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# **Room to Play**

**A Summary of the Evaluation  
2006-2008**

**PEEP Research Series**



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# What is PEEP?

## Background

PEEP (Peers Early Education Partnership) was set up in 1995. Through its *Learning Together* programme it aims to contribute towards improving the life chances of children, particularly in disadvantaged areas. Its purpose is to raise educational attainment, especially in literacy. The PEEP *Learning Together* Intervention Model consists of a set of principles, a programme with a curriculum, core activities and materials, and a spectrum of delivery methods.

## The PEEP *Learning Together* programme

The *Learning Together* programme focuses on how to make the most of the learning opportunities in everyday life at home – listening, talking, playing, singing and sharing books every day. By working *with* adults *about* their children's very early learning, the programme supports parents and carers in their role as the first educators of their children. The programme is structured around the 'ORIM' framework (Hannon; 1995). This recognises that children need to have: Opportunities to learn; Recognition and valuing of their early efforts and achievements; Interaction with adults to talk about what they do and how they feel; Modelling by adults of behaviour, attitudes and activities. The ORIM framework also influences the approach to work both with parents and partners from other services, providing a positive basis for working together to support families and young children.

## A process of empowerment

The PEEP *Learning Together* programme supports families through an empowerment process which enables them to grow in confidence and motivation. This process is focused on helping to move

families from isolation, where they are not accessing the support available to them in the community, to a position where they not only know what is available to them, but also know which service will be appropriate for them at any given time. The programme focuses on empowerment and support in four particular aspects of learning with their children: language development, literacy, numeracy, self-esteem and learning dispositions.

PEEP sees empowerment of families as a dynamic process that is always in flux, as parents/carers continually develop their knowledge and skills to support their children's learning and development. This development means that the needs of parents/carers are also continually changing. Offering a variety of ways in which support is offered helps provide services that are both relevant and accessible to a wide range of families with differing needs. The PEEP *Learning Together* programme is delivered through outreach into the home, groups and open access activities. A range of organisations, including children's centres, local authorities, primary care trusts and voluntary sector projects are now using the programme.

## Training

PEEP runs a range of training and professional development courses to prepare and support practitioners in their delivery of the *Learning Together* programme.

# Room to Play

## Introduction

The Room to Play shopping centre project is an innovative drop-in style provision underpinned by the PEEP *Learning Together* principles and programme. Based in a shop unit in a busy community shopping centre at the heart of one of the most deprived areas of an otherwise prosperous city in the Midlands, it aspires, not only to welcome and value all parents and carers, but also to extend their existing parenting practices. It is open to everyone, but it is intended to be of particular value to 'at risk' families with children whose life chances may be compromised by the circumstances in which they live, but who do not access existing statutory services. The project was initially funded for three years by the Sutton Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation.



*Room to Play 'shop' front*

## The challenge

Over recent years in the United Kingdom, there has been a growing emphasis on pre-school services for families, partly to allow parents to work and thus reduce the number of children growing up in poverty, and partly because of direct benefits to children themselves. Within this context,

help for parents bringing up children in difficult circumstances has been given increasing priority. Family support is central to the Sure Start initiative offered by children's centres and through extended services.

However, the 'reach' of these new services is known to be problematic, and there is evidence that their use is in inverse relation to need, with those who are most vulnerable least likely to take up offers of support. Typically those who do not participate are younger, less well educated and in less stable relationships (Barnes, *et al.*, 2006) and are sometimes referred to as 'hard to reach'. Consequently, developing services that are more in sympathy with the needs of isolated families has become a primary focus of policy and a challenge for established organisations such as PEEP.

## In response to the challenge

In 2005, PEEP, building on its existing commitment to support parents and carers in promoting their children's language, literacy, numeracy, learning dispositions and self-esteem through increasingly flexible modes of delivery, began a collaboration with the Sutton Trust which culminated in the opening of Room to Play in April 2006. Its intention is to offer a viable alternative to the support provided by 'formal' services, in order to appeal to families who are not attracted to a more 'obvious' form of delivery.

## Aims of Room to Play

- To engage parents who are often termed 'hard to reach'.
- To develop a model for a drop-in centre based in a 'neutral' venue that should be easier to access for more isolated families.

## Objectives of Room to Play

To offer:

- a welcoming, neutral place to spend time during the day;

- an opportunity to talk to practitioners about their children;
- directed and undirected play and learning activities;
- information about local services.

## The evaluation

PEEP has a long-standing commitment to research and evaluation. Over the past ten years, it has worked with the Universities of Sheffield and Oxford and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) (Evangelou and Sylva, 2003 and Evangelou *et al.*, 2005) to establish the effects of its programme in Oxford on adults and children within the community that it serves. PEEP is currently working with the Universities of Exeter and Warwick, funded by the DCFS, on projects that focus on research into practice.

### Aims of the evaluation

The first phase of the evaluation was designed to:

- document and critically appraise the process of setting up the 'shop' and the first few months of its operation in the light of its aims and objectives;
- identify any unexpected outcomes/successes/shortcomings;
- set the framework within which stages 2 and 3 of the evaluation could take place.

The second phase of the evaluation focused on gathering information about the users of Room to Play in order to ascertain whether it was attracting isolated families and to what extent it was meeting its central aims and objectives. The third phase of the evaluation focused on the process by which parents are encouraged to access other services, build up confidence to engage with other services and thereby reach a point where they can 'move on'. This phase of the evaluation also sought to draw together the findings of the past three years in order to reach conclusions about the operation of Room to Play. It addressed the following research question:

*'How successful is Room to Play in engaging its target group, and what is the nature of the contact? What are the processes that enable parents to take their first steps into the provision, and how are they encouraged to engage with other people and acquire the confidence to access the services they need?'*

### Research methodology

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with PEEP practitioners, the project manager and the CEO. The research officer also carried out periods of observation. A quantitative questionnaire was administered over a one-week period during both the second and the third phases of the evaluation to obtain a socio-economic 'snapshot' of the users. During the survey week in the third phase, first-time users, who represented 13% of visitors, were not included. More in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out in the second and third phase using the same questionnaire. Of the six users interviewed in the second phase, four repeated the interview in phase three and an additional four parents were interviewed for the first time. 'Composite parent sketches' were created from the interviews to protect the participants' identities.

## Description of Room to Play

### The premises

Initially a 'stall' was established in the concourse of the shopping centre offering activities, information and signposting. Whilst in many ways it was a challenging working situation for the practitioners, it contributed significantly to the process of engaging with families. There was no 'threshold' to cross and staff could begin to relate to potential users just by making eye contact with them as they passed. The stall was in operation for nine months, initially as

a pilot and then as a stop-gap until the lease could be signed.

Room to Play is located in a former shop premises in a community shopping centre within walking distance of local residents and close to bus routes that serve some of the most disadvantaged areas of the city. There is a main room, with a kitchen, toilet and storage area behind, and an outside enclosed yard. The style of decoration and presentation is informal, understated, comfortable and homely. Colour is provided by displays, mobiles and artwork by children and parents. It was intended to create a 'home from home' atmosphere and this has been retained over the three years.



*The main room*

Furniture is used to divide the main room into separate areas, but the feeling of stepping into someone's living room is maintained. There is a sitting area with sofas and books close by. In the centre of the room, there are two child-sized tables for activities. There is also space for role-play with dressing-up clothes. There is a baby area in a corner with a duvet for a soft floor covering and treasure baskets and other toys. On the wall, there is a mirror for the babies to be able to see themselves. Breast feeding is welcome anywhere but a chair, which is particularly comfortable, is available.

A display of photographs illustrates fun learning activities that parents and carers have shared with their children. There is an information area with leaflets, information folders and a comments book near the entrance. A computer with internet access is available on request. The kitchen offers opportunities for 'messy play' including water/sand or 'gloop' activities. Outside there are some larger pieces of play equipment and sand, balls and construction toys. There are also everyday objects, such as guttering and door knobs, that are utilised as play resources. Tubs and planters are used for gardening activities and to brighten the yard.

### **Opening hours**

Room to Play is open on Mondays to Fridays between 9.30am and 3pm, and on Saturdays between 10am and 1pm. Unlike a number of drop-in facilities, it remains open during half-terms and the longer school holidays, although it is closed on Sundays and public holidays. In term-time, it caters mainly for parents and carers of children who are not yet in full-time school. In the holidays, it welcomes children of all ages which means that numbers visiting can increase substantially and activities have to be adjusted to accommodate the broader age range.

### **Staffing**

Four PEEP practitioners and three assistants work in Room to Play on a rotational basis. Responsibility for planning the activities and documenting the links with the curriculum is shared by the practitioners, with input from the Services and Practice Development Manager and support from other PEEP practitioners. A practitioner and an assistant are always present and at certain times there is a third member of staff. A multi-lingual practitioner is present during certain sessions.

# Findings

## Room to Play is used by a range of families

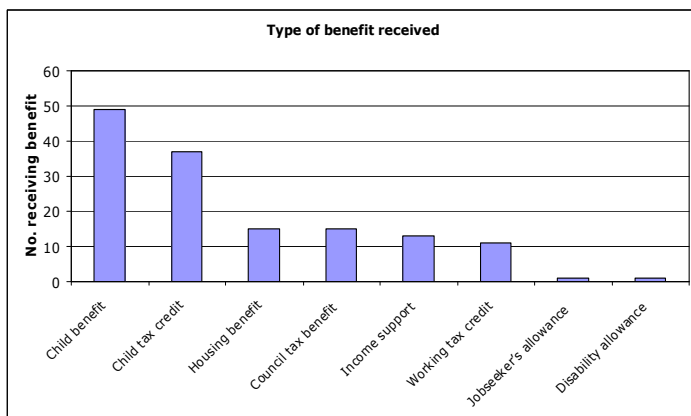
### A diverse user group

Room to Play is used by mothers, fathers, childminders, grandparents, relatives and friends looking after others' children, nannies and au pairs. In the final year of the evaluation, it was observed that Room to Play was busier and was attracting more fathers, grandparents, professional carers, first-time users, ethnic minority users, young parents and people who had experienced PEEP through other delivery methods. Almost two-thirds of visitors were full-time carers.

### 'Hard to reach' families within the mix of users

Room to Play set out to offer a service to a range of users, but wanted families most 'at risk', sometimes referred to as 'hard to reach', to be amongst them. The information collected in the evaluation clearly shows that users of Room to Play fall into some of the clusters defined in the literature which examines why families are isolated. This is supported by anecdotal evidence from the Room to Play staff.

### Benefits received by users



### Ethnicity and languages used at home

Two-thirds of users interviewed were of white British origin. The remaining third represented a range of ethnicities, including black African, Asian, and white 'other'.

71% of users spoke English to their children; a further 7% spoke English and another language. The remaining 22% were in non-English speaking households.

### Qualifications of users



### Family living arrangement

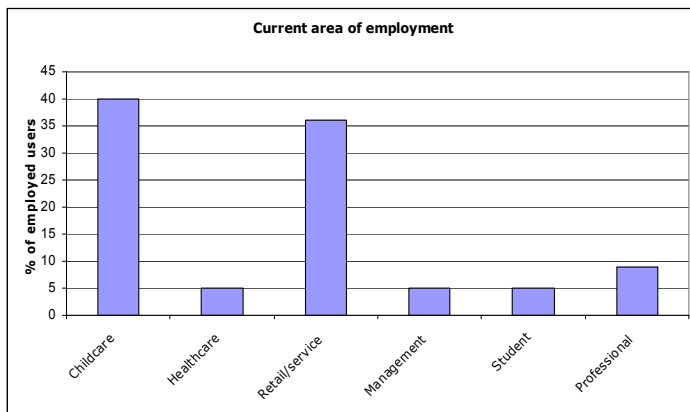
75% lived with someone else (for 71% of these people it was their spouse or partner). 12% lived alone with their children. It is possible that there were more lone parents than this 12%, as some lone parents may be living with other relatives or in shared housing.

### Postcode analysis

An analysis of users' postcodes against the Indices of Deprivation (2007) showed that almost half of the users came from neighbourhoods that scored 3 or 4 (of a possible 5) on the total index of deprivation. Only 8% cent of users came from the least deprived areas (those scoring 1 or 2).

## Employment of users

About a third of users were in full- or part-time employment.



## Use of other support services

36% of visitors to Room to Play accessed other local services, such as children's centres. Significantly, 30% of users said that they did not use any other services at all.

## Room to Play is accessed and used in a variety of ways

### How users hear about Room to Play

Users heard about Room to Play in a variety of ways. Over half the visitors said they had just been passing when they first saw Room to Play. This number had increased from just under a third in the second phase evaluation. Almost 20% had heard about it from a friend or other user, a significant increase on the previous year. Another 20% had been told about it by a PEEP practitioner or health visitor. A few visitors mentioned the stall, which had been set up in the main concourse of the shopping centre prior to Room to Play opening.

### How often users visit Room to Play

Almost 75% of users visited Room to Play at least once a week. Over 40% came two or three times a week. Just under 20% visited once a fortnight or once a month. This picture had evolved with more families now using it more regularly. A few users said

they visited every day. Each week there are approximately 250 'visits' to Room to Play, counting adults and children separately. Visits can be anything from five minutes to the whole day.

### How users travel to Room to Play

Between 2007 and 2008, the proportion of visitors walking to Room to Play increased from 59% to 66%. In 2008, the majority of the remainder of users came by bus with some by car.

### Reasons for using Room to Play

The majority of Room to Play users came mainly because of their child (52% in 2008, 33% in 2007) or because they could drop in easily when they were shopping (15% in 2008, 28% in 2007). However, there had been a fall in the number of people saying that they came to get out of the house and a corresponding increase in those saying that they came because of their own positive experience of using Room to Play and making friends there.

### What children and parents like about Room to Play

The best thing about Room to Play for the users was the good atmosphere, which is friendly and homely. The convenient location of facilities, such as a clean toilet and baby changing area, together with comfortable seating and being able to make a hot drink were also highly valued. The opportunity for social interaction was important, especially for one-child or single-parent families. The outdoor play area was another main reason why parents used Room to Play because it was safe and provided experiences those living in social housing or flats could not have at home. Parents felt that their children most enjoyed the chance for messy play with paint, play-dough, water and sand. Many of the children were not able to play with these things at home, but parents had learned and acknowledged that these opportunities were important for their child's early development.



*Messy play*

### **A welcoming and accessible gathering place has been established**

#### **The right place at the right times**

The evaluation has consistently shown that the location within a community shopping centre was the right place for Room to Play. Parents who might not be familiar with accessing services were familiar with and comfortable at the shopping centre and were, therefore, more inclined to come inside.

*Being in a shopping centre, it has the advantage that many people generally feel comfortable about going into shops; they already have that experience under their belt. The location is a good one; people pass continuously and feel that they can come in.*  
(Staff member, 2008)

The long opening hours mean visits did not need to be pre-planned and users could stay as long as they wished. The most vulnerable families, whose complex and sometimes chaotic lives made it very hard to keep to any sort of regular timetable, could make use of the provision without the need to plan ahead for their visit.

*Parents know it's there, they don't need to make a commitment to come on a particular day like a group. If they have a bad day or if they just don't make it there, well, there's always tomorrow.*  
(Staff member, 2008)

#### **Home from home**

The deliberate 'home from home' environment broke down rituals typical of a more formal setting, which are often used to establish procedures and relationships from the outset. The atmosphere of Room to Play was consistently described as friendly and homely. Staff felt that being inclusive, and remaining inclusive, was vital for the continued success of the project.

*We do have a socially mixed client group ... and I don't think this does happen much, but it's about ensuring that people are mixing, and that that in itself isn't causing people to feel too uncomfortable.*  
(Staff member, 2008)



*Skilled and experienced staff*

### **Building relationships**

Staff approached each family as individuals and built up a relationship with them in order to understand their needs and provide appropriate support and guidance. For some parents, this might have been their first positive relationship with an 'authority figure'. Staff acknowledged that there was also an element of modelling friendships.

*We focus first of all on getting them in, just being friendly, letting them sit down, trying to build a relationship, but not interfering too much. I think if anything we've become even more 'gently gently' in our approach. We now know that the most important thing is to make sure that the parent wants to come back another time.*  
(Staff member, 2008)

For many parents, Room to Play was a place where they could meet other parents, form friendships, help each other and share experiences. This friendship and social support between users is one of the big success stories of Room to Play. For some parents, the opportunity to make contact with other parents and children in a neutral space appears to be one of the most important factors in increasing parental confidence and reducing social isolation.

### **Blurring of boundaries between professionals and users**

The PEEP practitioners who work in Room to Play are often perceived by users as 'friends' whilst they think and act as 'professionals'. One staff member explained how she felt that building a rapport with parents by volunteering information about herself, encouraged them to trust her. Most staff are local and have brought their children up in the area so they bring very relevant personal experience with them.

### **Equipping staff with relevant knowledge from other service providers**

It was decided that instead of bringing in practitioners from other services to offer support to Room to Play users, the staff would be trained or briefed in order to pass on the latest information about policies and approaches to parents, when appropriate. This low-key approach avoided the need to arrange and advertise formal sessions from visiting professionals and maintained the informal homely atmosphere at Room to Play. Staff have been updated on current practice and policy in many areas, including speech and language, health, sexual health, engaging fathers, solution-focused brief therapy and listening skills. They are able to signpost parents to other service providers and also refer users to other PEEP delivery.

### **Qualities, skills and attitudes of staff**

Working in Room to Play requires staff with particular qualities and skills. They need to be calm, patient and sensitive. They must also be able to put PEEP principles into practice in a demanding and constantly changing setting. Being able to support families with issues other than those relating to PEEP *Learning Together* is also necessary. Given its diverse range of users and situation in a public location, the ability to cope with unpredictability by reacting and responding quickly and appropriately is very important. It is also important to note that working in Room to Play is particularly demanding and can be very draining.

*You couldn't do this every day, you just couldn't. Because by the end of the week ... you just wouldn't be nice to people. It is hard work. You can have just one person who's really needy and can take all your time ... and it's hard to explain that sometimes.*  
(Staff member, 2008)

**The PEEP Learning Together curriculum can be delivered flexibly in an unstructured setting**

The PEEP curriculum is delivered to adults. It includes information on how babies and young children develop and learn and it explores ways in which their development can be encouraged and supported through day-to-day activities. The curriculum is drawn upon to demonstrate to parents and carers the value of what they already do with their children, as well as offering ways in which these things may be extended. The curriculum makes explicit the notion that babies are active social beings and learners from birth and that relationships are absolutely central to learning. Sometimes these ideas, or elements of them, are new to parents. Integral to the curriculum is the ORIM framework. The curriculum is documented year by year (0-4) in nine themes. These focus on the five developmental areas of: self-concept and

learning dispositions, oral language, reading, writing and numeracy.

One of the challenges of Room to Play was to discover how the curriculum could be delivered in an unstructured setting to parents and carers whose primary motivation in visiting was not to engage in a 'parenting' or 'educational' activity. It has been established, however, that by offering a range of attractive, developmentally appropriate activities, staff can often encourage parents and carers to engage in these activities with their children, or at least to take an interest in what they are doing. These activities are planned to link with the developmental areas in the curriculum. The staff are sufficiently knowledgeable about the curriculum to introduce appropriate elements from it in a responsive and flexible manner. As a consequence, it has been possible firstly, to encourage adult/child interaction where this does not occur 'spontaneously', and secondly, to successfully deliver the curriculum in the unstructured setting of Room to Play.

*Engaging activities encourage adult/child interaction*



## Users have been empowered to move on

The following two 'composite parent sketches' show how Room to Play has empowered parents.

### Parent 1

This young single parent had attended Room to Play since its first days as a stall. Initially, she was isolated as a new parent, with limited family support, and faced practical problems, for example with housing. Staff had initially helped her to access furniture and equipment as she moved into a council flat, and had also signposted her to further information about benefits. She had been able to use Room to Play's phone for this. She also began to consult staff over concerns to do with her child, such as weaning, sleep patterns and behaviour problems. She had subsequently joined a PEEP group and began to make things for her child, such as mobiles and shakers. Within Room to Play she made friends with other parents, particularly other young mothers. She had left school without qualifications but was keen to undertake further training and study. With the support of staff, outside of Room to Play, she began to access Connexions as well as a training initiative for young mothers, and took part in a number of free courses from IT to basic first aid. She began to access other play opportunities for her child, for example, other family centres, and encouraged her friends to meet her there. Staff felt that they had provided a listening ear at the start, encouraging her to talk through her options for study and employment, and through these courses she had built up confidence. She had also made friendships with other young parents in similar circumstances, which had decreased her isolation. When she later attended a course which lasted a number of weeks, she sought advice from staff about childcare, and was able to find a childminder through Room to Play. In the early days, she visited every day; now her child attends nursery and she has a part-time job and attends once a week.

### Parent 2

This mother was originally from Pakistan (speaking Punjabi and Urdu) and had lived in the UK for around two years. She lived with her husband and in-laws and their ten-month-old son. She was in the early stages of learning English. Although her husband was supportive, he worked night-shifts and slept during the day while she was at home with her child, which further increased her social isolation (the only place she went to was to the shopping centre once a week). Her health visitor had suggested that she visit Room to Play and, with her consent, gave her phone number to an Urdu-speaking practitioner who first visited her at home, and then arranged to take her to Room to Play. The practitioner focused upon developing a good relationship with the parent, and building up the trust of her wider family as well. Speaking the same language was a vital part of this. She also helped the mother with some everyday situations that the parent found challenging due to her limited English. These included using the bus and accessing information, such as bus timetables. She helped the mother to access free English classes, and the parent also began to attend a PEEP group where she met a number of parents in a similar situation who shared a common language and formed friendships. The parent now visits Room to Play when she knows Urdu/Punjabi speaking practitioners will be present, and views Room to Play as a place where she can practise her English, as well as make things for her child, and speak to other parents in her own language. Room to Play has decreased her social isolation, and importantly, the practitioner also feels that through these interventions the parent has begun to interact more positively with her child, and has grown in confidence.

## Conclusion

Room to Play is a unique and effective project which has supported a wide range of parents and carers and their children in its first three years. It has been shown that the approach to Room to Play has been successful in creating an environment in which families, including those who do not access other settings, feel welcome and comfortable. A skilled and experienced staff of PEEP practitioners act professionally, yet personally, to form relationships with users so they feel both welcomed and valued. The convenient location, long opening hours and informal homely atmosphere provide an

environment in which parents can gain confidence and build relationships with staff, their children and other users in their own time. It has also been clearly demonstrated that it is possible to implement the PEEP curriculum in an unstructured setting where the practitioners are confident to introduce appropriate elements in a flexible and responsive manner. This is facilitated by the use of well-planned and appealing activities. Practitioners are also able to pass on information about other issues beyond the scope of PEEP *Learning Together*. A combination of all these factors has been successful and effective in engaging families at risk and supporting them in 'moving on'.



*Relaxing on the sofa*



*Outdoor space*

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