



## Family literacy and early learning in Taunton

Three years on, the legacy of an intensive three-week family literacy and early learning project is still being enjoyed at a children's centre in Taunton, Somerset. The Hollies children's centre worked with the library service to prepare very young children and their families for a lifetime of book-sharing. These were among the first families to try **Got kids? Get reading!** The Reading Agency's programme for adults who are not confident readers and who have children aged seven and under.

### The effects

**Got kids? Get reading!**<sup>™</sup> is part of The Vital Link adult literacy scheme which The Reading Agency runs with the National Literacy Trust. A short, intense programme of fun book-related activities for families who used a children's centre in Taunton, Somerset addressed early learning goals and helped prepare young children and their families for school. The partners were the SureStart project officer at Taunton library (many of the families lived in a SureStart area), a family literacy, language and numeracy tutor and Skills for Life staff from Somerset Adult Learning and Leisure Service. The parents quickly took ownership of the display of books for borrowing and sharing at the children's centre, which is still maintained. Enduring partnerships were established between children's centre and library staff.

### The experience

Joy Tollington, Team Librarian, Service Development, Somerset County Council Cultural Service

A visit from SureStart mobile library launched the three weeks of fun activity at The Hollies children's centre in Taunton for the toddler and pre-school children that attended groups there plus their parents and families. We invited families to browse and gave them free Got kids? Get reading! goody bags and information about library services.

Identical collections of carefully selected adult and children's titles were placed in the children's centre and Taunton Library.

To let everyone who visited the children's centre know about the project, the books were displayed in the entrance foyer ready to be borrowed or shared there and then. Some of the parents made an eye-catching rainbow display on a large notice board in the foyer, with pots of 'gold' coins for families to stick on to promote their favourite books. The display was thought up, created and owned by the parents (we'd had a different idea at the planning stage).

The three-week events programme included fun story and activity sessions at the local library shared by parents and children. There were 12 sessions for families, babies, pre-school groups, toddler groups plus one adults only group. These are some of the activities used:

- **That's not my...bear** A4 card with bear outline, and brown fur fabric; children could colour the bear and stick fur fabric on the ears to make a touch-and-feel picture to take home.
- **Shark in the Park** by Nick Sharratt - children made telescopes which they used to join in with a reading of Shark in the Park by Nick Sharratt, and also made 'pop-up' shark pictures
- **Owl Babies** by Martin Waddell - made owl finger puppets (paper)
- **Captain Duck** by Jez Alborough - made chicks from hand prints
- **Pants** by Giles Andreae/Nick Sharratt, - decorated pants (A4 drawn paper pants that is); cut-out shapes of washing to colour and peg on a line

Baby sessions included singing and rhymes (with actions) too.

Our plan was to produce material that parents and children could work on together and then take home to use afterwards to reinforce the session. Parents were keen to do this, and we found that leaving some to finish off at home meant that everyone could work at their own pace during the session. There was no budget for these activities, so everything we did was simple and used resources that we could assemble easily and quickly.

Everything worked out well and, as in the case of the owl baby puppets and the 'telescopes' for example, enhanced children's enjoyment of the story and encouraged them to join in with the action. The Shark in the Park session in the library also drew in as many library staff as could drop in for a few minutes, since they had kindly brought in the long cardboard tubes and were curious to see what they had been turned into.

During the library sessions, staff talked to parents about using books and libraries with their children. For parents, there were weekly '**Ready steady read (and coffee)**' book club sessions at the children's centre.

It wasn't all over in three weeks: families and staff at the centre chose extra books from an extended Got kids? Get reading! list which the library service agreed to buy extra books to lend to the children's centre over the next year.

## Outcomes

Although short, the project has led to closer working relationships between the children's centre and the library service and better mutual understanding of what each service offers. The Hollies appointed a member of staff as a 'library champion', and other children's centres have followed this model. This member of staff took on the work of liaising with the library service, enthusing groups and staff to visit the library and use books in the Centre, and generally being a brilliant library advocate.

Three years on, the library has just had a large display of children's work and the tutor of one of the parent and baby groups visits the library to focus on sharing books and rhymes with babies in the sessions. The various groups that meet in the centre continue to visit the library to spend time exploring and sharing and borrowing books, a habit that they renewed during the project.

Until SureStart funding finished in September 2006, the SureStart mobile library visited The Hollies regularly. The various groups, particularly families, came to choose, exchange and talk about books and to take part in story-reading sessions with mobile library staff. A direct

result of the project is that the Skills for Life tutor uses library books to encourage learners to share books with their children. One parent told the mobile staff that since the project she had been reading to her child every night, which she had never done before. When the mobile service came to an end, parents and children were encouraged to visit the library as well as use the books in the Centre.

The library's collection of books was kept in the library for a while after the project and then moved to the mobile. It has circulated around other libraries as a collection and is currently in a small library near to a fairly new children's centre. The Hollies' books have remained in the entrance foyer. The Hollies has bought an eye-catching bookcase and notice board which displays information about libraries and Bookstart. The rainbow book recommendations display was thought up, created and owned by the parents. As one parent said, *'It's easy to access and I have had a lot of fun doing the notice board' also that she had 'a lot of enjoyment seeing other people use it.'*

Having the collection of books always available and the rainbow display open to contributions made it easy for children's centre staff to open up conversations about reading, language and learning opportunities. Families are still encouraged to dip into the books while they drop off and meet children or to borrow them to take home. Similar collections made up from the SureStart mobile library books have now been set up at other children's centres in Taunton. The Hollies appointed a member of staff as a 'library champion' in the centre, which again has been used as a model in other children's centres.

## Resources and staffing

Through Got kids? Get reading! funding, Somerset Libraries provided:

- Two collections of books
- 50 packs for families
- Posters
- Stickers and other support material

Somerset Libraries also purchased a further lending collection for the children's centre. The senior family support worker at the centre organised and enthused the participating groups, and families and office staff at the centre oversaw the book collection and the honesty issue book for families who took books home.

Library staff and the SureStart library project officer took on the story/activity sessions as part of their normal outreach, in a more concentrated way than is usually possible. It took two early evenings after work (3 hrs) planning the sessions and their contents. Those running individual sessions assembled and prepared their resources – approx. 20 mins. Per session.

The SureStart mobile library added the visit to the Centre for the launch to its normal route. The FLLN co-ordinator helped to plan the sessions and the project, but was unable to provide input during the project due to illness. The plan was to offer an assessment to the parents during the coffee sessions, and then develop appropriate learning plans.

## Partners

- The Hollies Children's Centre, Taunton (staff and parents)
- Somerset Libraries (Cultural Service)
- SureStart Taunton

- Somerset Adult Learning and Leisure Skills for Life
- Early Years FLLN Co-ordinator

## Challenges/lessons learnt

The short, intense period of the project was a challenge. A longer project would have potential for more co-ordination of input from partners, preparation for participants and evaluation. With hindsight, the library might have chosen to work with just one of the groups within the centre in the time available, rather than all four. Due to illness, the Skills for Life strand of the project could not be achieved.

For this project's purposes, the Got kids? Get reading! collection did not include enough books for very young children.

## The future

As the work of children's centres develops, the library service hopes to continue to work in partnership as a community resource. The library service is represented on some children's centre forums. Settings within children's centres borrow collections of books from local libraries for group use. Although capacity is limited, librarians visit settings in centres and encourage families to become active library users and to enjoy sharing books. Libraries welcome group visits from children's centres.