, hurting her foot and being unable to get to the doctors, and that it was harder to get out during the holidays. She also mentioned that she did not drive. Consequently the twins had not mixed with many other children as yet, though they did occasionally see Cassie's mum. Based on her own childhood experience, Cassie felt a family can do a lot to help with reading and writing. Her mum had tried a bit with her, but her Dad had not been around. She felt that if a parent does more with a child (not just reading and writing) they will do better at school and

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<sup>3</sup> Glue ear (Otitis Media with Effusion) is a condition experienced by many children and involves the middle ear filling with fluid.

beyond. Activities such as drawing help a child 'bring themselves out'. She felt she did as many activities as she could, and though she could do better at them was doing okay given the children's ages and that 'they're not really understanding'. She often found that she was too busy to read to the elder daughter at night and was not happy for the children to make a mess in the house, avoiding playdough and sand. She did not allow the children to have pens in case they drew on the wall, and did not write in front of the kids, because what she wrote was important and 'they'll steal the pen off me'. As the children got older she felt she would be able to do more with them, particularly once Kieran's 'hearing's sorted out'. Cassie emphasised the kinds of activities she did with Tina, such as naming colours and singing songs, something she liked to do at bath time and when undertaking jobs around the house.

## **The Home visits**

### ***Lara and Kieran's engagement with Heidi***

During this first session the researcher noted that to start with the twins had little engagement with Heidi, being on the periphery of the session. Kieran was the first to initiate his own play, busily collecting and depositing toys on the sofa, then scrambling up and down them. As the session proceeded, there was gradual interaction from both children with what the practitioner, Heidi, was offering them, Kieran less so than Lara.

I look at the bag and the woman takes things out of the bag. Kieran chooses two things and then two more. He puts them on the sofa. I watch him put things on the sofa. I pick up a shaker. The woman talks about the ducks. I watch her holding the shaker. The woman makes the ducks move. I sit and look at the ducks. Kieran takes some ducks to the sofa. I stand still and watch. I look at big Ted and shake my shaker. I listen to Heidi singing. I watch and I stand still. I look at my shaker and shake it. I go to sit near the woman. She holds the red duck. She sings about the ducks. I listen and look at her. (Observation of Lara at the first session written in the first person)

The next session which the researcher attended, the third session, was also attended by the twin's elder sister, Tina. This inevitably had an influence on the group dynamics and Heidi had to adapt to the situation, integrating Tina into what she had planned for the session. Nonetheless the twins soon started to play with the toy fruit associated with the activities as well as with various other toys in the room, and Heidi was successful in drawing their attention to the puppets, small books and larger book. This engagement was invariably short lived but it was notable that they were relating to Heidi much more than in the previous session, and also to what she showed them.

I choose an orange from the basket. I try to open it. I look at the orange. I try to open it. I pull it apart. I look at mummy. I put the orange in the basket. I pick up the bowl. I offer it to Tina. I look at the basket. I go to my high chair. I look at Lara. Lara looks at me. I put my hands on the tray. I suck my fingers. I choose a fruit. I drop it in the basket. I look at the caterpillar book. The woman speaks to me. She says, 'Caterpillar, yum, yum.' The woman asks me to sit down with her. I walk away. I stop and look back. I listen to the story. I hold my tummy. (Observation of Kieran at the third session written in the first person)

This engagement was evident to Cassie too. She was very surprised to see the twins clearing up after the last session, which they 'never do', refilling the box which they had emptied. She was pleased and interested to see them touching and using 'new and different things, they



don't get to normally touch at home'. To Heidi it was also clear that the children were engaging with her more. She recognised this to be 'a small change', but that they were more confident having her in the room:

Even though they were, most of the time, choosing to do different things as well, not necessarily what I offered, or what I, I had planned I was there for...I feel it still went well, it just proves that you have to sort of adapt to different situations and, you know, what might work for one family doesn't work for the other. (comments made by Heidi after third session)

## **Reflecting on the Bookstart Corner sessions**

### ***Experiencing the sessions***

Cassie really enjoyed the Bookstart Corner sessions, and had looked forward to them from the outset, but would have preferred to have had the centre session at home, and mentioned the walk to the session as an issue. She felt that Kieran and Lara loved the sessions too, and looked forward to them as well. She also felt that all her children; the twins and her elder daughter who had taken part before, had each responded to the programme in different ways.

I mean I enjoy learning new things with the kids and you know, seeing them, how they react to things like that because obviously they're twins as well so it's more of a, 'cause obviously I've done it with Tina she's a single child and seeing how twins do things like this is quite interesting for me. (Interview with Cassie after the first visit)

Cassie found it useful to go through Bookstart Corner a second time. She was recommended to join the programme a second time because of the the twins delayed language and a perceived need to support a mother who herself had been late learning to read. She spoke positively about that initial experience of the programme, and the researcher noted that her daughter appeared to be doing well in her all round communication skills. Cassie had known most of the songs which were sung in the sessions from school, but it was good to be reminded of them, so that she could sing them in the right way again. She talked too about being encouraged to use finger puppets with the twins and to change the words in nursery rhymes to include the children's names. She felt that she had gained new ideas as well, from watching how Heidi had sung the songs and some of the different approaches taken. She liked the way in which Heidi had drawn the twins attention to the small bear books, and the way in which the bear puppets were linked to the bear books and the fruit to the Hungry Caterpillar. Cassie also noted how the big teddy bear worked well for the children, because it was something they associated with the children's centre.

It was noticeable to all concerned that the children became more interested in books across the course of the sessions. Heidi and the researcher noted how at the last session Lara had gone to a little box of books, of her own choice, and began to look through them. Cassie felt the twins seemed 'to be a little bit more into things'. For example, Kieran loved *Dear Zoo*, chewing it and carrying it everywhere:

I mean it's the only book that they've got but that they do like to play with that and he likes it when they open up and you can see what's inside. (Interview with Cassie after the final visit)

She was surprised that Kieran had not ripped this book and though she was unsure where it was at the time, she recognised that the twins could be careful with the books and that she could introduce more books to them. She talked about the change in the children's attitude to books, about showing them new ones and how using these new ideas at home was 'very exciting'.

### ***The impact of the sessions***

Cassie felt that the sessions were 'really good' as they were delivered and did not see ways for them to be improved. She was equally certain that the sessions had been useful:

It's important for kids to learn new things and nursery rhymes and pictures and show them the difference of things. (Interview with Cassie after the final visit)

The researcher noted that Cassie spoke with real insight about reading and books, and that she had come a long way in her own journey with literacy. He also noted that she felt she had to support her husband and that - both prior to and at the end of the sessions - she was the only person doing activities with the twins. The researcher recognised it was an ongoing challenge for Cassie to find time and energy to put her insights into practice with her three children. At the end of the programme it was evident that she still felt reticent about encouraging the children to engage in early reading and writing activities; the sessions had not challenged some of her own beliefs about their capabilities. Cassie was still reluctant to read to the twins, preferring to let them look at the pictures in the book. She still felt that 'they're not really interested about reading' and 'won't listen to you read'. Her certainty about this meant that she would carry on reading with Tina but she would continue to focus on singing with the twins. Similarly, Cassie mentioned trying to work with the children on the 'colour thing' but felt it was not right for them 'just yet'. She was also still not comfortable with activities which were messy.

At the end of her second experience of the Bookstart Corner programme Cassie felt that helping children with reading and writing was as important as she had at the start of the sessions. It enabled them 'to develop a lot quicker... or...slower', and she still wanted to do more and to be better at doing the activities:

Oh yeah, I could be a lot better at doing - I could let them draw and things but, you know, I could be better. (Final interview with Cassie)

She recognised that she instinctively sings with her children, and would like to show them new things and try activities linked to reading and writing, 'but not just yet'.

## **Case Study 5: Group sessions - Zara and Ned, Jasmine and Maddy, Jamilla and Donna supported by Dora**

### **Meeting the families**

#### ***Looking forward to Bookstart Corner***

Zara did not recall being told a great deal about Bookstart Corner, but decided to become involved after 'a brief conversation' with the practitioner, Dora. Her son, Ned, was 23 months at the first interview. She was happy to be involved in group sessions and hoped that, as well as giving Ned an opportunity to do a bit of reading, he would benefit from interacting with others.

Jasmine was interested in taking part in the Bookstart Corner programme with her 22 month old daughter Maddy, having seen an information pack. She knew that the sessions were about books and that over four weeks they would introduce activities to encourage Maddy to interact with them. The opportunity to get out with Maddy was important to Jasmine: 'I don't drive and I think if I drove I could take her to a lot more places'. They had a special outing once a week, which involved a visit to a baby group and a special lunch. She imagined the sessions would be more than play, with a quiet, small, group focus to encourage Maddy to 'maybe take more of an interest in it'. She hoped to get new ideas about things to do together, seeing the children centre staff as experienced/experts trained in the latest techniques. Her previous experiences with the centre meant she trusted them to do a good job.

Jamilla was told at playgroup about Bookstart Corner and had a broad understanding that it was to encourage development, literacy and reading. She was hoping to find out more about what her 21-month old daughter, Donna, 'should be doing at this age' and for Donna to have role models of other readers. Jamilla described how Donna has 'separation anxiety' and 'she is um, she is very clingy', taking time to settle in. Donna shared her home with Jamilla's partner's son, aged 7. They played a lot together and she learned a lot from him, enjoying reading alongside him. She also spent plenty of time with her cousins as well as with Maddy and Jasmine, who were family friends.

#### ***Language, reading, writing and drawing at home***

Ned's father used his first language, Albanian to talk with Ned, whilst Zara - who spoke a little Albanian - used English. Ned understood both languages, but talked in English. Zara felt that Ned could understand a lot more than he could say but she was happy with his speech and language. Ned liked books a great deal already, particularly books that enabled him to interact with the reader. He got his parents to read and re-read books to him and would read with anybody in the house, taking books over to them to make it clear he wanted to be read to. He would read three or four times in the day, asking for four or five books. Zara particularly read to him in the afternoon when 'he's a little bit more chilled out' and before bed. He had many books, but his parent controlled his access to them, swapping them around to keep them fresh and to stop him repeatedly reading one. The family bought books from book shops, charity shops and the supermarket but did not use the library. Ned liked drawing, painting and colouring, doing drawing activities every day; he used crayons at home, and got to make cards at nursery. He was restricted to the use of crayons at home because he 'will draw on everything'. He was not particularly interested in signs except the flashing green man at road crossings, reflecting an interest in sounds and toys with noises he can repeat back.

Maddy liked to read a variety of books, usually alongside her mother, discussing the story, parts of which she often remembered, seeking out particular images. Maddy was interested in words and pictures and enjoyed joining in the reading process, saying words or pretending to read. She was always interested in what Jasmine was reading and climbed on her lap to join in. They read together twice a day at least. Typically she did reading activities with adults, specifically her mum, dad and extended family, making it known that she wanted a book read. She would also read independently, and looked at books with others at baby group. The family tended to buy their books and did not go to the library because Jasmine did not drive. Maddy liked to draw, scribble and colour and wanted to take part when Jasmine was writing. She was not particularly interested in signs and symbol more generally, apart from the green man at the traffic lights.

Jamilla saw Donna's language as being quite advanced, in that she copied people's speech and made links from text and images to people she knew and her surroundings, though she was not interested in written words or signs. Donna read every night with her mother and alongside her brother, going and getting her books when he brought one home from school. She got a new book most weeks, but the family preferred to buy books from shops and online, so that while Donna had a library card they had not been there for a while. Donna paid attention to her mum's reading, particularly if there were pictures involved. She liked to play at reading too and when Jamilla was writing or on the phone Donna would take the pencil or phone from her. She liked to draw on her own and alongside her brother, asking for pencils and paper, and had drawn on the walls. Her interest in stories was focussed upon colourful, busy images.

### ***Parents' views at the start***

Zara believed that parents need to ensure reading takes place in the home as well as school, and that parents and extended family must engage in this 'as much as it drives us crazy'. She was concerned that technology might win-out over reading, writing and drawing as Ned got older. Generally, she liked doing activities with her son and tried to do as many as she could, wanting Ned to have a better introduction to reading, writing and education than she did. She often carried out activities automatically but she did not always have the time or energy she would like to have and felt that she could probably do more. She was aware of his interest in her reading, texting or using the internet but was wary about him grabbing her pen so would write where he could not disturb her.

Jasmine felt that home played an important role in developing a child's interest in books and that parents were 'the first teachers'. She suggested that the younger you started with a child the better, as you 'give them a head start', benefitting many aspects of their life. She believed this was particularly important because the nature of crowded schools meant children needed to learn to take the initiative as learners. Jasmine felt that books were more intimate than TV, and that they encouraged imagination. She believed playful, physical engagement with reading and writing activities helped children to develop co-ordination and interest; her priority was that 'it's fun for them or they're not going to want to do it'. She did a range of pre-literacy activities with Maddy, frequently without thinking about it, such as getting her to write in cards for people, but wanted to be better at such activities.

Jamilla loved to play with her daughter and her toys, believing parents have to make the effort to spend time with their children 'and have that interaction with them'. She was aware of time pressures, and so felt fortunate not to be in employment, particularly since she considered that reading and writing start at home. She thought that she could influence

Donna in this way by encouraging activities such as rhymes, shapes and drawing. She got her daughter to draw pictures in cards too, which Donna enjoyed. Jamilla saw these activities as a preparation for school and later life, hoping that Donna would be at a 'certain level' when she started school. She did her best to carry out such activities, but did many of them without thinking about them, just hoping that they would benefit Donna; because of this she wanted to know more about such activities.

## **The Group sessions**

### ***Settling in***

The nursery and children's centre was set within a fairly recently built residential estate, largely serving a rural or semi-suburban community. At the first session, Zara and Ned arrived first. Dora had already partitioned the room with a pull-across screen because she knew from other group sessions that Ned needed to run about. Next came Jasmine and Maddy. Maddy sucked on her dummy, watched Ned and stood close to her mum. After a little while, Jamilla and Donna arrived. Dora formally began the session. She talked to the group about the way parents were the first educators. Meanwhile, Ned was moving around the group, sometimes running back and forth to his mum, sometimes pressing a keyboard linked to Dora's sound and video equipment. Dora introduced 'Wind the bobbin up' and the adults sang whilst Donna and Maddy generally listened. Throughout this half hour session, Ned mostly followed his own interests:

I hear the people singing "Wind the bobbin up" but I don't join in. I run to the light switch and switch it on then I go back and switch it off. I clap my hands and run back to the man and to mummy. I look at the black toy that the man is holding.  
(Observation of Ned at the first session written in the first person)

Although to the researcher and Dora the intended rhyme, song and book content of this first session was only partially presented and experienced, the session itself was valued by the parents interviewed afterwards. Jamilla felt that it was difficult for Donna because it was her first session and though she had been slightly distracted by Ned playing with cars, she had really enjoyed the session and listening to Dora in particular. Jamilla took away with her the idea of using rhymes in the home, not just nursery rhymes which Donna already loved. Jasmine on the other hand did not feel that she had learned anything new, but she recognised that she had made an effort to sing a bit more at home. Zara too did not feel that she had learned any new skills but she had enjoyed the relatively infrequent experience of seeing her son in this different environment:

Yeah it was good, I like him coming to this 'cause he likes, he likes the mother and toddler groups, he likes them. He does get a little bit over excited...don't you? (Interview with Zara after the first group session)

Zara was also surprised by Ned's engagement with some of the content of the session, particularly the use of nursery rhymes:

I wasn't, actually I wasn't aware that they picked as much up as they do, nursery rhymes especially. The way that he reacts to nursery rhymes, he does like nursery, and there's some that [he] likes more than others, some ones he won't pay any attention to, other ones he really likes them. (Interview with Zara after the first group session)

## ***Developing participation***

The second session involved a smaller group because Donna and Jamilla could not attend. Jamilla said they were looking forward to coming but Donna was unwell. At this session Jasmine took a proactive role:

So instead of me just sitting there saying nothing if I encourage Maddy and encourage other children to do what Dora's asking them then they're more likely to do it...I would hope ...but sometimes they just don't want to play ball at all [...] We're all working to the same goal and the same achievements for our...for our children. (Interview with Jasmine after the second group session)

To the researcher it was clear that both Ned and Maddy were very interested to find out what was inside the book bag at the start of the second session and engaged in a way they had not with the singing and rhyme opening of the first week. Images of the session captured brief moments when Ned stood or sat with Zara alongside Maddy and Jamilla. They also showed Maddy physically joining in with the activities.

I jump and sit down on the carpet. I drop the Zoo book and pick it up. I run and sit on the big chair. I run back to the carpet and sit down. I look at the boy playing with the lights. I climb into the big chair. I say 'mummy's coat'. I talk to the boy. I give the woman some papers. I say 'oh-oh, mummy's coat'. The boy stands on mummy's coat. I get the coat for mummy. The woman blows some bubbles and I jump with the bubbles. (Observation of Maddy at the second session written in the first person)

The researcher and Dora, both noted how across the sessions Ned increasingly focused on the intended activity for longer periods, although it still took him time to settle. Both of them felt that in the final session there was one particularly significant moment, not only in relation to Ned's participation but also in Zara's awareness and confidence to put skills into practice. Prior to this it was felt that Zara had been less relaxed about actively responding and engaging with Ned within the sessions:

As I modelled making marks and saying 'wiggly, wiggly, wiggly wooooo!', he copied me saying the same words, he then tapped mum and pointed to his marks, mum then copied his marks, then they drew together. (Notes from Dora after the final session)

Across the sessions it was noted that although Donna was less actively engaged than Maddy and Ned, she did move away from her mother slightly more, not just being a careful observer of the social scene but beginning to join in with the activities more widely.

Mummy takes me to the tray. Maddy and Ned are there. We all make marks together. Ned shakes the sand and it goes into my eyes. Mummy helps me. I go to the tray and look carefully at a marker. I look at Maddy. She takes the pen from me. I let her. (Observation of Donna at the final session written in the first person)

## **Reflecting on the Bookstart Corner sessions**

### ***Experiencing the sessions***

Zara felt that Ned had spent most of the sessions 'running round', but she had liked the sessions, because it was good to see him enjoying himself with other children. She recognised too that he had settled enough to sit at a big table drawing with the others and enjoy the experience. She had particularly liked the stories and rhymes that were part of the sessions and did not feel that the sessions needed improvement. Jamilla appreciated the collective nature of the sessions too and liked hearing ideas from the other parents. This perhaps underpinned her suggestion that the sessions could be 'maybe a bit longer with a few more people', agreeing with Jasmine that they could have 5 or 6 sessions of an hour duration with up to 5 children attending. Jamilla recognised that Donna particularly loved the *Dear Zoo* book and that she was very careful with it. She continued to believe that parents can learn new things and be better at things, but that they can also do things and not realise their importance. Jasmine felt she knew much of the programme already but she was enthusiastic about the group sessions too, since they were fun, encouraged Maddy to participate, and unlike baby group had a focus on books. Both looked forward to coming to the sessions and their enjoyment was not dimmed by Ned's running around, though Jasmine felt it would be helpful to avoid distractions (such as toy cars) which did not have a focus on the books and reading/writing related activities. She noted that Maddy had enjoyed reading the *Dear Zoo* book, lifting the flaps and watching others, but felt she would have benefited from more books being available. Jasmine and Maddy liked getting the book bags. Taking ownership of them was important for Maddy, who also treated them with care.

### ***Impact of sessions***

All three mothers talked about the impact that the sessions had, both on themselves and their children. Zara had come to think that parents can do more to support their children's reading and writing than she did before the programme, recognising how much Ned picks up from the activities. She now involved Ned more in singing nursery rhymes and had begun to use the puppets at home, subsequently discovering that Ned responded to them really well, doing things if 'they' ask which he would not do if Zara asked. Zara felt she had become far better at doing the activities and that they had become part of their routine. She did not do things simply in response to Ned's requests; so, for example, she used to read to Ned when he asked, but now it was also part of the routine before bed. In other ways she had given him greater control. So whereas she used to turn the pages of the book, now she let Ned turn them. Ned would now independently flick through a book and could be left on his own to draw with crayons and a notepad. If they were reading together and they missed a page Ned noticed and flicked back.

Jasmine had seen a shift in her own awareness of words and of activities associated with reading and writing:

Like the other week, she [Maddy] had this big sticker thing and it had letters on it and I was getting her finger and tracing the letters. It was just like 'this goes curved', and like this 'goes round'. Yeah, I just...you just do it don't you. You don't really set out to do it, it's not planned...yeah, you just...as you go along you do things. (Final interview with Jasmine)

Jasmine appeared to be finding ways to engage with activities she was less keen on too. She did not like messy play, for example, and still felt that Maddy was too young to be painting at home and would make too much mess, but she intended to get her a sand and water pit table for her birthday for use outside. Maddy enjoyed the new activities at home too. So while she did not like to put her hand in the puppets, she liked her mum to, and (as with Ned) she would do what the finger puppets asked her to do. She was also more willing

to sit and read a book and Jasmine noted how she was now more likely to choose one over a toy.

Jamilla really enjoyed all the sessions and felt she had learned some valuable lessons. She had made a sand tray with some success and had used the puppets at home, though Donna tended to cuddle them. Jamilla felt Donna who had always liked books, now seemed 'more familiar' with them, but she was particularly taken with her daughters increased interest in drawing:

Donna's always been with a book but I'd say since Bookstart [she's doing] more with drawing...since we've been to Bookstart she's more wants to be like with pen and paper. She sits there drawing a lot more since Bookstart... [she] goes and gets paper - because she knows where the paper is...and she gets a piece of paper and she's got her own little table, and she'll sit there with it and get her books out and put them on there! (Final interview with Jamilla)



## Overview of findings

### *Parents' expectations of Bookstart Corner*

Most of the families involved in the study made regular use of local nurseries and baby groups, which they and their children enjoyed; but they assumed that the activities associated with Bookstart Corner would be different to those that they experienced in these settings. However the majority of the families were not very clear about exactly what the Bookstart Corner sessions would entail. There were a variety of reasons for this lack of clarity. Some parents had agreed to taking part on the basis of a brief conversation with someone or by reading an information leaflet. Others had experienced it already with another child or were keen to engage with any sessions through which they could learn more about their child. These hazy beginnings did not reflect their expectations of the service that they would receive. All the families believed they would be receiving useful advice from a knowledgeable and friendly professional, with experience of working with children and understanding of how to encourage reading and writing; where they had had previous engagement with children's centres this had been a positive experience.

A number of parents talked about the programme as serving as a stepping stone to school and academic success and compared this to their own experiences or that of other members of their family. It was noticeable that all parents had some notion of a norm in relation to what their child should be achieving. All of them referred to limitations in relation to their child, whilst two noted that their child was advanced in some way. All families were looking forward to seeing their child meeting someone new and a number made comments which suggested they valued their child having a chance to experience activities in a different context.

The families in the study came from a variety of educational backgrounds ranging from a university qualification to professional training to leaving school early. They all had connections with a range of different agencies for their own children. One family talked about being used to being assessed and accessing various other support services. The parents in the study also described the different ways in which they obtained things for their children; some families got their toys from charities or bought their books from charity shops, some used the library others visited book shops or online stores or relied upon gifts or upon books already in the family.

### *Parental Pressures*

The pressures under which parents were operating were numerous. These pressures were not necessarily negative or positive, but were frequently motivations or constraints, things by which a parent judged themselves as parents or judged their children. There were pressures which were associated with family personal history or personal relationships; there were issues associated with practical day to day living; there were aspirational pressures associated with lifestyle or ideas of success; and there were pressures arising from beliefs about childhood, learning and parenting. We identified more than a hundred of these pressures within the interviews, though we felt sure that if we asked in more detail or spoke with other families we could identify many more. Parents talked for example about worrying day and night about their child's development or of comparing their child to other children; they discussed practices which arose from living in a crowded house or being tired and pregnant; they spoke about wanting their child to be at a particular level on entering

education, how they were their first teachers preparing them for all that follows, and also of being bored by constantly re-reading books; and they discussed fitting in with working patterns. It is important to recognise the enormous range of issues that serve as pressures upon families; but it is equally important to recognise what to one family is a motivation is to another family a chore and to another a burden and to another may be an unknown. It was also evident that the families in the study frequently had competing priorities within the home or in what they wished to achieve for their children or in their ways of doing things.

### ***Parents as role models***

Parental responses to their child behaviour varies widely, modelling very different attitudes to reading and writing, so whilst some avoided pens and writing others were relaxed about writing on the walls or encouraged their children to 'write' their own cards for people. There were two bilingual families in the study, one family chose to speak both languages to the child, the other just spoke English but occasionally sang in the other language. Many of the parents loved to sing to their children and saw it as part of their everyday activity, whilst others saw it as a specific activity which they needed to undertake to benefit their child; a couple of mothers found it a challenge.

Parents described the importance of being seen to be readers in front of their children both inside the house and outside, but in contrast others said they did not have time to read or struggled to do so; in most families it was just one parent who was reading and carrying out activities regularly with the child. The presence of books in the lives of the children also varied. Some homes were filled with books, in others there were hardly any. One family did not let the children read the books in the house because they were too valuable, whilst another stored away the child's things because of space pressures, and another hid books and rotated what was available to the child so they maintained their interest. A couple of families did not read to their children, some read to children when the children asked, and some read at fixed points as part of the daily routine.

Three of the parents were uneasy about messy play, with a couple not allowing it at all, and whilst a couple did not allow their children to do drawing at home others provided them with different writing tools from the one's they used (specifically crayons and not pens). Few parents mentioned talking about signs and symbols with their children inside or outside the home, most suggesting their children were not that interested. In contrast, all the parents mentioned the benefits for their children of doing reading and writing activities with other adults and children, with a couple highlighting how elder siblings had both served as a role model for their younger siblings and taught them things about parenting too. Only one parent talked about the need for their child to feel like a successful learner. Another parent mentioned how much they enjoyed doing things alongside their child and about liking to play, though a couple felt that as much as they wanted to do activities with their children they were not yet old enough or interested enough to engage.

### ***Child agency***

Very young children largely express their views and feelings through the physicality of their actions. For example, a strong theme which emerged from the data where the child exerts their agency was taking phones from parents and pressing the buttons. Not all the parents minded their children doing this, but for some the very use of such technology was problematic. A similarly strong theme was the taking of pens. This caused such concern for some parents that they did not allow their children to use pens or avoided writing in front of them. It is possible to merely see such concerns as an over-reaction to typical child

behaviour, restricting the child's access to the experience of mark making and the 'reading' of these marks. However when one reflects on the wide range of parental pressures which exist such a reaction can seem reasonable; for instance, the cost of damage in a home with restricted income, the obligations of living in a rented bedsit or the challenge of balancing housework pressures.

Children take ownership and control of reading and writing in different ways. One girl always got her books out after bath-time; four other parents mentioned their children bringing books to them (and sometimes other people in the house) to let them know they wanted to be read to; a number of them would then climb into the person's lap, making it even clearer what they wanted to happen. One girl would wait patiently, while others were less patient. Once they started reading a few children would want their parents to read and re-read sections, jumping to their favourite bits; some would join in with sounds from the books or pore intently over images, perhaps pointing out if reading mistakes are made. Some read on their own, some read to their toys, some read with their siblings. Similar variation was evident when it came to drawing. For example, one boy in the study liked to scratch and stab at the paper and anything else handy, whilst another liked to eat his crayons, and one of the girls would collect her equipment and sit down next to her big brother to scribble alongside him.

It was therefore not surprising that activities associated with reading and writing development could become a source of confrontation for parents, particularly as their children's responses may not have been as they expected. Three parents talked about important (and less important) documents and books being damaged; two parents talked about their children being very resistant to reading; how they might throw a book away from them as soon as it was produced; a couple of others talked about the disinterest of their child in reading or drawing. Sibling disagreements were also identified as problematic. Inevitably all the children had things which grabbed their attention and had other things which reduced their interest, but it is important to note that these kinds of activities could also be a source of togetherness. People talked with delight about singing together, reading together and doing things as part of their routine. They talked with pride about achievements in language, about the bond that activities could create between members of the family, and about their delight in learning new things and seeing their children learning on their own and with others.

Inevitably, the children's different approaches to social learning situations was evident in the sessions too. A couple of children did not wish to join in with the planned activities, some preferred to watch what was going on from the safety of their mother's side. Some just wanted to play with the materials according to their own priorities whilst others wanted to engage with the practitioner from the outset. Across all the sessions however the children came to recognise that this person was introducing them to new and enjoyable things and even the most hesitant or distracted chose to spend time engaging with activities within the Bookstart Corner sessions.

In addition to the pressures that the parents in the study described experiencing, recognising and responding to child agency emerged as an underlying issue for some families. The researcher noted that all the practitioners supported the parent's management of this issue by modelling respect for children's wishes and preferences when they worked with a child. During his observations, conversations, and in the interviews, the researcher was left with the impression that all the parents learned from observing the practitioners and the way that they engaged with and involved children. In the post programme interviews one parent reflected that she was following her child's choice more when it came to selecting a book to look at. Another participant talked about recognising a wider range of her child's actions as being his way of communicating with her.

### ***Parent and child's relationship with the practitioner***

The positive attitude towards the practitioner, expressed by the parents in the pre-programme interviews, continued once the sessions began. In nearly all instances the practitioner quickly established a good relationship with the child (though perhaps slightly less quickly in the group sessions) and the child became increasingly comfortable with them. All the parents who received home visits or individual Bookstart Corner sessions remarked on the rapport between the practitioner and their child. Several reflected on the basis of this positive relationship, noting that the practitioner followed the child's lead or used preferred activities to draw the child into shared play. In their final interviews these parents noted that they were now trying to follow similar strategies when introducing activities at home. Parents talked about the practitioner being poised, providing a different perspective, offering solutions to challenges and serving as a link to a range of other services. All but one parent joined in the Bookstart Corner activities alongside the practitioner although for some such direct involvement was more gradual than for others. Most parents provided shelter and support for their child particularly in the first visits, sitting alongside the practitioner and acting as a safe place if their child was unsure about what to do. Usually the parents allowed the practitioner to introduce resources or activities and then to become involved as the play developed. As the sessions progressed some felt empowered to take a more proactive role, one in order to support the practitioner in what they saw as a difficult session to manage. Just one parent remained an observer throughout the sessions and stood back more from the exchanges between her child and the practitioner. However this did not impact on her engagement with the activities between sessions and her involvement with the changes in her child's use of books and related play.

Generally all the practitioners shaped their practices and interactions to take account of child and parental needs and this flexibility seemed key to parental engagement. The researcher's observations and conversations suggest that the practitioners listened carefully to parental concerns about children's behaviour and development. They often sought to reassure the parents through their explanations and suggestions that children were doing important things, even though these were at times very subtle. Several parents seemed to respond to this and appeared to take account of what was said to them. For example one parent in her final interview recognised that her son's communication skills involved gestures and actions as well as the use of words. Another parent acknowledged that her child was making progress in small but significant steps.

### ***What parents learned from being part of Bookstart Corner***

All the parents reported that they and their children enjoyed the sessions, that they enjoyed its social nature and looked forward to the next; the group members also reported that they enjoyed being collectively involved in a different environment. A couple of parents felt that everything they experienced was useful and that the sessions did not need to change, another noted that the practitioner did not over-structure the sessions and went with the flow. Not every parent felt that they were learning, some felt they had just been reminded of things they knew already, but all talked about doing things differently as a result of the sessions

The mother in Case Study 1 was sure that the experience had improved communication with her son, that he was more settled and receptive to playing with her. He chose to bring things

to her and responded when she spoke to him, and had begun to collect toys together rather than throwing them. He had also begun to make communicative sounds and had shown a genuine attachment to one of the books. The mother felt she had learned new activities to do, though would like to learn more. She was still hesitant about what her son was ready to do, but she felt more confident about what she could do to support him and how she might approach doing things that engage him. The researcher also noted this shift in the mother's self confidence and suggested that she had learned from watching the practitioner working with her child. He observed in later sessions that when the mother joined in the activities she was modelling her own communications and actions on the practitioner.

The mother in Case Study 2 increasingly joined in with the practitioner during the sessions, learning relevant ways to support her daughter. She progressively built activities into her everyday routines at home, particularly singing, and sought ways to include them further. She was delighted that her girl remembered activities from week to week and was engaging physically with books and prop characters. She appreciated that practical steps such as thicker crayons and a blank drawing book helped her daughter with her developing skills and interests, and was delighted that she had begun to vocalise book choices.

The mother in Case Study 3 was delighted to see her son sitting down and paying attention to things. She had gained new ideas about how to gain his attention, particularly doing actions, and using finger puppets. She had realised she could find different types of books for him and had an increased confidence in her capability to support him. She felt he had learned new words, was now counting different items in his environment and was increasingly looking at books. He was both responding more to people and expressing himself more. She did not put these small changes entirely down to the sessions but she was encouraged to see them. The mother's awareness of these developments may also be linked to her practitioner's skill at highlighting such positive changes for her. The researcher noted that in the process of working together during the sessions, the practitioner was frequently reassuring the parent that the child was doing interesting and important things.

The mother in Case Study 4 enjoyed the learning experience with her twins and noted how they both responded differently to the sessions. She was still hesitant about using the ideas she had picked up and tended to fall back on activities with which she was already comfortable, particularly singing. She could talk about how best to encourage her children's reading and writing but seemed constrained by her circumstances and her belief in the capability of her children. She was aware of small changes in the behaviour of her children though, particularly how her son took ownership of a book from the sessions and how he and her daughter had tidied up at the end of an activity.

The first mother in Case Study 5 did not feel she had learned much from the sessions, but she still was surprised to find out how much children could learn from nursery rhymes and she recognised that across the programme her son had become more likely to read to himself. She maintained too that though she had always undertaken activities of the kind she experienced at the sessions, these were now more part of their everyday life. She had begun to use the puppet too and was reading regularly to her son before bed. Despite feeling she had not learned a great deal, she was now giving him more control when they read together and felt she could contribute more to his support than she had at the start.

The second mother in Case Study 5 also felt she was not learning much at the start, but by the end felt her daughter had become more interested in books, was copying more and picking out words and pictures she recognised, and that she was more able to support her. Activities and constructive responses had become more an everyday part of her time with

her daughter and she was more aware of things related to reading and writing. She was singing with her slightly more too and had reconsidered her attitude to messy play.

The third mother in Case Study 5 had thoroughly enjoyed the group sessions with her daughter, even though she too felt that she already had a good basis of knowledge before the sessions began. Despite this she was pleased to have learned about the use of sand and mark making and to see her daughter's increasing interest in drawing, which she associated with the activities and the sessions. She also thought that her daughter had loved *Dear Zoo*, and that that was why she was now using the word 'mine'.

## Final thoughts and recommendations

In initially identifying the participating centres and families, the researchers made contact with over 50 children's centres. It was clear that these centres were working under huge pressure in relation to the nature of the tasks they undertook, their enormous workload, the shifting calls upon their practice and to changing processes of governance. The Bookstart Corner programme, therefore sits within an uncertain space, often defined by a range of challenges over which Book Trust can have little control. Its success however is very much dependent upon its relationship with these centres. The practitioners who worked with the families appeared central to the success of Bookstart Corner, tailoring the sessions to meet the needs of those families.

The researcher who observed 17 sessions across the study period recognised that it was the development of a trusting and enjoyable relationship with the practitioner that enabled the Bookstart Corner resources to catch the interest of the children and families and to be taken up by them. Though these resources were clearly of interest to the children and of value to the families, to a large extent it was the practitioner and the relationship they established with the families which enabled these artefacts to support the emergence of pre-literacy interests and skills. For example, the researcher noted that parental expectations and the wish to 'see' progress in literacy were often at the fore of the seven parents' thinking; however the practitioners were good at identifying and emphasising the smaller signs of progress which parents might have missed in looking for bigger signs. The researcher felt that all five practitioners which he had observed were notably skilled at the social-relational dimension of their work and were aware that that little can happen without this context-dependent, responsive approach.

The skill of the practitioners does not mean that they were alert to all that was going on in the sessions, however. For example, when the researcher shared some first person narrative observations about one of the children with the practitioner concerned, she remarked that she hadn't realised the extent to which the child was initiating activities for himself during a Bookstart Corner session. She concluded that, although she thought she was carefully pacing a session to meet his needs, she was probably still introducing too much stimulus for him. Her interpretation of his engagement was being defined by her expectations of what could be achieved in a session when working with a two-year-old. This would suggest that there may be value in Book Trust exploring further how to work with practitioners to create space for them to better reflect on, understand and develop their practice.

A key characteristic of the case study methods adopted in this study is that it cannot provide reliable, generalisable findings; instead it seeks to enable readers to pick up on aspects of a case study and use it to reflect upon the issues in relation to their own priorities and

experiences. It is also not surprising that overall there were no commonly agreed recommendations from parents for ways of developing Bookstart Corner. Generally speaking, the lack of specific suggestions was more in evidence. Parents identified different aspects of the sessions which they had liked; the use of the big bear and the children's attraction to it was mentioned; lots of the parents talked about trying - or wanting to try - puppets at home; some said that the nursery rhymes and songs were good; many mentioned their children's love of *Dear Zoo*, whilst others said they would like more books; and a couple of parents mentioned how much they valued the packs.

Parents in the home sessions were pleased to have had the opportunity of the session where they lived and felt that this had worked. The only slightly negative comments came from the home-visit parents whose final session was undertaken outside of the home, at a children's centre or library. This was not the case for all parents however as one parent was pleased with the opportunity to visit the library. In contrast, all the parents in the group sessions valued the collective nature of their sessions and the opportunity to get out of their homes. It was these parents who felt that the sessions were over too quickly and wanted them to last longer, to be over a longer period and to involve more children. These parents were also the ones who lived outside of an urban setting, providing the only suggestion of a possible difference in relation to the urban-rural mix of our sample.

It was also noticeable that all parents made reference to aspects of newer technologies within the home or within society more widely. The significance of alternative communication strategies amongst children was also widely evident within the homes. As important as the spoken and printed word are, it was clear that a range of literacies were being developed alongside reading and writing. Not surprisingly, the use of apps, TVs, tablets and mobile phones was positioned as both an opportunity within the family but was also a source of some concern and uncertainty amongst parents. Given the capacity of these other technologies to interact with the more traditional literacies of reading and writing at home and in the children's future learning situations, these observations may also be of relevance in considering how to develop Bookstart Corner further.

Accepting the limitations of making any recommendations based upon interviews and observations with seven families, we have looked across the thematic analysis of the data and attempted to identify some patterns that may provide insight. Across this very small number of families it was evident that:

- Parents were generally interested in and satisfied with the Bookstart Corner materials, usually having particular favourites which reflected what the child had most engaged with
- Parents valued being introduced to new resources and facilities
- Parents valued the social experience of the sessions, both for themselves and their children
- Parents were eager to learn from someone they felt was more knowledgeable about children and children's learning
- Parents felt that the practitioners were skilled in what they did and they learned from watching them interact with their children
- Parents had made small changes to their practices and interactions in the home, but small as these were, they recognised that they were valuable
- Parents tended to pick up on and use practices with which they were already comfortable

- Parents generally had high levels of awareness that coincided with professional notions of best practice, but also had personal beliefs about social practices and child behaviours which in some way conflicted with those notions
- Parents had very different views on digital literacy and the use of technology
- Parents wished to have more sessions with practitioners, though where these should take place and their format was less clear
- The children may not always engage with the materials as designed but do engage in the social learning context
- It was the development of a trusting and enjoyable relationship with the practitioner that enabled the Bookstart Corner resources to catch the interest of the children and families and to be taken up by them
- Practitioners needed to be skilled in adapting the resources to the context and the children's and parent's interests.

More tentatively we can suggest that:

- Parents identified challenges when moving venues once a pattern of home or centre attendance was established
- Parents identified development in their own practice but there was little indication that this transferred to other members of the family who didn't take part in the programme
- Parents felt, in some small way, after experiencing Bookstart Corner, that they were more confident or thoughtful about what they were doing with their children or were encouraged to try something new
- Parents noted that their children's interest or behaviour in relation to the learning situation and some aspect of reading, drawing or communication had altered across the lifetime of the programme, even though this change could be very small
- Parents did not always associate change directly with the programme, but saw it as part of an ongoing process of growing up
- Parents can have an ongoing resistance to certain practices, particularly if they cause lifestyle challenges
- Parents often framed their concerns about home practices as being a consequence of child behaviour or development or wider family constraints
- Parents came to see previously unnoticed strengths in their children across the lifetime of the programme.

As we have made clear above, these findings invariably come with a considerable health warning. Our data gave us a detailed look at the views and experiences of the participants but it cannot provide robust evidence about practice in any general sense. Our ability to make recommendations is therefore limited to making suggestions which can inform future discussions about the delivery of literacy programmes to very young children and their families, and potential ways to build on the existing programme. We feel that Book Trust can regard the Bookstart Corner programme and materials as the start of a relationship with families, which provides a framework for further exploring and developing parental practices and children's literacy learning. We would also suggest that:

- Book Trust should further consider the value of using broad theoretical frameworks such as The Learning Stair and ORIM in relation to such a short-term programme where any changes are likely to be very slight and cannot be reliably attributed to that programme
- Book Trust should further consider the influence of the programme on family members beyond those participating in the sessions, for example considering how to



encourage the involvement of siblings and grandparents in supporting literacy activities

- Book Trust could further consider how they can encourage and facilitate children's centre staff to work with and support families beyond the remit of particular programmes, so that the development and understanding of literacy is increasingly seen as an ongoing aspect of the children's centre's role
- Bookstart Corner could explore how to draw upon the different technologies and communication approaches which children experience and which reflect the diverse priorities of families and learning situations; thereby encouraging a focus upon the possible impact of a wider range of literacies.

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## Appendix 1 - Bookstart corner sessions and observations and interviews undertaken

Family	Session 1			Session 2			Session 3			Session 4		
	Place	Obs +FP N	Int	Place	Obs+ FPN	Int	Place	Obs +FPN	Int	Place	Obs +FP N	Int
<b>A</b>	Home	No <sup>4</sup>		Home	Yes	Yes	Home	Yes	Yes	Local library	Yes	Yes
<b>B</b>	Home	Yes	Yes	Home	Yes	Yes	Home	Yes	Yes	Children Centre	Yes	Yes
<b>C</b>	Home	Combined Session 1 & 2			Yes	Yes	Children Centre <sup>5</sup>	Yes	No	Home	Yes	Yes
<b>D</b>	Home	Yes	Yes	Home	No <sup>6</sup>	No	Home	Yes	Yes	Children Centre	Yes	Yes
<b>E</b>	Children Centre	Yes	Yes	Children Centre	Yes	No	Children Centre <sup>7</sup>	No	No	Children Centre	Yes	No
<b>F</b>	Children Centre	Yes	No	Children Centre	Yes	Yes	Children Centre	No	No	Children Centre	Yes	No
<b>G</b>	Children Centre <sup>8</sup>	Yes	No	Children Centre	No	No	Children Centre	No	No	Children Centre	Yes	Yes

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<sup>4</sup> Rearranged for family convenience

<sup>5</sup> This session was at Creative Little Characters, a two-hour centre-based group for two-years olds, young siblings and parents. Each week, it provides children with sensory activities which are related to a chosen story. The family worker then reads the selected book to the group at the end of the session. Families are normally invited to CLC after three Bookstart Corner sessions. However, it was felt appropriate for the child in Family C to attend during Bookstart Corner provision.

<sup>6</sup> Rearranged for family convenience

<sup>7</sup> Researcher had a hospital appointment so could not attend the third session.

<sup>8</sup> For the end-of-programme interview, the three parents (EF&G) were invited to a group interview at the Children's Centre. The family worker arranged play activities for the three children.