

PEEP

Room to Play



Summary of the evaluation 2006 & 2007

A project supported by

The Sutton Trust and Garfield Weston Foundation

This report is based on:

Evaluation of the Sutton Trust Shopping Centre Project: Room to Play
Maria Evangelou, Sally Smith and Kathy Sylva, University of Oxford Department
of Educational Studies, June 2006

and

Sutton Trust Evaluation Project (STEP): Phase 2
Kate Coxon, Maria Evangelou and Kathy Sylva, University of Oxford
Department of Education, August 2007



Introduction

One of the most recent initiatives from PEEP is the Room to Play shopping centre project, an innovative drop-in style provision underpinned by the PEEP principles and programme. Based in a shop 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 hoped that it will be of particular value to 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 will run for three years and its running costs are met by the Sutton Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation, with the setting up of the venue initially being funded by the Charles Hayward Foundation.

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 increasingly prioritised and in the last decade parenting support has been emphasised in family literacy initiatives and in programmes such as Sure Start. Parental outreach and family support services are integral elements of the Children's Centres and the Extended Schools agenda.

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, J., MacPherson, K. & Senior, R. (2006) *Child and Family Social Work*, 11, 107-117) 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 interventions 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, learning dispositions and self-esteem through increasingly flexible modes of delivery, began collaboration with the Sutton Trust, culminating in the opening of Room to Play in April 2006.

Its intention is to offer a viable alternative to the support provided by a formal service, in order to appeal to families who are not attracted to a more 'obvious' form of delivery.

Aims

- 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

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 Oxford University's Department of Educational Studies (OUDES), the University of Sheffield and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to establish the effects of its programme in Oxford on adults and children within the community that it serves. (Evangelou, M. and Sylva, K., 2003. *The Effects of the Peers Early Education Partnership on Children's Developmental Progress*. London:DfES. Evangelou, M. Brooks, G. Smith, S. and Jennings, D. (2205) School Study: An evaluation of the Peers Early Education Partnership. London:DfES Sylva, K. Evangelou, M. Taylor, R Rothwell, A and Brooks, G., (2004) *Enabling Parents: The Role of PEEP in Supporting Parents as Adult Learners*.

On this occasion, the Sutton Trust has commissioned an independent evaluation of the project by Oxford University Department of Education. The evaluation is taking place in three discrete phases over the duration of the project.



In the garden of Room to Play

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 explore if and how it was meeting its central aims and objectives.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with PEEP staff, the project manager and CEO. The research officer also carried out periods of observation. A quantitative questionnaire was devised in the second phase. It was administered over a one week period to obtain a socio-economic snapshot of the users. More in-depth qualitative interviews were carried out with six users from which composite parent sketches were created.

Findings

1 An effective 'contact' process has been created

Room to Play was deliberately sited in a local community shopping centre because it offers a neutral location in public premises not associated with the provision of formal services. There is no attempt to recruit target families because the centre is somewhere they go frequently and know well. Whilst work

was going on to secure the lease on the chosen premises and carry out some basic work to prepare it, a stall was established in the concourse of the shopping centre, with the purpose of operating as a pilot for the 'shop' itself. Due to ongoing delays with the acquisition of the lease, the stall was in operation for a total of nine months. Whilst it was in many ways a very challenging working situation for the staff, 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 by making eye contact with them as they passed. Children also acted as a catalyst by being attracted to the play activities in which they wanted to be involved. This early contact with potential users started the process of building relationships which continued once the shop was open.

2 An attractive and accessible gathering place has been established

Users are welcomed at the door and invited in as if they were visiting someone's home. The layout and atmosphere are also 'homely', with comfortable sofas, a kitchen and a bathroom, so it is possible to breast-feed, warm bottles and change nappies. There are no entry requirements often typical of formal services, such as signing in or giving personal information, nor are they required to complete forms. Rules are kept to a minimum with any 'unacceptable' behaviour, such as shouting, swearing or smacking, addressed through conversation between practitioner and parent/carer.



Putting the PEEP curriculum into practice

Users are offered a cup of tea, a place to sit and chat, and someone ready and willing to listen. Indeed users perceive the PEEP staff as friends. In this way, the staff are able to get to know users in a seemingly informal context, gain their trust and offer advice, whilst always being aware of the boundaries and their professional role. The play activities, which are all related to the PEEP curriculum, offer a range of opportunities for practitioners to help parents to engage with their children and understand how they can be involved in their child's learning. Friendships are also developed between parents who support each other in the common task of parenting, and find new social opportunities by arranging to meet up outside Room to Play.

"The first time I came I was a bit afraid, but you get used to it. I don't have any other places where I go, I just come here. They try to help you teach your kids to do things; it's good to get them used to sharing, get used to the idea of playschool and nursery. It's a nice place for kids to come." [young parent of child aged 2]

3 Room to Play attracts a very diverse group of people

Room to Play is used by parents, childminders, grandparents, relatives and friends looking after others' children, nannies and au pairs. The users interviewed ranged from 17 years to 54 years of age with the majority having 2 or more children (65%). All are seeking support in their roles as carers of children.

"It's a place where you don't feel that someone is more skilled than you, as a parent you are all vulnerable at some point." [parent of 1 child, aged 18 months]

- **CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND**

There is also cultural and linguistic diversity – information collected during the limited period of quantitative research showed that about two thirds of families using Room to Play were of white British origin with the remaining third representing a range of other cultures speaking more than half a dozen languages other than English at home.

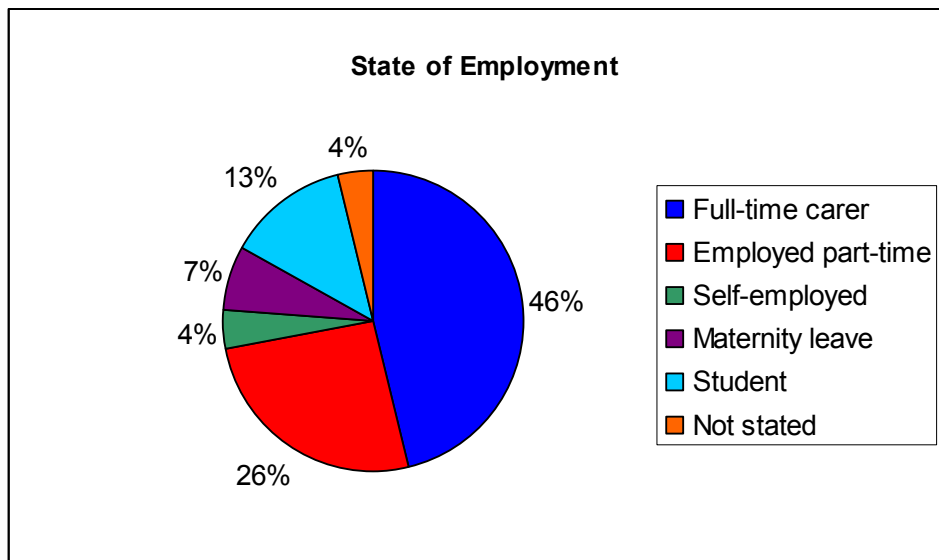
- **EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS**

A significant proportion of the users had less than an A-C GCSE qualification.

- 15% had no qualifications at all.
- 48% left school at age 16 or under.

- **EMPLOYMENT**

The employment profile of users is also very diverse with almost half being full time carers and a further quarter being employed part-time.



- **LONE PARENTS**

A significant proportion of the users were single parents.

- 38 % had no partner
- 24% lived alone with their children
- 62% live with a partner of whom 65.2% are in employment

- **BENEFITS**

Many of the users were on benefits, ranging across a wide spectrum.

- 87% receive child benefits
- 33% receive housing benefits
- 20% receive income support
- 65% claimed tax credits
- 30% receive council tax benefits

- **RESIDENTIAL AREA**

Users were more likely to live in a 'more deprived' than a 'less deprived' area, with 28% living in areas ranked in the top 25% most deprived areas.

It was clear, however, that everyone felt welcome and comfortable, and that whilst they were very different from each other, the shared experience of parenthood was a significant unifying factor.

"I've made friends here. Everyone talks to everyone. They're friendly."
[single parent of one child, aged 2 years]

4 Users come to Room to Play for a wide variety of reasons

The wide variety of users of Room to Play reflects an equally wide range of reasons for using the support offered there.

- **FOR THE CHILD**

A third (33%) of families come specifically for the child.
"My child loves it." "My boy loves to come here."

- **BECAUSE OF LOCATION**

Almost a third (28%) came because they were in the shopping centre.
"I come here when I go shopping. It makes shopping bearable for the children."

- **TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE**

Almost a fifth (17%) came simply to get out of the house.
"It's very important to me. It helps me get out of the house. You have limited social life as a mother: your life is really narrowed down." [Parent of child aged 2]

Many other reasons were given as well. Some come just to feed and change children; some like to sit for a drink and a quick chat; some come specifically at lunchtime. Parents and grandparents arrange to meet friends there.

"I've made lots of friends here. I arrange to meet up with them for lunch, or we meet to take our kids to the park." (single parent of child aged 2)

Child minders value having a safe place for children to play and access the curriculum. Social housing close to the shopping centre consists of flats with no gardens, so Room to Play offers somewhere for children to be outside. Health visitors have recommended it to mothers who were going through a difficult phase with their children. Time spent in Room to Play varies from just a few minutes to change a nappy, to a few hours, or even much of the day on a regular basis. Whatever the reason, many adults have incorporated a visit to Room to Play into their regular routines.

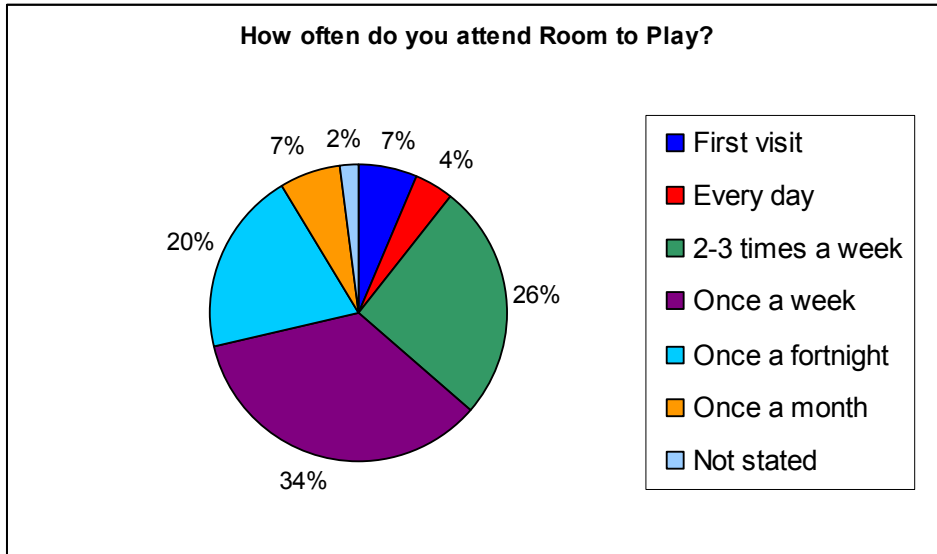
"Some people come here just to sit down on the sofa, have a drink and switch off. Other people want to play with their child, some come in as groups - they've arranged to meet there, that's quite nice. Some come in to have lunch. Some

people end up staying just for an hour and other people can be there all day.”
[staff member]

5 The way families’ use Room to Play varies

- **NUMBER AND FREQUENCY OF VISITS**

Over 50% of users came once a week or less frequently.



During the first year of Room to Play, there were generally 80 to 120 visits per week.

Each week:

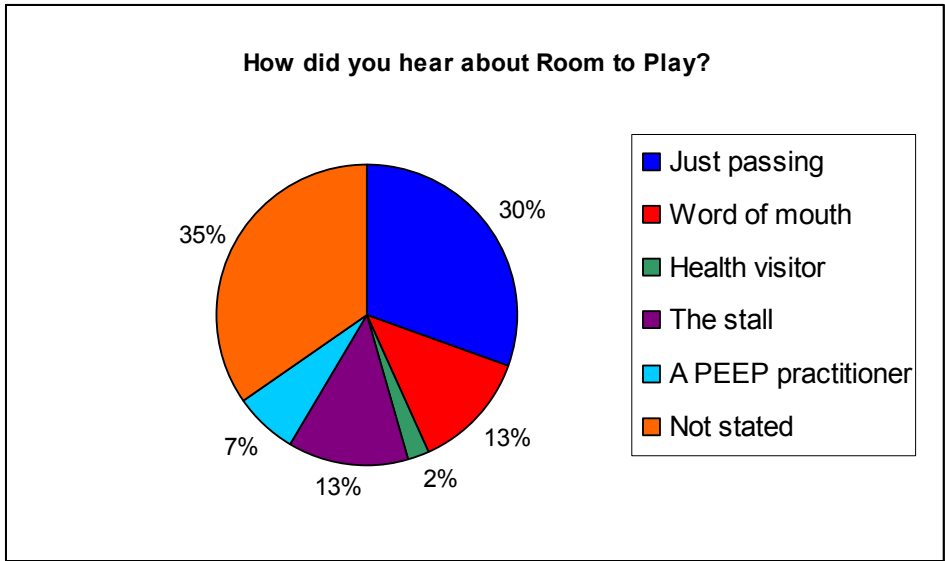
- 7 to 10 visits were for the first time.
- 21 to 32 families visited two to three times.
- 28 to 42 families visited once that week.
- 16 to 24 families made their fortnightly visit.

The user profile confirms staff perceptions that Room to Play appeals to a cross section of families which includes a significant proportion which have a high number of demographic risk factors (e.g. lack of qualifications, lone parents and low income).

6 Users came to know about Room to Play in a variety of ways

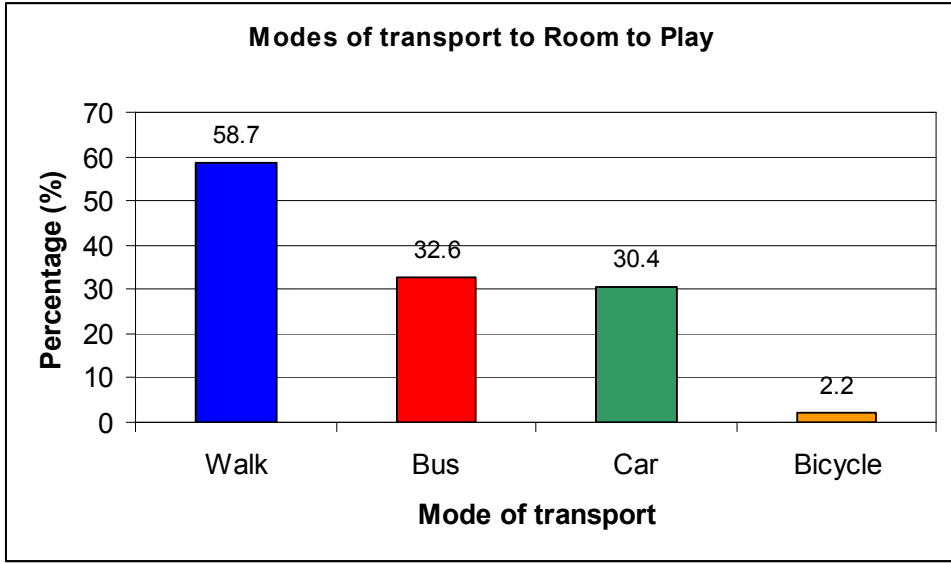
- **LOCATED WHERE FAMILIES CAME REGULARLY**

Many people said they were just passing by and decided to come in when they saw the signs.



7 Users come to Room to Play in a variety of ways

Almost three quarters of the users either walked or came by public transport to the shopping centre.



8 New experiences are offered to parents and children

For many parents and children, one of the attractions of Room to Play is that it offers new experiences. These include the more messy experiential activities such as playing with 'gloop'. Some, having had their first experience of this type of play and an explanation about why it is important, are keen to have the recipe for play dough, so that they can make it at home. Ideas for activities like this, which can easily be done at home, often using recycled objects rather than spending money on toys, are enthusiastically received.



"The staff showed me how to make a shaker out of a bottle with water and glitter in it, stuff like that. They get you to play with things at home, use up things you've already got." [parent of children aged 3 and 5]

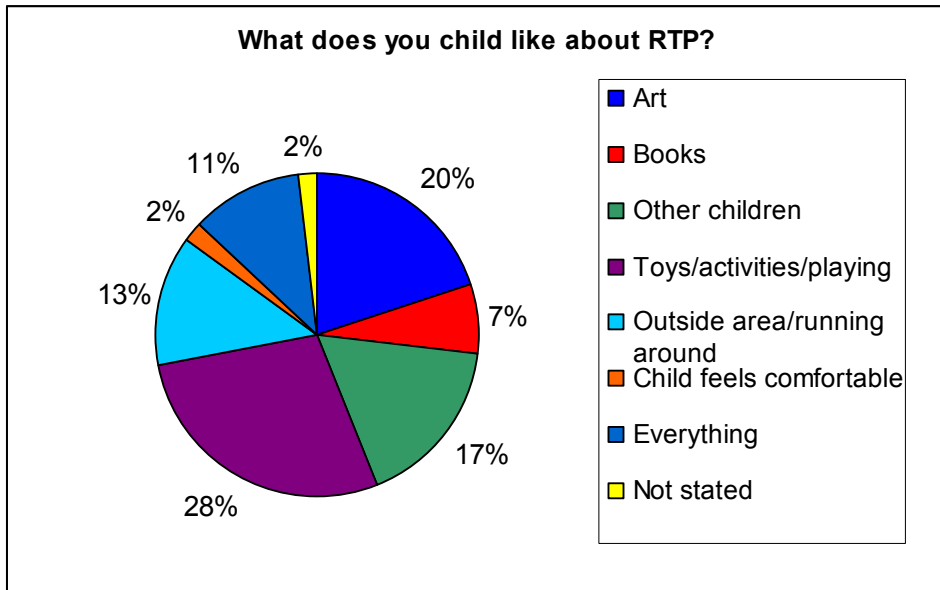
For users, taking things home to display and show to other relatives and friends is also important.

"It gives you ideas of games you can play. I've made books here with the digital camera so my child can show her dad what sort of things we do, like cutting and sticking." [parent of 2 year old]



Enjoying a book together

Added to these experiences for some people is the first experience of sharing books with their children. The great variety of activities builds the understanding amongst users that Room to Play is a place where children and parents can learn together.



"Quite a few parents have sat down and made stuff with their children here, and they've had a really nice time and it's sort of showing parents that they can do this and they can do that and they can have a nice time - it doesn't have to be all telly and play on their own. And a sense of pride as well - seeing what their children are doing, you know what they're going to take home, and seeing their children play with other children." [staff member]

9 Parents/carers use the local information provided

In addition to the advice and guidance staff give parents and carers about supporting their children's learning, there are leaflets giving information about a range of local services. These are well used, and PEEP is working with the Oxford Children's Information Service to see how the range and display can be improved. The practitioners are also very knowledgeable. Some have brought their own children up in the local area and have personal as well as professional information to pass on. Parents also share information with each other. A laptop is available on request to access the internet, and a number of parents use it to look up information ranging from health and dietary information for their children, to low-cost holidays and furniture exchange schemes.

Based on observations, the local authority's manual on nursery and school places seems to be the most commonly requested resource. Information about activities to do with children, such as the PEEP play dough recipe is also much in demand. Housing is also a subject which is frequently discussed. A file in which council house exchanges are advertised and sought is well used and updated regularly by parents.

10 Staff need to be highly competent

Room to Play relies on a highly skilled team of staff. Most have substantial experience of working with families in disadvantaged circumstances, and additionally, all are parents themselves, mainly living locally. There is a broad range of skills across the team, and individuals also have specific professional and personal qualities which are relevant for working in this type of provision. An additional factor in the success of Room to Play is that the same staff team has worked together since it opened. The combination of these skills, qualities and consistency makes a unique skill base from which to offer a frontline service to families with complex needs in a setting with few rules.

"I don't think you can be trained actually in working in Room to Play: I think it can be quite hard, it's something obviously about confidence and stuff you get used to, it's more building up that relationship and trust." [staff member]

Staff need to be able to cope with unpredictability and be flexible in how they react to and deal with different situations. Thinking on your feet and 'judging the moment' are also important skills. There are ongoing challenges, both in terms of how to deliver the curriculum in an unstructured setting, and in coping with the pressure of encountering families with very specific needs living in difficult circumstances. PEEP is aware of the demands on staff of working in Room to Play. Staff know they need to debrief after particular incidents and situations. Formal counselling has been offered, though not considered necessary to date as the staff use each other for support, and hold regular supervision sessions and meetings.

"I think it's been very hard with people's problems, and I mean a lot of stuff that they bring in that they have to cope with in their life...I think the pressure of that is very hard, ..."[staff member]

EMERGING ISSUES

Reaching the 'hard to reach'

One of the aims of the project is to offer support to those families who are considered to be 'hard to reach'. It has become clear through the evaluation, that agreeing on a definition is not straightforward. Although risk factors can be identified, labelling or identifying users as hard to reach might not be particularly helpful. Many staff felt that attaching a label to families was not helpful to them in their efforts to support the family. The most important task was to find out as much as possible about the child's and the family's situation, in order to assess their level of need. The welcoming atmosphere of Room to Play allows a gradual building of friendship and trust in which users are comfortable in talking about themselves and their situation. This enables staff to think about the most appropriate approach to engage with them, ascertain what support would be most helpful, and identify where it could be accessed.

"I think it's getting to talk to people, and knowing more rather than judging what you see and hear, when you've made a bit of a relationship." [staff member]

"Hard to reach is a stereotype. The families we would most like to help through Room to Play are those who find it difficult to engage with their children, and you can see that that's for a variety of reasons – sometimes for not understanding that play itself can be helpful. We have these conversations around mess and getting dirty. Some people genuinely believe that a child getting dirty means they're being naughty and not playing 'properly'." [staff member]

Delivering the PEEP curriculum

One of the greatest challenges facing Room to Play is implementing the PEEP curriculum in a way that is unthreatening, accessible and flexible. The activities in Room to Play are based on the PEEP curriculum which explores five developmental areas: self-concept and learning dispositions, oral language, reading, writing, and numeracy. These are developed through core activities which can be part of everyday living for parents and children: singing (songs and rhymes), talking and listening (sharing books and stories), and playing. The vast range of people who use the shop may be at very different starting points in terms of their engagement with their children. Staff can be so absorbed in supporting parents and carers to deal with their immediate needs, that it is difficult to get them to engage with their children in their playing.

"If someone is so troubled how can they engage? Their heads are full of other things, they come and they sit on the sofa and it's difficult for them to engage with their child, because they're so exhausted". (staff member)

The way the curriculum is delivered in other models within the PEEP spectrum of delivery is through a nine-theme format divided into sessions, each with their own focus, which take place weekly over a year. This sort of formal plan does not readily transfer to Room to Play where in effect



Sharing books

multiple sessions take place simultaneously, lasting for different periods of time and with different levels of engagement from the parents. The process of delivering the curriculum in a varied and flexible way is continually developing, without losing the value of the developmental structure which is so helpful to the parents and children. The most vital tool in successfully introducing the curriculum, however, remains the skills, experience and intuition of the staff in being able to seize opportunities at the right time and proceed at the parent's pace.

"I think it is about relationships and for some families it being a long term activity towards a point where you feel confident to say to someone - oh look come over here and see what they're doing ... oh have you thought of doing this at home...

Some will engage with you and talk about an activity but where people clearly are not there you're just working towards it. I suppose that's the first thing."
[staff member]

CONCLUSION

Room to Play has made a valuable start.

"It's gone beyond my expectations. I'm really really pleased with Room to Play - it's been fantastic. It's got a really good atmosphere, loads of people coming in, and loads of positive stuff going on." [staff member]

"Finally, and perhaps most important of all, Room to Play should continue to view itself as a dynamic and innovative entity, experimenting to find the best ways of supporting parents..." Sutton Trust Evaluation Project (STEP): Phase 2

"I think the shop has loads of potential, and unless you try different things, you're not going to be able to get to the bottom of that potential." [Staff member]