Evaluation of Small Steps Big Changes

Annual Report 2022

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Contents

Executive summary

Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC) is a 10-year programme hosted by Nottingham CityCare Partnership and funded by The National Lottery Community Fund's 'A Better Start' programme. The programme operates across four wards in Nottingham - Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green and Arboretum, and St Ann's. It aims to improve outcomes for expectant parents and children from birth to three years old in the areas of diet and nutrition, social and emotional skills and language and communication skills. It also aims to bring about system change by 'tipping the system on its head' and empowering parents, communities, and workforces to coproduce services and achieve together. Small Steps Big Changes commissions a range of services and activities (for further details please see: www.smallstepsbigchanges.org.uk) to achieve these aims. This report presents the findings from the evaluations of the Family Mentor Service, Story and Rhyme Time and Family Mentor group activities delivered online.

Evaluation of the Family Mentor Service

Family Mentors are a paid peer workforce who have been employed by local voluntary and community sector organisations (The Toy Library, Home-Start and Framework HA) who were awarded the Family Mentor contracts by SSBC. Family Mentors are local parents and grandparents who have been employed to support children's development through the delivery of early intervention services and activities (i.e., the Small Steps at Home Programme and group activities) focused on improving nutrition, communication and language skills and social and emotional development.

Aim

To explore what parents and Family Mentors think are the important factors that need to be taken into consideration when setting up a Family Mentor Service (for the delivery of the Small Steps at Home programme and group activities) in terms of Family Mentor qualifications, training, work experience, experience of parenting and personal qualities; diversity of Family Mentors; matching of Family Mentors to families; continuity of Family Mentor throughout families participation in the Small Steps at Home programme and Family Mentor caseloads.

Method

A mixed methods approach was adopted that included:

- A questionnaire for parents who had taken part in Small Steps at Home and/or had attended Family Mentor group activities; and

- Focus groups with Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams.

Parents were invited to complete a questionnaire that examined their views and opinions of the Family Mentor workforce. The questionnaire was sent out by SSBC directly to all parents who had participated in the Small Steps at Home programme (and consented to being contacted). A link to the questionnaire was made available online through SSBC's Facebook account. In this part of the evaluation, those who completed at least 50% of the online questionnaire were included as otherwise the sample size would be smaller and information lost. The final sample size was 58. Throughout the relevant section of this report, percentages based on the number of parents who answered each question of the online questionnaire are presented.

Members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams and Family Mentors from The Toy Library, Framework HA and Home-Start were invited to participate in an online interview or attend an online focus group. The aim of the interviews and focus groups was to explore their perceptions of the factors that need to be taken into consideration when setting up a Family Mentor Service. Sixteen Family Mentors participated in a focus group and five members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams participated in an interview.

Key findings: parents' questionnaire

The key findings from the parents' questionnaire are summarised below:

1. The majority of the parents would like to have the same Family Mentor throughout their participation in the Small Steps at Home programme. They also would like to take part in choosing their Family Mentor.
2. The majority of the parents would like to have a Family Mentor who has similar characteristics with them in terms of gender, language, culture/religion and area of residency.
3. The majority of parents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that it is important that Family Mentors come from a wide range of backgrounds (e.g., ethnicity, culture, religion, gender).

4. The majority of parents participating in the Small Steps at Home programme prefer the home visits from their Family Mentors in comparison to online and over the telephone. Attendance is higher for the face-to-face groups compared to the online groups.

5. The majority of parents would like Family Mentors to continue to run the groups instead of another person or professional. Although some of the groups delivered by Family Mentors are popular (e.g., Baby Massage, Story and Rhyme Time, and Cook and Play), the popularity of some of the groups (e.g., Chatterpillars) is low.

6. With regards to the qualifications of Family Mentors, families would like to see a Family Mentor with practical experience (either lived or by training) in working with children and families but not necessarily with an official degree in these.

7. Finally, for the majority of the parents, being a good communicator, friendly person, having a professional attitude, being non-judgmental, a good listener, supportive, trustworthy, knowledgeable, flexible, passionate and committed to mentoring, compassionate and sympathetic, confident, treating others as equals and reassuring were fairly or very important.

Recommendations: parents' questionnaire

- Where a change of Family Mentor is required, delivery providers should continue to ensure the current Family Mentor arranges a meeting with the family to introduce their new Family Mentor.

- It is recommended that Small Steps at Home visits should, in the main, take place in the families' homes as this is parents preferred delivery method (taking necessary precautions to prevent spreading the Covid-19 virus).

- SSBC alongside delivery providers should investigate why attendance at some groups is low and encourage parents to attend more groups, which are freely available to them, to increase the effect of the groups on SSBC children's outcomes.

- Face-to-face groups appear to have better attendance rates and it is recommended that the groups are delivered face-to-face as much as possible to increase their effects.

Key findings: focus groups and interviews with Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams

Key findings from the focus groups with Family Mentors and interviews with members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams are summarised below.

1. Prior educational qualifications were not deemed necessary for the role of Family Mentor. However, good literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to undertake the training required were considered important. Training was considered to be of very high quality; however, it was suggested that refresher training and additional training in time management and organisational skills, resilience and signposting to other services would be beneficial. Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams were keen for the training undertaken to be formally recognised as a qualification.

2. The personal qualities considered necessary for the role of a Family Mentor were: being relatable, approachable, friendly, empathetic, understanding, creative, compassionate, flexible, confident, adaptable, having good people skills and being non-judgemental. Personal skills identified as being crucial to the role were: time management and organisational skills; assertiveness; resilience; and being able to work as part of a team.

3. While Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams were all agreed that it was an advantage for Family Mentors to be from the local area (as they understood the community they live in) there were disadvantages with Family Mentors not always feeling that they can switch off. Recruiting Family Mentors from a diverse range of backgrounds was considered very important and it was felt the diversity of the teams supported the matching process. All areas felt the matching process was effective and worked well.

4. Families having the same Family Mentor throughout their participation in the Small Steps at Home programme was identified as being key to the building up of a trusting relationship. However, there could be difficulties with continuity due to sickness absences and Family Mentors leaving. Nevertheless, there were systems in place to address the transition to a new or temporary alternative Family Mentor.

5. Family Mentors' caseloads were deemed to be manageable due to delivery partners being well-funded services. However, there could be temporary problems caused by sickness absence, Family Mentors leaving and when Family Mentors take on several new families in a relatively short space of time. The key to ensuring Family Mentor caseloads were manageable was good supervision and reviews of caseloads.

6. It was suggested that one of the reasons for the success of the Family Mentor service is because it is a universal service and not targeted. Removing the universal element could affect the uptake from families.

Recommendations: focus groups and interviews with Family Mentors and members of the Senior Leadership Teams

- Consider providing additional training in time management and organisational skills, resilience and signposting to other services.
- Explore the need for refresher training where there is a gap between initial training and commencing the role of a Family Mentor.
- Investigate whether good English literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to undertake training are detailed in job specification and description and if not whether they should be included as part of the essential or desirable criteria.
- It is recommended that caseloads continue to be regularly reviewed.
- It is advised that the Family Mentor Service remains a universal service.
- Explore the possibility of accreditation for Family Mentor training.

Evaluation of Story and Rhyme Time

Story and Rhyme Time is a reading and singing programme delivered via community group sessions. It provides parents with the opportunity to spend time with their child developing positive interactions through stories and rhymes. It is proposed that these interactions can then be adopted at home. This is supported by providing parents with materials to use in their home.

Each session lasts for between 60 and 90 minutes and is led by a least two Family Mentors who are trained to develop age specific guidance to parents and their children. Each session is supported with a session plan which details the resources and songs that could be used.

Aim

The evaluation explores the impact of Story and Rhyme Time in relation to the improvement in children's and parents' outcomes from the perspective of Family Mentors and Parents. There was exploration of the new online programme and face-to-face sessions Pre-COVID, which examined the outcomes of the programme including the delivery of sessions; Speech, language and communication; and Social and Emotional development.

Method

Data was collected using one-to-one qualitative semi-structured interviews. Interviews explored the participants experiences and thoughts on the benefits and limitations of Story and Rhyme Time.

Family Mentors and Parents were both asked their views in relation to both Child and Parent outcomes. Interviews took place either on the telephone or face-to-face after Story and Rhyme time sessions. Participants were recruited either via direct contact (Family Mentors) or recruitment at Story and Rhyme time sessions (Parents). The final sample includes 14 parents and seven Family Mentors.

Key findings: Family Mentors' interviews

Family Mentors suggested that:

1. Story and Rhyme Time enables parents to interact with their children through stories and rhymes whilst giving them the tools to do this at home.
2. There is a flexible approach to the structure and delivery of Story and Rhyme Time sessions. In practice this meant the sessions often did not involve the key features such as mark making, had limited stories and/or rhymes and often focussed more upon free play.
3. Sessions commonly revolved around stories with related rhymes and used props to encourage engagement.
4. Engaging children was difficult during online sessions, although there was a recognition that they reduced anxiety for parents.
5. Children's speech, language and communication was improved during sessions, and this would be particularly beneficial for young children when they attend nursery.
6. Children's social and emotional development was improved as a result of the sessions, particularly in terms of the confidence they gained. Sessions also improved children's interaction with others and concentration skills developed by listening to stories.
7. Parents social and emotional lives were positively affected and gave them confidence to read with their children.
8. Parents became less isolated because of attendance at the sessions.
9. Parents gained tools to help them develop their children's outcomes at home, particularly in relation to modelling and reading techniques.

Key findings: parents' interviews

Parents suggested that:

1. The focus of Story and Rhyme time sessions is somewhat confused. Parents were unsure what sessions should include. It is clear that parents felt nursery rhymes were the focus,

but it remained unclear as to whether stories and mark making should be included in sessions.

2. Sessions were often more about free play with a story at the end of the sessions.

3. Online sessions were useful and helped the children to interact with Family Mentors.

4. Children's communication skills had been developed through engagement with books. However, this did not occur in all sessions as Family Mentors sometimes read the stories without any discussion.

5. Children's language had been improved by attending the sessions, this was particularly noted by parents for whom English was not their primary language.

6. Children's emotional development had benefitted from session attendance. This was noted in terms of the relaxed atmosphere created at sessions and also interaction with others which children had missed as a result of the pandemic lockdowns.

7. Children had become more confident and more willing to explore during sessions.

8. Children's fine motor skills improved as a result of the interactions during sessions such as using shakers and rattles.

9. Children learned about the importance of books. Parents found this valuable due to the learning benefits from books at an early age including associating words with images.

10. Parents learned skills during sessions which were useful for home learning including singing and reading skills.

11. Parents' own speech, language and communication skills have been improved, particularly for those who don't speak English as their first language.

12. Attending sessions had reduced parents' social isolation, provided them with an opportunity to make new friends and allowed them to build their confidence in reading whilst being with other parents.

Recommendations

- The Story and Rhyme Time sessions become more uniform if they are to be delivered as Story and Rhyme Time. Sessions that resemble free play should perhaps be reframed to reflect this as they will not lead to the same outcomes as Story and Rhyme sessions.

- Related to point one, both parents and Family Mentors need to be supported to recognise the importance of certain aspects of Story and Rhyme which must be delivered to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, Story and Rhyme needs to include Stories (from books), nursery rhymes/singing and mark making, as these have all been shown to be effective.

- Family Mentors need to be supported to communicate to parents the importance of reading to young children and how this helps their development.
- Additional training sessions should be provided for Family Mentors in the delivery of the sessions to ensure they are interacting well with the stories. Dialogical reading was highlighted as an aspect of Story and Rhyme Time that is evidenced in research and Family Mentors need to ensure that this is always pursued.
- There should be consistency in relation to the inclusion of mark making during sessions. It is unclear whether Story and Rhyme Time sessions should include mark making. It has been shown to be beneficial but at present appears to be used only within free play time.
- SSBC should consider whether sessions could continue both online and in person. Although Family Mentors preferred face-to-face sessions, the parents could see benefits of both, particularly with regards to accessibility.

Evaluation of online group activities delivered by Family Mentors

Small Steps Big Changes' (SSBC) Family Mentors deliver group activities to expectant parents and children from birth to three years old across four wards in Nottingham - Aspley, Bulwell, Hyson Green and Arboretum and St Ann's. These group activities aim to improve outcomes for children in the areas of diet and nutrition, social and emotional skills, and language and communication skills. Due to Government restrictions, put in place to stop the spread of Coronavirus, all face-to-face group activities delivered by Family Mentors ceased temporarily. Some groups were moved online and delivered via Zoom. The groups delivered via Zoom varied by area but included: Baby Massage, Cook and Play, Story and Rhyme Time, Active Play, Messy Play, Baby Play, Fun with Friends and Jiggle and Wiggle.

Aim

The aim of this evaluation was to explore parents' and staffs' perceptions of the online activity groups delivered by Family Mentors, including implementation and delivery of the online groups, strengths and weaknesses of the online groups, levels of engagement and interaction, and outcomes for children.

Method

The evaluation team undertook interviews with 12 parents who attended online groups activities, and focus groups and interviews were carried out with 10 Family Mentors and four members of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams, involved in delivering these groups.

Key findings

1. The online groups were set up in response to the Coronavirus pandemic and the restrictions put in place. As a result, the Family Mentor workforce did not have ample opportunity to prepare in advance for the delivery of groups online and most had no experience delivering groups online. There were challenges, including differing levels of confidence and abilities delivering groups online and access to necessary resources, e.g., laptops and cameras. Training was provided, but in general this was after online groups had commenced and the Family Mentors would have welcomed further training in Zoom and basic IT skills. In the main the online groups ran smoothly, however there were difficulties including: unreliable internet connections, background noise and concerns that families could not always see and hear the Family Mentors properly.

2. The privacy of the Family Mentors delivering the groups online and the families attending the online groups was a concern. Parents were asked not to record sessions or take photographs and at times were asked to turn off their cameras and microphones to protect their privacy. In addition, login details and passwords were provided in order to ensure that only families that had registered to attend the online groups did so.

3. Baby Massage classes were well attended, and it was suggested that this is because they were more convenient for new parents who were not required to get their new-born baby ready to leave the house or travel anywhere. The home environment could also be less stressful for parents with new-borns, compared to face-to-face group settings, particularly where they were concerned that they would be judged if they went to a class and their baby started to cry. The disadvantages of Baby Massage online were the limited visibility and communication between the Family Mentors and parents in comparison to face-to-face sessions. Two wards mentioned the possibility of streaming face-to-face Baby Massage sessions in the future, so that parents at home can join in if they prefer this option to face-to-face classes.

4. Cook and Play was pre-recorded and posted on Facebook in one ward and delivered in real-time in another. The latter was well attended, and it was suggested that this was because some parents feel more confident cooking in their own kitchens (rather than with others in a community kitchen). Another advantage was the additional space at home, that allowed them to cook with their own children (which was not always possible at face-to-face Cook and Play, as there is not often the space in community kitchens to accommodate all parents and children in attendance). Yet attending Cook and Play online from home could be challenging for parents who did not have another person to help take care of their child. Cook and Play online was also more costly and time consuming as Family Mentors were required to buy, pack, and deliver the ingredients to each family participating. It could also be challenging knowing whether or not families participated.

5. The success of Story and Rhyme Time was mixed. Some families who had not previously attended face-to-face Story and Rhyme Time, attended the online sessions. One possible reason given for this, was that it could be less intimidating for parents who may be concerned that their child may not sit and listen to a story in a face-to-face setting. Whilst some parents reported that their children enjoyed the sessions, there were difficulties engaging very young children in a story via video and the singing element of Story and Rhyme Time appeared to be more engaging for under 5s. An additional challenge for Family Mentors delivering Story and Rhyme Time online, was the concern that reading copyrighted

stories via a video conferencing facility could be breaking the law. Whilst all wards were back to delivering Story and Rhyme Time in face-to-face settings (as this was considered the most effective set up) making Story and Rhyme Time available in a pre-recorded video format for families to access at a later date, could be beneficial for those not able to attend groups in the day.

6. The play groups (i.e., Jiggle and Wiggle, Active Play and Messy Play) were well attended and supported families to be more active, however there were challenges. Family Mentors experienced difficulties maintaining children's engagement online when children could not interact directly with other families and Family Mentors.

7. Online groups were more convenient for parents with young children as they were not required to leave the home or travel. They were also more preferable to some parents, particularly those who lacked the confidence to attend face-to-face groups or had reservations about bringing their child to a face-to-face group. Online groups were also more preferable to fathers, with more attending online groups than face-to-face groups. Online groups can accommodate more families as they are not limited by venue capacities. However, whilst the online groups were popular, engagement waned over time and it was suggested that this was due to families losing interest in being online during the later stages of the pandemic.

8. For some parents accessing online groups was challenging. Whilst some parents had no difficulties, others experienced problems due to their lack of familiarity with the Zoom platform, unreliable internet connection, and lack of access to devices.

9. The online groups provided families with a connection to other families, which was appreciated by parents who could feel isolated during the pandemic. However, communication and interaction was minimal during online groups, especially in comparison to when they attended face-to-face groups (when these were possible). It was difficult for parents to develop friendships during online groups and they limited opportunities for children to socialise and interact with other children. Both Family Mentors and parents reported that groups via video were not as effective for engaging very young children as face-to-face groups.

10. Views about the impact of the online groups were mixed. Generally, the Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership team perceived the online groups to be less effective in developing children's outcomes, when compared with face-to-face groups. Children's communication and language development was deemed to have deteriorated as a result of their limited social interaction with other children and families. Baby Massage

classes were deemed to have been effective with parents reporting that they used the techniques learned to help ease their babies colic, stomachache, teething and constipation, and aided to relax and calm their babies. Outcomes for Cook and Play were mixed. Some parents reported making healthier choices and repeating the recipes they had learned during the sessions. However, the opportunity for children to interact and learn from each other was missing. There was very little feedback from parents in terms of outcomes for the Story and Rhyme Time group and the play groups. This could be because these groups were the ones that children struggled most to engage in, making it challenging for parents to reflect on whether they had made a difference to their children's outcomes.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the Family Mentor workforce have access to necessary equipment including laptops and cameras.
- Provide further general IT training and training in the Zoom video conferencing facility.
- Explore issues of copyright and privacy ensuring that there is guidance in place for the Family Mentors workforce and families.
- Consider offering both online and face-to-face Baby Massage groups.
- Consider offering evening online Baby Massage groups for parents who cannot attend during the day due to work commitments.
- Consider offering pre-recorded Story and Rhyme Time for parents who cannot attend during working hours.

Evaluation of the Family Mentor Service.

Introduction

This section of the report presents findings from an evaluation of the Family Mentor Service. Family Mentors are local parents and grandparents who have been employed to support children's development through the delivery of early intervention services and activities (i.e., the Small Steps at Home programme and group activities) focused on improving nutrition, communication and language skills, and social and emotional development. Family Mentors deliver programmes and activities across Bulwell, Aspley, Hyson Green and Arboretum and St Ann's. Family Mentors are a paid peer workforce who have been employed by local voluntary and community sector organisations (i.e., The Toy Library, Home-Start and Framework HA) who were awarded the Family Mentor contracts by SSBC.

Aim

To explore what parents, Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams think are the important factors that need to be taken into consideration when setting up a Family Mentor service (for the Small Steps at Home programme and group activities) in terms of:

- Educational qualifications and professional training (pre and post appointment);
- Work experience;
- Personal qualities;
- Experience of parenting or caring for a child;
- Lived experience of parenting locally;
- Recruiting Family Mentors from a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, culture and religion, and languages spoken;
- Continuity of Family Mentor (i.e., same Family Mentor throughout families participation in the Small Steps at Home programme);
- Matching families participation in the Small Steps at Home programme to Family Mentors; and
- Caseloads per Family Mentor (i.e., number of families allocated to a Family Mentor delivering Small Steps at Home).

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was adopted that included:

- A questionnaire for parents who have taken part in Small Steps at Home and/or have attended Family Mentor group activities.
- Focus groups with Family Mentors and interviews with members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams.

Data collection methods

Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed that explored parents' views and opinions of the Family Mentor workforce. A link to the questionnaire was sent out by SSBC directly to all parents who have participated in the Small Steps at Home programme (who consented to being contacted). The questionnaire link was also made available online through SSBC's Facebook page. The questionnaire took no longer than 15 minutes to complete. Details of participants demographics and characteristics are provided below.

Fifty-eight parents were included in the analysis.[1] The majority of the parents lived in Bulwell (31.6%)[2] followed by Aspley (24.6%), St Ann's (22.8%), Hyson Green and Arboretum (10.5%) and Other (10.5%). Since we asked the parents whether they had or have a Family Mentor, it seems that some parents who had a Family Mentor moved out of SSBC wards as six parents lived in other areas such as Broxtowe, Carlton, Forest Fields, Mapperley and Radford (see Table 1a). The majority of parents' first language was English (66%) while 34% of the parents spoke English as their second language (see Table 1b). Those who are aged[3] between 20 and 30 years made up 40.8% of the sample, while 59.2% of the sample were aged between 31 and 44 years. Only one parent was male (1.9%) while female parents made up 98.1% of those who replied to this question.

The majority of the parents were White (including English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, any other White background; 64.8%) followed by Asian (including Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, any other Asian background; 13.0%) and Mixed (including

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[1] The detailed profile of the parents (n=58; we included those who completed at least 50% of the questionnaire as otherwise the sample size would be smaller and we did not want to lose information) is presented in tables 1a - g.

[2] Throughout the report, we present percentages based on the number of parents who answered each question.

[3] The age question was an open-ended question, with no one under the age of 20 participating.

White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background; 13.0%). Black (including African, Caribbean, any other Black/African/Caribbean background) parents made up 7.4% of the sample who replied to this question. One parent (1.9%) preferred not to answer this question. In terms of representativeness of the sample regarding ethnicity in comparison to Nottingham population, White and Mixed ethnicity participants were not representative. White participants were under-sampled and Mixed ethnicity participants were over-sampled. However, Asian and Black ethnicity participants were representative of the Nottingham population. The majority of the parents were not in employment (50%) followed by those who worked part-time (31.5%), worked full-time (11.1%), or were students (7.4%). The majority of parents co-habited (35.2%), followed by those who were single (29.6%). Those who were married made up 24.1% of the sample who replied to this question.

Table 1a: What part of Nottingham do you live in?

	Number	Percentage
Bulwell	18	31.6
Aspley	14	24.6
St Ann's	13	22.8
Hyson Green or Arboretum	6	10.5
Other	6	10.5
Total	57	100.0

Table 1b: Is English your first language?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	35	66.0
No	18	34.0
Total	53	100.0

Table 1c: How old are you?

	Number	Percentage
20-30	20	40.8
31-44	29	59.2
Total	49	100.0

Table 1d: What is your gender?

	Number	Percentage

Male	1	1.9
Female	53	98.1
Total	54	100.0

Table 1e: What is your ethnicity?

	Number	Percentage
Asian/Asian British (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Chinese, any other Asian background)	7	13.0
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British (African, Caribbean, any other Black/African/Caribbean background)	4	7.4
Mixed/Multiple ethnic background (White and Black Caribbean, White and Black African, White and Asian, any other Mixed/Multiple ethnic background)	7	13.0
White (English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British, Irish, Gypsy or Irish Traveller, any other White background)	35	64.8
Prefer not to answer	1	1.9
Total	54	100.0

Table 1f: What is your current employment status?

	Number	Percentage
Employed full-time	6	11.1
Employed part-time	17	31.5
Not in employment	27	50.0
Student	4	7.4
Total	54	100.0

Table1g: What is your marital status?

	Number	Percentage
Married	13	24.1
Civil partnership	3	5.6
Co-habiting	19	35.2
Separated	1	1.9
Single	16	29.6
Prefer not to answer	2	3.7
Total	54	100.0

Managers and Family Mentors from the Toy Library, Frameworks HA and Home-Start were invited to participate in an online interview or attend a focus group. The aim of the interviews and focus groups was to explore their perceptions of the factors that need to be taken into consideration when setting up a Family Mentor Service. Sixteen Family Mentors participated in a focus group and five members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Teams participated in an interview. The interviews took approximately 30 minutes and the focus groups one hour. All interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams. Two focus groups were held via video using Microsoft Teams and one was undertaken face-to-face at the organisation's offices (covid restrictions had been lifted at this point to allow face-to-face data collection).

Data analysis

Parents questionnaire

Due to the small sample size, only descriptive statistics are reported, without conducting a statistical analysis.

Focus groups with Family Mentors and interviews with members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team

Thematic analysis of interviews and focus group transcripts was undertaken to identify patterns through a process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development. A deductive approach was undertaken in which data coding and theme development was directed by the research questions.

Ethics and consent

Informed consent was obtained from all participants (parents and staff). Participants were assured that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to and could withdraw from the study without giving a reason. With staff's consent, audio/video recordings of interviews and focus groups were undertaken. Recordings were stored securely on an NTU server. Transcription of the interviews and focus groups was carried out by an authorised secure university transcriber. Transcripts and data from the questionnaire were stored in a restricted folder on the NTU drive. All data was anonymised as soon as possible after collection. Participants were assigned a unique

identification number and data was stored against this number, rather than against the names of the participants.

Ethical approval was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the evaluation. The evaluation was also registered with the Research and Innovation Department within Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

Review of the literature

Introduction

The aim of this review is to gain an understanding of the role of a Family Mentor, and to explore the services Family Mentors provide. Kram and Isabella (1985) suggest that the word 'Mentor' has many and varied meanings to different people. Haggard et al., (2011) identified approximately 40 different definitions that have been used in Mentor literature since 1980, suggesting that there are a number of ways in which Mentors are defined. It seems that defining what a Mentor is forms an important part in understanding the service that mentors provide.

This review is structured into four sections. First, it identifies what mentoring is and considers different definitions of mentoring. It appears that mentoring, in its simplest form, takes place when one person imparts their knowledge to another person. Second, the review concentrates on the role of a Family Mentor; defining the role of a Family Mentor is crucial when identifying key elements that create and defines a good Family Mentoring Service. The third section looks at Mentoring Services with regard to the structure of the services Family Mentors may provide. Finally, the fourth section aims to identify what makes a good Mentor. There are key characteristics that appear to be essential when it comes to becoming a Family Mentor. Trust, commitment and team working skills are highlighted as the main characteristics vital for family mentoring, as shown in this section of the review.

Defining 'mentoring'

There are multiple definitions of the word 'mentoring', yet there has been little discussion or examination of the differences in these definitions (Haggard et al., 2011). However, Eby et al., (2007) have described how mentoring overlaps with, but is distinctly different from, other developmental

relationships such as role model–observer, teacher–student, advisor–advisee, supervisor–subordinate and coach–client. Furthermore, Wanberg et al., (2003) stated that while some researchers have criticised the lack of consistency in the definitions of mentoring, there does appear to be consistency in the general concept of mentoring. Nonetheless, Dougherty and Dreher (2007) noted the importance of understanding differences in Mentor definitions and called for a systematic examination of these differences and their potential impact.

Philip and Spratt (2007) stated that mentoring is the development of a trusting relationship between an older, more experienced person and a younger, less experienced person over an extended period of time, with the aim of providing social support. In addition, in other Mentor literature there has been some suggestion that mentoring occurs when a more experienced person (Mentor) takes an active interest in supporting and encouraging a less experienced person (mentee) by providing direction and feedback regarding their personal development (Eby et al., 2008; Ragins and Kram, 2007). Mentors can offer support functions in work-based situations such as sponsorship, coaching, exposure, visibility, protection, and challenging work assignments (Allen et al., 2004). Additionally, there has been some suggestion that mentoring in the workplace results in benefits such as increased job satisfaction, higher pay and more promotions for mentees (Allen et al., 2008; Eby et al., 2008; Underhill, 2006).

Huizing (2012) proposes that a mentoring relationship occurs between the Mentor who is "perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience" (p. 731) and the mentee who has fewer of these characteristics. Aspects of mentoring can occur in formal contexts, in which the Mentor is acting in a voluntary or paid capacity by an external organisation, or in natural contexts, usually involving a non-familial adult who is already present in the person's life (Philip 1999; Hall 2003). In addition, there are support functions that can enhance a person's sense of competence, identity, and effectiveness through acceptance, counselling and role modelling (Dougherty and Dreher, 2007; Dreher and Ash, 1990).

What is family mentoring?

This section of the literature review concentrates on the aims of family mentoring. The first sub-section concentrates specifically on Family Mentors. The second sub-section identifies key elements of peer mentoring. Peer mentoring has been included in this literature review because there seem to be some quite distinctive similarities between family and peer mentoring. A Family Mentor can be defined as someone who is an expert and has shared experience in family matters (Drabble et al.,

2016) whereas peer mentoring is defined as someone passing their knowledge on to others (Bryant and Terborg, 2008).

Family mentoring

Family mentoring can be described as a peer workforce who work alongside parents and their families, so that together they can improve outcomes for children and their families (Framework, 2021). Family mentoring can be a vital part in the support provided to children, young people and families (Family-action, 2021). Rhodes (2002) suggests that Mentors can reinforce parental advice, which mentees may be more open to when coming from an alternative adult figure, which helps with the mentees' need for continued support and connection. Sambunjak et al., (2010) propose that family mentoring can help individuals in all circumstances to develop skills and knowledge. The role of a Family Mentor involves taking the lead in activities and making a commitment to meet regularly with their mentee (Karcher et al., 2006). There may be some activities that are intended as teaching exercises, while other activities may simply be for fun.

It is thought that the holistic, family-centred approach and team skills required to be a Family Mentor make it most likely that those with higher levels of expertise will be most comfortable and proficient in their work (Allen et al, 1997). However, there has been some suggestion (Werner et al, 2007) that a common theme in family-centred systems is the perceived benefits that parents receive when engaging with Family Mentors. In addition, it appears that the best course of action is to engage parents in both the services and the outcomes when working with Family Mentors and agree on working towards a common goal (Huebner et al, 2018).

There has been research which shows that in minority communities the extended family have traditionally played an important role in raising children and providing support (Hirsch, et al., 2002; Sanchez and Reyes, 1999), which could be helpful in establishing the legitimacy of an older adult as a mentor. Karcher et al., (2006) suggest that family mentoring programmes should include Mentors that possess characteristics such as age, gender, and ethnicity which can be effective in contributing to positive outcomes in mentoring programmes. Therefore, it appears that, in providing an inclusive service, Mentors should consist of different genders, ages, and ethnicities, which may encourage a wider range of the community to become involved in the mentoring service. It appears that cultural engagement may play a role in whether the group mentoring experience promotes positive outcomes. However, other research found no evidence for racial or ethnic differences or the extent of group cultural diversity playing a role in the effectiveness of group mentoring (Sanchez and Colón, 2005).

Peer Mentoring

Peer mentoring is a one to one relationship that involves someone who has more experience in the service they are providing and teaching new skills and knowledge to those less experienced in the service that is being mentored (Bryant and Terborg, 2008). A Peer Mentor is a person who provides guidance, support, and practical advice to a mentee who is close in age and shares common characteristics or experiences (Beltman and Schaeben, 2012; Kram, 1983). Colvin and Ashman (2010) suggest that Peer Mentors identify with five roles: connecting link, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate and trusted friend.

The term 'peer mentoring' could suggest that Mentors and mentees are the same age, although this is not always the case (Karcher et al., 2006). The peer element of mentoring reflects the fact that the Mentors are a similar age or have had similar life experiences to the young people they are supporting (Mezey et al., 2015). Karcher (2005) proposed that peer mentoring should entail an older and wiser person as the Mentor. Godshalk and Sosik (2003) suggest that there are some hierarchical differences between the Mentor and mentee and that this could be interpreted as allowing for a more experienced peer to serve as a Mentor. Additionally, being a role model is an important dimension of the mentoring relationship (Kram and Isabella, 1985). Minor (2007) put forward a suggestion that the Peer Mentor role is fundamentally based on having an experienced peer interact with the mentees, sharing their knowledge and experience, and thus improving the mentees' understanding and learning. It is thought that the more the mentees can identify with the Mentor, the more receptive they will be to the Mentor's efforts to support them (Minor, 2007).

What makes a good Family Mentor Service?

This section of the review provides an insight into the services that family mentoring provides and aims to identify key elements that may need to be considered when delivering a Family Mentor Service.

There are a number of elements that make a good Family Mentor Service, such as the contents of the service and the structure of the delivery of the Family Mentor Service. In addition, there needs to be consideration of where the family mentoring sessions should take place to ensure smooth delivery of activities. Group-based mentoring programmes appear to be the most popular option in the delivery of Family Mentor Services, therefore group-based mentoring is evaluated. To conclude this section there is an examination of the family mentoring organisation itself, exploring the role that skills and knowledge of the management that plays in the success of a Family Mentor Service.

Mentoring Services

The structure of mentoring programmes should be a key element when considering delivery of a Family Mentor Service, to enable Mentors and mentees to gain the most benefits. For example, the type of mentoring of the programme on offer along with the nature of the mentoring sessions, the programme goals and the expected outcomes for Mentors and mentees (Karcher et al., 2006). Mentoring may be open to all programme participants as one of several primary activities, or it may be used as a secondary prevention strategy (Cavell and Hughes, 2000). In some mentoring services, eligibility for matching Mentors occurs after a period of participation in other programmes (Emshoff et al., 2003). In other instances, mentoring may be the primary vehicle through which skills training or other programme components are offered (King et al, 2002) or additionally may serve as the point of entry for accessing other services (Bettencourt et al, 1998).

Good organisation seems to be an important part of ensuring the success of any Family Mentor Service. Karcher et al., (2006) suggests that the Family Mentors that are involved in the running of the service can mean the difference between confusion and clear-cut expectations of the programmes being delivered. Leake et al., (2012) cautions Mentors may be prone to do things for parents rather than empower parents and support their autonomy, therefore suggesting the need to focus on ensuring that Mentors teach parents to advocate for themselves.

Group based mentoring

Mentoring provides the capacity to learn wisdom and experience from another who has been there and done that (Dansky, 1996; Russell and Adams, 1997). Therefore, it would seem that if one of the goals of mentoring is to secure the wisdom and experience of others, group mentoring, where the wisdom and experience of multiple people is available, would appear to bring a greater outcome (Huizing, 2012). Sipe and Roder (1999) have estimated that 20% of all mentoring organisations employ group mentoring as part of their programme, suggesting that group based mentoring is a popular choice for mentoring programmes.

Group mentoring may have several advantages when compared with other delivery methods. Herrera et al., (2002) have stated that group mentoring contributes to improved relationships by fostering positive peer interactions. The group setting can provide a safe environment in which to test social skills and for the mentees to receive constructive feedback from peers (Yalom, 1995), that can then be generalised to other settings. As is the case for other non-traditional approaches to structuring mentoring relationships, group mentoring has not been defined consistently, and the literature on it is only beginning to move beyond descriptive studies to examine potential

mechanisms and outcomes of this approach (Herrera et al., 2002; Rhodes, 2002). Group mentoring programmes are typically site-based in either school or community settings; groups engage in activities, both structured and unstructured, ranging from academic to social (Herrera et al., 2000). 'Site-based mentoring' broadly refers to those programmes in which Mentors and mentees interact primarily in one of a variety of specific mentoring sites, including schools, community agencies, youth development centres, religious contexts, the workplace, and hospitals or clinics (Karcher et al., 2006). In addition, school-based mentoring refers to programmes that take place on school grounds (Sipe and Roder, 1999).

Management

Family Mentor Services should be well managed as this may promote accuracy and efficiency; along with establishing credibility which enables managers to progress effectively and identify areas that need improvement (Karcher et al., 2006). There may be some Family Mentors who may lack the peer support and professional development experiences needed to be effective in their role (Maher et al., 1998). This suggests that responsibility rests with the managers to create an environment in which there is openness to learning and support, along with the opportunity for Family Mentors to learn from one another and discuss shared strategies (Davies, 2007). Thus, it appears managers of mentoring services need to be aware of the needs of individual Family Mentors to facilitate their development of competencies and expertise. King et al., (2007) suggests that managers need to provide appropriate formal and informal professional development experiences for Family Mentors, which allows them time to facilitate a learning-based and supportive team environment. Furthermore, other managerial considerations could include building an effective team; engaging in succession planning to ensure the transfer of expertise; and ensuring time for role release training (Foley, 1990). In addition, it is important to provide opportunities to encourage reflection and self-development that provide support, training and development of expertise for Family Mentors, that has potential payoffs for children, families and the community (King et al., 2009). Finally, Family Mentor Service providers should have sufficient resources and funding to commit to training, manage and monitoring the intervention, including the provision of a Project Manager whose role would be to coordinate the programme (Rainer et al., 2008).

Maher et al., (1998) stresses the importance of training Mentors as there may be some that may lack the peer support or professional development experiences needed to be effective in their role (Maher et al., 1998). Alberta, et al., (2012) suggest that there may be some personnel challenges of hiring Family Mentors into professional systems, as they argue that, although they may have experience, this may be their only official credential. However, the value of shared experiences

between Family Mentors and parents is critical in inspiring trust and hope (Drabble et al., 2016). It appears that an important consideration in family mentoring is having a safe space for participants and Family Mentors to feel they can share their experiences without judgement and enable groups activities to have an element of confidentiality (Karcher et al., 2006). As a result, it seems it is crucial to provide sufficient screening, training, support and supervision to Family Mentors, to ensure their commitment and emotional well-being throughout a mentoring programme (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2010).

What makes a good Mentor?

A Family Mentor's role includes building caring relationships with parents and engaging them in services. This can be achieved by putting parents in charge to promote their autonomy and confidence and provide guidance to parents which can decrease their uncertainty about the mentoring services (Huebner et al, 2018). To enable a Family Mentor to build on developing relationships with parents and family members, there appears to be a set of common characteristics that Family Mentors share. The following section discusses common characteristics that are needed to make a good Family Mentor. In addition, during the literature review there appeared to be three main characteristics that stood out to be important: trust, commitment and teamwork. These three key characteristics are discussed in the following section.

Mentoring characteristics

There are a number of key attributes that a Family Mentor should possess, including being enthusiastic about their role, valuing learning, being active listeners and treating others respectfully (Haggard et al, 2011). These characteristics enable the Family Mentors to work with individuals in a professional and enthusiastic way. King et al., (2007) suggest that Mentors in general should have competencies that go beyond basic knowledge and skills and include personal qualities such as: empathy; self-awareness; emotional self-control; sensitivity; interacting with authenticity; listening effectively; facilitation skills; and interpersonal communication skills. The skills necessary for effective teamwork include listening and communication skills; negotiation skills; skills in giving and receiving feedback and skills in resolving conflicts and reaching consensus (King et al., 2008). Additionally, Family Mentors need to be aware of their own comfort zone in delivering interventions from other disciplines (Haggard et al., 2011). It appears that Family Mentor services have benefits for families, including less intrusion on family life and better outcomes for children due to more coherent intervention plans and holistic service delivery (King et al, 2009). This suggests that Family

Mentor Services should be tailored to meet the needs of both children and families to ensure they receive the best outcome.

Several studies have outlined the characteristics of good Mentors, including personal characteristics, interpersonal abilities, and professional status. In a qualitative study of nomination letters for a mentorship award, investigators concluded that good Mentors should exhibit admirable personal qualities, act as career guides, make time commitments, support personal and professional balance, and role model good mentoring (Cho et al, 2011). Metzey et al., (2015) suggest that, when it comes to characteristics of Mentors, attention should be given to selecting Mentors who are most resilient, who are empathic and who themselves have good coping styles and high levels of self-esteem.

Trust

Pascarelli (1998) states that Mentors establish trust, demonstrate empathy, and function as a guide, advocate and supporter to their mentees. Trust in Mentors may benefit those being mentored, by increasing motivation to participate and willingness to take advice and guidance from Mentors and use leaders as a model for healthy relationships (Griffith and Larson, 2016). Sears et al., (2017) found that Child Welfare Mentor Teams needed time to develop trust, and that, as a consequence, supervisors had to encourage mentor teams to talk about personal struggles that affected their work. Central to the success of mentoring programmes is the quality of the mentoring relationship (Chesmore et al., 2017). Specifically, the strength, length, and closeness of the mentoring relationship are key factors that contribute to mentoring's effectiveness (Herrara et al., 2013). According to the Rhodes model of mentoring influence, the elements of a successful mentoring relationship are mutuality, trust, and empathy (Rhodes, 2002). Therefore, it appears that the mentoring relationship itself presents potential challenges in terms of the Mentor and mentee building rapport and trust and maintaining a strong emotional connection (Mezey et al., 2015). When Mentors and mentees develop a trusting and connected relationship, where they feel safe and express their feelings and receive feedback from their Mentors, this can contribute to positive developmental change (Rhodes, 2002).

Commitment

One of the key elements for Mentors is commitment, which in turn may help them feel satisfied in their role, better performers and less likely to leave their organisation (Meyer et al., 2002). Commitment between employees and their organisation is characterised by having a strong acceptance and support of the organisation's goals and values, along with a strong desire to maintain membership in the organisation (Meyer and Allen, 1991). Therefore, it could be argued

that effective commitment is based on an individual's "emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation" (Meyer and Allen, 1991, p. 67). Consideration is needed regarding Mentors and their commitment to their role. The early or unplanned termination of a mentoring relationship is likely to impact detrimentally on a mentee, potentially resulting in feelings of rejection and reduced sense of self-worth (Satchwell et al., 2006; Goldner and Mayseless, 2009). In addition, research suggests that an important way in which any organisations can foster commitment amongst their employees is through staff mentoring (Donaldson et al., 2000; Payne and Huffman, 2005).

Teamwork

The ability to collaborate and work well with others is a key factor in mentoring programmes (Briggs, 1997). Others have pointed to the importance of the interdependence among team members, along with the Family Mentors' interchangeable roles and responsibilities, and the need for them to exchange information, knowledge, and skills (Costarides et al., 1998; Moodley et al., 2000). King et al., (2009) suggests that theories and skills can be taught to any person who is receptive to learning, whereas the teamwork involved in family mentoring requires clear communication of team members' roles and responsibilities. There appears to be some suggestion around the importance of collective teamwork. As O'Reilly (2001) suggests, an important feature in Family Mentoring Services is the ongoing interaction among team members from different disciplines, enabling them to pool and exchange information, knowledge and skills, and work together cooperatively. As Foley's (1990) suggest it is the role of collaborative professional teamwork that makes an effective mentoring service a success.

Summary

In this literature review, the definition of mentoring has been discussed to enable a deeper understanding of the role of 'Mentor'. There is particular focus on the definitions of the word 'Mentor' as the term appears to mean the same across disciplines; a person helping another person. Trust, commitment to the role and team working are highlighted as key elements in enabling an effective mentoring relationship. However, there appears to be more to providing an excellent Family Mentor Service than relying on the characteristics of the Mentors. The service that the Mentors are providing is also key to providing a successful mentoring programme and this appears to include all those individuals who are working in the service, from management to Mentors to mentees. Therefore, this literature review has highlighted a number of key elements that are needed to enable a successful Family Mentor service. These are summarised below:

- The aim of a Family Mentor is to work with families through providing support for children and families. Family Mentors take the lead in structuring the context of the programmes making them fit for a purpose that will support families.

- Planning programmes should be developed by Mentors and mentees to ensure they get the best outcomes for families and children. In addition, planning a Family Mentor Service will ensure the service is well organised and can enable parents to become empowered and feel supported by the Family Mentors.

- Site based and group-based family mentor programmes are the most popular choice for delivery as they provide a safe environment for all participants.

- Management can help to create an environment that supports Mentors and mentees in their openness which helps to develop their expertise, thus enabling potential payoffs for families.

- There are several key characteristics that Family Mentors should have. These are:
  - Valuing learning;
  - Being an active listener;
  - Able to treat others respectfully;
  - Empathy, and sensitivity towards others;
  - Self-awareness and emotional self-control;
  - Interacting with authenticity;
  - Interpersonal communication skills;
  - Excellent negotiation skills;
  - Resilience;
  - Good coping mechanisms; and
  - High levels of self-esteem.

Findings

Findings from the parents questionnaire

The following section, reports findings from the online questionnaire that examined parents' experiences with Family Mentors.

Small Steps at Home is a home visiting programme delivered by Family Mentors and starts at 32 weeks pregnancy and runs until the child's 4th birthday. Each visit focusses on a range of topics, which are relevant to the child's age. The aim of the programme is to improve child development outcomes. The following findings explore the experiences of parents who had a Family Mentor, as

part of the Small Steps at Home programme, examining their perceptions in terms of the continuity of Family Mentor and important considerations when being matched with a Family Mentor.

Question: If you had to have a change of Family Mentor what do you feel would make the transition process easier?

Parents were asked what would make the transition easier if they had to have a change of Family Mentor. They were allowed to select more than one option (see Table 2)[4]. The majority of parents said that they would prefer being introduced to the new Family Mentor by their current Family Mentor (39.7%) followed by having a discussion with the delivery provider as to who will be their new Family Mentor (36.2%). They also preferred to receive a phone call from the new Family Mentor prior to their first visit (34.5%).

If a parent ticked the 'Other' option, we asked them to provide details. One parent wanted to have an explanation as to why they could no longer have their current Family Mentor. One parent noted their positive experience regarding the change of their Family Mentor with the help of the delivery provider. Finally, one parent noted that the delivery provider monitor the quality of the relationship between the Family Mentor and the family and intervene if the relationship deteriorates.

Table 2: If you had to have a change of Family Mentor what do you feel would make the transition process easier?

	Number	Percentage
Discussion with delivery provider as to who will be your new Family Mentor	21	36.2
Information from the delivery provider regarding the new Family Mentor	17	29.3
Introduction to the new Family Mentor by your current Family Mentor	23	39.7
Phone call from the new Family Mentor prior to their first visit	20	34.5
Other	4	6.9
Prefer not to answer	2	3.4
Total	58	100.0

Question: Is it important to you that you see the same Family Mentor throughout your participation in the Small Steps at Home Program?

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[4] Therefore, the sum of number of parents who ticked each answer does not add up to 58, which is the total sample size

Parents were asked whether it was important to them that they see the same Family Mentor throughout their participation in the Small Steps at Home programme. The majority of parents (86%) said that it was important for them to see the same Family Mentor. Four per cent of the parents said it was not important. Finally, eleven per cent of the parents said that it was neither important nor unimportant. Reasons for wanting the same Family Mentor included: feeling comfortable, consistency and having someone to report on their (both parent and child) progress.

Table 3: Is it important to you that you see the same Family Mentor throughout your participation in the Small Steps at Home Programme?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	49	86.0
No	2	3.5
Neither important nor unimportant	6	10.5
Total	57	100.0

Question: How important do you feel the following factors are when matching a family with a Family Mentor?

Parents were asked how important some factors, such as gender, language, culture, religion, area of residency were when being matched to a Family Mentor as part of their participation in the Small Steps at Home programme. The findings are presented below.

Forty-six per cent of the parents said that it is fairly or very important for them to have a Family Mentor of the same gender. Twenty-eight per cent of the parents said that it is not at all important to have a Family Mentor of the same gender. Parents were asked to give a reason for their answers. Those who were in favour of having a Family Mentor of the same gender gave the following reasons: feeling comfortable, having similar experiences, better understanding between women, being a single parent, and being able to discuss giving birth and breastfeeding. These answers reflect that some women are more comfortable with a female Family Mentor due to shared experiences such as labour and breast feeding. In addition, one parent noted that they feel comfortable with a Family Mentor of the same gender due to being autistic. However, some of the parents noted that the gender does not matter as long as the Family Mentor can give support to them and are knowledgeable. It should be noted that only one parent was male, meaning only he actually had experience of a different gender Family Mentor, considering that all Family Mentors are female. He said that it was not at all important to have a Family Mentor of the same gender.

Table 4: The Family Mentor is the same gender as me

	Number	Percentage
Very important	14	24.6
Fairly important	12	21.1
Low importance	6	10.5
Not at all important	16	28.1
Neither important nor unimportant	8	14.0
Prefer not to answer	1	1.8
Total	57	100.0

Parents were asked how important it was for their Family Mentor to speak their first language. Forty per cent of those parents whose first language is not English said that having a Family Mentor who is able to speak their first language is fairly or very important. Thirty per cent of them said that it is not important at all (see Table 5).

Parents were also asked whether they could give a reason for their answer. The main reason given by those who said that it is important for them to have a Family Mentor who is able to speak their first language is ease of communication. One of the parents who said that it is not important at all to have a Family Mentor who is able to speak their first language noted that they would have no service if they would speak their first language. This means that some parents might be reporting unimportance of having a Family Mentor who is able to speak their first language due to the fears of not being able to receive the service.

Table 5: The Family Mentor is able to speak my first language

Is English your first language		Very important	Fairly important	Low importance	Not at all important	Neither important nor unimportant	Total
No	Number	4	3	5	6	0	18
	Percentage	22.2	16.7	27.8	33.3	0.0	100.0

Parents were asked about the importance of their Family Mentor having an understanding of their family's cultural and/or religious background. Fifty per cent of the parents said that seeing a Family Mentor who has an understanding of their family's culture and/or religious background is fairly or very important. Fourteen per cent of the parents said that it is not at all important. Those who said it is important for them to have a Family Mentor who has an understanding of their family's cultural and/or religious background provided the following reasons: Family Mentors can understand the choices of families, give tailored advice to families and care for the family holistically. In other words,

a Family Mentor with the same religion or culture can understand some differences in culture that might exist, relate, and help families. In addition, some parents noted that they would not want to be offended through the Mentor's lack of knowledge or collide on issues due to cultural differences. Some parents stated that as long as there is a mutual respect and Family Mentors are willing to learn their culture/religion, it is not that important to have a Family Mentor who starts off with an understanding of their family's cultural and/or religious background.

Table 6: The Family Mentor has an understanding of my family's cultural and/or religious background

	Number	Percentage
Very important	14	24.1
Fairly important	15	25.9
Low importance	11	19.0
Not at all important	8	13.8
Neither important nor unimportant	6	10.3
Don't know	3	5.2
Prefer not to answer	1	1.7
Total	58	100.0

Parents were asked how important it was for their Family Mentor to be a member of their local community. Forty-seven per cent of the parents said that having a Family Mentor from their local community is fairly or very important. Twelve per cent of them said that it is not important at all. Those who said that it is important, to have a Family Mentor from their local community, gave the following reasons: If Family Mentors live/know their local area/environment or have worked in a similar area, they can help them to inform them with regards to activities, groups and services that are being run in their local areas. Some of the parents noted that it does not matter whether the Family Mentor is a member of their local community as long as they are interested in learning about the community and helping the families.

Table 7: The Family Mentor is a member of my local community

	Number	Percentage
Very important	7	12.1
Fairly important	20	34.5
Low importance	12	20.7
Not at all important	7	12.1
Neither important nor unimportant	10	17.2
Don't know	1	1.7
Prefer not to answer	1	1.7

Total	58	100.0

Parents were asked the importance of being involved in their choice of Family Mentor. Fifty-three per cent of the parents said that being involved in the choice of their Family Mentor is fairly or very important. Twelve per cent of them said that it is not at all important. A number of parents said that it is important for them to be involved in the choice of their Family Mentor so they can get along with their Family Mentors. In addition, parents think that they have a right to have a choice as to who they invite into their family life. Parents also think that choice of Family Mentor should be an ongoing process allowing for change as the needs change. A few of the parents that said that it is not that important, noted that they trusted the delivery provider in choosing their Family Mentor. Some parents noted that as long as Family Mentors have an understanding of their family and can be supportive and helpful, they would not feel it important to choose a Family Mentor. However, they also noted that if they felt the Mentor did not fit, they would like to be able to voice that to someone.

Table 8: I am involved in the choice of Family Mentor

	Number	Percentage
Very important	12	21.1
Fairly important	18	31.6
Low importance	9	15.8
Not at all important	7	12.3
Neither important nor unimportant	10	17.5
Don't know	1	1.8
Total	57	100.0

Due to COVID-19 and government restrictions, the Small Steps at Home programme temporarily moved from home visits to Family Mentors carrying out the program online or via telephone calls. Parents were asked about their experience of this alternative delivery method and the findings are presented below.

Question: Have you had experience of both Family Mentor home visits and sessions over the telephone/via video?

The majority of parents (84.5%) have taken part in the Small Steps at Home programme through face-to-face home visits and video or phone calls. Three per cent of the parents only took part in the Small Steps at Home programme via face-to-face home visits from their Family Mentors. Finally, ten per cent of the parents only took part in the Small Steps at Home programme via video and/or the telephone (see Table 9).

Table 9: Have you had experience of both delivery methods, i.e., home visits and sessions over the telephone/via video?

	Number	Percentage
Yes - I have taken part in the Small Steps at Home Programme face-to-face through home visits and also via video and/or over the telephone	49	84.5
No - I have only take part in the Small Steps at Home Programme via face-to-face home visits from my Family Mentor	2	3.4
No - I have only taken part in the Small Steps at Home programme via video and/or the telephone	6	10.3
Prefer not to answer	1	1.7
Total	58	100.0

As a follow up question, parents were asked which delivery method they would prefer. The majority of parents (62.5%) said that they would prefer the home visits from their Family Mentors. Only five per cent said that they would prefer remote visits (i.e., video or phone calls). Twenty-five per cent had no preference as to whether the visits are online/over the telephone or in the home. Those who preferred home visits provided the following reasons: when the visits were online, Family Mentors were not able to interact with their children and spend time with them at different stages of their development and different ages; and parents found it easier to talk about a child's development face-to-face. In addition, they did not feel comfortable with online sessions that they found quite limited compared to face-to-face sessions as some parents noted that it's difficult to have the sessions over the phone with children running around. Those who preferred the remote visits provided the following reasons: concerns regarding Covid-19, finding it easier with four children, and being more flexible. Some parents also noted that phone sessions mean more continuous support and they are quicker at solving issues.

Table 10: If you have experience of both home visits and online/telephone visits, please could you indicate which statement applies to yourself

	Number	Percentage
I preferred the home visits from the Family Mentor	35	62.5
I preferred the remote visits via video/over the telephone from the Family Mentor	3	5.4
I have no preference as to whether the visits are online/over the telephone or in the home	14	25.0

Not applicable to me	3	5.4
Don't know	1	1.8
Total	56	100.0

The following findings reflect the answers of parents that have a Family Mentor through participating in Small Steps at Home, but also attended the group activities that are run by the Family Mentors.

Question: Have you attended any of the following groups run by Family Mentors?

Parents were asked whether they had attended any groups run by the Family Mentors (they were allowed to select more than one option[5]). The most popular groups were Baby Massage (41.4%) and Story and Rhyme Time (41.4%), followed by Cook and Play (27.6%) and Baby Play (19%).

Table 11a: Have you attended any of the following groups run by Family Mentors?

	Frequency	Percent
Baby Massage	24	41.4
Cook and Play	16	27.6
Story and Rhyme Time	24	41.4
Fun with Friends	7	12.1
Jiggle and Wiggle	8	13.8
Baby Play	11	19.0
Saturplay	4	6.9
Boogie Tots	7	12.1
Chatterpillars	1	1.7
Fathers Reading Everyday (FRED)	5	8.6
Active Play	10	17.2
Messy Makers	4	6.9
Messy Madness	4	6.9
Messy Monday	5	8.6
None of these	16	27.6
Total	58	100.0

Question: Prior to COVID-19, on average how often did you attend face-to-face groups run by Family Mentors?

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[5] Therefore, the sum of number of parents who ticked each answer does not add up to 58, which is the total sample size

In order to explore the popularity of group activities delivered by the Family Mentors, parents were asked how often they attended face-to-face groups prior to the COVID pandemic. The majority of the parents (34.1%) attended the groups once a week, followed by those who attended the groups a few times a week (13.6%), once a month (11.4%), and a few times a year (9.1%). While those who attended the groups every day or almost every day make up five per cent of the parents, those who never attended the groups make up eighteen per cent of the parents. Five per cent of the parents stated that they don't know the frequency of their attendance and two per cent of them preferred not to answer this question.

Table 11b: Prior to COVID-19, on average how often did you attend face-to-face groups run by Family Mentors?

	Number	Percentage
Every day or almost every day	2	4.5
A few times a week	6	13.6
Once a week	15	34.1
Once a fortnight	1	2.3
Once a month	5	11.4
A few times a year	4	9.1
Never	8	18.2
Don't know	2	4.5
Prefer not to answer	1	2.3
Total	44	100.0

Question: On average how often have you attended online groups run by Family Mentors?

To explore whether there was any difference in attending groups delivered online, as a result of the COVID pandemic and government restrictions, we investigated the frequency of attending the online groups. The majority of parents (17.3%) attended online groups once a week, followed by those who attended the online groups a few times a year (15.4%), once a fortnight and once a month (5.8%, respectively), and a few times a week (1.9%). Only one parent (1.9%) said that they participated in the online groups every day or almost every day. Forty per cent of the parents never attended the online groups. The results suggest that the number of parents participating in the online groups is much lower that the number of parents participating in the face-to-face groups.

Table 12: On average how often have you attended online groups run by Family Mentors?

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Every day or almost every day	1	1.9

A few times a week	1	1.9
Once a week	9	17.3
Once a fortnight	3	5.8
Once a month	3	5.8
A few times a year	8	15.4
Never	21	40.4
Don't know	3	5.8
Prefer not to answer	3	5.8
Total	52	100.0

Question: How important is it that the Family Mentors run these groups and not another person/professional?

Parents were asked how important it is that the groups are run by Family Mentors and not another person or professional? Seventy-three per cent of the parents said that it is fairly or very important that the Family Mentors run these groups not another person or professional. Four per cent of them said that it is not important at all. Those who said that it is important that the Family Mentors run the groups and not another person or professional provided the following reasons: parents find Family Mentors familiar as Family Mentors know the families, which reassures them (both parents and children); parents find it easier to have a Family Mentor who can help them in relation to their children's development as they stated that their children are more engaged with Family Mentors; parents find that Family Mentors are knowledgeable but informal which makes them feel at ease.

Table 13: How important is it that the Family Mentors run these groups and not another person/professional?

	Number	Percentage
Very important	21	40.4
Fairly important	17	32.7
Low importance	7	13.5
Not at all important	2	3.8
Neither important nor unimportant	4	7.7
Prefer not to answer	1	1.9
Total	52	100.0

The following section explores parents perceptions on the importance of Family Mentors having qualifications and particular qualities and attributes and views on Family Mentors professional development.

Question: Do you think it is important for Family Mentors to have a formal qualification?

Parents were asked whether they thought it was important for Family Mentors to have a formal qualification. The majority of parents (43.9%) said that it was not important for Family Mentors to have a formal qualification. According to those who said that it was important for Family Mentors to have a formal qualification (36.8%), the order of importance of qualifications were as follows: NVQs/Vocational Qualification in Childcare/Social Care/Healthcare (32.8%), Degree in relevant subject (e.g., Childcare/Social Care/Healthcare; 17.2%), GCSEs (15.5%) and A Levels (3.4%) (they were allowed to select more than one option see Table 14b[6]).

Table 14a: Do you think it is important for Family Mentors to have a formal qualification?

	Number	Percentage
Yes	21	36.8
No	25	43.9
Don't know	8	14.0
Prefer not to answer	3	5.3
Total	57	100.0

Table 14b: If yes, which qualifications do you feel are important for a Family Mentor to have?

	Number	Percentage
GCSEs	9	15.5
A Levels	2	3.4
NVQs/Vocational Qualification in Childcare/Social Care/Healthcare	19	32.8
Degree in relevant subject – Childcare/Social Care/Healthcare	10	17.2
Total	21	100.0

Question: Which of the following training do you think a Family Mentor should have as part of their induction and continuous development?

Parents were asked what training Family Mentors should have as part of their induction and continuous development. As they were allowed to select more than one option, the majority of the parents selected most of the options with Child Development being the most popular choice (93.1%), followed by Safeguarding (87.9%), Supporting Communication and Language Skills (86.2%),

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[6] Therefore, the sum of number of parents who ticked each answer does not add up to 21, which is the total sample size

Food and Nutrition (82.8%) and Play and Learning (82.8%). According to the parents' answers, the least important training that a Family Mentor should have is Breastfeeding (67.2%; see Table 15 for further details). Parents were also asked whether there was any other training that they think a Family Mentor should have. They listed the following training: mental health training; neurodiversity training or training working with parents with additional needs; respectful parenting; visible child training; safe sleep, including co-sleeping training; financial help for families training; and training in family centred care and how to provide holistic care for the whole family.

Table 15: Which of the following training do you think a Family Mentor should have as part of their induction and continuous development?

	Number	Percentage
Safeguarding Children	51	87.9
Child Development	54	93.1
First Aid	45	77.6
Breastfeeding	39	67.2
Home Safety	44	75.9
Food and Nutrition for Babies and Children	48	82.8
Play and Learning for Babies and Children	48	82.8
Supporting Communication and Language Skills	50	86.2
Total	58	100.0

Question: How important is it that the Family Mentors have the following personal qualities?

Parents were asked how important certain personal qualities were. For the majority of the parents treating others equally (94.5%), being a good communicator (90.9%), a friendly person (90.9%), a trustworthy person (90.9), a non-judgmental person (89.1%), a good listener (87.3%), a supportive person (85.5), a person passionate and committed to mentoring (80.0%), a compassionate and sympathetic person (80.0%), a reassuring person (80.0%), a knowledgeable person (69.1), a person with a professional attitude (58.2%), a confident person (58.2%), a person valuing learning (50.9%), and a flexible person (38.2%) were very important (see Table 16 for details). Parents were also asked if there were any other personal qualities that they felt were important. Some of the qualities they noted were as follows: welcoming, energetic, being funny, having parenting experience, being patient, being respectful.

Table 16: How important is it that the Family Mentors have the following personal qualities

Good communicator	Number	Percentage
Very important	50	90.9
Fairly important	4	7.3
Low importance	1	1.8
Total	55	100.0
Friendly	Number	Percentage
Very important	50	90.9
Fairly important	5	9.1
Total	55	100.0
Professional attitude	Number	Percentage
Very important	32	58.2
Fairly important	16	29.1
Low importance	4	7.3
Not at all important	1	1.8
Neither important nor unimportant	2	3.6
Total	55	100.0
Non-judgmental	Number	Percentage
Very important	49	89.1
Fairly important	5	9.1
Don't know	1	1.8
Total	55	100.0
Good listener	Number	Percentage
Very important	48	87.3
Fairly important	7	12.7
Total	55	100.0
Supportive	Number	Percentage
Very important	47	85.5
Fairly important	8	14.5
Total	55	100.0
Trustworthy	Number	Percentage
Very important	50	90.9
Fairly important	5	9.1
Total	55	100.0
Knowledgeable	Number	Percentage
Very important	38	69.1
Fairly important	15	27.3
Low importance	2	3.6
Total	55	100.0
Flexible	Number	Percentage
Very important	21	38.2
Fairly important	25	45.5
Low importance	5	9.1
Neither important nor unimportant	1	1.8
Don't know	3	5.5

Total	55	100.0
Passionate and committed to mentoring	Number	Percentage
Very important	44	80.0
Fairly important	11	20.0
Total	55	100.0
Values learning	Number	Percentage
Very important	28	50.9
Fairly important	22	40.0
Low importance	2	3.6
Neither important nor unimportant	3	5.5
Total	55	100.0
Compassionate and sympathetic	Number	Percentage
Very important	44	80.0
Fairly important	9	16.4
Low importance	2	3.6
Total	55	100.0
Confident	Number	Percentage
Very important	32	58.2
Fairly important	19	34.5
Low importance	3	5.5
Neither important nor unimportant	1	1.8
Total	55	100.0
Treats others as equals	Number	Percentage
Very important	52	94.5
Fairly important	3	5.5
Total	55	100.0
Reassuring	Number	Percentage
Very important	44	80.0
Fairly important	8	14.5
Low importance	2	3.6
Prefer not to answer	1	1.8
Total	55	100.0

The next section explores the importance of Family Mentors having experience of parenting/caring for a child and previous experience working with families. Parents were asked how important the following statements were.

Statement: It is important that Family Mentors have personal experience of parenting/caring for a child

Parents were asked how important it was for Family Mentors have personal experience of parenting/caring for a child. Eighty-two per cent of parents said that they strongly agreed or agreed

with the statement 'it is important that Family Mentors have personal experience of parenting/caring for a child'. Seven per cent of them said that this statement is neither important nor unimportant (see Table 17).

Table 17: It is important that Family Mentors have personal experience of parenting/caring for a child

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	29	53.7
Agree	15	27.8
Disagree	4	7.4
Strongly disagree	1	1.9
Neither important nor unimportant	4	7.4
Don't know	1	1.9
Total	54	100.0

Statement: Family Mentors should have previous experience of working with families

Parents were asked whether they were of the perception that Family Mentors should have previous experience of working with families. Fifty-nine per cent of the parents strongly agree or agree with the statement 'Family Mentors should have previous experience of working with families'. Twenty-four per cent of them said that this statement is neither important nor unimportant (see Table 19).

Table 19: Family Mentors should have previous experience of working with families

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	8	14.8
Agree	24	44.4
Disagree	5	9.3
Neither important nor unimportant	13	24.1
Don't know	3	5.6
Prefer not to answer	1	1.9
Total	54	100.0

Statement: It is important for the Family Mentors to have experience of working with children aged under 5

Parents were asked whether it was important for Family Mentors to have experience of working with children aged under five. Seventy-four per cent of the parents strongly agreed or agreed with

the statement that it is important for the Family Mentors to have experience of working with children aged under 5. Fifteen per cent of them said that this statement is neither important nor unimportant (see Table 20).

Table 20: It is important for the Family Mentors to have experience of working with children aged under 5

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	19	35.2
Agree	21	38.9
Disagree	4	7.4
Neither important nor unimportant	8	14.8
Don't know	1	1.9
Prefer not to answer	1	1.9
Total	54	100.0

Statement: It is important that the Family Mentors come from a wide range of backgrounds e.g., ethnicity, culture, religion, gender

Parents were asked about the importance of Family Mentors being from a wide range of backgrounds. Eighty-nine per cent of the parents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'it is important that the Family Mentors come from a wide range of backgrounds (e.g., ethnicity, culture, religion, gender)'. Two per cent of them said that this statement is neither important nor unimportant (see Table 21).

Table 21: It is important that the Family Mentors come from a wide range of backgrounds e.g., ethnicity, culture, religion, gender

	Number	Percentage
Strongly agree	26	48.1
Agree	22	40.7
Disagree	2	3.7
Strongly disagree	1	1.9
Neither important nor unimportant	1	1.9
Don't know	1	1.9
Prefer not to answer	1	1.9
Total	54	100.0

The final section explores parents perceptions of the number of years parenting experience Family Mentors should have and views on the importance of Family Mentors coming from the local community.

Question: How many years parenting experience do you think a Family Mentor should have?

Parents were asked how many years parenting experience they thought a Family Mentor should possess. Forty-one per cent of the parents did not answer this question. Twenty one per cent said that Family Mentors should have one or two years of experience parenting. Twenty one per cent of those who answered the question said that Family Mentors should have more than two years of experience parenting. Some parents noted any experience (as a parent or not) is good as long as they are knowledgeable about children. Some parents suggested that it depends on each family's situation, as a new mother would not be very helpful to a mother of multiple children or older children.

Table 18: How many years parenting experience do you think a Family Mentor should have?

	Number	Percentage
1-2	12	20.7
2+	12	20.7
Further comments (detailed above)	10	17.2
Did not answer	24	41.4
Total	58	100.0

Question: Family Mentors are recruited from the local community

Parents were asked about the importance of recruiting Family Mentors from their local communities. Seventy-three per cent of the parents prefer that Family Mentors are recruited from their local communities. Twenty-seven per cent of them said that it is not important to them which areas the Family Mentors are recruited from. Those who like the fact that Family Mentors are recruited from the local community provided the following reasons: Family Mentors can sign post them to the right services, so help them to learn about activities, groups, and services in their local areas. However, some parents noted that experience is more important than geographical location, knowledge and not being judgmental about the local area.

Table 22: Family Mentors are recruited from the local community.

	Number	Percentage

I like the fact that Family Mentors are recruited from the local community (i.e., either Bulwell, St Ann's, Aspley, Hyson Green or Arboretum)	40	72.7
It is not important to me which areas the Family Mentors are recruited from	15	27.3
Total	55	100.0

Summary

The summary of the findings from the parents' questionnaire and recommendations for SSBC are presented below.

- The majority of the parents said that it is important for them to see their same Family Mentor throughout the programme. In case of a change of Family Mentor, the majority of them preferred being introduced to the new Family Mentor by their current Family Mentor as a way of smooth transition.

- Forty-six per cent of the parents said that it is fairly or very important for them to have a Family Mentor with the same gender; forty per cent of those parents whose first language is not English said that having a Family Mentor who is able to speak their first language is fairly or very important; fifty per cent of them said that seeing a Family Mentor who has an understanding of their family's culture and/or religious background is fairly or very important; forty-seven per cent of them said that having a Family Mentor from their local community is fairly or very important. This means that the majority of the parents would like to have a Family Mentor who has similar characteristics with them in terms of gender, language, culture/religion and area of residency.

- Eighty-nine per cent of parents strongly agree or agree with the statement that 'it is important that the Family Mentors come from a wide range of backgrounds (e.g., ethnicity, culture, religion, gender)'.

- Parents want to take part in choosing their Family Mentors as fifty-three per cent of them said that being involved in the choice of their Family Mentor is fairly or very important.

- The majority of parents (84.5%) have taken part in the Small Steps at Home programme through face-to-face home visits and video or phone calls. The majority of parents (62.5%) said that they would prefer the home visits from their Family Mentors.

- The most popular Family Mentor run groups are Baby Massage (41.4%) and Story and Rhyme Time (41.4%) followed by Cook and Play (27.6%), Baby Play (19%), Active Play (17.2%), Jiggle and Wiggle (13.8%), Fun with Friends and Boogie Tots (12.1%), Fathers

Reading Every day and Messy Monday (8.6%), Saturplay, Messy Makers and Messy Madness (6.9%), and Chatterpillars (1.7%). Twenty-eight per cent of the parents did not attend any of these groups.

- The majority of parents (34.1%) attended the face-to-face groups once a week. However, those who attended the online groups once a week made up 17.3% of the sample. This means that attendance is higher for the face-to-face groups.

- Seventy-three per cent of parents said that it is fairly or very important that the Family Mentors run the activity groups and not another person/professional.

- The majority of parents (43.9%) said that it is not important for Family Mentors to have a formal qualification. Even those who said that it is important for Family Mentors to have a formal qualification did not expect them to have an advanced education as reflected by their answers: NVQs/Vocational Qualification in Childcare/Social Care/Healthcare (32.8%), Degree in relevant subject (e.g., Childcare/Social Care/Healthcare; 17.2%), GCSEs (15.5%) and A Levels (3.4%). Eighty-two per cent of parents said that they strongly agree or agree with the statement 'it is important that Family Mentors have personal experience of parenting/caring for a child'. In addition, seventy-four per cent of parents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'it is important for the Family Mentors to have experience of working with children aged under 5'. With regards to experience in working with families, fifty-nine per cent of parents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'Family Mentors should have previous experience of working with families'.

- When parents were asked what training a Family Mentor should have, the majority of them selected most of the options in the questionnaire, with Child Development being first place (93.1%). According to parents' answers, the least important training that Family Mentors should have is Breastfeeding (67.2%). They also wanted Family Mentors to have training in Mental Health. Overall, the answers to these questions can be summarised as follows: families would like to see a Family Mentor with practical experience (either lived or by training) in working with children and families but not necessarily with an official degree in these.

- Finally, for the majority of parents, being a good communicator, friendly person, having a professional attitude, being non-judgmental, a good listener, supportive, trustworthy, knowledgeable, flexible, passionate and committed to mentoring, compassionate and sympathetic, confident, treating others equal and reassuring were fairly or very important.

- Where a change of Family Mentor is required, the delivery provider should continue to ensure the current Family Mentors arrange a meeting with families to introduce their new Family Mentor.

- It is recommended that Small Steps at Home visits should, in the main, take place in the families homes as this is parents preferred delivery method (taking necessary precautions to prevent spreading the Covid-19 virus).

- SSBC and delivery providers should investigate why attendance to some groups are low and encourage parents to attend more groups, which are freely available to them, to increase the effect of the groups on SSBC children's outcomes.

- Face-to-face groups appear to have better attendance rates and it is recommended that the groups are delivered face-to-face as much as possible to increase their effects.

- In addition to the practical experience of Family Mentors that needs to be looked for by delivery providers, delivery providers should also look for key characteristics in Family Mentor candidates (detailed above) or encourage current Family Mentors to consider these attitudes when interacting with families.

Findings from focus groups and interviews with Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team

The findings detailed below are based on Family Mentors' and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team's experiences and perceptions of what factors need to be taken into consideration when setting up a Family Mentor Service, with a focus on:

- Educational qualifications (prior to appointment as a Family Mentor).
- Educational qualifications and professional development training (post appointment as a Family Mentor).
- Important personal qualities and attributes of Family Mentors.
- Previous experience including experience of parenting or caring for a child and living locally.
- The importance of recruiting Family Mentors from a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality, culture, religion, and languages spoken.
- The importance of continuity of Family Mentors throughout the delivery of the Small Steps at Home programme to families.
- The significance of matching families to Family Mentors.

- Suitable caseloads for Family Mentors (i.e., number of families allocated to a Family Mentor delivering the Small Steps at Home programme).

Educational qualifications and professional development training

Family Mentors and the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team were asked whether they felt it was necessary for Family Mentors to have educational qualifications prior to appointment. It should be noted that Family Mentors are not currently selected for employment based on their educational qualifications or previous experience of employment. Both the Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team were agreed that educational qualification were not necessary for the role. They felt that personal qualities and attributes and lived parenting experience were more important.

> "Well, I think it's that lived experience. I don't think it's you know qualifications and indeed we don't ask for qualifications" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "I think you know, the kind of person you are is far, far more important than any formal qualification" (Family Mentor).

> "So, you know, I think people skills is really important, you need to be able to have good people skills, empathise with people, and actually the rest you can learn" (Family Mentor).

> "Left school with no qualifications. And that's my personal experience, but you know, I've developed even within my role. So, you know, I think that itself shows that actually you don't need those formal qualifications" (Family Mentor).

While educational qualifications were not considered necessary for the role, a number of Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team said that a certain level of literacy and numeracy, and willingness to undertake further training was necessary to be able to complete the training required to undertake the Family Mentor role.

> "That they have a basic level of literacy and numeracy" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "So it's, somebody needs to have an awareness of learning, and be prepared to learn, and take it as part of the job as well. And then apply that learning to the role" (Family Mentor).

Although not considered essential, one Family Mentor and member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team felt that having a childcare qualification was beneficial when undertaking the role of a Family Mentor.

> "I am from a childcare background, and from my personal point of view, I think having that is a huge bonus, because it really does carry us through. Because obviously, we do work around child development. There is a lot of training given in the service you know, to staff, but for me and a couple of others that are from the same background, it is a huge bonus. It just makes the job so much easier" (Family Mentor).

> "So, it depends, but if we're talking childcare and health qualifications, I don't think they're necessary. Nice, nice if you've got that experience, it gives you a bit of a head start, but I think for the Family Mentor job, for the level that they need, it can be taught in basic training as they go along" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

While both the Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team did not consider educational qualifications necessary for appointment to the Family Mentor role, all were agreed that the SSBC training received post appointment was essential to the delivery of the Small Steps at Home programme and the group activities delivered in the community. The majority of the participants considered the SSBC training to be excellent and of very high quality. Several Family Mentors felt that refresher training on topics would be very useful. This would be particularly useful where there has been a delay in initial training and delivery of group activities.

> "And what was difficult for me, even though I had the training, but I didn't have to practice the things I've learned, it has to be rehearsed before. And I would say like a Triple P [tip sheet], or the contents of Baby Massage. So, there was a big gap between the training and actually delivering" (Family Mentor).

> "So then to have that information refreshed back to you at a later stage, once you are already established and doing the job, I think it would be really beneficial" (Family Mentor).

One issue that has risen as the role has developed, is that the Family Mentors can be asked questions that are not relevant to their role and the programme they are delivering and may not have the answer to, or where it would not be appropriate for them to offer advice. It was felt that it would be useful for Family Mentors to have additional training or resources to enable them to signpost parents to the correct place where they can obtain suitable advice and support.

"We do really good you know, a good job at what we do, but there are people that specialise in other services that do really well at what they do. And unless we know where to signpost them, they're going to lose out on accessing those people" (Family Mentor).

"It's not so much training, but an extra handbook that's a list of all that ...well if you've got a housing question; go to this person, signpost to here, those sort of things"(Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Some Family Mentors would have liked additional training in delivering groups. In one ward new Family Mentors shadowed a Family Mentor delivering a group activity prior to delivering it themselves and it was felt that further training would have been beneficial. Having detailed plans for particular sessions, such as Cook and Play, would also be useful for when such sessions require covering as a result of staff absence.

"I think sometimes people will just shadow for a short while, maybe do a little bit around sort of the group planning, and then sort of later it's like, oh you're delivering it this week. And that can be quite scary" (Family Mentor).

Further training suggested by the Family Mentors included training in organisational and time management skills. A number of Family Mentors mentioned the need to have resilience and the ability to deal with stress and suggested that training in these areas would be helpful.

"I think also you know, overall, I think you know, to have some training on sort of how you manage your own stress, how you make the most of your working day, about maybe goal setting for ourselves you know" (Family Mentor).

"I think that boils down back to sort of the training, and you know, I think quite often we're told you know, to be resilient, to do this, to do that. But nobody really tells us how to be. And I think you know, if we had further training on how to sort of do that" (Family Mentor).

The Family Mentors stressed the importance of the training and development they had undertaken to be recognised externally, especially as the role currently is potentially limited by the length of the SSBC programme. SSBC are aware of this and have commissioned an organisation to accredit the training.

"So there's been talks previously about offering us kind of a recognised qualification. Because we've had loads and loads of training for this job. However, when this programme

does come to an end, I have no childcare experience previous to this job, so is the training that we've done going to be recognised elsewhere?" (Family Mentor).

"I think when I've spoken to other Family Mentors from like [name of area removed] and [name of area removed] and stuff, and I've been in groups like this with them. They have said that they would like to change the training and make it accredited" (Family Mentor).

"Obviously you don't need qualifications for the job, but it would be nice to have some qualifications, because you do get a lot of experience, you do do a lot of training. And I think a lot of the training would be good and could come with qualifications" (Family Mentor).

Personal qualities and skills

Both the Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team considered that having good personal skills and qualities were crucial to the role. They were very clear what personal qualities were required and the additional personal skill set that was needed to carry out the role successfully. The personal qualities identified as being key to the role were being personable and an effective communicator and listener, with the ability to interact with others; develop trusting relationships and imparting advice and information.

"They are approachable and have a friendly manner, that will put families at ease" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"We are looking for people that can talk to people, and that people trust" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"We recruit them on their ability to build a trusting relationship with families and to be able to pass on information that is given to them" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Well the obvious one really is, you need to be a good listener, and it's not about yourself when you're going round to support those families" (Family Mentor).

Other important qualities included being non-judgmental and being understanding; being assertive and confident; having the ability to work independently but also as part of a team, organisational and time management skills; and the ability to handle stressful situations.

"There are a number of essentials, not being judgemental, having a higher degree of respect for people from any background" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"You're very much on your own a lot of the time. Which is a good thing, you can plan your time, plan your own day, manage your own time. But at the same time, you've got to obviously have the skills to do that. Because if you don't, your day's just gone, so you need to be very organised, and have very good kind of time keeping organisational skills to do that job as well" (Family Mentor).

"Confidence; you need a bit of confidence. Whether it's delivering groups, or you know, I think within this job, we've all been pushed out of our boundaries. But even when it's, you have your first visit, and you're knocking on somebody's door for the first time, you need to have you know, that level of confidence to be able for them to open the door" (Family Mentor).

"Being prepared to change and be flexible and consider the team as a whole. We are working individually, but we exist as a team" (Family Mentor).

"We had to have training on being assertive didn't we? Like what other Family Mentor said, if you are in certain situations. Being able to… it's like with families, tell them sometimes that we can't do certain things" (Family Mentor).

"I think resilience and the ability to sort of handle stressful situations. Whether that's you know, in your work and kind of having to do something, and it being sort of dropped on you with no planning. You know, doing something that you're not particularly comfortable with you know. You might hear something in a family home, which really kind of hits hard and has an effect. But having that resilience to sort of come back from that, I think is quite important" (Family Mentor).

"The [role of former employee removed] back then, she said was, that this is more about our qualities and values as people, and the lived experience we have. Because all the skills, we can be trained and learn, but it is about compassion, understanding, passion, determination, empathy, understanding sleepless nights" (Family Mentor).

Lived experience of parenting and living locally

Both Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team felt it important for the Family Mentors to have lived experiences of parenting. Being a parent or having experience of parenting was thought to be a very important aspect of the role as it gave Family Mentors an insight and understanding of the challenges parents may be facing.

"I think being a parent is probably one of the most important aspects of the role" (Family Mentor).

"So, I think it is that lived experience of either being a parent or knowing what it's like to be a parent and being able to relate to all that entails really" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"You had to have had experience of parenting. And that the reason that they were quite particular about that was obviously the market research that had been done, the families had requested peer support, so family to family discussions rather than a health professional to a family discussion. So, it was seen that family experience of children and having raised children, or had children or you know, cared for a child was the only real thing that was absolutely necessary" (Family Mentor).

The advantage of having Family Mentors from the local area meant that they had an understanding of the communities that they live in. One member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team added that if they did not live locally then it was important that the Family Mentor had experience of living in an area with a similar socio-economic background.

"They've got an understanding of the dynamics, the stresses and strains of living in the community they're serving" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"That's why we're trusted, that's why people like us, that's why people will speak to us, and that's why we have so much local knowledge" (Family Mentor).

"They can understand the various aspects of what that community is like, and what it's like to live and bring up children there" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"I think it is important, either locally or in an area with similar socio economic background and factors" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

There were however difficulties for Family Mentors living in the same community they worked in and this included not being able to switch off from work as a result of feeling they were always on duty/representing the programme. It was also challenging living near families they were working with when there were safeguarding concerns.

"Because even when you're off duty, as you are in most jobs, you're still representing you know, the programme and who you are and what you deliver. So, you have to be very you know, very aware" (Family Mentor).

"I think for their [families'] support, it is really good. And I do like that; I do like to bump into them all the time. But when I've not got my [work] t-shirt on, and I'm just doing my own thing, I have been known to spot a family and go down the aisle the other way, just because I think you know what, I love it, but not when I've not got my t-shirt on" (Family Mentor).

"Safeguarding can be an issue. And if you have quite serious you know, safeguarding issues, and those families are on your doorstep, it does make you worry a little bit you know. Like how vulnerable you can potentially be. But it's so hard, because I think it works so well because we do all live in [name of area removed]. I think it'd be a shame to sort of ever say you know, it doesn't work and stop that, because I think that's one of the big things that makes it work" (Family Mentor).

There are few Family Mentors who have never lived in the four wards where the SSBC programme is delivered and they did not find this disadvantageous. One felt that this was because she lived in a nearby ward and therefore knew the area well. Furthermore, she did not have the same concerns and issues as other Family Mentors living within the ward. Another felt it could be seen as positive that she did not live within the ward, as she did not have any preconceived perceptions of the area.

"I live in [name of area removed] as well, but I live, well I'm classed as out of Ward, because [name of area removed] is split into two Wards. So, although I live in [name of area removed], I'm literally the other side. So, for me, I get the beauty of being away from the families in that respect. So, I haven't got those concerns like some of the other members of the team. But I think what works well is the fact that because you are local, just walking through [name of area removed] all the time you know, when you're in your uniform particularly" (Family Mentor).

"But sometimes that [not living within an SSBC ward] can be quite a positive thing, because I've got a completely unclouded view. I don't have any sort of personal experience of a bad experience with a teacher or you know, I've got nothing to sort of go in. And I look at it very practically from that point of view" (Family Mentor).

All the participants felt that it was really important to recruit Family Mentors from a diverse range of backgrounds. In many areas, the Family Mentor service was serving a diverse community and both Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team considered it to be important that their workforce reflected these communities in terms of cultures, ethnicities, religion, nationalities, and languages spoken. It was felt that having a diverse workforce from different backgrounds meant the Family Mentor service was better equipped to support the process of matching Family Mentors to families. Furthermore, having a diverse team of Family Mentors provided opportunities for Family Mentors to learn about different cultures from each other.

> "We're serving a diverse community and so we want to be reflective of that" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "When we are matching a Family Mentor to a family, it is a matching process, so we want to have you know a breadth of experiences and backgrounds from the Family Mentors" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "All the families are extremely different, the whole team needs to be very different. If we were all the same, it just wouldn't work" (Family Mentor).

> "It gives a really good opportunity for us as Family Mentors to learn off each other and learn about cultures as well. I think that's a massive, massive bonus" (Family Mentor).

> "We have a very diverse group of Family Mentors. So, we have also [Family] Mentors that can interpret for us. So, some can speak Arabic, some can speak Urdu, some can speak this language, some can speak Polish, some can speak Romanian, all sorts. And I think that is really important, because then they can work with families, and families can relate, and they can speak in their first language and feel more comfortable" (Family Mentor).

All participants were of the opinion that they had a diverse workforce that reflected the communities they served. However, one ward felt that they could be more ethnically diverse. Their area had traditionally been quite 'white working class', but this was changing and they were keen to reflect the changes.

> "It is changing. We have always been traditionally very white working class. And that is changing a little bit, and most of my team are white. We've just taken on an Indian lady. It is quite representative of the area that we live in I think. But then again, it is nice to have

some diversity; it is nice to have different experience and somebody that gives that extra something that the rest of the team haven't got. Because obviously we do have a small ethnic minority [living in this ward]" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

All teams referred to the difficulty in recruiting men and the importance of having male Family Mentors in terms of encouraging fathers to participate in the SSBC programmes and Family Mentor group activities.

"I think the one thing that we don't, we never managed, and not many of the teams have, is getting men as Family Mentors, that's very, very difficult" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Just to have that option, because there are …partly because of the emphasis on trying to reach fathers and make the service inclusive to fathers. I think it always helps to have a few males [in the role of a Family Mentor], or at least one male in the team to do that" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

In addition to ensuring that the Family Mentor workforce was diverse in terms of recruiting individuals from different backgrounds, participants also mentioned the importance of recruiting Family Mentors with a breadth of different parenting experiences, including first time parents, those who have larger families, parents of twins, young parents and older parents, and grandparents.

"It's important because you know, some Family Mentors, they've got one child, some Family Mentors have got six children, some Family Mentors are grandparents, some Family Mentors are young parents you know. Like obviously I've got twins, so I get [allocated] a lot of multiple birth families" (Family Mentor).

"Because they're an older mum …They don't want a young mum to come in and chat to them when they've already been there and done it" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Matching families to Family Mentors

The matching process, whereby Family Mentors are matched to families participating in the Small Steps at Home programme, was deemed to be effective across all wards with families being suitably matched to an appropriate Family Mentor. Matching is discussed with parents who are asked about

what type of Mentor they would like and the qualities that are important to them. They are also shown videos of the Family Mentors. Parents are given the final say about whether or not they are happy with the Family Mentor they have been matched with and are given the opportunity to opt for a different Family Mentor if they wish. This has been identified as one of the reasons the matching process works well. It was rare for parents to request a change of Family Mentor and there were only a few instances where matching a Family Mentor to a family had not been a success.

> "I think it [matching process] is very effective, and actually we have some parents that do comment on it. And I think I've actually got a written case study where the parent, actually after four years said, I do just want to say how well we have been matched and get on" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "Parents have a choice, they've always got the last say in who their Family Mentor might be" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "I think most of the time, they are matched well. We do like videos of ourselves, and I think when they do the initial visit, I think they used to ask like what qualities would you like in a Family Mentor? Like some have asked for like 'oh I'd like an older Family Mentor' some have asked 'I'd like one my age'" (Family Mentor).

> "It must be a tiny proportion of those families who request to change Mentors. I think the matching process works as well as it possibly can. I don't think there's any other way that you could do it better really" (Family Mentor).

In terms of challenges when matching families to Family Mentors, the main issue was capacity. Sometimes the most suitable Family Mentor for a family was not available due to their caseload which meant they did not have the capacity to support another family under the Small Steps at Home programme.

> "When you have a particular Family Mentor that is, their caseload is just cram packed full, and then you do initial visits with another four families and you could actually give that person another two. But you can't because they're already full" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "But then you've got to offset that against workload, because they're all flat out working with their high caseload as well. So, it's not always possible. So, there are challenges. But I think the key there is making it high priority, making it something that is not last on the list

that you consider. That it's the right person for the right family has to be at the top of the list" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

One member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team found that restrictions put in place due to the Coronavirus pandemic made the matching process more challenging. This was because they were unable to meet families face-to-face during the matching process and instead had to speak to them over the telephone, which made getting to know them more difficult.

> "And so I've not actually met people, and so it's been a bit hit and miss. Because if you're going into somebody's house, you take longer, it's a 45 minute visit, and you can gain a lot of what they're like by, from their house you know, photographs and all sorts of things, and you can ask all sorts of questions. You can't do that on the telephone" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Continuity of Family Mentors for families participating in the Small Steps at Home programme

Continuity of Family Mentors was identified as very important. Having the same Family Mentor throughout participation in the Small Steps at Home programme was identified as key to building the relationship between families and Family Mentors and developing bonds with the families they support.

> "Continuity, yeah 100%, 100%, that's what's key to build up that trust and that relationship" (Family Mentor).

> "But with having the same Family Mentor, they'd really build that relationship, and that Family Mentor knows that family. So, they also know if there's a feeling that something's not quite right when they go on a visit. And they love celebrating you know, seeing these children grow" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "That they forge, which you don't if you're seeing somebody different every time. And it's good that they feel comfortable and relaxed with people" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

There are however challenges to ensuring the same Family Mentors deliverer the Small Steps at Home programme to the same families throughout their participation. The main issues affecting continuity are if a Family Mentor leaves the Family Mentor workforce or where a Family Mentor is absent due to illness (particularly when this is for a long period of time) or on maternity leave.

"We've had very few people actually leave. We've had one lady go on maternity leave, and she's back. I think we've had like three people; four people leave over six years. So, it's not been a huge problem. It does cause a problem I think, when they [families] get used to people [Family Mentors], like if people have gone off long term sick" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Contingency measures are in place if a change of Family Mentor is required. A family will be offered another Family Mentor permanently or temporarily and steps are taken to smooth the transition through ensuring that they are matched to a suitable Family Mentor or matched to a Family Mentor they know through their attendance at group activities. Whilst in some instances families will accept a new Family Mentor, others will choose to wait for their Family Mentor to return (if they are on sick or maternity leave). Whether families are willing to accept a new Family Mentor could sometimes be dependent on how long they have been participating in the Small Steps at Home programme and hence how long they have been receiving support from a particular Family Mentor.

"Continuity becomes a problem is when people are off on long-term sick, and we have to try and pick those caseloads up along with our own. Often it's tried you know, if people have attended some of our groups, or if we you know we know them from previous groups or you know, through Baby Massage or whatever, it's tried to be linked that you would then contact that family. And I guess the success is sort of variable. I mean some people will just say, no I'll wait until you know, whoever it is comes back off sick, and other people will embrace you for that short period of time" (Family Mentor)

"Obviously it's less of a problem if they've only a couple of months into it, and they don't notice the switch so much. That's the only problem, if they really are used to somebody, and they've confided in somebody, and you know this person's helped them with their problems. To suddenly say, we're just giving you somebody else for six months, they'd rather wait" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Caseloads for Family Mentors delivering the Small Steps at Home programme

Caseloads, i.e. number of families allocated to a Family Mentor delivering the Small Steps at Home programme, appeared to be manageable across the Family Mentor services. Caseloads remained

manageable as a result of ensuring that funding obtained included the recruitment of a sufficient number of Family Mentors. Caseloads were also regularly reviewed by caseload supervisors[7].

> "So, I would say that at the moment and in this service, because it's well funded, that hasn't been such a problem" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "So, we have these temporary blips but generally if we were fully staffed properly fine, there's no problem I don't think" (Member of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "I think as when there's a full team, and you have the, you know, correct amount of people in your caseload, then it's more than manageable" (Family Mentor).

However, there were times when caseloads became too high, and this was when Family Mentors were allocated additional families as a result of staff leaving or absences. Caseloads can also become challenging when a Family Mentor is allocated a number of new families at the same time - due to the intensity of initial visits which are weekly (and later reduce to fortnightly and monthly visits). Family Mentors also run group activities in the community and depending on how many they are running; this can impact on their capacity to visit families participating in the Small Steps at Home programme.

> "We've got two [Family Mentors] off ill for a month at the moment, so that's quite an issue, you have to cover their work" (Member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "Our problem is, we had two ladies [Family Mentors] leave just at the beginning of lockdown, we've only recruited to fill those, but we managed through lockdown. I've got two ladies off long term sick unfortunately at the moment, and two new Family Mentors, but they're not trained up enough to take on some of the workloads. So, it does mean the rest of the team are going to have to take on the extra caseload of those people that are off sick for the next month or so. But it's a temporary thing, we've you know, managed before" (Member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

> "And then all of a sudden you've instantly got like six new families who have a Family Mentor visit them weekly. This is too big adjustment at once. So, what I'm, trying to say, is there will be times when there is so much coming at once. But it's just adjusting, and having

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[7] Caseloads can vary as a result of the hours worked by individual Family Mentors, time allocated to deliver activity groups, time allocated to complete administrative duties, experience, and the ages of the children in the caseload as younger children receive more frequent visits. This highlights the importance of having systems in place when allocating families to the family mentors and regular reviews.

those skills helps certainly. You have to adjust the situation, and then they will be covering extra groups at the same time maybe" (Family Mentor).

A number of Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team mentioned the importance of organisation and time management in managing caseloads.

> "And I think because you're in charge of your own diary, it's down to you to be in control of that. So, you can't sort of go and visit a family and be there an hour and a half if you know you've got four or five to fit in that day. So, it's down to you yourself to think, okay I need to fit in four or five visits in, I can give them all an hour, but I have to be moving on by this time. It often doesn't work like that, but that's the key, you do need to be really again, super organised to make sure you can get through them [home visits]" (Family Mentor).

Other considerations

It was suggested that one of the reasons for the success of the Family Mentor service is because it is a universal service and not targeted. Whether or not families participate in Small Steps at Home or attend group activities delivered by Family Mentors is their decision and voluntary and there is no obligation for them to engage. It was felt that being universal removed any stigma associated with support and that removing the universal element would affect the uptake from families.

> "That it remains as a voluntary service, and within the voluntary sector you know. That's the reason why it has such a good uptake, and people have so much trust in the service I think, is because we are separate to the you know, other services. And I think because it's voluntary, because it's their choice, that helps the service run so well. Because they have a different trust and relationship with us because of that" (Family Mentor).

> "It's not a referral service, it's not, ooh she's got that woman (Family Mentor) look, you know" (Family Mentor).

The way the service was funded was also deemed crucial to how well it works. One concern raised was that the service would be adversely affected if it was done on a reduced budget.

> "Because into what happens to the family service, Family Mentor service after SSBC, I think that the resources put into it, need to identify those priorities that are essential, consistency and intensity. My fear would be, I'm just thinking ahead now, my fear is that in the next… because resources won't be as generously available as they are currently. The fear is that it will be slimmed down, and people will think, well it doesn't… I mean if I'm really honest with

you, my biggest fear is something somebody says, oh it doesn't need to be universal anymore, we can't afford it to be universal. We'll have less Family Mentors and they'll just do target, work with targeted families. And that for me would lose the essence of what the Family Mentor service is" (Member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"So I think yeah, I suppose ongoing issues are that it's an expensive service that I hope to see survive. And I hope that a lot of the demands that come with austerity and the lack of funds don't strip it out of what it really is. Which is an essentially trusting relationship that requires work on the part of the Family Mentor to maintain the trust. And that requires the resources to have the time to do that" (Member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Summary

Prior educational qualifications were not considered necessary for the role of Family Mentor. However, it was considered important that the applicants for the role of Family Mentor had good English literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to undertake the training required. Overall, the SSBC training was considered to be excellent and of very high quality, however it was suggested that refresher training on topics would be useful. It was suggested that some of the other personal (soft) skills like time management and organisational skills, and resilience training could be incorporated into the Family Mentor training. In addition, signposting training or resources was identified as being needed to support Family Mentors in their role.

Parenting experience was considered key to the role, as it gives Family Mentors an insight and an understanding of the experiences and challenges parents may be facing. It was also deemed beneficial for Family Mentors to be from the local area (as they understood the community they live in). There were however disadvantages with Family Mentors not always feeling that they could switch off from work due to the likelihood that they will see the families they support outside of working hours as a result of living in the same neighbourhood. The personal qualities considered necessary for the role of a Family Mentor included being personable and an effective communicator with the ability to develop trusting relationships; organizational and time management skills; the ability to work independently and as part of team; assertiveness and confidence; being understanding and non-judgmental; and possessing the ability to deal with stressful situations. Recruiting Family Mentors from a diverse range of backgrounds in terms of gender, ethnicity, nationality, culture, and religion was very important and benefitted the teams. It was felt the diversity of the teams supported the matching process. People from all areas felt that the matching process was very effective and worked well.

Continuity of Family Mentors was identified as being key to the building up of the trusting relationship between the Family Mentors and families. There could be difficulties with continuity due to sickness absences and Family Mentors leaving, but there were systems in place to try to address the transition to a new or temporary alternative Family Mentor, sensitively.

In terms of Family Mentor caseload this was felt to be manageable due to SSBC being a well-funded programme, although there could be temporary problems caused by sickness or maternity absence, Family Mentors leaving and when Family Mentors take on several new families in a relatively short space of time (which requires weekly visits initially). The key to ensuring Family Mentor caseloads were manageable was good supervision, where caseloads are regularly reviewed.

Recommendations

- Consider providing additional training in time management and organisational skills, resilience and signposting to other services.
- Explore the need for refresher training where there is a gap between initial training and commencing the role of a Family Mentor.
- Investigate whether good English literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to undertake training are detailed in job specification and description and if not whether they should be included as part of the essential or desirable criteria.
- It is recommended that caseloads continue to be regularly reviewed.
- It is advised that the Family Mentor service remains a universal service

Evaluation of online group activities delivered by Family Mentors

Introduction

Family Mentors deliver group activities to expectant parents and children from birth to three years old children, across four wards in Nottingham - Hyson Green and Arboretum, Aspley, Bulwell and St Ann's. These group activities aim to improve outcomes for children in the areas of diet and nutrition, social and emotional skills and language and communication skills. Due to Government restrictions, put in place to stop the spread of Coronavirus (including stopping non-essential travel and contact, social distancing, and a subsequent lockdown that required the public to work from home where possible) all face-to-face group activities delivered by Family Mentors ceased temporarily. Some groups were moved online and delivered via Zoom. The groups delivered via Zoom varied by area but included: Baby Massage, Cook and Play, Story and Rhyme Time, Active Play, Messy Play, Baby Play, Fun with Friends and Jiggle and Wiggle. Timeframes for the online group activities varied between wards with Bulwell commencing the online groups in May 2020 and running their last group online in October 2021; Aspley ran their groups online from March 2020 to September 2021; St Anne's, and Hyson Green and Arboretum from September 2020 to April 2021 .

Aim

The aim of this evaluation was to explore parents' and staffs' perceptions of the online activity groups delivered by Family Mentors, including implementation and delivery of the online groups, strengths and weaknesses of the online groups, levels of engagement and interaction, and outcomes for children.

Methodology

Interviews were undertaken with parents who attended online group activities and focus groups and interviews were carried out with Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team involved in the delivery of these groups.

Data collection methods

Interviews with parents

The evaluation team undertook interviews with parents that had attended online group activities. Several adverts were placed on SSBC's Facebook page and parents were asked to either contact a

member of the evaluation team if they were interested in taking part in an interview or provide their contact details in an excel form. A member of the evaluation team then contacted parents that had responded to the advert, explained the interview further and if they wished to take part a suitable date and time was arranged. As a thank you for taking part, parents received a £10 high street gift voucher. In total 12 parents were interviewed and this included 10 parents interviewed over the telephone and two via video (over Microsoft Teams). The interviews with parents explored their perceptions about the benefits and limitations of attending virtual online groups, engagement and impact, and whether they had faced any difficulties attending the online sessions. All participants were females. Further demographics data was not available for all participants however eight parents provided their ages; they ranged from 30 to 42 years. Four parents were stay at home mums. One parent was on maternity leave and two in employment (data was missing for the remaining five). Eight participants provided details of their self-described ethnicity (i.e., they were asked how they would describe their ethnicity) and the descriptions were as follows: Arab, mixed heritage, White, Indian, Polish White, Muslim Arabic, White British and Pakistani.

Interviews and focus groups with Family Mentors and members of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team

To understand the implementation and delivery of the online groups, members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team and Family Mentors from the Toy Library, Framework HA and Home-Start were invited to participate in an interview or attend a focus group. Three focus groups were run which were attended by 10 Family Mentors and four members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team took part in an interview. All staff focus groups and interviews took place via video over Microsoft Teams. The purpose of the focus groups and interviews was to examine the implementation and delivery of the online groups, key challenges and strengths of delivering the groups online and outcomes for children.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis of interview and focus group transcripts was undertaken to identify patterns through a process of data familiarisation, data coding and theme development. A deductive approach was undertaken whereby data coding and theme development are directed by the research questions.

Ethics and consent

Verbal and written informed consent was obtained from all participants (parents and staff). Participants were assured that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to

and could withdraw from the study without giving a reason. With participants' consent, audio/video recordings of interviews and focus groups were undertaken. Recordings were stored securely on an NTU server. Transcription of the interviews and focus groups was carried out by an authorised secure university transcriber. Transcripts were stored in a restricted folder on the NTU drive. All data was anonymised as soon as possible after collection. Participants were assigned a unique identification number and data was stored against this number, rather than against the names of the participants.

Ethical approval was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the evaluation. The evaluation was also registered with the Research and Innovation Department within Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

Review of the literature

Child development and parenting programmes provide education to parents on all aspects of child development, enhance parental skills and improve confidence in parenting (Sanders, 2008). Online interventions/programmes are relatively new, and therefore the research is limited (Doty et al., 2016). Furthermore, much of the evidence provided is based on parents' perceptions of online interventions and limited attention has been given to the challenges facilitators face in providing online interventions (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2018). However, emerging evidence suggests that online programmes/sessions can develop parenting skills and improve child outcomes (Cotter et al., 2013) although there are some disparities surrounding the extent of the efficacy with regards to online interventions, suggesting they may not be as effective as face-to-face (Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., 2018).

Online child development and parenting programmes can potentially offer more flexibility in their delivery (Blackburn and Read, 2005). Depending on the type of programme, offering it online allows access at a convenient time for parents i.e., it can be pre-recorded and accessed from the convenience of their home, reducing some of the barriers to engagement (Breitenstein et al., 2014). Online groups can enable professionals to support a larger number of parents with a limited number of staff and can support the engagement of harder to reach groups such as single parents, large families and fathers (Dadds et al., 2019). In addition, delivering online programmes can sometimes increase the uptake rates as more parents and children are able to attend (Breitenstein et al., 2014) and can serve as convenient, accessible and cost-effective methods of delivery (Bert et al., 2008).

Accessibility

Access is of concern regarding online interventions. Ofcom suggests (pre-pandemic) that approximately 1.78 million families in the UK did not have access to a laptop (Ofcom, 2020) and research from the Sutton Trust found that children's experiences of remote learning varied substantially across different socio-economic backgrounds, with reports that parents and children lacked the appropriate devices and adequate internet to access online learning (Montacute and Cullinane, 2021). This inequality is often described as the 'digital divide', in which restricted access is more widely spread in disadvantaged families on low incomes (Holmes and Burgess, 2020).

Ofcom (2020) data on UK households (pre- pandemic, 9th January - 7th March) found that approximately 9% of families with children did not have access to an appropriate device such as a laptop or tablet, 2% had no internet access and children in low income households were the most affected. Furthermore, the Institute for Public Policy Research revealed, many low-income families do not have a reliable and fast internet connection (McNeil et al., 2020). Similarly, The Early Intervention Foundation (2020) explored the impact of the Coronavirus pandemic on early help services. They found a common barrier to accessing services/programmes online was the lack of technology at home, with many parents reporting they only had access to a mobile phone with very limited data (Early Intervention Foundation, 2020; Wilson and Waddell, 2020).Therefore, consideration needs to be given to parents who cannot or prefer not to use online services, by offering alternative formats and ensuring internet access to disadvantaged and low-income families (McNeil et al., 2020).

Engagement and Attendance

Online programmes/interventions can sometimes reduce barriers to engagement (Doty et al., 2016). Du Paul and colleagues (2018) examined parent engagement of face-to-face and online behavioural parent training. Families were randomly assigned to either a face-to-face group or an online group. Findings showed both groups resulted in high attendance and both improved knowledge and implementation of the intervention delivered.

A wealth of research on face-to-face parenting intervention exits, and this could be used to inform online interventions (Doty et al., 2016). Participation is a well-researched area and attendance at face-to-face parenting interventions is very varied: some studies have reported that between 35% to 61% of parents have attended face-to-face sessions (Baker, Arnold and Meagher, 2011; Coatsworth et al., 2006; Heinrichs et al., 2005). A number of suggested reasons for the variations have been reported. For example, single parents attend fewer face-to-face sessions compared to married or

cohabiting parents (Kazdin et a., 1997). Conversely, other (more recent) studies did not find any differences (Baker et al., 2011; Nix et al., 2009). Another important factor affecting attendance is family size: larger families have been found to attend fewer face-to-face sessions (Baker et al., 2011). Single parent families, lower SES families and larger families, attended fewer face-to-face sessions when perhaps these families would benefit most from the services (Baker et al., 2011). Furthermore, Czymoniewicz-Klippel et al., (2018) reviewed issues with modes of delivery (face-to-face and online) and parent participation. They found, compared to online, that face-to-face recruitment was more difficult. In contrast, retention was worse online than with the face-to-face session. Some parents who completed the online programme described a need for more interpersonal connections, although they found the online format engaging. This suggests that a combination of online and face-to-face modes of delivery might be an option for future implementation.

Social Connectedness

Online programmes can offer parents a social network, giving them a sense of connectedness. They can offer ways to interact and access groups, enhancing the lives of families who are unable to leave their house (e.g., due to childcare needs, weather and illness) (Obst and Stafurik, 2010; Valtchnaov et al., 2014). However, online delivery can also lead to social isolation and limit opportunities for face-to-face contact (Strange et al., 2018). Some parents (mothers) suggest it does not serve as a substitute for face-to face communication (more of a supplement) as they value the face-to-face peer support - seeing other parents respond to their children, and sharing experiences with other parents, family and professionals (O'Connor and Madge, 2004). Conversely, some parents like the anonymity of online interaction, whereby they can offer and receive advice online via discussion boards in confidence (Nieuwboer et al., 2013). Strange and colleagues (2018) explored experiences of online communication (social networks, parenting interventions, forum etc.) for parents with children under five (n=487). Parents reported how online groups enabled interaction with other parents (adults) and reduced feelings of social isolation caused by family care needs or relocation. Conflicting findings suggest that some parents felt it could also increase isolation, suggesting they 'hide' behind the screen instead of going out and meeting face-to-face.

Fathers

Few studies have compared whether online interventions for fathers are more effective than face-to-face (Plantin and Daneback, 2009). However, Hudson and colleagues (2003) compared two groups, one of fathers receiving an online parental guidance intervention (n=17) and the other taking a face-to-face professional led session (n=17) provided by maternal and childcare services. Fathers who participated in the online intervention had access to an online information library, a

discussion forum, whereby they could meet and interact with other parents, and email access to a midwife was also available. Fathers in the online intervention reported an increase in parental confidence (self-efficacy) whereas the control group did not significantly change. This finding could open doors in accessing harder to reach groups such as fathers for future intervention formats (Baum, 2004; Plantin, 2007) as men are often left at a disadvantage; women appear to be more willing than men to discuss issues about, pregnancy, birth and parenting (Bremberg, 2006).

Hudson and colleagues (2003) investigated the effectiveness of an online intervention in improving first-time fathers' parenting self-efficacy and satisfaction when compared with a control group (no online intervention). Fathers reported that the online intervention was easy to use and they valued the opportunity to use the online discussion forum. Overall, fathers reported higher parenting self-efficacy and satisfaction scores than the control group. Although findings from this study were from a small sample size and cannot be generalised to the wider population, they suggest that fathers can also benefit from online interventions and gain support networks via the online discussion forums.

Children's engagement and interaction

Online parenting groups/activities may have some advantages, such as flexibility and convenience. However, some children may find difficulties in fully engaging with the activity: if consistently online, children may fail to make connections with the activity or lose concentration (Lim, 2004). In addition, they may lack full interaction with peers resulting, in some cases, in negative effects on their physical and mental health (Brazendale et al., 2017).

More recently, Harding and Paechter (2020) examined the effects of Covid-19 on families with children under five in Nottingham. Conversely, they found online story reading was well received, although it was only offered in English. More importantly there were concerns from parents about the negative effects on the social and emotional development. Parents reported that their young children were missing the social interaction with their friends, and some had lost confidence (become clingier) in social situations. These findings are echoed in a study by Dong et al., (2020) who found online learning for young children lacked social interaction, resulting in poor learning outcomes.

Misirli and Ergulec (2021) explored parent's views on children's experiences of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Parents reported that sometimes their children were easily distracted when online, often watching television or on the internet, stressing that their children got bored and struggled to concentrate. However, the majority of pre-school and primary children did attend the online classes with the support of a parent. It could be argued, the social restrictions

imposed by the recent pandemic contributed to the decreased social interaction as during this time many activities adopted online formats - reducing face-to-face interaction, free play and outdoor activities for their young children and thus reinforcing the view that online activities are unsuitable for young children (Erdogan et al., 2019). Moreover, Erdogan and colleagues (2019) examined parental preferences with regards to 'digital play' which refer to using technologies for play based activities (Marsh et al., 2016). They surveyed and conducted semi-structured interviews with parents (n=500) across four countries. When digital play was compared to other types of play, such as physical or pretend it received the lowest rating from participants in all four countries, with traditional play being the most popular. Findings also revealed some advantages of digital play for children. For example, American and Chinese parents claimed it improved concentration and self-regulation. In addition, the use of the online technology also improved their computer literacies. Parents also identified a number of disadvantages. Parents raised health concerns, suggesting their children were more sedentary during digital play which may lead to childhood obesity.

Preferences

Understanding parents' preferences when it comes to delivery methods is important. Furthermore, technology can sometimes enhance the outcomes achieved (Bates, 2000) and online methods can be more convenient, easier to access for users (parents) and be more cost effective for services (Bert et al., 2008). Metzler and colleagues (2012) surveyed 162 parents with children aged three to six years. Overall, parents preferred online formats and written materials to face-to-face intervention. Least preferred formats included home visits and multiweek parenting groups. For parents of children with behavioural problems, such as those attending Triple P, online and written formats appeared to be more suited to their needs as they were able to access the material at home and at a convenient time.

Duppong-Hurley and colleagues (2016) examined parents' perceptions regarding alternative methods of delivery such as online interventions. Qualitative analysis indicated a growing interest in online alternatives. When parents were asked which modality they preferred (online or face-to-face) 56% stated a preference towards an online format and 44% preferred a face-to-face intervention. More interestingly, when asked about a hybrid format (a combination of online and face-to-face) 70% of parents expressed an interest, suggesting the majority of parents interviewed would be open to a hybrid format, claiming it would reduce some of the barriers such as childcare, illness and time. However, there were some concerns about the lack of interaction with peers via the online format. Personal interaction was highlighted by parents as a strength of the face-to-face session. This

programme then added an online discussion board alongside the online session and as a result 67% of parents expressed an interest in this facility (Duppong-Hurley et al., 2016).

Effectiveness and Outcomes

A recent meta-analysis by Nieuwboer and colleagues (2013) evaluated online interventions for parents and families. They found that online interventions have the ability to improve parental outcomes and child outcomes and can increase knowledge such as, new-born care, child development and enhance parenting skills.

Recently, more traditional face-to-face interventions such as the Positive, Parenting Programme (Triple P) have recently been adapted for online use. Sanders et al., (2012) evaluated the efficacy of Triple P online. They found that this online intervention improved outcomes in children's problem behaviour and increased parental confidence and the positive effects continued six months following the intervention. Although the online intervention was not compared to a face-to-face intervention, it does suggest that online interventions can give encouraging results. In support, a recent meta-analysis of online child development and parenting programmes by Spencer and colleagues (2020) found the programmes had significant effects on parenting skills such as confidence and produced positive outcomes for parent and child. However, it should be noted that this study only examined online programmes and did not compare the effects on outcomes with face-to-face programmes.

Beschorner and Hutchison (2016) explored differences in parent education programmes in reading, comparing face-to-face and online delivery methods. They concluded that both delivery methods supported the outcomes of the reading intervention such as increased expressive vocabulary and improved understanding of comprehension techniques, e.g., asking questions about the story. However, Bert et al., (2008) assessed three intervention formats (online, face-to-face and a booklet) to understand the differential impact of each condition. They used the Adventures in Parenting intervention (which offers five principles of parenting, for example 'responding' which refers to how parents react to their child which parents can then utilise in their daily lives, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2001). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three formats. Findings suggest that the online and face-to-face formats were the most effective and led to an increased knowledge of the principles, as they used a combination of training materials alongside professional led training sessions. This is in line with research by Kwok and colleagues (2016) who compared children's (4 to 8 years old) rate of learning in a face-to-face condition to an online interactive condition. They found children's rate of learning was the same across both conditions. Du Paul et al., (2018) compared face-to-face versus online training for parents targeting

children with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Findings indicated that online training offered similar effective outcomes (a reduction in challenging behaviours and parent stress) to the face-to-face training, suggesting that either format can offer the same outcomes. Roberts et al., (2019) also compared face-to-face to online sessions. They explored whether online sessions could provide improvements in sleep for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and parents' quality of life. They taught identical sessions (online and face-to-face), comparing baseline measurements to post teaching sessions. Results revealed that sleep score improved for both online and face-to-face groups, with an improved night-time sleep awakening for the online group. This improved sleep pattern resulted in an improved parent quality of life for both groups, demonstrating online sessions and face-to-face can support improvements in sleep for children with ASD.

Summary

Overall, there are advantages and disadvantages for online and face-to-face programmes. Some programmes are more suited to face-to-face delivery and others are more suited to online. Previous research suggests that the hybrid format appears to be the most popular mode of delivery, as this supports the needs and challenges of all families (Duppong-Hurley et al., 2016). Advantages of online formats include, being more convenient for parents as they can be accessed from home, cost effective for the service providers (Bert et al., 2008) and they reduced feelings of social isolation (Strange et al., 2018). However, some suggested they increased isolation as parents became more reluctant to meet face-to-face (Strange et al., 2018). Some children showed, improved concentration and computer literacies when online (Erdogan et al., 2019) but there were concerns about the lack of social interaction (Clark and Mayer, 2004; Dong et al., 2020; Harding and Paechter, 2020; Lim, 2004). In addition, some fathers preferred online programmes, suggesting this format could open doors to harder to reach groups (Hudson et al., 2003; Plantin and Danebeck, 2009). Therefore, a supplementary online, group may be an alternative option (Strange et al., 2018).

Research suggests online programmes may be less effective for disadvantaged groups (McNeil et al., 2020: Wilson and Waddell, 2020). Poor internet connection and no access to a computer/laptop are among the barriers reported (Montacute and Cullinane, 2021; Wilson and Waddell, 2020). Therefore, providing support and services to those parents who prefer to use online services, is vital (McNeil et al., 2020).

Findings

Findings from the interviews with parents that have attended the online groups and staff involved in delivering these group activities are provided below and include: implementation and delivery of the online groups; strengths and weaknesses of the online groups; levels of engagement and interaction from families; and outcomes for children.

Implementation and delivery of online group activities

Setting up and commencing online group activities

The online group activities, delivered by the Family Mentors via Zoom, were set up in response to the Coronavirus pandemic and subsequent government restrictions put in place, which at the time required people in England to remain at home where possible. Due to the speed of the lockdown, the Family Mentor workforce were not initially well prepared to deliver group activities online. One ward made the decision to delay the commencement of online group activities until some training had been provided to the Family Mentors and they had had the opportunity to practice delivering sessions online.

> "We weren't very well equipped. It was kind of a case of you know, we've got to get this out, we've got to get this started, we've got to get this done, and we're just going to work it out as we go. Which you know, I'm all for as an approach. But the reality is, it left us with a lot of challenges, in that we were ill equipped. we didn't feel necessarily all that prepared" (Family Mentor).

> "I think we started later than we would have like to, but that was because we wanted to put in… we did a lot of practice sessions and things like that. So, we didn't want that added pressure you know, we'd identified the pressures, so we tried to put some different training in, and practicing and things like that" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Prior to the pandemic the majority of the Family Mentors had no experience of delivering group activities online and confidence with technology and digital platforms such as Zoom varied. Whilst some family mentors were confident delivering sessions online, including being in front of a camera and using video conferencing facilities/digital platforms, others were not.

> "Temperamentally, even for different people like, some of us do feel incredibly confident doing things like this. Like my husband tells me I was born to be on TV, and I'm quite happy with that you know, it works for me. But it doesn't for everybody… Like I do have

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experience in front of a camera, it wasn't something that was new to me. But for a lot of people, it really was. And yeah, I think there were a lot of challenges with that" (Family Mentor).

"I think it's as I say, a mixed bag I think, in terms of staff confidence as well, and having to obviously learn how to work Zoom and how to get round that" (Family Mentor).

In some wards the Family Mentors practised together to build confidence and some even received training to develop their confidence.

"Although we were later at actually putting it [online group activities] on, we weren't later in thinking about it, getting the resources in, and getting the Family Mentors practicing and feeling more confident. I suppose we were you know, we put a lot of time in making sure that the Family Mentors were supported rather than just chucking them in front of the screen" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Quite early on, they paid for somebody to deliver some training that helped confidence in their staff" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

In some wards training was provided on the digital platforms Zoom. Some training was provided in-house whereas other wards outsourced the training. In most cases training was provided after the commencement of the online groups. This was due to the Family Mentor workforce having little time to prepare in advance for the online groups but wishing to move the groups online as soon as possible in order to provide some support for local families that were in lockdown.

"So, we did our own little training session. At the time, we'd got somebody who could do, knew how to use Zoom and [Microsoft] Teams, so we did little training sessions" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"And we did actually bring somebody in to give us a bit of training" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Well, it wasn't right at the start, there wasn't the training. I think we were already doing it [delivering the groups online] once we got the training" (Family Mentor).

Some of the Family Mentors would have liked further training in Zoom, in order to make the most of its different functions, and also more general IT training, due to some Family Mentors having very little experience using IT services and therefore lacking in ability and confidence.

"I could never work out how you like take over the screen [on Zoom], and you can put like slides up, and yeah, some of the more technical stuff. I was okay just like talking and setting the meeting up. That became easy didn't it, scheduling it all and stuff, it was the more technical bits where you could pretend like you were in Florida or put the slides up, and like PowerPoint" (Family Mentor).

"When we was reading the story, I was actually holding the story [book], and then trying to read it, whereas if I'd have been a bit more techy I could have had the story on the screen. Maybe that would have worked better" (Family Mentor).

"Not everybody, but a lot of staff had absolutely no IT training whatsoever. So, they literally sent emails. And so, I can remember staff being petrified, because remember, a lot of the ladies, that when they started this job you know, they was at home mum's. They'd not worked in admin, and you know, it was quite daunting when [name of person removed] said; we're going to do a staff meeting on Zoom. Some people, it took them ages to get on. And it sounds simple, but if you're frightened of technology. I think that just a general lesson in basic tech IT" (Family Mentor).

The sudden introduction of restrictions, as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, meant that Family Mentors experienced difficulties accessing the necessary resources, including laptops and cameras. As a result, Family Mentors were originally required to use their own mobile phones in order to deliver the online groups, until the necessary laptops and cameras had been purchased.

"I think there were a lot of technical challenges like, if we're being honest, it's like it's absolutely… we didn't have the right equipment to do it all the time. Like we're expected to use our work phones or our personal phones. When actually, when we got to the stage where some of us had laptops and things like that, so that was so much better" (Family Mentor).

Whilst in general delivery of the groups online ran smoothly, there were some challenges. These included: poor internet reception; background noise when attendees had forgotten to mute themselves; and concerns that families could not see or hear the Family Mentors properly.

"I mean sometimes with equipment, and internet. Because obviously everybody's using the system. So sometimes you wouldn't get a good reception when you're doing your deliverance, which can be quite annoying" (Family Mentor).

"We had a phone on a tripod, and you had that concern of, am I chopping my... is my head chopped off you know, am I loud enough? Depending on which room you was doing it in you may have had an echo" (Family Mentor).

"Just like when it comes to instructions probably having people on mute a bit more because I did find that a bit distracting when you could hear things going off in the background" (Parent).

Initially the Family Mentors were required to deliver the groups on their own, as due to government restrictions at the time, it was not possible to have another Family Mentor in the same room at the same time. Some Family Mentors found it difficult to deliver the sessions alone due to all the elements involved including singing, dancing and reading stories. Delivering groups online alone could also be isolating.

"So, for me, one of the no biggest challenges delivering a group is, so there was points during obviously the Covid, where we couldn't be together. So, it was one person delivering on their own. And singing and telling a story for an hour on your own, you get a tickle or you know, you start coughing, or you know, there's nobody to kind of pick it up. You know, you're dancing around, and you're becoming breathless, but you've still got to keep singing. And your voice just goes all croaky and it's like, yeah. I think that was really, really difficult" (Family Mentor).

"Doing it on your own. It was quite isolating" (Family Mentor).

Even when restrictions were eased and Family Mentors could deliver group activities together, there were still challenges due to the requirement to keep a distance from each other and wear a mask. These conditions made delivering sessions online difficult, as they limited the extent to which families could see and hear the Family Mentors.

Privacy of families and Family Mentors

The privacy of families attending online group activities was a worry for the Family Mentors. There were concerns about the extent to which families' privacy can be maintained, and about unwanted guests in the form of Zoom Bombing, whereby a Zoom session is interrupted by an uninvited user who has managed to gain entry and hijack the session. Fortunately, the latter did not happen and steps can be taken to protect accounts to prevent this from taking place. In terms of privacy, parents were asked not to record sessions or take photographs and at times were asked to turn off their cameras and microphones to protect their privacy.

"When you do a group, you obviously know who's there. Whereas online, you don't know who's listening, who's in the background and who's watching. So that was all raised kind of, we needed to make sure that that was spoken about, and no recording, screen recording, anything like that" (Family Mentor).

"In Baby Massage wasn't it, that mostly the cameras were off. Because obviously the babies tend to get stripped down, and it's parental choice whether they take nappies off as well, and just that lack of control on our behalf. And for the families like you say, you don't know who's watching, potentially watching, that we can't see. So that was very much for that particular session why we said you know, have your cameras off while doing the strokes, but if you want to speak or ask a question, then by all means pop it back on" (Family Mentor).

"I don't know the technical term, but it's called Zoom bombing. So, someone can manage to get into your… and they do quite scary, or they can do like rude… but that was what my concern was, was a rude flash. Yeah, so I was worried, I don't know what, we seemed to be safe from that didn't we? But I think that's because if people find out what your ID is, which would be very easy, so that's it, it goes into the wrong hands. But thank god that never did happen" (Family Mentor).

Although this was rarely raised by the Family Mentors, the privacy of Family Mentors is also important as they are working from their own homes. Delivering group activities from the home inevitably involves inviting people into your personal space, albeit virtually, and as a result attendees may have insight into the personal lives of Family Mentors as a result of seeing their homes, photographs and also others that might be the home, i.e., family members.

"And then you was at home, and I have a lot of photographs in my house. So, I was like, well I don't want all these people that I don't know seeing my personal life. So, you can't put the blur on because they need to see you. Because when the blur's on, an arm can go missing, or a leg, or half your head" (Family Mentor).

Baby Massage

Baby massage is a course in which parents learn massaging techniques and follow the facilitator, massaging their baby during the session. It is therefore very interactive for the parent but not the child, which appeared to lend itself to the online delivery format.

"Baby Massage, that's still going on Zoom you know. We don't have any problems with that at all. I think it just depends on what… when you've got an active toddler that you want the face-to-face stuff" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Baby Massage appeared to be well attended online and interviews revealed that there were potentially two reasons for this: convenience and comfort. It can be challenging leaving the house with a new-born baby (in terms of getting a new-born ready to leave the house) and online Baby Massage classes are an accessible alternative to face-to-face sessions. Some parents can also find it less stressful attending Baby Massage classes online, particularly where they are worried that they will feel judged if they go to a face-to-face class and their baby starts to cry.

"I think we had quite a good attendance. Like with the Baby Massage, I think we actually had better attendance, because parents would go like, on well it's raining today, I haven't got to get baby ready and come out at this time in the morning. Because it was a 10 'clock start then" (Family Mentor).

"For me, was quite good, because I was first time mum. So, I didn't feel you know, this pressure or stressed that someone watching me when my baby cried, or when I had to change the nappy. So, I can just turn off the camera, or you know. And we didn't have like microphone on, so I was quite happy. Because you know, it's just sometimes, it's quite uncomfortable when your baby crying, and you can't really calm him down. I think because it was the lockdown as well, and it's just like a first time mum, it's just like, you worry that you know, someone judging you" (Parent).

There were disadvantages to delivering the Baby Massage course online, in particular visibility and loss of communication between Family Mentors and parents. It was often not possible for the Family Mentors to see the parents participating in Baby Massage from their homes. This was because some parents chose to turn their camera off (or were advised to) and where they left it on, it was difficult for the Family Mentor to see them properly due to both the position of the parents and camera, and because the Family Mentors main focus was on showing the parents the massage techniques using a doll as a prop. Consequently, it was difficult for Family Mentors to be aware of whether or not parents were performing the massage techniques properly and offer advice where needed. In addition, whilst there were opportunities for questions, it is often not as easy to ask questions online as it is face-to-face.

"The camera cannot show everything because I'm busy with the baby more than with the camera. So, if I would like to… if I'm doing something wrong maybe the tutor may not pay

attention as well because they are watching too many people at the same time and maybe the camera, the position of my camera is not right. So, this is one thing, it's not practical when the course or the session is about something physical, it's not like a lesson or something is told verbally only. The massage group, the massage is requiring interactivity and physical moves and so on, and the tutor should watch the moves to comment if there's anything wrong, like aerobics, like if you do any fitness activity. So, I think yeah, face-to-face would be more practical" (Parent).

"It felt really strange, sitting in your living room at home, talking to yourself basically. Because they can see you and hear you, but you're actually talking to yourself while you're massaging the doll. So that was strange" (Family Mentor).

Whilst some parents found the Baby Massage sessions easy to follow, others experienced difficulties. However, parents reported being given examples before commencing techniques and reported receiving clear instructions, which helped.

"It was just, sometimes it was hard to follow step by step the massage, because you know, your baby you know, not really want to cooperate with you. So, you know, the lady was you know, move on with the massage, and you just stuck on this you know, the last step. But we had the instruction, and I had, I can do this like after a session you know again. So, everything was really clear, and she explained everything perfectly" (Parent).

"It was really easy to follow as I say, the teacher [Family Mentor] was really, really good at explaining it, and showing us, you know, doing an example before we're doing the routines" (Parent).

Whilst at the time of writing this report all wards were back to delivering Baby Massage face-to-face in community settings, for a limited time, one ward streamed face-to-face Baby Massage sessions live on Zoom so that other parents could join in at home. Another ward is considering offering this option to parents in the future. The same ward also felt there was merit in providing a Baby Massage course in the evening, for fathers who may not be able to attend during the day due to work commitments. This group could also be offered to mothers, as some may have to return to work soon after the arrival of their new-born baby and therefore may not be able to attend Baby Massage sessions delivered during working hours. Interviews revealed that this option would be welcomed by some parents.

"Having that opportunity to either to do it online for some people, might work better… Yes, and sort of giving people the option of, we've either got it available via Zoom, or you can actually attend face-to-face now?" (Parent).

Cook and Play

One ward delivered Cook and Play online in real time and another pre-recorded Cook and Play and posted the videos on Facebook, for families to do in their own time. The Cook and Play groups delivered in real time were well attended, with this ward reporting higher numbers attending than when they delivered the groups face-to-face. Two reasons were given for this; families being able to cook together in their own kitchens and parents feeling more confident cooking at home. Delivering Cook and Play face-to-face in community settings can be challenging as it is often difficult for all families in attendance to be in the kitchen at the same time due to space. Furthermore, some parents can feel more confident cooking in their own kitchens without others around them.

"Our numbers, we got more online than face-to-face so far" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Obviously we have to do it [face-to-face Cook and Play] in a venue where there's a kitchen. Say you had 10 families [attending], you could have maybe two mum's in the kitchen cooking with you, and then they come back out, look after the children, and it would take turns. Never really worked very well, and we ended up with one staff in the kitchen and another member of staff at almost like a crèche" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Another plus as well as the numbers for Cook and Play, but I had people that wouldn't feel very… because cooking, people can feel quite unconfident about cooking, they don't know how to chop properly" (Family Mentor).

"But on a Zoom for me, like you know, I had peace in the kitchen, because my partner could look after my child when I cooked. So that was quite good.. Yes, and you know, it's just I think obviously, I like cooking, but I just like cooking in my time, and with no pressure" (Parent).

Conversely, some parents found it more difficult participating in the Cook and Play session at home, particularly when they were at home alone with their child(ren), as it was challenging for them to cook and take care of their child(ren) at the same time. Some parents preferred to watch the session

but cook in their own time when they had someone to watch their child(ren) and were not time pressured.

> "With [face-to-face] Cook and Play you've got more spare hands to be able to do things as well. Because I would be in the kitchen normally and say like a member of staff would look after the children, so it's not as stressful. Because I did find doing Cook and Play over Zoom was stressful at times because like I said it was trying to keep an eye on the kids as well as doing the cooking" (Parent).

> "I mean I was given the ingredients so I was able to do them in my own time, so that was one of the benefits of having the group as well. So, there wasn't any pressure on having to join in there and then, I was able to do it a bit later" (Parent).

> "And even if you not in a mood to cook, you can still watch the live is what they said to me. You don't need to be there in the kitchen, just have a watch and then do it later on your own time" (Parent).

There were concerns that it was not always possible to know whether or not families had taken part in a Cook and Play session and made a meal with the ingredients provided. In an attempt to encourage families to cook the meals with the ingredients provided, one ward requested feedback in the form of photographs of the meals parents had cooked.

> "There'd be some [parents] that would take the food, but then you wouldn't get any comeback. So, we wouldn't know whether they would have actually used it in the right way or not" (Family Mentor).

> "So, feedback with either photos with their consent, showing that what the children are doing, and that was kind of part of it for Cook and Play. So almost, and I know it sounds awful, but prove that, have they used the food, did they learn anything?" (Family Mentor).

There were challenges delivering Cook and Play online, including the cost and time it took to deliver the ingredients (for the meals that were going to be cooked during the session) to all families taking part at home. In addition, parents were not always in when the Family Mentors were due to deliver their ingredients.

> "So, where you might have done two big shepherds pies face-to-face, and they eat there, we're having to do individual, and it works out more expensive. Be more time consuming because you need the staff. We did the shopping anyway, but then they've got to weigh it

all out IN individual boxes, then deliver it to somebody's house. But it has proved more popular, so it's swings and roundabouts. I don't think we'll stick with it because it is more time consuming and more expensive" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Some people used to mess them about, they would not be in when they called, and things like that" (Family Mentor).

Whilst the wards have returned to delivering Cook and Play in face-to-face settings, one ward is looking at adapting the face-to-face Cook and Play sessions to resolve the issue of families not being able to cook together due to the size of the community kitchens. The plan is to install cooking stations for families to use.

"So, we're going to try and adapt it so the children are included [at face-to-face Cook and Play groups]. So, you might have little workstations in the hall, and then you pass it over to somebody in the kitchen to cook it. We're adapting it anyway, so we'll see how we get on with that" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Story and Rhyme Time

The success of Story and Rhyme Time was mixed. In one ward, families that had not previously attended Story and Rhyme Time, face-to-face, came along to the online Zoom sessions. It was suggested that one reason for this may have been that attending via video link is perhaps less intimidating, particularly where parents might be concerned that their child might not sit and listen to the story.

"One of the big positives was, we had a lot of families that we've not reached before. And I don't know whether that's because it was the only thing going, so that's why they did it. Or because a lot of families get a little bit of anxiety about coming to Story and Rhyme Time, because they don't believe their child's going to actually sit and listen to the story. They think they're just going to cause chaos. Whereas they had a bit of a security blanket being at home, knowing they could turn the camera of, or log off if that was the case. So, we did get quite a few new people that probably wouldn't have come to a group because of their anxiety" (Family Mentor)

Whilst some parents reported that their children enjoyed the sessions, there were difficulties engaging children via video. Face-to-face appeared to be a more successful format for Story and Rhyme Time as it was difficult for Family Mentors to engage very young children via video.

"The hardest part of Story and Rhyme Time, when it's face-to-face, is actually reading the story. Ironically, like that's what the session's about, but it's hard to gain their [children's] attention for a whole book. And then doing it online, it's even harder. So, it was almost like that part of the session wasn't of interest to many of the families. It was the singing, it was… we used to ask for a song request. So that side of it was a really successful part of that session. The actual reading of the story, which is a big part of Story and Rhyme Time, did not work online" (Family Mentor).

"When he's with other kids, even like other adults, if they're face-to-face, he absolutely, he loves it. He loves playing with them; he's entertained, he's happy. In front of the screen, like if it's a cartoon, he does like it, but I don't know why with the Zoom session, he just was not interested. I think he found it a little bit boring. And so he was at that age, because they can't understand sentences as much as he can now. I think hearing stories, he sort of… I think he didn't know what was going on, and kind of… maybe older kids are probably a bit more into it" (Parent).

One parent recommended making the Story and Rhyme Time groups more interactive to try and engage children more effectively.

"If you're reading a story to a group of kids, you absolutely need to take into account that it'll be disrupted and integrate that disruption into the story somehow. Make it engaging, looking to see if a child doesn't pay attention. How are you going to include them, how are you going to including acting out part of the book? If they just turn the pages, and this is all that you do with a book, doesn't do much. And because of that, kids just stop, and they are doing something else, they are picking up a toy, they are started screaming, they are… yeah, it's pretty chaotic. And they get frustrated" (Parent).

There was the suggestion that for Story and Rhyme Time to be effective, parents needed to take the lead and encourage their children to listen and participate. However, despite parents' best efforts it could be difficult to get their child to concentrate on the screen.

"I think the responsibility is on the parent when it comes to online you know. The child and the parent are only going to get as much out as they put in, in how they react to that group you know. And I would say you know, probably Baby Massage, it is kind of hands on, and it's kind of an expectation that actually they participate. Whereas the Story and Rhyme Time or the Jiggle and Wiggle, it's almost like you have an option of, do I just sit on the sofa and watch with my child, or do I actively participate? And you know, although we'll encourage

that, they still have a choice. So yeah, I think it, yeah it is about you know, how willing the parent is to actually engage, how much they want to put in" (Family Mentor).

"I think he's so used to watching cartoon on the I-pad or the laptop, and just watching sort of… I think he found it a little bit boring, and not as entertaining as a cartoon. He liked it initially, the first time in it, and then he sort of you know, pulled away or something. He wasn't very interested, like I tried to get him to sort of watch, but I think he just likes being with children sort of face-to-face" (Parent).

One ward was concerned that they could be breaking the law by reading copyrighted stories via a video conferencing facility as part of the Story and Rhyme Time group and therefore chose not to and instead wrote their own stories and told children's nursery rhymes:

"We couldn't use certain books, because we started out with Story and Rhyme time, so you know, if it was face-to-face, we'd be using the Imagination Library books. But with it being online, we didn't want to break any laws or anything" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"We were told specifically that we weren't allowed to read stories on video and then put it out there, because of copyright infringement and things like that" (Family Mentor).

All wards had gone back to delivering Story and Rhyme Time face-to-face as it was considered the most effective format. Yet there does appear to be some value to Story and Rhyme Time being available in video format: parents who cannot attend the groups face-to-face, due to work commitments, could access the video at a more convenient time.

"I think Story and Rhyme Time will probably stay face-to-face, just because I think the interaction between the Family Mentors and the families is better, and the engagement with the children is better if it's face-to-face" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"Well now I'm back at work it's harder for me to be able to take her to things, so it is nice to have like Story and Rhyme Time on the computer or whatever, for her to… for me to be able to do with her whilst I'm at home, like on a lunch break or something like that. Because she goes to nursery, but when she's not at nursery it's still nice for me to be able to do that with her. But yeah, also because a lot of them are during work time, for me, during work time, I think maybe if they're recorded and put somewhere. I don't know if they already are, but if

they're recorded and put somewhere so we don't have to be there at a certain time to be able to take part" (Parent).

Play groups

Each ward delivered a play group online and whilst they were all similar in terms of involving children and parents in active play, they all had different names: Jiggle and Wiggle; Active Play; and Messy Play. Whilst some were well attended and helped families to be active, there were challenges delivering them online. The main challenge was retaining children's focus and engagement when no-one can interact directly, i.e., children could not play with other children and Family Mentors could not interact with the families directly.

"Though we did see on the screen on Active Play, well the ones I did, I saw parents doing 'ring-a-ring-a-roses' in the living room and things like that. So, I think they got something out of it" (Family Mentor).

"We're singing songs to them, they're [children] not joining in with us. It's like now, with the Active Play, you do a parachute game, or you sing some songs, or you'd get down on their level and like" (Family Mentor).

"In Jiggle and Wiggle, when the children come, like when we do face-to-face, sometimes you have a child who comes in and is very shy, and is just you know, doesn't want to get involved at the beginning. But as soon as they have seen the other children who are involved and start doing activities, you see them slowly start joining in. And then you know and bring their confidence back. Whereas if it is on Zoom, it's you know, it's just that child. You don't have another child there to you know. So, I think you know, with Jiggle and Wiggle, it's nice to have it face-to-face, then you can have all the children involved" (Family Mentor).

"Because even when we do Active Play on Zoom, we've been in our kitchen, they've been in their kitchen. They [children] wouldn't be interacting and running around with other children" (Family Mentor).

Views about Messy Play were mixed. Whilst it was interactive for children, which helped in terms of maintaining their attention, it was sometimes difficult for parents to participate as they were required to get their own ingredients. This prior preparation made it less accessible to parents, particularly when they were not given much notice. Messy Play also appeared difficult for parents to replicate at home as there are a wider range of items available at face-to-face than parents have at home, making it difficult to replicate the session at home fully.

"Messy play was a bit better because there's something to actually do… So yes, Messy Play was good because she had something to focus on, so yeah she'd probably sit for ten or fifteen minutes" (Parent)

"I think Messy Play just definitely didn't work. It just… because Messy Play is very much sort of hands on. And we could give them the ideas, and [name of Family Mentor removed] and I would have the things at home, and kind of would show them. But then they're not necessarily ready, even though I think [name of Family Mentor removed] was sending out a list of ingredients. So, if they want to do to things at the same time. So more often than not, they weren't doing them at the same time. So, it was more sort of just giving them ideas for them to do in their own time. So, I don't know, for me it just wasn't the same at all" (Family Mentor).

"So, the group itself was great. I think they could have given us a bit more of a heads up about what to plan. For example, one time they used oats and I think we only got told the night before, now luckily, I have oats, but if you don't have oats you can't go out in the night to go and buy them ready for the morning… So, for Messy Play, no, you had to organise your own resources" (Parent).

"Doing that online they would suggest one activity, so for example dry oats with scoops, whereas at Messy Play when we go – we're back they are doing Messy Play [face-to-face] now again – so there will be, you know, foil, spaghetti on one, there will be a water tray, there will be sand tray, there will be shredded paper so she can fully get involved and watch other children and play with them, sharing. Seeing the Mentors, yeah, it's much better" (Parent).

"Messy Play was a huge disappointment for me… I mean Messy Play [face-to-face]; they had all sorts of things that they would use and stuff like this. Which wasn't possible [at home] obviously. I think it was pretty unfortunate to be fair, Messy Play on Zoom" (Parent).

Families' engagement and interactions with the online group activities
Accessibility and reach

Whilst the online groups were popular, engagement waned over time and it was suggested that this was due to the sheer amount of time families were having to spend online: during the pandemic many people were required to work from home and at the beginning older children also studied from home, leading to long periods of time spent in front of a screen. The easing of restrictions also

led families to disengage from online groups. Once they were able to leave their homes more often they returned to face-to-face activities.

"People have Zoom fatigue. They were just exhausted with being online" (Family Mentor).

"Towards the end, they were a bit fed up with it, and they wanted to get back in the community" (Family Mentor).

There were challenges for families in terms of joining and interacting with online groups. Whilst some parents were familiar with digital platforms and confident joining groups online, others were initially anxious due to their limited experience using digital platforms. Some parents also experienced technical problems such as problems with their internet and difficulties navigating unfamiliar technology. Whereas some parents had their own laptops or devices, others did not or shared devices which meant that they did not always have a device available in order to join a group online. Further it was noted that some parents only had mobile phones, which are not ideal for joining in groups online, due to the size of the screen.

"They send a message one day before the session, with the room, the number of the room, the link, and the password. So, I think everything, I've never had a problem with how to use the Zoom and you know, I've never had a problem with you know the… no everything went smoothly really" (Parent).

"I've never used it [Zoom] up until that point. At first it was really quite daunting because I was sent a link, but I wasn't aware that I had to download the software as well. I thought I'd just click on the link and be able to take part. I did manage it okay; I was just late joining the first session. I think probably just a bit more information from the outset, to say that you know, you have to download the actual software" (Parent).

"A lot of parents didn't know how to work Zoom; weren't confident with technology you know. Some mums would join us, and their kid had shown them how to get onto the Zoom. So, you know, that's really challenging for parents. Some of us are a bit technophobic aren't they? Yeah, and that's us, and we had to do it. So, some parents who are a bit like, I don't know how to work this you know, my son's not home, he can't show me how to do it. And that stopped them joining in" (Family Mentor).

"I mean I'm lucky because I have a laptop, I have internet and I'm quite… I mean I'm alright with using a computer, but I know some parents, friends of mine, they don't have computers, iPads or whatever, so it would be on their phone" (Parent).

"And I think an element of it, is that when people are finding that all school lessons were online, you may be having an issue with like devices available" (Family Mentor).

"It's [online groups] very difficult to access on a phone" (Family Mentor).

Online groups can be more convenient for families as they do not require parents to get their children ready to leave the house or any travel to and from a venue. They can also accommodate more families as online groups are not limited by venue capacities.

"I think with parents, they're quite accessible, because like they're at home. It doesn't matter if it's chucking it down with rain, they're at home, they can sit in their pyjamas. They haven't got to make a special effort to get ready, get the child ready, come to a session. They might be feeling a bit under the weather, but they could still attend. So, I think for the parents, it was quite good for them wasn't it? For those that did attend" (Family Mentor).

"The comfort that I don't need to prepare myself to get out, because this is hassle when I have a baby. Going out is sometimes… it's nice to be outside in the fresh air and seeing people around and all this stuff, but it becomes a kind of hassle to prepare for going out after having a baby. Because I have to feed him, change him and I have a son, so I have to do multiple tasks and he doesn't settle down easily, even if he has everything. Sometimes he just cries; he doesn't want to be in the pushchair or something like that. So sometimes in order to prepare myself to go out I need two hours or something, so it's a complete hassle. So sometimes virtual sessions or something will help with that, but of course if everything is virtual also it's not nice, so this is the good part about having something online, remotely" (Parent).

"Well, my daughter was, I'm trying to think how old she was. She was only very young at the time; she was maybe a month old, maybe just a bit older than a month old. And so, it was good that it was online, because I didn't have to travel anywhere. I didn't feel under pressure, and the teacher [Family Mentor] was excellent in being able to deliver it online, that made a huge difference. You know, for the time it takes for an hour session, it could probably take me more than an hour to get us both ready, get us there and back" (Parent).

"Because when you do online [groups] you know, there's no capacity [limit] then, you can take as many people as you want" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

Furthermore, as mentioned previously, online groups are also sometimes more preferable to parents who may lack the confidence to attend a face-to-face group or have some reservations about bringing their child to a group activity in case they do not wish to join in or misbehave. In one ward, online groups also appeared to be more preferable for fathers with the Family Mentors in this ward reporting that more fathers attended the Baby Massage classes online than previous face-to-face ones.

"I think if it was the option of you know, one way or the other, I possibly would have tried it online at first, and then maybe took the opportunity to go and do it in you know, in person classes as well. I think I probably would have done both, it there was that opportunity. Just to build some confidence first and foremost. So, having it online like I say, I didn't feel under any pressure. I felt quite comfortable because I was at home" (Parent).

"We got a lot more dads online, doing the massaging you know" (Family Mentor)

"That was a real positive. Because they [fathers] wouldn't feel comfortable coming to a group, especially if there was all women there" (Family Mentor).

Communication and interaction

Online groups provided families with a connection to other families and this was appreciated by parents who were very isolated during the pandemic and subsequent lockdown.

"I think that I benefitted in terms of staying connected, in terms of having some, how should I put it, some changes in my schedule some diversity, some break in the routine" (Parent).

"It was nice for me, because I've got to sort of you know, other mums are online, and we knew some of them. I recognised like the names of the children. So, it was nice, yeah, during lockdown we were so isolated, it was quite refreshing to get online and sort of see those you know, names and you know, faces and things" (Parent).

"It was good to have something scheduled to do because this was really early when I was in the early months after giving birth and I was very isolated. And so, I didn't have any face-to-face groups as well because of the pandemic, so there were not any groups so it was nice to feel connected with other people who go through the same situation" (Parent).

However, despite the Zoom video conferencing facility offering two way communication, communication and interaction was minimal during group activities. Unfortunately, in the main, families had to mute themselves on Zoom to reduce background noise so that the Family Mentor could be heard. Further, whilst in some groups families could see each other and there were opportunities to communicate, families did not interact as much as they did when they were together face-to-face. Parents also missed out on developing friendships with other parents.

"That was probably the main drawback of online groups, because there was nothing for parents you know. It wasn't a situation where parents could interact with other parents. Which let's be real, is half of the reason you take your kid to a group. Yes, it's for their social development, but it's also for your socialisation as an adult. And with face-to-face groups, you can't underestimate the impact of that" (Family Mentor).

"When I went face-to-face, then it's quite different. So, you have a person next to you, and you just talk… So, it was easier for me to talk, and we can talk about children. But on a Zoom, I felt really strange to talk to someone. So, I was quiet, and most of the women like when they were first time, were quiet as well" (Parent).

"If they're [parents] together, they're talking to each other, and the parents get to know each other don't they and all of that. So, the social element is definitely lost when you're online" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

In addition to families not interacting and communicating, it was also difficult for the Family Mentors to communicate and interact with the families attending and it could feel as if they were talking to themselves, as a result of it sometimes being necessary for families to mute themselves and not always being able to see families properly.

"It felt really strange, sitting in your living room at home, talking to yourself basically. Because they can see you and hear you, but you're actually talking to yourself while you're massaging the doll. So that was strange" (Family Mentor).

"When you're in the group, in a session, a proper group face-to-face, you sing, and it comes more naturally. When you was doing it at home, it was just you, and other people couldn't join in. Because on Zoom, if you all talk together, you can't hear anything. So that was a big issue for me especially, and it wasn't as much interaction as we're used to" (Family Mentor).

Attending groups remotely via video also meant that children could not socialise and interact with other children. Whilst children could see each other, interaction via video was limited and more challenging.

> "And the reality is, yes you okay you could wave to another two year old on a video camera, but you can't, it's not the same in terms of the socialisation of children, it's not the same experience for the children" (Family Mentor).

> "When you've got a child, you want them to have friends and stuff, and it's kind of part of the… we used to go to baby groups and all sorts. But obviously it all got stopped, so we didn't go to them. We obviously lost out on a lot of that. Because we used to go to one on a Tuesday, two other baby groups on a Tuesday. Went up until he was obviously four months old, and then we went into lockdown and that was it. So then since then, we've not been able to, he's not really been able to interact with any other children" (Parent).

> "My daughter she loves to be around other children and when she's around other children she tends to like copy off them and learn new things from them. And obviously I want her to be with other children as well. I don't want her to be staring at a TV doing some dance; I want her to be there with other children. So yeah, I much prefer that" (Parent).

> "Story and Rhyme Time, you're not getting that interaction. Like children can see other children on the screen, but it's not the same as going up and sitting next to the or doing row row row your boat with them. There's no social interaction by doing it online" (Family Mentor).

A key difficulty of the online groups was engaging children and keeping their attention, which was challenging. The Family Mentors felt that groups via video were not conducive to engaging with young children and found it easier to keep their attention when groups were face-to-face. This was supported by some of the parents interviewed, who found that their child struggled to connect with Family Mentors online. However, keeping the groups short and using children's names did help to maintain their attention.

> "And we definitely knew that the engagement with the families was impaired by having a screen, and just the whole medium wasn't conducive really in terms of you know, working with young children" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"I think we found over time that actually, using children's names quite a lot within the sessions kind of helped with keeping their attention" (Family Mentor).

"They obviously kept it shorter than it would have been face-to-face. I think one of the... the feedback that we had across the board was keeping children's attention in front of the screen. So, you know, they've got a limited attention span, it was very difficult, parents were saying. It was really hard to get them to sit and concentrate on a screen for any length of time" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"She [daughter] doesn't understand that the Mentors are talking to her, really. So yeah, face-to-face is the best way" (Parent).

"It was, I think [name of family mentor removed] has a really amazing skill at engaging. And that really shines through, even in the Zoom sessions. She was the only Mentor that was actually addressing the kids, calling their names, trying to... actually calling them and saying, raise your hand, do whatever, and I think it made a difference, I think it made a huge difference at that point in time" (Parent).

Effectiveness and outcomes

Perceptions about the impact of online groups varied. Overall, the Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team were of the perception that online groups are not as effective in developing children's outcomes as face-to-face groups. Some believed that children's communication and language development had suffered as a result of the lack of social interaction with other children and families. It was also noted that children appeared less sociable and nervous about interacting with others.

"I feel the team would say this, is that we did our best. And I think you know, we definitely didn't get the feeling that we weren't being effective, but we knew that it was, we were just doing the best we could. It wasn't ideal, it wouldn't be the best way and the way that we would choose to do it and engage with families. And we definitely knew that the engagement with the families was impaired by having a screen, and just the whole medium wasn't conducive really in terms of you know, working with young children. But we did the best that we could. And so, I hope that we achieved something, and you know, we achieved some of the outcomes. But I think they're better served and better achieved on face-to-face for sure" (member of Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team).

"There's a lot of language and communication, and there's also a lot of social interaction, that you can tell has been missing from the children. So, they're quite standoffish now aren't they, or they won't… and that's from all groups, not just one that we do" (Family Mentor).

"So, like language and communication, actually like regressed instead of moving forward. And the like social interaction, they're clinging to their parents, because they don't know anything else" (Family Mentor).

"And we know children, they don't know any different, they'll run up to another child and play, they don't care who it is. Like whereas now, it's like no, I'm not letting go of my mum. And in our handbooks we deliver separation anxiety, and that's one of the biggest tip sheets I know that I've used, since coming back face-to-face. And that's from all ages of children, and that's actually aimed at children from six to eight months" (Family Mentor).

Interviews with parents revealed that they found Baby Massage to be effective, revealing that the techniques they had learned during the course had helped to ease their babies colic, stomachache, teething and constipation and aided to relax and calm their babies and in some instances get them off to sleep.

"The children went to sleep, so the parents actually could put the child down and have a little bit of time for their self. We had quite a few saying, oh you know, they went straight to sleep after Baby Massage last week, so I just had a half an hour, and just sat down. So, at least they got a bit of relaxing time as well. So, I think that was a good thing about it being online wasn't it" (Family Mentor).

"Baby Massage I would say did help, I found it did help because I was able to use some of the techniques to calm the little one" (Parent).

"For me, it helped with… so my daughter, she was really constipated, and so some of the movements really helped for bowel movements and so on. So that was good, really beneficial" (Parent).

"He got colic really bad, so obviously it helped knowing obviously where to pinpoint that point when he's got his colic" (Parent).

"Because we learn how to you know; make a good massage when he like has a tummy ache or something. So, or teething, so I think it helped me a couple of times with like a tummy

massage. So, I think that was beneficial as well, so I knew what to do when something like this happened. Oh, I still use it even now when he has a problem for poo" (Parent).

Outcomes for Cook and Play were mixed. Whilst some parents reported repeating the recipes they had learned at the sessions and making healthier choices; it was felt that face-to-face would be more effective due to the opportunity to interact with and learn from other children.

"I still use a couple of the recipes, which is from muffins and granola, and some help make bun. So, I still use them, so I think that was really good" (Parent).

"In Asian [food], we have like too much oils going to... and the salt, we put a lot of it. But with the children, no salt at all, so that's… sugar, a little bit, or not that much, but they guide, yeah. I do avoid it now" (Parent).

"But I would say with the Cook and Play it didn't really benefit them [children] as much. Yeah, we got some lovely meals out of it, that was one bonus, but then normally with face-to-face interactions they'd have the other children to interact with. So yeah, my eldest she loves interacting wither other children" (Parent).

"The only one thing which I think I missed, because my child is a little bit picky eater. So, I think if he would be in the group, and he could see other children eating, I think he would be you know, like more interested in this food. He still you know, tried, but it was like try, and sometimes he just left it" (Parent).

In terms of outcomes for the play groups (i.e., Messy Play, Jiggle and Wiggle, and Active Play) and Story and Rhyme Time - there was very little feedback from parents. This could have been because these were the most difficult for families to engage in and therefore challenging for them to reflect on whether they had made a difference to their children. However, one parent did feel that Story and Rhyme Time had helped her child with her language development:

"She enjoys the like nursery rhymes and stuff like that, and singing, and now she'll just sing them to me when we're in bed and… yeah, I think she has learnt a lot, like with her language and learning songs and stuff like that, so yeah, definitely" (Parent).

Summary

The majority of Family Mentors had no experience delivering groups online and there were challenges including differing levels of confidence and abilities delivering groups online and access to

necessary resources. Whilst in general the groups were run effectively, there were some challenges including issues with internet connections, background noise and concerns that families could not always see and hear the Family Mentors properly. Privacy of both families and Family Mentors was also a concern. Some groups appeared to be more successful than others. Online Baby Massage classes were well attended, and it was deemed that this was as a result of it being more convenient for new parents in comparison to the face-to-face sessions. Cook and Play was also well attended. Some parents felt more confident cooking in their own kitchens (without others around them), however it could be challenging for parents that did not have another person there to help look after their child(ren). Delivering Cook and Play online was also more costly and time consuming as Family Mentors were required to buy, pack, and deliver the ingredients needed for each Cook and Play session to each family participating. The success of Story and Rhyme Time was mixed. Whilst some parents reported that their children enjoyed the sessions, there were difficulties engaging very young children in a story via video. Each ward delivered a play group online and whilst some were well attended and supported families to be more active, there were challenges maintaining children's engagement when they could not play with other children and Family Mentors could not interact with them directly.

Interviews revealed that online groups were more convenient for parents with young children as they are not required to leave the home or travel. They can also be more desirable for some parents who lack the confidence to attend face-to-face groups or have reservations about bringing their child to a face-to-face group. Online groups were also more preferable to fathers, with more attending online than face-to-face groups. However, accessing online groups was not without it challenges. While some parents had no problems, others experienced difficulties due to their unfamiliarity with the Zoom platform, internet issues and access to devices. Furthermore, communication and interaction was minimal during online group activities and engaging and maintaining children's' attention online was challenging.

Overall, the Family Mentors and members of the Family Mentor Senior Leadership Team felt that online groups were not as effective in developing children's outcomes as face-to-face groups and there were particular concerns about children's communication and language development which were deemed to have deteriorated as a result of the lack of social interaction with other children and families. The Baby Massage classes were effective in terms of parents using the techniques to help alleviate their babies' colic, stomachache, teething and constipation and relax and calm their babies. Outcomes for Cook and Play were mixed. Some parents reported repeating the recipes they had learned at the sessions and making healthier choices. There was very little feedback from

parents in terms of outcomes for the Story and Rhyme Time group and the play groups and this may have been because these were the most difficult for families to engage in, making it difficult for them to reflect on whether they had made a difference to their children.

Recommendations

- Ensure that the Family Mentor workforce have access to necessary equipment including laptops and cameras.
- Provide further general IT training and training in the Zoom video conferencing facility.
- Explore issues of copyright and privacy, ensuring that there is guidance in place for Family Mentors and families.
- Consider offering both online and face-to-face Baby Massage groups.
- Consider offering evening online Baby Massage groups for parents who cannot attend during the day due to work commitments.
- Consider offering pre-recorded Story and Rhyme Time for parents who cannot attend during working hours.
- Explore whether SSBC families have reliable and fast internet access and access to devices when needed.
- Explore how opportunities for communication and interaction between families and also families and Family Mentors can be factored into any future online groups.

Evaluation of Story and Rhyme Time

Introduction

Description of Story and Rhyme Time

Story and Rhyme Time is a reading and singing programme delivered via community group sessions. It provides parents with the opportunity to spend time with their child developing positive interactions through stories and rhymes. It is proposed that these interactions can then be adopted at home. This is supported by providing parents with materials to use in their home.

Each session lasts for between 60 and 90 minutes and is led by a least two practitioners who are trained to develop age specific guidance to parents and their children. Each session is supported with a session plan which details the resources and songs that could be used. Throughout, there is a focus upon signposting parents to the books available via Bookstart and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. Previous Studies of the Imagination Library have demonstrated positive outcomes for young children when exposed to storybook reading (Tura et al, 2021; Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, 2017). Dolly Parton's Imagination Library provide a vital resource to children, their families, and their communities, Waldron (2018) identified that early literacy achievement was improved by children's participation in and exposure to storybook reading through the Imagination Library.

It is suggested that a programme based upon practitioners modelling speech, language and communication to parents via Story and Rhyme Time, leads to improved outcomes for children, particularly in terms of school-readiness (Baker and Scher, 2002; Mol et al., 2008; Mol and Bus, 2011; Wolf and McCoy, 2019; Seden, 2008; Shanahan and Lonigan, 2010)

Aim

The evaluation explores the impact of Story and Rhyme Time in relation to the improvement in children's and parents' outcomes from the perspective of Family Mentors and parents. There will be exploration of the new online programme and face-to-face sessions pre-COVID, examining the outcomes of this phase of the programme including delivery of sessions; speech, language and communication; and social and emotional lives.

This will be achieved by measuring changes and improvements in children and parents in the following indicators:

- Improved understanding of the importance of reading with children (parents)
- Increased confidence to read/sing with children
- Increased reading regularity with children
- Increased library visits
- Improvement in home learning environments
- Regular attendance at Story and Rhyme Time
- Improved language and communication skills.

As part of the data collection phase of the evaluation we will:

- Interview parents who have taken part in Story and Rhyme Time (online)
- Undertake focus groups with Family Mentors.

Rationale for Story and Rhyme Time's effectiveness

Story and Rhyme Time is offered universally in community venues in all four SSBC ward areas to parents and carers who have a child, from birth to their 4th birthday. The Story and Rhyme Time sessions are delivered by Family Mentors who offer and deliver activities to children. Sessions contain core elements based on evidence to support language and communication outcomes. These include activities to help parents develop the skills to engage in regular reading and play with their child in between sessions at home. In addition, practitioners signpost parents to the Dolly Parton Imagination Library and Bookstart books that are available for free. Family Mentors use these resources to model age-appropriate positive reading behaviours for parents such as the use of songs and rhymes with actions and dialogic reading.

Family Mentors are trained to provide age-appropriate tips (key messages) to parents and carers throughout Story and Rhyme Time sessions. These help the parent/carer to develop and extend their reading habits with their children as well as the home learning environment. Family Mentors also observe parent/carers- child relations during reading activities and then they offer support, encouragement and reinforce positive interactions. Parents can take home resources which can be hosted electronically and are available for parents to practice the language and communication strategies learnt from the Story and Rhyme Time sessions.

The rationale for Story and Rhyme Time revolves around a number of suppositions:

1- The focus upon the specific wards is purposeful. This is taken from the Bercow report (Rogers, 2008) which found that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have significantly lower speech and language skills than other children of the same age.

2- Language development at the age of two predicts whether children are ready for school (Roulstone et al., 2011). This is pushed further to suggest that children who read regularly are more successful readers (Mol et al., 2008).

3- The long-term goal of Story and Rhyme Time is to encourage parents to introduce home learning, which has been identified as having a positive impact upon learning (Sylva et al., 2004). Roulstone et al., 2011 also specifically noted teaching songs/rhymes and reading with children as being beneficial in the home.

As a result, SSBC hope that Story and Rhyme Time will lead to:

- Understanding of the importance of reading with your child;
- Increased confidence to read/sing with your child;
- Regular attendance at Story and Rhyme Time;
- Parents reading regularly with children;
- Increased visits to the library;
- Development of language rich home learning environments; and
- Children have improved language and communication skills during pre-school and in EYFS.

Evidence base for Story and Rhyme Time:

1. Parents self-reported benefits of Bookstart Corner (Sheffield Hallam University, 2013). Most notably, 85% of parents felt more confident reading to their children, 84% knew more about how to read to their children, and 71% read more books to their children. Note, no benefits for children have been highlighted.

2. Increase communication skills in children, particularly with regards to helping bring stories to life (Waski and Bond, 2001).

3. Offering freedom to make marks (writing) increases communication skills (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). However, there appears to be no emphasis on 'mark making' in Story and Rhyme Time.

4. Dialogic book reading (discussing aspects of the story via key questions) has been noted as improving vocabulary. However, as with point three, it is unclear how this works within the context of Story and Rhyme Time.

Methodology

Data collection methods

Parent interviews

The parents were recruited via an email to the Family Mentor Managers at three different groups in the Nottingham area: Toy library, Framework HA, and Home Start. The Family Mentors discussed the interviews with the parents in the Story and Rhyme Time sessions. The volunteers who were interested in taking part gave their email address/phone number to the Family Mentor Manager and these details were passed on to the evaluation team. A poster advertising the evaluation and seeking participants was also put on display. In addition, a member of the evaluation team attended two Story and Rhyme Time groups to recruit participants. There were 14 parents who participated in an interview. The parents and their children have been attending Story and Rhyme Time for between two weeks and two years. The parents were recruited from the different SSBC Story and Rhyme Time play groups in the Nottingham city area. There were three parents from Aspley, two parents from Bulwell and eight parents from St Ann's.

Family Mentor interviews

The Family Mentors were recruited via an email to the Family Mentor Managers at the Toy library, Framework HA and Home Start. The email contained an information sheet regarding the aims of the evaluation, along with a consent form for each of the participants to complete. Those who were interested in taking part, gave their email address/phone number to the researcher. An appointment was made for an interview; either a telephone interview or an interview via video through Microsoft Teams. There were seven Family Mentors who currently undertake the Story and Rhyme Time sessions and their time delivering these sessions ranged from 18 weeks to three years. Also, as part of this study, a Family Mentor who had initially set the Story and Rhyme Time sessions up, and had been a Mentor of SSBC since 2018, also agreed to be interviewed.

Due to the lockdown situation in the UK at that time (COVID-19) the interviews were conducted by telephone call or via video through Microsoft Teams, where they were recorded. The interviews were structured using questions regarding the implementation of Story and Rhyme Time, but the

participants were able to speak freely about their experiences. The interviews were around 30 minutes in duration.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was undertaken to identify patterns through a process of data familiarisation, data coding, and theme development. A deductive approach was undertaken whereby data coding and theme development were directed by the research questions.

Ethics and consent

Verbal and written informed consent were obtained from all participants. Participants were assured that they did not have to answer any questions that they did not want to and could withdraw from the study, without giving a reason, at any time up until publication of the findings. All data was anonymised as soon as possible after collection. Participants were assigned a unique identification number and data was stored against this number rather than against the names of the participants. Digital recordings and transcripts of interviews were saved securely in a Nottingham Trent University secure and restricted folder. Transcription of interviews was carried out by a member of the evaluation team. The consent forms were stored in a locked filing cabinet.

Ethical approval was obtained from Nottingham Trent University Business, Law and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study. The evaluation was also registered with the Research and Innovation Department within Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust.

Literature review

Background

Story and Rhyme Time is a group session that supports parents to develop the confidence to spend time reading and singing with their child. Practitioners teach parents and carers skills to read interactively with their children by modelling appropriate activities using books, play and rhymes.

Previous research attributes many positive benefits of Story and Rhyme for both children and parents. Positive benefits for children include language development, providing an interactive learning experience, and improving literacy skills (Mol et al., 2008; Wolf and McCoy, 2019; Shanahan and Lonigan, 2010). Rodgers (2008) suggests that approximately 50% of children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds have significantly lower speech and language skills than other children

of same age. Without effective communication skills, children will struggle to thrive in later life in terms of achievement, making friends and interactions with the world around them. Therefore, as Wasik and Bond (2001) recognised, younger children and those with low levels of language benefit from simpler reading systems that incorporate props or objects to bring the story to life similar to the elements of Story and Rhyme Time.

This literature review aims to answer the following:

1. What can the literature tell us about the effectiveness of Story and Rhyme Time?
2. How can evaluation findings be located within the literature?
3. How can Story and Rhyme Time be improved?
4. How can this review contribute to existing knowledge?

This review explores previous research related to Story and Rhyme Time, reporting on the outcomes and the impacts on parents and children.

Home learning environment and parental involvement

In Western culture reading to children is considered an important activity as it promotes children's language, literacy, and cognitive development (Mol and Bus, 2011). Research suggests that the age at which parents begin reading to their children correlates with children's language development, therefore, children who are read to from an early age tend to have higher scores on language measures (Pancsofar et al., 2010). Furthermore, children's language skills in the early years are widely considered to be predictive of their later reading success and literacy skills (Shanahan and Lonigan, 2010). Rowe (2008) found that young children respond to rich stimulation such as parents reading to them, suggesting that, as children learn to develop language, the quality of language interaction with parents is crucial. Additionally, parents reading to their children has been found to help them identify letters and words, and helps them read simple words, which are key indicators of the early language skills necessary for successful transition to schooling and early academic performance (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2008; Wolf and McCoy, 2019).

Karrass and Braungart-Rieker (2005) identified that shared book reading and early literacy learning have been shown to have a positive impact on children. In their study they found that shared reading at eight months of age is associated with infants' later expressive language abilities, both at 12 months and also at 16 months. In addition, Karrass and Braungart-Rieker, (2005) also suggest that books provide a rich assortment of objects and environments that parents can introduce to children's vocabularies through labelling. Involvement in shared book reading has been found to

increase children's motivation to participate in literacy activities which support positive child–parent relationships (Seden, 2008, Baker and Scher, 2002). This has been found to lead to positive educational and cognitive outcomes that last over time, "at least up to an age of 10 to 11" (Kalb and Von Ours, 2013, p. 25). There is also evidence that language and pre-literacy skills can develop as children hear language, therefore, a child hearing more varied words during play or other activities, like book reading, improves their vocabulary (Rowe, 2008). Furthermore, reading to a child, along with playing, are understood to be positive parenting characteristics which are viewed as crucial in promoting early language skills (Roopnarine and Dede Yildirim, 2018). Parents who are interested in reading themselves are more likely to read to their children; therefore, improving their own literacy skills may also benefit children's language and literacy development (Bracken and Fischel, 2008). Research continually demonstrates that children's word-reading accuracy and fluency is linked to the frequency that parents read to their children (Kiuru et al., 2017). Sylva et al., (2004) stated parents who engage in their children's schooling at an early age have a positive effect on their children's learning process. Indeed, Doyle et al., (2009) found that it is the home influence that is crucial to a child's language development, particularly in the early years. Furthermore, children who read at young ages are likely to continue to read as they get older (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 2001). Roulstone et al., (2011) reveals that language development at age two is a strong predictor of 'school readiness' at age four, further suggesting children who read regularly with an adult between the ages of 0-5, learn language faster, and enter school with a larger vocabulary (Mol et al., 2008). Therefore, it seems that adults reading to their children helps their communication skills. Without these skills, some children may struggle to thrive in later life in terms of achievement, and in interactions with the world around them (Mol et al., 2008).

Parents reading storybooks with their children is beneficial for the children as it can help develop their early language and vocabulary skills (Read et al, 2014). Additionally, the vocabulary of books read aloud has been shown to be an important source of linguistic input for children, particularly as picture books have been found to contain more unique word types than are found in parents' regular child-directed conversations (Montag et al., 2015). Ellis and Brewster (2014) suggest that illustrations in picture books 'synchronise with the text to help clarify and support learning' (p. 18). It has been suggested that the transition to illustrated books should be gradual, using books that contain familiar rhymes in picture books. Each rhyme is accompanied by one illustration in symmetrical interaction, which implies that 'the words and pictures tell the same story, essentially repeating information in different forms of communication' (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2000, p. 225).

Evans et al., (2011) found that while parents reading to children tended not to take up opportunities to explain unfamiliar words, they were more likely to discuss a new word when it was at the end of a page. However, research suggests (Booktrust, 2009; Libenson, 2007) that fewer parents in today's society engage their children in nursery rhyme activities either because they do not consider them to have educational value or that they believe nursery rhymes are "old fashioned" or find them embarrassing to recite to their children. In addition, Booktrust, (2009) found that only about 50% of the youngest generation of parents know all the words to traditional nursery rhymes.

Sylva et al., (2004) reported the importance of the home learning environment for intellectual development in children. In their report they stated that the home learning environment is more important than parental occupation, education, or income. In addition, their report identifies that parental involvement in activities such as reading to their child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes is significant in accounting for the differences in social and behavioural development at the start of primary school (Sylva et al., 2004). Moreover, it is important for children's emotional lives to begin by recognising the power of attachment and their bond with parents/caregivers (Music, 2016). Thus, children's abilities to develop aspects of emotional maturity are dependent on how they are treated by the adults who take care of them. Language play fosters attachment and, by extension, positive feelings, for example, where a baby innately respond to others' emotions. Lewis et al., (2013) point out that the "new-born reactive cry," whereby a baby cries when hearing another baby's cry, may be "the first instance of empathy without awareness" (p. 444). Indeed, Story and Rhyme Time has been shown to help even with babies. A good example of this would be a lullaby, a slow song to help soothe and calm an upset baby (Mullen, 2017). This is because as babies respond emotionally to rhyming, they begin to develop self-esteem and prosocial behaviours (Mullen, 2017).

There is research that shows parental engagement is a key factor in advanced student engagement and improvements in school (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Chrispeels, 2006). Sylva et al., (2004) identified that parents who engage in their children's schooling at an early age has a positive effect on their children's learning process. Lamb (2010) suggests there is little differences between a father and mothers' interactions with their child, but it is the importance of family context that matters. What is important in a child's life is that they have supportive parents whether this is a one parent family, same sex parent family or two parent family. The emphasis therefore should be on support for the parent(s) to help them provide a positive connection with their child. Indeed, it has been suggested that it is the support of their parents and the stability of the family that matter most in a child's development (Lamb, 2010; Fomby and Cherlin, 2007).

Rhyming incorporating play

It has been suggested that nursery rhymes and songs can provide an environment in which children can have an interactive learning experience (Mullen, 2017). Research suggests that children benefit greatly when adults interact with them using the nursery rhymes and songs of language play (Cobb, 2007). In addition, children learn well in environments "rich in language, joy, and playfulness" (Makovichuk et al., 2014, p. 105). Therefore, when parents play rhyming games with their children this involves play such as lap games that children find enjoyable and highly engaging (Fernald and O'Neill, 1993). Rhymes that incorporate play can help increase communication skills in children, particularly with regards to helping bring stories to life (Waski and Bond, 2001). In addition, children benefit greatly when adults interact with them using the nursery rhymes and songs of language play (Cobb, 2007). Research has indicated that the playfulness aspect of nursery rhymes does play an important part by providing an enjoyable environment for gaining language skills, as children 'spend a great deal of their time producing or receiving playful language', and that, for them, 'a good deal of language remains primarily driven by sound rather than meaning' (Cook, 1997, p. 228). Equally, nursery rhymes provide the children's love of playful interaction with language that contains 'an element of fun, of playing with the language' (Scott and Ytreberg, 1991, p. 27). Therefore, integrating nursery rhymes into the early childhood curriculum has been demonstrated to contribute to a linguistically rich environment contained within the English language (Harper, 2011).

Children have been found to show enjoyment in hearing rhymes and stories repeated. Arnold (2005) states that a child must hear a new word four to 14 times before it becomes part of his vocabulary. Therefore, rereading provides valuable opportunities for reinforcing learning (Arnold, 2005). Pruden et al., (2006) suggest identifying nursery rhymes and rhyming games that children especially enjoy and actively engage the child in the activities as part of routine play. Nursery rhyme games and activities are likely to be beneficial to most children but are especially important for young children with disabilities (Boudreau, 2005; Peeters et al., 2009). There have been a number of intervention studies of children with disabilities that indicate that rhyme-related interventions are associated with a host of positive literacy outcomes, and Blondel and Miller, (2001) state that nursery rhymes exist in sign language just as they do in oral language. The repetitive feature that appears in rhymes is similar in both spoken and signed language (Valli, 1990). Nursery rhymes and rhyming games have long been a part of early childhood intervention with young children with disabilities (Blos, 1974). With the focus on rhythm, children sing, and they step to the beat of the songs as they move around (Wiggins, 2007).

Rhyming and song

There have been suggestions of a positive link between nursery rhyme knowledge and familiarity and reading outcomes (Bryant et al., 1989; Hayes, 2011). Rhyme may help children remember exact words which potentially helps strengthen less familiar words for children and when added to other story cues like the narrative or illustrations, can also enable children to anticipate words at the end of a line even before they are read (Read et al., 2014). For example, when words are predictable, and used in frequent frames, common phrases like brush your… teeth (Arnon and Clark, 2011; Fernald and Hurtado, 2006) or contextually specific phrases like the pirate buried the… treasure (Borovsky et al., 2012) then those words can be anticipated and identified more rapidly (Borovsky et al., 2012), and are often produced correctly (Arnon and Clark, 2011). Rubin (1995) states that there is a memory advantage from rhyme because of how it makes the exact sound of words important, therefore more easily recalled. This suggests that rhyme can benefit word retention and even word learning from shared storybook reading, and that there is a connection between the predictability that rhyme affords to make the words more memorable (Read et al., 2014).

Exploring rhymes and songs has been suggested as an enjoyable way to provide knowledge and skills that can later help children become successful readers and writers. Godden (1988) maintains that "children should be introduced to poetry through nursery rhymes because nursery rhymes are true poems, poetry, with all its gifts of language rhythm and unexpectedness" (p. 309). Indeed, nursery rhymes provide a means for children to read effortlessly and accurately words they have heard and seen many times. In a study conducted by Maclean et al., (1987) they found children who knew nursery rhymes were better at detecting rhyme and did better in early reading than those who had no such knowledge. In another study (Braze et al., 2011) focusing on understanding of rhyming versus non-rhyming words in 2-year-old English toddlers, they found the toddlers looked significantly longer when hearing rhyming versus non-rhyming words. This suggests that the toddlers preferred rhyming words rather than non-rhyming words.

Research has found that infants as young as 16 months are able to group rhyming words apart from another set of words that do not rhyme (Floccia et al., 2014). Stagg et al., (2008) state that 'if children cannot make sense of a poem, they are unlikely to enjoy it' (p. 30). Therefore, Curtain and Dahlberg (2010) suggests using rhymes with limited vocabulary, 'compatible with the language being used in the classroom so that the words and concepts in the song reinforce or introduce material used for many other activities in the curriculum' (p. 396). So far, research has only been explored for infants' spontaneous processing of phonological overlap at word onsets, but not offsets (Jusczyk et al., 1999) and for rhyme processing after extensive training (Hayes et al., 2000). Hahn et al., (2018)

study suggests that 9-month-old infants can spontaneously process phonological overlap at word offsets and do not require any training to do so, which may be important when rhyming information is transmitted in a natural and accessible stimulus, which a song provides.

Research suggests there is a connection between music and language development, for example, Tallal and Gaab (2006) have shown that music and speech functions have many aspects in common and are similarly involved in speech and music. Indeed, songs contain rhymes within a solid scaffold of melody and rhythm, which caregivers express through various multi-modal cues (Bergeson and Trehub, 2002; Delavenne et al., 2013; Longhi, 2009). These structural cues potentially enable children to attend longer to children-directed song compared to children-directed speech (Costa-Giomi, 2014). In fact, research has repeatedly identified children-directed singing as a tool for children's arousal regulation (Trehub and Nakata, 2002). This suggests that prolonged attention to song might enable children to extract information from song that is otherwise inaccessible to them. However, there are very few studies exploring children's linguistic processing abilities in song, and none focused on the processing of rhyme (Hahn et al., 2018). In addition, there have been studies which demonstrate that children can detect a change in the order of a string of syllables only when the syllable string is sung on a melody, but not when the string is spoken (Lebedeva and Kuhl, 2010; Thiessen and Saffran, 2009). These studies suggest children actively encode the phonological content of songs, which is important in detecting rhymes at phrase endings in songs. For songs, Hahn et al., (2018) suggest that by six months of age, children are sensitive to the phrase boundaries in song melodies. There has been some research that indicates children process songs by using song stimuli that have shorter phrases, and with melodies and lyrics that are repeated in several trials of the experiment (Corbeil et al., 2013; Lebedeva and Kuhl, 2010; Thiessen and Saffran, 2009). Indeed, the nursey rhymes and songs that children encounter may be the earliest settings in which children encounter rhymes in their language input (Burling, 1966; Rubin, 1995). As children's songs and rhymes have a clear and repetitive structure, children may benefit from this when detecting complex phonological patterns (Hahn et al., 2018). Read (2014) states children benefit from rhyming stories when learning new words because they are better able to learn new words if they rhyme with the phrase-final word of the previous verse. In the early learning setting, music's engaging nature encourages children to attend during reading activities, and in addition encourages children to be active listeners, which in turn promotes comprehension and dialogue (Wiggins, 2007).

Children mark making

It is unclear whether Story and Rhyme Time specifically includes mark making. As will be discussed, it was a feature present at a number of the sessions during free play. However, most Family Mentors

actively discouraged its inclusion in sessions. Here we will outline what the literature has said about the benefits of mark making with this proviso in mind.

Children begin their writing skills by mark making. Mark making is where children 'scribble' and create different lines and circles on paper, the children are mark making, this is the first step towards writing (Early Years, 2015). The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) recognise that very young children need to be in an environment that lets them explore and become competent communicators, this can be achieved through their mark making. Mark making allows children to communicate their ideas through mark making along with expressing their feelings and developing their imagination and creativity (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008). Therefore, in understanding mark making can enable children to use them as a means of conveying their thinking to others, and as such use them as a tool for social communication (Ring, 2010).

Mark making is an activity that can help children develop a love of both drawing, but also help develop and support their writing skills (Early Years Careers, 2016). When children are given the opportunity for mark making, they are visible thinking which is fundamental to children's learning and development (Department for children, Schools and Families, 2008). Coates and Coates (2006) suggest mark making is important for children in their development of writing skills and literacy development (Price et al., 2015). Nonsense poetry, such as nursery rhymes, can provide exciting stimuli for imaginative play, artwork, writing, and mark making and discussion (McCormack, 2020). Additionally, drawing, painting and model making are ways in which children learn to communicate, Kress (1997) suggests a multi-model of learning that emphasise the importance of all these methods helps children naturally develop as a learner through combining what they are doing with what they are feeling and thinking.

Mark making can provide children with effective tools for thinking, reasoning and problem solving. Indeed, Mark Making Matters (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) aims to raise awareness of the importance of young children's mark making as a tool for communication and thinking across the six areas of learning and development, while strengthening the quality of provision for mark making in communication, language, and literacy. Furthermore, Carruthers and Worthington (2006) revealed children's development of their early mathematical thinking as they explore the symbolic 'written' language of mathematics that include: scribble-marks, drawings, writing, tally-type marks, and invented and standard symbols including numerals.

Speech and language

There has been some research which has suggested there is a link between children's early language skills and later reading abilities (Bryant et al., 1990; Strickland and Shanahan, 2004; Yopp and Yopp, 2000). This includes research which suggests there is a link between preschool children having knowledge of nursery rhyme and their future success in reading, writing, and spelling. Bradley and Bryant (1985) report that understanding rhyme and sound repetition prior to a child's entry to schooling plays a causal role in their reading success several years later. In addition, this study reported that children's initial nursery rhyme knowledge was a powerful predictor of their growing skill in rhyme and sound repetition over the next year. Bryant et al., (1989) study shows a clear connection, with nursery rhymes positively affecting the ability level of children's reading. The experience with rhymes, whether gathered from storybooks or simply recited orally, does correlate positively with some wide-ranging measures of language development (Read et al., 2014).

The use of nursery rhymes with young children promotes positive attitudes toward language learning and helps children to build awareness of sound patterns of language. Language and literacy development is facilitated when children have many opportunities to use language in interactions with adults; to listen and respond to rhymes, and stories; and to experiment with the sounds of language (IRA and NAEYC, 1998; NAEYC 2008). The use of nursery rhymes in teaching English language to children has been recommended as a way of effortlessly developing the children's grammar (Pinter, 2006, p. 86) which subsequently 'form part of a child's linguistic data base from which generalisations may be made' (Rixon, 1996, p. 36). Furthermore, there have been several studies that show early knowledge of nursery rhymes is directly linked to later success in reading and spelling (Bryant et al., 1989; MacLean et al., 1987).

Nursery rhymes are repetition at the linguistic level, with 'many repetitions of word sequences containing slight variations, which from the child's point of view, may aid the perception of abstract linguistic categories' (Crystal, 2001, p. 29) and language patterns (Gordon, 2007, p. 99). This would suggest that the repetitive language and nature of nursery rhymes can help with language skills without the potential accompanying feeling of potential boredom or frustration (Crystal, 2001, p.28). Additionally, nursery rhymes can be used as a valuable motivational tool for phonological and phonemic awareness instruction that can 'help language learners acquire connected speech' (Bland, 2013, p. 162). As children develop, their response to rhyme this can expand the children's sound knowledge to other words in different contexts which contributes to their ability to read, write and spell (Bryant et al., 1989).

Story and Rhyme Time can 'provide children with the tools for acquiring the necessary knowledge both about themselves and the world around them and the indispensable skill of dealing with emotions', thus helping them develop emotional intelligence (Prosic-Santovac, 2007, p. 47). Furthermore, children who have early knowledge of nursery rhymes can help them to build awareness of sound patterns of language, which plays an important role in a child's linguistic and early literacy development (Harper, 2011). This skill development contributes to the ability to read and has positive effects on reading and spelling as demonstrated by Bradley and Bryant (1991). Furthermore, the extent to which nursery rhymes, and rhyming activities are both engaging and beneficial is likely to be influenced by how interesting the rhymes are to a child (Frijters et al., 2000; Laakso et al., 2004).

Phonological awareness

The role of phonological awareness in the development of learning to read has been established as a sign in the attainment in understanding that the letters of the alphabet represent phonemes in speech (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). There has been some suggestion that one of the most important skills for children is phonemic awareness, or the awareness of individual sounds called phonemes that make up spoken words suggesting the understanding of phonemes helps a child's ability to hear sounds, and to spell phonetically (Harper, 2011). Furthermore, as children develop sensitivity to individual phonemes, build their awareness of sound patterns of language, and combine phonemes leading them to recognise new words in written texts, their reading ability improves (Bradley and Bryant, 1985) which may lead to improved writing and spelling (Strickland and Schickedanz, 2004). Indeed, children are expected to understand the sound-based system of our language, including rhyming skills and beginning letter sounds when they are entering preschool (Loniganet al., 2000; Snow et al., 1998). MacLean et al., (1987), study identified that knowledge of nursery rhymes played a role in children's phonological development. Using nursery rhymes can be a way of combining tactile- kinaesthetic activities in which language is explored, and can enhance children's phonological awareness, which may stimulate phonemic skill development (Harper, 2011). Custodero et al., (2003) argue that singing rhyming songs is also an activity that can promote young children's phonological-related abilities.

Dialogic book reading

Another good strategy to support child language development which can be built into story time reading, is dialogic book reading (Mol et al., 2008). Dialogic reading is a method of reading picture books with children in which parents/caregivers are shown how to encourage the child to actively

participate in the reading of a book (Zevenbergen and Whitehurst, 2003). The aim of dialogic reading is that the child eventually takes over the role of narrator. The dialogic reading model has been shown to help develop children's growing literacy, language, and linguistic skills (Reese et al., 2010). Dialogic reading styles can have a positive impact on young children's expressive vocabulary and supporting parents how to do it is also cost-effective. Some research has shown that reading with children is associated with cognitive and affective outcomes over time. In the dialogic model parents/caregivers support children in the learning of story vocabulary and discussion of the plot through various questioning and explanatory techniques (Barratt-Pugh and Rohl, 2016). Siraj-Blatchford (2007) argues that joint attention to texts (through parents and children reading together) contributes to advances in early language and literacy skills.

The importance of dialogue during reading is shown as parents respond to comments from the child about the pictures or text and hence adapt the discussion to the child's level of understanding (Bus et al., 1995; Mol et al., 2009; Nyhout and O'Neill, 2013). In addition, Barratt-Pugh and Rohl (2016) suggest that it is the type of interaction that takes place around the reading of books with children that is highly important in the shared book experience. To become strong readers, children first need a strong foundation of oral language as their language skills play a larger role than cognitive ability in literacy acquisition (McGinty and Justice, 2010). Exposure to rhyming is an excellent strategy to help children develop phonological awareness (Bryant et al., 1989; Dunst et al., 2011). Oral language also builds vocabulary (McGinty and Justice, 2010); when children know a word, they will more easily decode it in print materials like books.

What would make Story and Rhyme Time effective?

Engaging in reading storybooks with an adult and using rhymes does benefit the child as they retain words better because rhyming makes the words more memorable (Read et al., 2014). Therefore, rhyming can be helpful to children as it helps children with words that are familiar and helps them with their learning of new words. As Cook (2000) stated 'verse may help children gain control over difficult new language and ideas of the language and meanings which it carries' (p. 27). Children's books are loved for many reasons, but one common feature is the song-like quality of the language that comes from rhythm, repetition and often rhyme. In a survey of 165 parents of 2-to 4-year-old children, parents reported that on average rhyming books make up 38% of their home libraries, and 20 of the Top 100 children's books of all-time (Read et al., 2014) for children aged 0–5 are in verse. In Hayes et al., (1982) experiments, which set rhymed vs. non-rhymed versions of stories against one another for the purpose of testing children's recall, they found that regardless of how well children remembered the stories, they consistently liked the rhyming versions of the stories more. Therefore,

this suggests that it is the child's experience of shared storybook reading and rhyming that they enjoy. Furthermore, research has established that parents and carers can benefit from the guidance of others such as practitioners, in helping their child with literacy in the home (Paratore et al., 2014).

Summary

The literature review for the Story and Rhyme Time evaluation suggests that regular storybook reading for young children has many positive impacts including increasing their speech, language development and communication skills. Indeed, incorporating rhymes into children's reading has been shown to encourage children to become interactive within their reading because rhyming often involves play and games, making story and rhyming an enjoyable and fun experience for children. This is because nursery rhymes are socially engaging, playful, and they help develop an appropriate way for young children to hear, identify, manipulate, and experiment with the sounds of language (Harper, 2011). In addition, rhyming stories have been shown to have a connection to music development as the melody of rhymes has a repetitive structure where children can learn new words (Read, 2014). The literature suggests that there is a link between preschool children having knowledge of nursery rhyme and their future success in reading, writing, and spelling. In addition, rhyming allows children to understand repetition in words, which helps in their reading (Bradley and Bryant, 1985). There has been some suggestion that one of the most important skills for children is phonemic awareness, or the awareness of individual sounds called phonemes that make up spoken words, suggesting that the understanding of phonemes helps a child's ability to hear sounds, and to spell phonetically (Harper, 2011). The use of nursery rhymes with young children promotes positive attitudes toward language learning and helps children to build awareness of sound patterns of language.

This literature review has highlighted positive impacts for children who regularly read with their parents as it helps the children with their language development (Wolf and McCoy, 2019) improves the children's vocabulary (Rowe, 2008) and leads them to become more successful readers in school (Mol et al., 2008). Sylva et al., (2004) identified that parents who engage in their children's schooling at an early age have a positive effect on their children's learning process. In addition, children who engage in reading storybooks with an adult and using rhymes retain words better because rhyming makes the words more memorable (Read et al., 2014). Furthermore, reading at home increases both parent and child confidence in reading

Rhyming may help children remember exact words which potentially helps strengthen less familiar words for children and when added to other story cues like the narrative or illustrations, can also

enable children to anticipate words at the end of a line even before they are read (Read et al., 2014). In addition, Barratt-Pugh and Rohl (2016) suggest that it is the type of interaction that takes place around the reading of books with children that is highly important in the shared book experience. There is also some suggestion that there is a link between mark making and the development in children's writing skills (Early Years Careers, 2016). Thus, Story and Rhyme Time and mark making can be seen as a fun activity where children are playing while they are learning language skills.

The literature suggests that Story and Rhyme Time encourages language and play with families and children. Nursery rhymes and songs support children's overall development in meaningful and engaging ways because the content within the rhymes and songs allows children to be introduced to words, numbers, and concepts which aids their language development skills. Furthermore, Story and Rhymes can help children become familiar with narrative elements. They also gain knowledge about their world and can further strengthen emotional bonds, for it is only on a solid foundation of attachment that all children's relationships and developmental learning are built (Cobb, 2007).

Findings

Interviews with Family Mentors

Interviews with Family Mentors began with an exploration of their thoughts and experiences regarding sessions in relation to their purpose and delivery.

Purpose

Family Mentors suggested that the purpose of the Story and Rhyme Time sessions is for parents and children to interact through stories and rhyme. The sessions aim to help parents to read to their children through demonstration. It is envisioned that skills learnt at sessions could be transferred to the home environment where parents could use things they have at home to bring their books and stories to life.

> "Part of the Story and Rhyme Time group was for Family Mentors to be trained in how to role model to parents, what they could do at home, and to give them like ideas and activities, which would be either low cost or no cost" (Family Mentor).

Additionally, Family Mentors discussed how during the Story and Rhyme Time sessions children could develop their motor skills as they joined in dancing to the rhymes and songs.

"It's linked into the movements and moments later parents that within this group and it's also about developing their motor skills and fine motor skills. So, for example, we explain like sounds like head, shoulders, knees, and toes help children develop their motor skills because it's a big arm movements like movements and so on" (Family Mentor).

Overall, the purpose of the sessions was to help parents and children come together and have fun.

"So, it was really getting parents to come together in a group where their children could play, but they went home with some sort of ideas that they could keep doing at home" (Family Mentor).

The ideal session was described thus:

"As part of that hour in that incorporates them coming into the room, getting settled, signing in, and having a chat with all the parents, and so that's probably going to take about 10, 10 minutes or so 10 - 15 minutes to do that. Then we get them all to sit down in a circle and we'll do a hello song… so we kind of have head, shoulders, knees and toes or an action song or something to get them moving… We have a song basket and in our song basket we've got a little prop. There's a little mouse for Hickory Dickory Dock and there's a frog for Frogs on a Lily Pad…by having props we find that it engages children more with the story. We read the story and then we'll have a couple of books related songs so because Brown Bear Brown Bear was a book about colours, we did the Rainbow song and we also did teddy bear, teddy bear turn around, teddy bear, teddy bear, touch the ground just to kind of link that in with the book. If they are songs that aren't particularly well known, then we will print out the words for them and hand them round and then they can take those with them as well so and so not only are they getting repetition through, erm kind of common well known nursery rhymes… at the sessions as well and then we will either do a kind of a physical type of activity, so we've got little shaker eggs. We've got scarf, so we've got a parachute, so as much as we try and plan an itinerary for these sessions, we just kind of go with the flow… for the next song again, will go back to the song basket and pick those children that haven't picked anything yet and then we will always do a take home activity related to the story, so we'll get the take home activity out, we will tell them what it's about we hand them out and then we finish with any happy birthday is if there is a birthday, So we ask the birthdays we sing happy birthday and then we finish off with the Goodbye Song and hope everybody comes back again next week" (Family Mentor).

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However, in reality, Story and Rhyme Time sessions varied and were dependant on where the sessions were delivered. Family Mentors highlighted how when they first started to deliver the Story and Rhyme Time sessions, they were very structured with the emphasis on the children learning. However, the Family Mentors found because the focus was so much on the structure towards learning, the sessions were less fun.

> "Children were really encouraged to follow that structure and there were feedback from parents that I had got personally that it was too much like a nursery setting erm and learning was forced upon them" (Family Mentor).

As the sessions became less focused on learning, the Family Mentors explained how play became the main focus. The sessions began to develop as more of a free play session.

> "I think because there were a lot of families have decided not to come to groups because they didn't like that structure so since it's been a bit more free flow so that they come in and they have the Hello Song and welcome the people who have come in and then we do free play and parents just let them play" (Family Mentor).

Family Mentors were given the flexibility to adapt the Story and Rhyme Times sessions to fit with what the parents and children wanted.

> "I set up, set them up and did the training. But actually, the individual Family Mentors will have adapted or made the sessions their own depending on their communities and the need in the community" (Family Mentor).

The sessions have changed over time to meet the needs of the community as well as the Family Mentors. This flexibility was seen as being positive. However, it does raise the question whether the Family Mentors were actually delivering Story and Rhyme Time and whether the session would be able to meet the desired outcomes.

Use of songs and nursery rhymes

The Family Mentors did sing songs during the session and encouraged the children to join in. They started the session with few warm-up songs and followed this with songs that could relate to the book that they were reading.

> "Do like a couple of warm-up songs and then we sort of introduce the book and it's normally one from the Imagination Library and yeah, we'll do sort of like what we, what we've been

trying to do is a song for almost every page of the box, so whether it be a picture on that book that we can relate to a nursery rhyme, or you know" (Family Mentor).

The Family Mentors encouraged the group to sing their favourite nursey rhymes which they knew well and other members of the group could learn these versions too. The goal here is to improve the vocabulary of the children.

Props

During the Story and Rhyme Time sessions Family Mentors use an assortment of props to enhance the interactive nature of the sessions.

> "They've got a pompom, and a scarf and it just makes it easier for us to wash, disinfect, and then be ready for use again for the next sessions and so, but we will encourage sort of shaking of the shaker egg you know could do lots of different things with the scarf and pompoms" (Family Mentor).

The props help the children become interested in the story and the props give the Family Mentors the chance to become creative and have fun.

> "Well, you know, we're just we're quite creative with what we've got erm so yeah, even though you know they have a, they are restricted, three things in the bag. You know it's that they are the things that kids seem to kind of go to as well. So, we've picked like the most important things that they like, and I'm gone with those. So yeah, and jumping, skipping, hopping, stretching, crouching down, going, pretending you're asleep and lots and lots of different things" (Family Mentor).

Free play

During some of the Story and Rhyme Time sessions, there is an element of free play which varies throughout the groups, as discussed previously. However, some groups focussed almost solely on free play.

> "In the very structured session that we did, we felt like we were always telling the parents, no you can't do that, no you can't have that whereas when you are having a free play and just the story at the end, they know that it is the end, and they are bought back into the session" (Family Mentor).

Therefore, such sessions were free play with at story at the end of the session. This sharply contrasts with the official definition of Story and Rhyme Time.

Drawing/mark making

During the interviews, Family Mentors were asked if the children had the opportunity to draw or mark making during the session. It appears that there were no sessions that encourage the children to draw during the part of the sessions allocated for stories or rhymes.

> "Erm drawing, colouring or what we call mark making, so giving children access to big chunky pens or whatever and just practice in that holding of pens and things like that" (Family Mentor).

Family Mentors suggested that the lack of mark making during sessions was a conscious decision as mark making detracted from their aims.

> "No- It takes the focus away from Story and Rhyme. What we found was children were coming or parents are bringing children and the majority of them enjoyed the activity side of it, then either messed around and weren't focused on the story bit" (Family Mentor).

There were instances however, when mark making was encouraged during free play and Family Mentors sent out materials such as crayons and paper. As noted, it is unclear whether mark making is supposed to be an aspect of Story and Rhyme Time, and its implementation appears to be inconsistent.

Online versus face-to-face

There were four Family Mentors that had delivered face-to-face sessions as well as online sessions during the lockdown, plus two Family Mentors that have only delivered the face-to-face sessions.

The Family Mentors who delivered the online sessions highlighted how these sessions were more difficult to deliver than the face-to-face sessions, stating that it is.

> "Much harder to sort of engage and parents and children over, you know, a computer screen and so you have to be quite inventive, if you like" (Family Mentor).

There was also more difficulty getting people to sign up to online sessions.

"The online groups were really good, but we didn't get a lot of people signing up for them, whereas we are now back in face-to-face the numbers are a lot higher" (Family Mentor).

In addition, the online sessions were quite difficult in the sense that the Family Mentors did not know the legalities of reading a story book online and therefore often made up the stories themselves.

"To be honest, we made our own stories up because there was a bit of a, uh, unsure whether we could actually read stories and then they go out over, you know, the Internet" (Family Mentor).

The Family Mentors also explained how the online sessions were less personal than face-to-face sessions.

"With the face-to-face groups the Family Mentors could chat with parents in private without the other parents hearing what was being said" (Family Mentor).

During the online sessions, the Family Mentors explained how they tried to make the sessions as interactive as they could in order to keep the children engaged. They used a prop bag where they would pull out an item which would create excitement and wonder about what is in the bag.

"We had like a story bag where we pulled out an item and told a story in correspondence to whatever we pulled out. So, you know that was created, that sort of excitement, you know, and the kids, sort of and the parents doing drum rolls as I pulled things out the bag. So, you know, even if you lost their attention, it's like I've got the story bag" (Family Mentor).

Online sessions seemed to work well because they were less anxiety inducing for the parents. This could be because the sessions were comfortable in their own home.

"I think a lot of our families have a bit of anxiety about this group because their child has to kind of sit and stay focused for a short space of it, whereas to take him to a play group up in the running wild and I think for some parents feel a bit of anxiety that their child isn't going to sit and do that and therefore going to kind of disrupt the session, whereas there's a bit of a security blanket on when they're doing it online, knowing that they can leave or they mute" (Family Mentor).

The most discussed benefit throughout the interviews with the Family Mentors was with how the Story and Rhyme Time sessions enhanced the communication skills of the children who attend. The Family Mentors explained how they could directly interact with the children during the sessions as stated below.

Language and Communication skills

> "There's more opportunity to talk. You know directly to the children, so George, what do you think? What? What is this dinosaur doing? You know, it's you can really kind of pull that attention in, yeah so and yeah, I mean obviously you know, I think when people come, they see the impact of reading stories. I think we really kind of you know. I think most people now have to sing and dance and jump around with the children" (Family Mentor).

The children's language skills are developed by repeated reading of books along with rhymes and singing. In addition, the Family Mentors also highlight how talking to incredibly young children who have recently started talking helps with their communications skills because they try and imitate the language that is being spoken to them.

> "Once they are starting to talk, they will babble along with the books or feel more confident kind of reading the pages even if it is just describing what is going on in the pictures" (Family Mentor).

The Story and Rhyme Time appears to help enhance the children's communication skills from an early age. It is suggested that attending the Story and Rhyme Time sessions develops the skills that will be beneficial for them when they start school/nursery.

> "You know those things which again going to support them with school readiness, concentration, turn taking, because a lot of the sessions the facilitator will be sort of singing a line, then the children, it's their turn so they get used to that kind of speech, dialogue and things like that, which I think is really beneficial" (Family Mentor).

Although the Family Mentors can see that the children develop and enhance their communication skills by engaging with the Story and Rhyme Time session, Family Mentors were unsure at this stage whether a difference was being made.

> "So, we started our baseline on what people's language and communication and literacy scores were when they started in reception, and those kids haven't yet got to that age

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because it's open from, I think it's 2-year-olds, so, we're still waiting to collect whether it's made any difference to language" (Family Mentor).

Social and Emotional Development

Family Mentors suggested that children develop their social and emotional lives during Story and Rhyme Times sessions. They painted a picture of children not wanting to leave their parents during the sessions. This was exacerbated by the pandemic as many of the children have not had the chance to interact with other children. Attending the sessions could help the children's social skills develop as they learn how to interact with other children as well as the Family Mentors.

> "And you know lots of children come, especially sort of since lockdown and probably not really experienced other children, groups, etc…and it's like. mum, I'm not leaving your side. You know very clingy. But after a few sessions in and they start that, you know, it might just be likely to get off mums' knee and another little go with a shaker egg. And before you know it, you're crowded by children that just, you know, they were marching around the room" (Family Mentor).

The children's ability to interact with others was seen as something important, in particular after the pandemic as many children have not had the opportunity to interact with other children. The impact that the pandemic has had on children were noticed by the Family Mentors as they discussed how the loss of the children's interactions with other children had an impact on their development. Some of the children that had started attending had never interacted with anyone other than the people who lived in their home.

> "And then like all the other groups, they are meeting others, they are meeting other families. The children are interacting and that's a lot of thing to see because some of these children have never been to a group before - they were born in lockdown, and they've never been, so for us to see this child for the first time at a group and how kind of the quite shy when they walk in, to doing head shoulders, knees and toes or row, row, row your boat with another child by the end of the session. It's lovely to see" (Family Mentor).

The Family Mentors noticed how the children's confidence grows with each session they attend. They discussed how children.

> "Would just sit on their mums' knee when they first started to come in, and now they'll and wait for me to take the song basket up to them. Whereas now they'll come to us to get something out" (Family mentor).

The Story and Rhyme Time session also benefitted attention and concentration skills too. During the stories they are encouraged to listen to the entirety of a story.

> "We encourage children when we're reading the stories, to sit down quietly and pay attention to this story, which in time help them when they go to school to pay attention to the teacher, to be quiet and listen generally, then developing these skills and listening in school as well" (Family Mentor).

The listening skills of the children are developed through the Story and Rhyme Time sessions because they are encouraged to sit and listen while the Family Mentors read the story. The Family Mentors encourage the children to join in with the story and the children will need to listen to know what the mentor is saying and when the mentor is asking questions about the story.

Love of books/stories

The Family Mentors highlighted how they believe that the children who attend the Story and Rhyme Time sessions will grow up to love books.

> "Hopefully it is giving them a love of books cos I think that is really beneficial thing for kids to have" (Family Mentor).

Family Mentors suggested that introducing children to stories at a young age was an important step in preparing them for learning.

> "Trying to get children into loving stories and love to read from a very early age so they can build up on one side and then they go to school. They're already interested in learning new things, and they're more open to" (Family Mentor).

Nursery preparation

Building upon instilling a love of books, Family Mentors explicitly argued that Story and Rhyme Time helped to prepare children for nursery.

> "It's giving them the first bits ready for when they go to nursery and I think that is why parents like it as it is now, they get that play and they get that story and they get that singing which they know they will have to do at nursery, you know they all do carpet time or circle time and that sort of thing at nursery so I think they quite like that we encourage them to come and sit down" (Family Mentor).

It was suggested that the skills children are developing will help them become familiar with the nursery environment. Sitting and listening during the story time will be something that they will have to do at nursery. The emphasis on interacting and engaging with stories will be something that children are familiar with.

Family Mentors' views on the benefits for parents

Social and Emotional Development

The Family Mentors felt that the parents do not have to be the most confident readers, or the best singers, to interact with their children. They stress that it is about encouraging parents to take part and to have the confidence to read or sing with their children.

> "It teaches them nursery rhymes, it teaches, that we don't have to be the best singer to sing to child because I'm definitely not the best singer, in fact, I'm tone deaf. And so, it teaches them anybody can actually sing to the child. It teaches them how to bring books to life, isn't just about reading a book word for word on the page" (Family Mentor).

One of the most important aspects of the sessions was the opportunity for the parents to socialise with other parents as well as the Family Mentors. Socialising with other parents was suggested as being key to increasing confidence.

> "I would say it's really good for social because obviously they are coming out to the group and I think it builds their confidence as well so what I have learnt is actually a lot less parents than you think are confident in reading whereas actually coming to this group and having to read the stories and really encouraging them to be silly with us and to sing along with us and to be loud it actually builds their confidence which I think will then improve their story telling" (Family Mentor).

The parents may not have a wide network of family and friends or may have become isolated, something that was exacerbated by COVID lockdown restrictions.

> "Some parents come and they don't know anybody else with children the same age as their child and they come - and you know they might not, we have had some that have made friendships but for others it's a friendship for this group they will come in and speak to each other every week and they will ask each other how their week has been and how the children have been so it's really nice to see that" (Family Mentor).

Home learning

Family Mentors saw one of the key benefits of Story and Rhyme Time as the ability to pass skills to parents to put into practice at home.

> "Parents learn a lot from coming to Story and Rhyme Time, especially when we are creative with the stories that we are telling, I think it does have an impact and it just makes them feel a little bit more confident in doing it as well at home" (Family Mentor).

Alternatively, the Family Mentors may give the parents some resources that they can take home. This gives the parents ideas of how they can entertain and interact with their children at home, helping support parents at home too.

> "Giving some resources for them to take home and say why don't you have a go now making your own finger puppets? Or why don't you have a go at? You know doing the painting this face or planting some seeds in the garden? When we've looked at a book about growing plants, you know that kind of thing, so I think it would, that would support parents a little bit more" (Family Mentor).

Interviews with parents

Purpose of Story and Rhyme Time

The parents were asked about their understanding of Story and Rhyme Time and what the purpose the session served. There were mixed remarks around the reading, stories and rhymes.

Learning nursery rhymes

Many of the parents believed that it was the rhymes that were beneficial to their children because of the repetitiveness of the words. As one parents stated, such repetition led to better understanding of the story.

> "I think it is more of the rhyming than the story, obviously a lot of the rhymes are repetition and that sort of thing and they can kind of tell stories as well because they kind of know the way of the rhymes and things so it's easier for them to tell a story, it helps them with speech as well so obviously when they are hearing words that are repeated" (Parent).

In addition to the repetitiveness of the rhymes improving the children's understanding of the words, the Family Mentors suggested that the rhymes made sessions enjoyable for children.

"We absolutely love the rhymes, he's 18 months old and he doesn't really get the stories but we do practice sitting down and listening, I think the singing is amazing, he loves singing" (Parent).

It's not about stories/reading

Parents were unsure on the focus on the stories in the sessions. Although the Family Mentors read a story during the session, it appears that reading was not seen as the main focus of the session, as one parent stated.

"Yes, it is, it's not the reading, it's more like showing them and telling them, this is the thing, this is, and this is a flower, where the cat and things like that it improves their skill as well, and they are quite like, it's not all about the reading its more about they learn stuff from" (Parent).

Put simply, parents felt that there was a distinction to be made between reading and learning from books. Some parents suggested that during the sessions the focus was upon learning from books, rather than learning words or stories.

Drawing/mark making

The parents were asked if their child had the opportunity for mark making (drawing) during the Story and Rhyme Time sessions. Most of the parents revealed that there was no opportunity during the sessions for drawing. Most of the parents answered stating they do not draw during the sessions:

"It's just literally the story time so there are no pens or paper or anything like that, so literally they go to a sports leisure hall so it's just little bits of soft play and then they will do the music where we will be singing like nursey rhymes, and we've got like little shakers and then it's just literally the story time so there are no pens or paper or anything like that" (Parent).

However, a couple of the parents noted that their Story and Rhyme Time sessions were mostly about free play and that mark making was part of this. In this scenario mark marking was not seen as part of the Story and Rhyme Time but as was offered separately. Again, this brings into question whether the parents were attending what could be classified as a Story and Rhyme Time session.

"I will make sure she joins in any arts and crafts session, I mean during the session, because she loves art, doing arts and crafts, so she does find an opportunity to draw, to write, this is

when I can find out if she can actually hold a pen or a pencil to even to scribble to write, she draw, she will try although she is only 2 years old" (Parent).

Delivery

Structure of a session

The Story and Rhyme Time sessions differed at each centre. Two of the sessions consisted of one hour where the Family Mentors would read a story with lots of rhyming and songs throughout the session. Most sessions focussed upon reading stories and incorporating rhymes.

Two parents did note that the Story and Rhyme Time sessions were combined with Jiggle and Wiggle and Mini Movers sessions. These sessions consisted of around 30 minutes to one hour of free play where the children could play with toys, read books, or craft. At the end of the session, in the last 15-30 minutes, the children were called together and the Family Mentors read the children a story and sang rhymes to them.

> "We do the Mini Movers playing bit first and then we will do the singing and then it is the story at the end, maybe a couple more songs if they have time, it must be about half an hour, with half an hour playing and then half an hour singing and story" (Parent).

These sessions were described as being more focussed upon play, with the story at the end of the session being used as a way of relaxing children and to signal the end of the session.

> "They've got like the ball pit, they've got other equipment that the children can play with, for the last half an hour they will do like the dancing and we all join in and were given like little shakers and like bits of ribbon that the children can play with and at the end they have story time and that's really nice, so it's really active and towards the end they have a quiet time which is really good and I love that, my little boy likes it when the music comes on you know like head, shoulders, knees and toes, he loves it" (Parent).

As the groups were all named Story and Rhyme Time sessions, this did cause some confusion amongst the parents regarding the contents of the session, as one parent stated.

> "So, all I am aware of, is we don't call it Story and Rhyme, they call it the Mini Movers, is what they called it so I'm not quite sure what the difference is between the different ones" (Parent).

Online sessions

There were only two parents interviewed that had been attending before lockdown; all the other parents started attending the Story and Rhyme Time sessions after the lockdown restrictions had been lifted. The two parents that had attended for a couple of years also attended online sessions during the lockdown, but they had mixed reviews regarding the online sessions. One parent thought the online sessions were much better than the group sessions.

> "I did prefer the way they did it with the Zoom sessions because they kind of broke it up so they read the story but they broke it in to parts so they would do a song in between erm to kind of interact with the children rather than just reading a story at them" (Parent).

However, the remaining parents did not believe online sessions were as beneficial as the face-to-face groups.

> "I mean in terms of similarities they have got the same sort of content like reading the stories and singing the songs and getting other people to join in erm but in terms of differences, I mean when it was Zoom, my little one didn't really engage with it, she was still quite young so getting her to sit there and stare at a TV and getting her to join the people on the screen was a bit of an ask really, she can interact a lot more with people when they are faced to face" (Parent).

Face-to-face sessions

The two families that did attend both online and face-to-face sessions had mixed reactions about the face-to-face sessions too. The parent that did not like the online sessions found the face-to-face sessions better because they were more interactive which was beneficial.

> "She can interact a lot more with people when they are face-to-face" (Parent).

However, the other parent who found the online session beneficial did not find the face-to-face sessions very beneficial for their child.

> "The ones that we attend in person, they do all the singing and dancing first erm and then they go and sit down on little mats, and they just listen to a story, and they are literally just sat there watching somebody read a story erm and I think that is quite difficult especially for a one-year-old" (Parent).

The parents were asked about the benefits for their children of attending the Story and Rhyme Time session. The parents described positive benefits of the sessions, specifically with regards to speech, language and communication, social and emotional lives, and growing the love of books.

Speech, language and communication skills

One key aspect of Story and Rhyme Time sessions is the discussion of stories. It is felt that this aspect in beneficial to speech, language and communication skills. However, this was not always encouraged and did not occur in all sessions. One parent explained how 'the lady just reads the book and that's it and then puts it away' (Parent).

Parents also specifically noted that they do not do this due to the age of the children.

> "Yeah, I don't actually, but I probably would when he's a bit bigger, he's only 17 months so we tend not to talk about things that we did previously, we tend be quite like in the present moment together" (Parent).

However, other parents stated they do ask their child about the book that was read during the Story and Rhyme Time session. The parents ask their children if they recall what had happened in the book and they discuss the characters and the story following on from the session.

> "After we finish the session, we try to recall what book we have read in the conversation, this is actually good because she can remember about the main character of the book, though she could not recall everything about the book, but she could remember when we talk about" (Parent).

Some of the parents highlighted how the Story and Rhyme Time sessions helped with their English language skills, particularly with those parents for whom English is their second language. It was noted how their children benefitted from the stories as it gave the children the opportunity to hear and speak English.

> "My little boy he always struggled with his speech erm and then obviously when we started going to group when we were singing songs and things like that erm he tries to sing them because they are quite fun to sing rather than just having a conversation with a child I think rhymes stick more and they try to say the rhymes themselves, it gets them talking more" (Parent).

Parents suggested that the sessions were useful for leaning new words, and the meaning of such words. After going to the sessions some of the children began to say the words that they had heard during the Story and Rhyme Time sessions.

> "Yeah, I think quite, like now he starting like pointing to something and then he's trying to say words but maybe not clear enough but like he pointing at shoo and he said 'shoo' I don't know if it's right or wrong, but we've just found out he knows something.…they can learn from the picture; they can see so like every time I see a plane or if there is a helicopter passing by our place and I say helicopter and he say plane so every time I say plane, he is pointing at the sky so yes exactly" (Parent).

Throughout the interviews, parents often commented on how the Story and Rhyme Time sessions improved their children's singing skills. Parents felt that this was an important skill that would also teach them about music.

> "She has recently started singing by herself now, so she will just break into song every now and again which is nice erm yeah I do think it's important because it teaches you to appreciate music really I think" (Parent).

Social and emotional lives

Several of the parents highlighted how the sessions helped the children with their emotional development. This was mainly due to the fact that children found the sessions enjoyable and relaxing.

> "Especially for her emotional development, she is happy when we can sing together erm she find it relaxing, soothing, when we sing the song… I will sing it with my second daughter but not that much before the session so after attending the session I did sing songs, every day we will sing a song because of her she wants me to sing a song, she makes me sing it" (Parent).

As noted, parents felt that Story and Rhyme Time sessions created a relaxed atmosphere. This was something that continued at home after sessions.

> "I think he listens more now, he will give me books now and he will kind of sit and wants me to read which is lovely though, I think it's kind of like a listening thing as well, to get the child to listen which is important as well, it's sort of like quiet time as well, it's a bit of chill time" (Parent).

Being in a group setting also helped the children with their listening skills as they noticed what the other children were doing and copied from others, so they know when it's story time it is time to stop playing and sit down.

> "And if it's part of their routine, it does calm them down a little bit if they can sit down and read, I think at home, I think especially in that group session they are looking around and it's like ok, we should be sitting still and listening and getting used to that" (Parent).

It is clear that parents felt that sessions were particularly important after the isolation of lockdown. There are some children that have never met or perhaps not seen another baby because of the pandemic. By attending the Story and Rhyme Time sessions, the children have the opportunity to interact with other children and play with other children.

> "Because my son has going to be two this month, he was born in 2019 and after that is COVID and everything he didn't got chance to go out at all and after that, this is the first club that I attend with him and he really enjoyed it, they do stories and after that they sing nursey rhymes and it is all really nice, he's enjoying it and I'm enjoying it as well" (Parent).

Parents suggest that such interaction has had a positive impact upon children's confidence. This was reflected in their interaction with others and their playing. One parent discussed how the sessions had improved their child's behaviour with other children.

> "It has improved his confidence definitely because before he wasn't even looking at the other children, now he seems to don't mind them, if someone comes and takes his toy away, he doesn't even care about it, he just laughs about it and goes and takes another toy so it's a good a thing" (Parent).

The benefits of learning from each other are clear here, although it is important to note that this particular example comes from a period of free play rather than Story and Rhyme Time. However, parents did make specific claims between Story and Rhyme Time and improvements to child outcomes. One parent noted how the storytelling was beneficial in terms of building their imagination.

> "I think it is really important to build their imagination and their sense of storytelling and different things, I think reading and communication is a different skill to have an imagination as a narrative and I think that understanding fairy tales and folk law as well, I think it's important kind of culturally" (Parent).

It is also interesting to highlight how the parent highlights cultural learning through nursery rhymes.

Physical development

Parents suggested that one of the benefits of attending the sessions is the development of the children's fine motor skills. Although this aspect was mainly developed during free play, there are also specific activities that were beneficial such as using shakers and drawing. Parents also noted how they continued to develop this during learning at home.

> "I could see that she's making progress with her fine motor skills so we did a few different things at home to improve that, still playing like with the rice and the pompoms so I build it up with using the pans and the spoons to improve her fine motor skills other than that I would give her chalk and markers for her to scribble on, anything really" (Parent).

The movements that children do when in the sessions help build their fine motor skills, from playing with shakers, drawing, and catching a ball.

> "It's a bit like fine motor skills and like hand ball movements and I think that's really good, learning how to catch, learning how to throw, I think that's really, really good" (Parent).

In addition, because children have so much energy, the Story and Rhyme Time sessions helped the children burn off their energy and they enjoyed this energetic activity with other children.

> "There is a big space over there, he can use his energy because he's a very hyper child but the best one is interacting with kids because we don't have friends with other kids you know so giving him something new as well" (Parent).

Importance of books

Parents suggested that Story and Rhyme Time highlighted the importance of books in children's learning journeys. This was often suggested in relation to learning to read. Participation in Story and Rhyme Time was often linked to improved reading skills.

> "Obviously with learning to read erm even just sounding out letters in a book erm some things rhyme, you know seeing pictures of different things in books whether they are animals or, I know my little boy at the minute he's talking about like space so he likes looking at a book at the minute with all space things in it so, so definitely so my older little boy he's definitely asking more questions like what's in the book, what is this, what is that so I think it is definitely good reading" (Parent).

The parent above also highlights a common suggestion by parents and one that was raised by the Family Mentors. Books were sources of knowledge and information. Children learnt about the world through books, particularly in terms of naming objects and assigning labels.

> "I think they learn from pictures and it's an imagination thing and if I point at something in a book, something like a tree, he will know, if I say tree he will point at it and then I will refer it back to the book, you know I think reading is really important for children, it's like an escape isn't it as well, it's like kind of an imagination of how things would be if there wasn't pictures" (Parent).

More generally, parents who attend the Story and Rhyme Times session highlighted how the sessions have helped their children to develop their love of books. Enjoyment and engagement with books was suggested as being a beneficial outcome from Story and Rhyme Time sessions.

> "My four year-old he really loves books erm and obviously I do feel that has maybe come from the sessions because obviously it made it quite fun and them my almost one year old, he loves books too and he is quite happy to sit and have a look at a book with you" (Parent).

Home learning

As discussed throughout, parents highlighted how they used what they had learnt during sessions at home with their children. It is clear that parents continue singing and rhyming with their children at home and implementing the skills they have learnt. One parent provided an everyday example of teeth brushing.

> "Small things like if I say to him in the morning 'oh lets go brush your teeth' and I start singing the song 'this is the way we brush our teeth' and he going to start brushing so we wash our face and things and when we eat I always say things like 'the teddy bear eat like this or you have to eat with the fork ok' and he copying" (Parent).

No additional benefit

There were some parents who did not believe that the Story and Rhyme Time sessions had any impact on their children. Parents suggested that as they read to their children already, the impact of doing Story and Rhyme Time was minimal.

> "It is hard to say if it is a result of Story and Rhyme, maybe with the singing but not the stories because of the actions and the words and the putting them together, at this stage its

more singing, that's what I can tell, whether he's putting it together in his head, I'm not so sure" (Parent).

Parents views on the benefits for themselves

Parents reported positive outcomes in relation to themselves as a result of attending the Story and Rhyme Time sessions. This was noted in relation to their language and communication skills, (particularly for those whose English was an additional language), social and emotional lives (in relation to the confidence gained through socialising with others) and finally in relation to skills or techniques developed during the sessions that they were able to put into practice at home.

Language and communication skills

Some families attending Story and Rhyme Time do not regularly speak English in their home. Parents suggest that being able to use English with others had improved their language skills.

"I have quite a lot of book in English but we don't have quite a lot English friends with the fluent English and if that my son understands for example simple words in English and all the time if possible I put on English songs for him and he learns English like that but I try and speak to him like English" (Parent).

The parents were also asked if they visited the library. There was only one parent who attended the library with their child. This figure may be skewed somewhat however, as libraries have been closed as a result of Coronavirus lockdowns. Most of the parents who were interviewed do receive the Dolly Parton Imagination Library books. This may also be an additional reason why they did not visit the library as they had books delivered to their door. One parent did mention that they were signed up to the library but did not attend as libraries were anxiety-inducing venues.

"I signed to the library but for now we don't walk there, like library for me is a scary place with my little one who put everything and take everything by his mouth so for now I avoid this place, maybe in a little bit of time but for now we have quite a lot of books at home but most of them you know he try and eat it" (Parent).

Social and emotional lives

It was evident from the parents' interviews that an important aspect of the Story and Rhyme Time sessions was the social element, particularly making new friends and spending time with other

adults. Story and Rhyme Time sessions were seen as a safe space for parents to meet and connect with other families who live locally and may have children who are similar in age.

> "A bit of time out really for me, erm yeah it just makes my life a little…it kind of gives me a little bit of a breather and I get to meet other parents and have a natter and yeah there are a lot of families that are there that are happy to chat and its nice just to be able to talk to other mums and share obviously experiences and things like that so yeah" (Parent).

Parents stated the importance of Story and Rhyme Time session in supporting them and their family by reducing social isolation, even just by getting them out of the house and into a different environment.

> "I love talking to the other mums and seeing what they are doing and talking about like your child's development erm it gets me out of the house it makes me feel good about myself to know that I've brought these out and they are happy. That fulfils my day to be honest and I love that, it's just speaking and meeting new people which I really like" (Parent).

Going to a group with other parents improved parental confidence amongst some of the parents, as it reassured them that they were not alone in their experiences and that their children's development and behaviour was perfectly normal.

> "Also it helps us meet new people erm and share parenting tips I suppose with other parents, kind of what works good and what doesn't also it helps to see that every child is different as well and what is going to work for us is not going to work for other people and one kid's going to behave not like our kid is going to behave it just kind of highlights the difference between the different kids" (Parent).

Home learning

Parents noted how the rhyming and singing aspects of the Story and Rhyme Time sessions were enjoyed by the children. This was an aspect that continued within the home.

> "Oh yes, definitely we do singing for him he like singing, he likes singing and trying to imitate dance as well" (Parent).

In addition, parents highlighted how much they have learned from attending the sessions, and how they were able to put this into practice at home. One parent discussed how they had gained confidence to alter the way they read stories.

"It has helped me as a parent just to feel a bit more confident with reading a story and just to make it a bit more exciting as well so kind of picking up tips from the group you know certain thing, try and make it a little bit of a song out of it" (Parent).

Several parents highlighted how they learned different reading techniques from watching the Family Mentors read. They could see how the children reacted when they were told a story and they could use these reading techniques when reading at home.

"I watch the ladies how they do it like they hold the book up and they turn it the other way and stuff so I have started doing it that way instead of just sitting it on my knee and then they follow their fingers round through the writing as well which is good so I have started to do that, I know how to read a book but it has learnt me a different way how to read it to a child" (Parent).

Improving Story and Rhyme Time

Family mentor suggestions

During the interviews, the Family Mentors were asked about how they believe the Story and Rhyme Time sessions could be improved. The suggestions raised related to adjusting how sessions were delivered, adjusting the focus of sessions, improving materials to be used in sessions and some challenges that Family Mentors themselves had to overcome.

Adjusting the session delivery and participation

Family Mentors were critical of the length of the sessions, as engaging children for such a long period was seen as being very difficult. A number of Family Mentors suggested that one hour was too long.

"Sometimes I think the length is difficult, I think sometimes an hour is quite long but I think that is for most groups anyway because children that we work with, cos of their ages their attention span is quite short still and having an hour when you are kind of expected to just have to read one story and then accompany it with nursery rhymes sometimes that can feel like it's not working as well because you can see the children starting to fidget and be less into the session" (Family Mentor).

One Family Mentor questioned whether the sessions could be run by members of the community rather than run by the Family Mentors. There was some suggestion that the parents who attend the session could learn from the Family Mentors and run their own Story and Rhyme Time group.

> "I think maybe it could be delivered by members of the community themselves, rather than needing a reliance on a service like the Family Mentors to deliver it. I think that it would be really nice if other mums and dads decided that they wanted to run their own singing groups or story groups and things like that" (Family Mentor).

It was suggested that the benefits for the families would be a more continuous service.

Family Mentors were also keen to make sessions age specific. This would enable Family Mentors to create sessions that would be better adapted to the children. As a result, Family Mentors could increase or decrease the number of songs in a session depending upon the confidence levels of the children.

There were also a number of administrative adjustments suggested, particularly in relation to the current booking system and the venues used. Family Mentors discussed how parents need to book to attend a session but quite often do not turn up. As a result, they have to turn away other parents. A more flexible approach to booking was seen as being beneficial.

The venue in which the Story and Rhyme Time sessions are held needs to be fit for purpose. The space where the sessions take place needs to be comfortable but also child friendly.

> "And as lovely as it is, it's a contained space, so we're back to if a child does get up and start fiddling with the chairs, five other children are going to go and start fiddling with the chairs as well" (Family Mentor).

Adjusting the focus of sessions

Family Mentors were keen to adopt a flexible approach with regard to what the sessions would focus on. As noted previously, a number of Family Mentors downplayed the importance of stories and rhymes and called for more free play. Family Mentors wanted to adjust the name of the sessions to reflect this.

> "I was going to say to change we would do is change the name of this group to, I don't know family fun session for instance and then the Story and Rhyme Time would be just the Story and Rhyme and maybe just for half an hour…I think it's quite overwhelming for children to

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be told you're doing this, you're doing this, do this, do this, so unless you've got a blank canvas where you only have stories out and props for singing it is very difficult to stop children from playing and why would you want to" (Family Mentor).

Family Mentors suggested that the name change would improve the sessions and attract more families to join. However, it was clear that some of the Family Mentors felt that being flexible was important to engage children.

> "I think the 15 minutes at the end is just enough, the stories are not very long and by the last 3 pages the children are starting to get a bit restless, screaming and getting up and things like that so we couldn't have that, sometimes we do the imagination library books but we have to look at the book, are we going to get to that bit? Is it too long?" (Family Mentor).

It is worth re-iterating that these suggestions propose a move away from what might be recognisable as Story and Rhyme Time.

Improving materials

The Family Mentors discussed how they could improve Story and Rhyme Time by having books that are relevant to what is happening in the world. For example, when celebrations are happening such as at Christmas, they believe they should be reading books that are based on Christmas. This would give children a wider learning experience and a better understanding of the world. However, the Family Mentors stated that they do not have books that are relevant.

> "When it comes to Christmas it's trying to find a Christmassy story, sometimes the Imagination Library won't have a Christmas story or there are certain celebrations throughout the year and it's trying to match them with Diwali, with Hanukkah just general things" (Family Mentor).

Similarly to this, Family Mentors were critical of the range of books they had access to. Access to a wider variety of books and the ability to read more stories during the session would be welcomed.

> "I think we could incorporate more stories into the session or maybe just make it on a bigger scale like having people to come in to do reading or have more of a variety of stories as well" (Family Mentor).

Challenges and Family Mentor skills

The Family Mentors also highlighted how sometimes the behaviour of the parents attending the groups could be a problem. One Family Mentor talked about difficulties interacting with children whilst parents are chatting to other parents.

> "Parents tend to talk to each other and have those little chats. And you know, I think you you've got to be quite firm in saying come on guys, you know your kids are watching you. If you're chatting, they're not going to participate" (Family mentor).

Parents suggestions

The parents were asked during the interviews how they believe Story and Rhyme Time sessions could be improved. Although the parents were generally very happy with how the current sessions are run, there were a few small improvements the parents suggested that could make the Story and Rhyme Time sessions better.

Adjusting the session delivery and participation

One parent suggested that the story the Family Mentors were reading could be broken down into smaller sections. By having smaller sections of story, the Family Mentors could sing songs and rhymes in between the sections.

> "Probably breaking it down into little snippets and have like songs in between and break stories up" (Parent).

There were also calls for more sessions each week. At present, sessions only ran once per week. However, as parents and children enjoyed the sessions, they would have liked the opportunity to attend more.

> "I wish I could attend more and more; I just wish that I could attend, I wish they would do like twice a week instead of just one a week" (Parent).

In direct contrast to the thoughts of Family Mentors, there were also parents who would have liked the sessions to last longer than they did.

> "Maybe longer sessions, slightly longer sessions I want to say that they are an hour and a bit, they are just over an hour at the moment so maybe just slightly longer but I'm happy with the way they are" (Parent).

Adjusting the focus of sessions

As with Family Mentors, parents suggested a more flexible approach to the sessions. For parents, this related to the ability to read more books during sessions.

> "I wouldn't change anything, maybe they could do two books because they only do one book because they do singing then do one book and then singing that means that they could add another book into it" (Parent).

Overall, parents were happy with how Family Mentors engaged with the children, and there is evidence of Dialogical reading during the sessions. This was important for parents who were critical of Family Mentors who didn't explore books fully with children.

> "When they are kind of reading a story to you without asking questions like 'oh what do you think is going to happen?' because I have been to quite a few of the sessions where people have literally just read a story and that has kind of been it" (Parent).

Negotiating challenges

There were a number of practical suggestions that parents made to improve Story and Rhyme Time sessions. There was a call to update play materials such a ball pits. Books were also noted as having very small text which was not useful for reading with children. Parents also noted that Story and Rhyme Time did not seem to work for children who are very active, and that some of the children did not want to sit and listen to the story.

> "[Child] is not sitting and listening, so what we do for the first hour, the children are playing around in the ball pit and then there's the soft toys whether they are pushing them or playing around with them and for the next half an hour they go into the next room they are doing story time and they are jumping and dancing but [child] is not interested in the stories he just runs around and that's it, he's not very interested, he likes to check the books and the pictures, but he doesn't fancy sitting and listening to mummy reading, not yet" (Parent).

Summary

Delivery of Story and Rhyme Time

In general, there were very few issues with regards to the delivery of Story and Rhyme Time. The main concern was attendance, with numbers being low in some wards. This was mainly due to the booking system that had been implemented as a result of the current pandemic. Places for Story and

Rhyme Time during this period were limited and parents needed to book their place before the session took place. There were differing opinions between Family Mentors and the parents who attended sessions. Whereas Family Mentors were critical of the length of sessions, parents actually welcomed longer and more frequent sessions. Family Mentors also called for a more flexible approach towards free play and what they saw as forced learning. Although parents did enjoy the free play on offer, the were happy with the delivery of sessions and called for more stories during the sessions.

The focus of Story and Rhyme Time sessions

The focus of Story and Rhyme Time differed greatly, dependent upon where it was being delivered. All of the Family Mentors that were interviewed delivered Story and Rhyme Time differently and although there was standardised Story and Rhyme Time session, this is not replicated. Some sessions involved the Family Mentors reading a story and singing rhymes throughout the whole session, whereas there were other sessions that consisted of free play for the majority of the session, with a Story and Rhymes for the last 10-15 minutes of the session. Moreover, there was some confusion surrounding the aims of Story and Rhyme Time. Family Mentors made the case that the sessions should be adapted to what works best for parents, and that certain aspects of Story and Rhyme Time do not work for all children. However, this does raise questions about the implementation of the programme and whether this evaluation does indeed evaluate Story and Rhyme Time.

Benefits for children

In the literature review we highlighted a number of aspects that Story and Rhyme Time are built upon that could potentially have positive outcomes for children. Here the report will break these down in relation to the outlined findings and explore how they relate to what is known to be positive for children.

Family Mentors were wary about the effects of 'learning' on young children, arguing that it was the wrong focus and that the emphasis should be solely upon creating fun sessions. Although it may have been true that free play sessions would have been enjoyed and developed educationally, such a session does not result in the positive benefits outlined by Story and Rhyme Time. The argument put forward by Family Mentors, that the children were too young to benefit from learning-focused activities does not reflect previous research evidence: positive benefits of rhymes and lullabies have been documented in research with babies (Mullen, 2017).

The parents were very positive about Family Mentors who took the time to explore the books with their children. Engaging with the stories and interacting with the children is a central component in Dialogical Reading, which has been shown to help develop children's growing literacy, language, and linguistic skills (Reese et al., 2010).

Parents and Family Mentors noted that the interactive nature of the sessions was positive. Book sharing is thought to have a positive impact on infants' expressive language (Karrass and Braungart-Rieker, 2005). Additionally, the opportunity to interact with adults, listen and respond to rhymes and experiment with the sounds of language are all beneficial to language and literacy development (IRA and NAEYC, 1998; NAEYC 2008).

Parents felt that the skills they learnt during the sessions were very beneficial. Reading and engagement techniques gave parents the confidence to read with their children. This is a clearly evidenced aspect of Story and Rhyme Time, as parents who engage in their children's learning at an early age have a positive effect on their children's learning process (Sylva et al., 2004).

It is clear that the Story and Rhyme Time sessions described by the parents did not feature mark making to the same extent that was originally intended. Family Mentors noted that mark making was often too difficult to facilitate and often led to disruption of sessions. This seems to be a major shortfall in the delivery of the sessions. Research shows that mark-marking is a positive method to encourage communication and expression. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) for example, noted how mark making allows communication to take place without a reliance on speech.

Although, there was variation in the structure and approach, it is likely that for Story and Rhyme Time to be effective it needs to include stories from books and rhymes to enhance vocabulary. Both parents and Family Mentors were clear that the rhyming during sessions was beneficial. Not only was it a fun activity, but it clearly helps children to recognise and use words. Rhyming and repetition has been shown does make words more memorable (Read et al., 2014). The repetition of rhymes is also important as research shows that children have to hear a word 14 times before it becomes part of their vocabulary (Arnold, 2005). Additionally, there are links between music and language development (Tallal and Gaab, 2006) which singing and rhyme can help to enhance.

Parents were more sceptical about the benefits of reading to small children. Most parents ignored this aspect of Story and Rhyme Time as potentially being beneficial. Again, this is unfortunate and needs to be challenged by Family Mentors. Reading from books is an important source of linguistic input for children, particularly in terms of developing vocabulary (Montag et al., 2015).

Benefits for parents

For some parents, attending the classes had helped to reduce social isolation which was particularly important during the current pandemic. Many of the parents as well as the children had spent a considerable amount of time in lockdown where they did not interact with people outside of their family home. By attending the Story and Rhyme Time sessions this gave the parents and children the opportunity to interact with other adults and children.

Previous research reveals that parents reading to their children has been positively documented with positive outcomes for children's learning (Mol and Bus, 2011). Furthermore, parents spoke about the improvements they witnessed in their child's speech as well as their communication skills, which resulted in their child's speech improving. Indeed, previous research does suggest that parents reading to a child can hold a young child's attention, which facilitates learning (Mol et al., 2008). Furthermore, some of the participants expressed how reading with their child became something of a cherished time that they and their child spent together. Overall, the Family Mentors believe that Story and Rhyme Time is a positive initiative as they regularly commented throughout the interviews regarding how the sessions impacted on a child's language and vocabulary skills.

Story and Rhyme Time was found to have helped to strengthen the bond between parent and child. Parents emphasised how reading with their child had brought them closer together, enhancing their connection and developing the relationship they have. Some parents attributed this to the quiet time that reading stories involves, and the dedicated one-to-one time they got to spend with their child during the sessions. They argued that Story and Rhyme Time improves the bond between parent and child and gives parents the opportunity to spend quality time with their child during sessions.

Recommendations

We recommend that:

1. The Story and Rhyme Time sessions become more uniform if they are to be delivered as Story and Rhyme Time. Sessions that resemble free play should perhaps be reframed to reflect this as they will not lead to the same outcomes as a Story and Rhyme Time session.
2. Related to point one, both parents and Family Mentors need to be supported to recognise the importance of certain aspects of Story and Rhyme Time which must be delivered to achieve the desired outcomes. For example, Story and Rhyme Time needs to include stories

(from books), nursery rhymes/singing and mark making, as these have all been shown to be effective.

3. Family Mentors need to be supported to communicate to parents the importance of reading to young children and how this helps their development.

4. Additional training sessions should be provided for Family Mentors in the delivery of the sessions to ensure they are interacting well with the stories. Dialogical reading was highlighted as an aspect of Story and Rhyme Time that is evidenced in research, and Family Mentors need to ensure that this is always pursued.

5. There should be consistency in relation to the inclusion of mark making during sessions. It is unclear whether Story and Rhyme Time sessions should include mark making. It has been shown to be beneficial but at present appears to be used only within free play time.

6. Consider whether sessions could continue both online and in person. Although Family Mentors preferred face-to-face sessions, the parents could see benefits of both, particularly with regards to accessibility.

Further Progress and Next Steps

This report has provided the findings from the evaluations of the Family Mentor Service, online group activities delivered by Family Mentors and Story and Rhyme Time. The next report is due in Spring 2022 and will include the results of our work on the effects of participation on SSBC children's language scores. One of the aims of the SSBC programme is to develop children's language and communication abilities prior to school entry. Therefore, this evaluation will compare SSBC children and no-SSBC children from the same schools at reception (i.e., the first term of primary school) in terms of their 'language' scores (measured using the British Picture and Vocabulary Scale) to test whether participating in the programme has had an impact on SSBC children's 'language' development.

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