



**READY**

**STEADY**

**LIBRARY**

**Project Report  
May 2018**

**Part 1 Summary**



# READY STEADY LIBRARY Part 1

## INTRODUCTION: why babies in libraries matter

*East Staffordshire has the lowest take up of nursery funding in the County...wards where children achieving a Good Level of Development (school readiness) was between 50% and 65%, compared with the County average of 74%*

*'Pre-school: inspiring parents to read and rhyme with their child and form a lifelong reading habit*

*Giving parents space and time to spend time bonding with babies and building parental confidence*

*Enhancing life outcomes for children aged 0-2*

*Supporting attachment, resilience, emotional health and wellbeing, building resilience and character, speech, language communication development; early literacy and school readiness'*

ASCEL Children's Promise

*'...Citizens, families and communities are empowered to be independent, support each other and achieve better outcomes. Connected citizens living in resourceful communities...*

Staffordshire County Council  
People Helping People  
Strategy

In 2017 the Department for Education published the Early Year's Foundation Stage framework (EYFS) for all birth to five-year-olds, setting standards for learning, development and care. The EYFS promotes 'school readiness', a range of emotional, cognitive and physical skills acquired before starting school which underpin successful learning throughout a child's life in education through to employment. Of these, language proficiency is a key predictor of school success.

The need for 'school readiness' is acute in the West Midlands, which has a higher level of low income and other indicators of deprivation which hamper children's development than England as a whole. In Staffordshire, despite relatively good levels of development Countywide, there are pockets of severe deprivation, including some of the most deprived 10% areas in the country. In East Staffordshire 12 areas fall into the most deprived 20%, all of them in Burton upon Trent.

Children from the poorest homes are on average a year behind middle-class children when they start school - and research shows that behaviours at home outweigh even good early years education. Changing early years parenting can close the gap, and Libraries can play a crucial role in that change. For example, parental interest in reading can be a more powerful ingredient in school success than social class, family size and level of parental education.

In 2017, Burton Library, inspired by the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians' (ASCEL) *Children and Young People's Promise*, created a partnership with Staffordshire Council and local Children's Centres and nurseries around an innovative project to empower parents in deprived areas to develop resources for creative play, storytelling and reading to support the EYFS curriculum. Central to the project, funded by the Arts Council England (ACE), was a creative participatory process led by an early years play and creative arts therapist and an illustrator.

*'The best thing for me has been the energy and positivity; and the real understanding of the developmental areas of pre school children'*

Library staff, online feedback

*'It helped us meet Children's Centre targets for partnerships and involvement in community-led projects as part of our District Priorities'*

Interview with partner

By positioning parents as the experts on the barriers to school readiness and giving them the tools to better understand how to support their own children's development within that process, *Ready Steady Library* offered an unusual opportunity to increase engagement and impact. Moreover, despite the challenges, the project kept parents, babies and toddlers themselves at the centre of the co-creation process.

Its legacy is not only high quality, parent-led, artist-designed, resources for local Libraries and Children's Centres, but also more confident and skilled parents who see their Library as a place of welcome and source of rich experience for their babies and children: a significant contribution to improving school readiness and reducing referral rates to specialist services where it is most needed. Resources are borrowable by any Library member including individuals, community groups etc.

This report is based on an independent evaluation comprising observations, interviews, written and online feedback from participants, partners, artists and staff. It offers reflections on the achievements and challenges of the project and makes recommendations about future work.

Dr Sue Challis, May 2018

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The Libraries Opportunities for Everyone Innovation Fund supports Library Services to trial innovative projects that will benefit disadvantaged people and places in England. RSL met its aims of:*

*Increasing literacy  
Increasing children's access to and use of libraries  
Supporting creativity, use of new technologies  
Improving health and well-being*

Increasing Arts and Cultural Activity Through Libraries'  
Arts Council England



RSL illustration by Steve Smallman

*'Listening to parents and childcare workers drove the design and content of the resources'*

Early Years Coordinator,  
Children's Centre

*Ready Steady Library* was launched in Spring 2017, funded by an Arts Council England's Libraries *Opportunities for Everyone Innovation Grant*. The project, led by Stock, Services and Activities Officer Liz Gardner at Burton Library, had a genuine element of co-creation and partnership at its heart which shaped its delivery.

During the following 12 months the project actively involved over 200 participants and more than 40 staff and Library volunteers were trained. 74 parents and carers (and 70 babies and children) attended 28 Library-based sessions co-creating and designing high quality digital and hands-on activity resources and learning how to use them in ways which would support children's Early Years development. 132 attended focus groups to support the co-creation process.

The innovative learning sessions, led by a highly experienced play and creative arts therapist, Jacqui Shankly, drew in parents and children from 0 to rising five. Award-winning children's author-illustrator, Steve Smallman, worked with parents on the resource's aesthetics and design. Independent project evaluation showed that a range of participants, mainly parents and carers, including those with English as a second language, parents from areas of multiple deprivation, childminders, grandparents, the confident and less so, learnt new techniques and understandings to support Early Years development, and that they went on to regularly implement these new activities at home. The sessions managed to balance the (observed) development of babies' and toddlers' communication skills, a vital component of school readiness, with a high level of parental engagement and learning - and fun!

Following the parents' input, four very well attended sessions were organised to enable 108 partners, Library staff and volunteers from Libraries and community organisations to make their input into the resources and plan how best to manage their implementation. Community Managed Libraries across the County were enthusiastically involved in these workshops.

*'It helped us meet Children's Centre targets for partnerships and involvement in community-led projects as part of our District Priorities'.*

Interview with partner

*'My daughter is 8 months old. I've had postnatal depression. It's been a difficult year... The activity bags are meant to be for her to learn but they have helped me so much. I have a reason to go out to walk to the library and borrow one so we get fresh air and exercise and I don't just stay stuck in all the time. I didn't use the library before borrowing the bags but now I do. I go to baby bounce and rhyme. It's helped me feel less on my own'*

RSL new Library user



RSL illustration by Steve Smallman

*Ready Steady Library* demonstrated that the Library Service and Library staff have the experience and resources to commission high quality participatory arts projects that meet ACE standards.

As well as increasing Library use, the collaboration led to reciprocal arrangements which in turn led to an increase in Library membership and Children's Centre registration. Joining the Library was an important step for a significant number of participants.

As this initial project draws to an end, the roll-out of the new resources in March 2018, developed and modified by participants, is being led by those parent volunteers and professionals through local Libraries and Children's Centres. By the end of May 2018, nearly 100 requests to book them had already been made and 32 bookings completed. Of these, 64% were to people *not* library members prior to borrowing. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. The high quality activity bags are the central tool of the project's long term aim to promote child development and school readiness in under 5 year olds in some of the County's most deprived areas.

Successfully consolidating and extending partnerships with local children's centres, nurseries and community centres, as well as Community Libraries, has been essential to the project's long term legacy of developing staff, parents and volunteers able and committed to making full use of the new resources. It also ensured that *Ready Steady Library* contributed to wider County Council and other local strategic outcomes. A key RSL partner summed this up: *'As a direct result of this collaboration we are already co-writing a joint funding bid for a story-walk with learning opportunities between the Library and the Children's Centre'*

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Ready Steady Library successfully met both its ACE and local partners' aims:

- successful recruitment in target areas
- high level of engagement and positive feedback from participants (parents, babies and children, volunteers and staff)
- successful co-creation process producing high quality and appropriate resources sought after by target users
- parents empowered by new learning to better support children's early years development
- babies and children improving school readiness
- parents and children becoming active Library users
- successful partnerships working across diverse organisations leading to a joint desire for future collaborations

## KEY CHALLENGES

- the low age of 'toddler' participants (average 14 months). This was owing to local external factors, e.g. more local 2 year olds are in nursery because of the Think2 initiative; following initial recruitment local nursery capacity increased and RSL lost several 3+ years children
- initial barriers to the co-creation process such as participants' lack of confidence and lack of confidence in the process; balancing child and parent engagement
- difficulty of generating a coherent group given the sporadic attendance / late coming endemic to families with small children in this target group
- managing a complex project and maintaining diverse partnerships within overstretched and non-dedicated staff capacities

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

1. Ready Steady Library was a highly successful project which exceeded its targets and generated a genuine sense of co-creation, empowering parents, volunteers and staff. It is recommended that the partnerships built in the project be swiftly utilised in further collaborative activities
2. Co-creation requires commitment, skilled input and time. *Ready Steady Library* demonstrated that even limited co-creation can enhance the engagement of participants and partners and ensure the relevance and usefulness of new resources and practices. Integrating babies into this process was fruitful and enriching but also challenging. At some points in the project this process could have been more effective with additional resources, for example, creche provision, or separate engagement e.g. at a local nursery or Health Visitor clinic. It is recommended that, wherever feasible, elements of co-creation and the resources it requires are built into future projects, including with partner organisations
3. The success of *Ready Steady Library* depended on the project's ability to consolidate and extend large and small partnerships, bridging organisations and professional cultures across the County and its sustainability depends on the desire for future collaborations generated. It is recommended that the time and resources needed to maintain and develop partnership working are built into future collaborative projects
4. This was a complex and innovative project which stretched local capacity; nevertheless, building school readiness has been shown to reduce future costs. It is recommended that future projects are adequately resourced to enable a dedicated project team and/or project lead
5. The effectiveness of the new *Ready Steady Library* resources depends for its continued impact on the support of partners including volunteers, and non-project Library staff, many of whom are part time. It is recommended that the continued ability and commitment of these groups to

support the resources monitored over time, and, if necessary, additional training or support offered

6. The project model and type of resources produced in the project have potential for further development. It is recommended that the Library Service explore the extension of the *Ready Steady Library* model for specific uses, for example, for projects working with groups such as special needs, disabled, dual heritage, elderly people
7. *Ready Steady Library* developed integrated and ongoing evaluation and feedback collection with the independent evaluator and the project team which clearly evidenced the immediate outcomes of the project such as improving school readiness for participating families. However, longer term, statistically significant impact will emerge only over time. It is recommended that
  - a) the evaluation techniques developed by the Ready Steady Library project are used as a starting point for developing appropriate methods for future participatory projects; and
  - b) resources are committed to track local school readiness statistics over a relevant period so that any potential changes can be linked to this project

This is Part 1 of a two part report.





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**Part 2 IMPACT**



# READY STEADY LIBRARY Part 2

## IMPACT

### THE ACTIVITY BAGS

*'I took part in the evaluation exercises for professionals and think the bags are exceptionally well-resourced, quality contents. The artist-designed frieze has great potential for spin-offs'.*

Feedback from partner

*'We've set up Ready Steady Library sessions at each other's houses once a month using the activity bags. It's early days; we started off with like five of us and now we've got ten. I can see it growing. There's a mum who comes to the group who is new to this country and doesn't have much English and another one who has social anxiety. We help our kids learn and support each other over a cuppa.'*

RSL new Library user

*'Using the bags at home, it's something I can just pick up and do with her, the activities are simple and I'm learning at the same time as she is. Activity bag time is our special time together!'*

RSL new Library user

The bags, which Library members may borrow for free from any Staffordshire Library, are designed to meet home-learning needs, focused on specific developmental stages in the EY curriculum, and are targeted at different age groups. Each bag contains books for shared reading and a specific development activity, the materials to carry it out and written overviews linking the activities to developmental stages. The materials (such as puppets, musical instruments, objects) are all robust and high quality. There are further suggestions for low- cost / no-cost extension activities, information on local family services and links to recommended parenting websites and educational apps.

The bags also contain books for shared reading and an option to borrow an e-reader which provides access to Staffordshire Libraries' free e-book and e-audio book collection

The bags are attractively designed and illustrated by author-illustrator Steve Smallman and modified by parents in the co-creation process. In an online survey of Library staff and partners, all respondents rated the bags as 'appropriate and attractive' and could envisage how and with whom they could be used in their settings.

By the end of May 2018, over 100 requests to borrow the bags had been made and 32 borrowings already completed. Of these, 64% were to people not previously Library members.

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive: 99% of borrowers felt that the bags helped to support the development of their child's school readiness; 88% that the bags have enabled them or members of their family to develop new skills; and 79% that the bags have had a positive effect on well-being within their family.

## PARENTS' AND CHILDREN'S WORKSHOPS

*'It's been nice to see families whose first language was not English feel confident enough to take part positively in this course'*

Non-participating Library staff member

74 parents/carers and 70 babies and toddlers (aged between 6 months and 2 years) attended 28 one-hour sessions in Burton Library which were a mix of informed age-appropriate play and parent/carer input into the activity resources design. 89% of these participants were from East Staffordshire wards and 29% were not native English speakers. Both groups (babies and toddlers) included grandparents, aunties, carers and dads and a range of 'starting points' from experienced childminder to first time parent. Initial focus groups explored their expectations, hopes and ideas for the project.

As new games and activities were introduced or rehearsed, the play and creative art therapist explained their developmental context, linking them to physical, cognitive or social stages. The new resources, explored together with babies and children during the sessions, were reviewed by parents and modified for re-evaluation in following sessions.

Some of the sessions also involved a digital element but this was limited in line with current guidance. Liz Gardner commented: *'Some experts suggest that children under the age of two years should not spend any time using digital devices especially if this is passive use i.e. does not involve communication with an adult. If digital devices are used, it is important that exposure is limited to 15 to 20 minutes and to ensure that any content is educational and in a context of sharing with a parent / carer'*. Keeping this in mind, the iPads and e-readers purchased for the project were used for time-limited shared activities, enabling participants to try out story and language related activity apps and explore sharing e-books and e-audiobooks with their child to see whether they would like these elements included in the borrowable activity bags. The consensus was that the option to borrow an e-reader would be a good idea but that the emphasis should be on physical books.



Parents and children workshop

*'Libraries are boring'*

*'If it's free I might use it'*

*'He cries a lot and you have to be quiet don't you?'*

*'It's too far away, I'd have to get a bus'*

*'I might go if I had someone with me, I wouldn't go on my own'*

Examples of parent comments at onset

*'Reading seems to calm her down and she likes a cuddle when being read to. We can do that here [in the Library]'*

## USING THE LIBRARY

At the initial focus group for the project a range of attitudes and habits regarding Libraries was recorded, with many negative comments and lack of awareness that Libraries were free

resources or that activities other than book exchange happened there. This changed dramatically during the project. All non-members joined the Library during the project (49 people) and 33% of these showed regular Library borrowing between September and March 2018, with 44% attending one or more special Library event. During the sessions parents were also signposted to other local provision and Library resources. For example, eight families, previously uninvolved, began to take a regular part in the Library's Baby Bounce and Tots Time. A key set of comments from participants was how much more comfortable they felt visiting the Library because of the project, and how much more confident and familiar with it their children were. These comments were linked by participants to two factors: being unaware of the Library 'offer' ('I've been to the cafe lots but never joined or got a book out'); and fearing that an unruly young child would be unwelcome. But on further enquiry they also reflected a lack of awareness that reading is possible with and beneficial for very young children, beliefs which the project sessions successfully challenged.

*'I really enjoyed coming to the Library with my toddler. I feel like I know it now'*

Final parent feedback

### **STARTING POINTS**

The initial focus group revealed that the parents' tended to have considerable concerns and often anxieties about their children's development. These ranged from serious dilemmas about challenging behaviours to issues about 'juggling' competing time demands, and included a large number of expectations out of step with developmental ages, for example, [of an 18month toddler] *'He only wants to draw circles and not straight lines. I am trying to get him to write his name and he will not do it'*. A significant number of parents showed by their comments that they felt unconfident in their own expertise and needed reassurance from an 'expert': for example, *'We are not English. His father says we should only speak English to him so he does not grow up a stranger. I think he likes me speaking to him in his own language. What should I do?'*

*'Why do they have tantrums, and how to stop them?'*

*'Why does he have so much energy?'*

*'I want him to learn to read before he goes to school. What is the best way to do this?'*

*'I feel like he is in charge and I don't want him to be. How can I change it?'*

*'I think doctors and things make you feel worse when sometimes you just want them to say everything is OK'*

Examples of parents' initial concerns

There was a common anxiety about preparation for school and comparisons with other children, for example, *'I'm OK until someone says, Oh so-and-so was doing this at that age, and then I'm like OMG he's not doing what he should be'*. More relaxed comments were less frequent: *'I only know what I know from being a mum. You pick it up as you go along'*; *'There's too*

*'She is very clingy this past six months when she wasn't before and I'd like to know what to do about that?'*

'Do they need to know how to write or does the school teach them that?'

Examples of parents' initial concerns

*'This course has gave me some good ideas for helping my child's brain and physical [development]. My concern is that he is very active.'*

Parent's final feedback

- *Being exciting, inspiring and engaging*
- *Actively involving children and young people*
- *Developing belonging and ownership*
- *striving for excellence and innovation*
- *being authentic*
- *ensuring a positive and inclusive experience*
- *enabling personal progression*

ACE Children & Young People's Quality Principles for participatory arts

*'I didn't realise how many questions I ask every day. Today I learnt to listen and not take over'*

Parent interim feedback

*'I'm aware I didn't try so much to control the situation and mess this week when Isabelle was making craft'*

Parent interim feedback

*much information out there and you don't know what to believe. If I have concerns about her development I'll do something about it but I'm not going to get obsessed'.*

### **THE IMPACT OF THE SESSIONS**

The content and impact of the project sessions were recorded through weekly discussion, parent/carer written feedback (36 detailed statements, 35 post-its) and focus group discussions. As well as evaluating session delivery, this feedback explored what new learning had taken place, what changed behaviours if any parents had implemented at home or observed in their children, plus their experiences of reading and library use. Feedback was dated to show progression over the sessions (comments in the margin left are marked 'interim' or 'final'). In addition, the play and creative play art therapist kept her own reflective journal; and three written independent observations were made based on the Arts Council's Children and Young People's Quality Principles (see left), developed by ACE through widespread consultation and recognised as standards of participatory arts delivery. The observations also focussed on the quality of parental engagement and the integration between parents, children and the resources. Asking for written feedback was not appropriate for all the participants, and the creative play art therapist noted that, 'participants couldn't always assess the impact of the experience or what they felt about the sessions or new ideas immediately - sometimes people talked about the impact of the first session in session 10' (Interview).

Independent observations recorded changes in parents' behaviours (e.g. asking fewer questions, letting child participate in their own way, being able to be more expressive in storytelling without embarrassment; and changes in children's responses, such as longer attention spans, much more eye contact, anticipation and concentration:

*'Seven Mums, all young, seven toddlers (four boys, two girls). During the creative activity I observed a noticeable increase*

*from last time in parents making statements (not questions) and 'leaving a gap'. Parents had to do their own artwork, not child's: letting go was very hard for some, but lots of conversation around the table about it: 'I just stopped her putting the stars there because I thought it looked better but I wish I hadn't because it's her picture not mine, isn't it?' Different from playgroup because consciously challenging habitual behaviours and discussing it. More interaction between parents than last time. Lots of reassurance from leader: 'If Saeed wants to watch from outside the circle that's fine' (child watches leaders face intently throughout).'*

Observer's notes Nov'18

*'Learning Goals:*

- *Help him with his language*
- *My child to improve his knowledge*
- *Cheap play ideas'*

Examples of individual Parent Learning Goals at outset

Although not all parents were comfortable with the process of setting Learning Goals for their own or their child's 'Learning Journey', almost all did identify changes in their own or their children's behaviours: 'I have noticed that he learn new difficult words and movements'; 'I let William try to explain himself more than me jumping in and speaking for him'.

Participant feedback was 'chunked' where possible into comments describing *impact*, on parent's skills/understandings or child's development, *awareness*, of difficulties or responsibilities, and *emotional* responses about the process<sup>1</sup>.

All parents reported that they had learned new skills or changed their behaviours at home because of the course. These included:

better listening/less 'speaking for' their child, fewer questions/waiting longer for child to speak  
 making more one-to-one time, including cuddling  
 regularly reading books, being much more interactive during reading, accepting repetition as essential part of development  
 regularly singing/listening to music interactively with their child, keeping rhythm/dancing, using rhymes including sounds  
 extended range of games and craft activities, creating games with everyday objects  
 joining library/taking out more books or visiting more often  
 far greater ability to link play with new understanding of intellectual and physical development e.g. messy play with learning and manipulative skills, being 'less controlling' about creative or messy activities

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<sup>1</sup> CHN Intervention:Parents' Experience, IJAN 2015

understanding stages of development better and adjusting expectations, recognising and encouraging preverbal vocalisations rather than correcting

All parents reported (and children were observed in sessions) showing some of these new or increased cognitive and social skills or behaviours at home:

'Looking back at Learning Goals:

- *He start learning how to sing and play in group*
- *He loved playing different crafts*
- *I've noticed he learn new different words and movements'*

Example of a Parent's final feedback on Learning Goals

*'At home we could have spent more time on the activities but it's sometimes difficult when busy with all the chores'*

Parent interim feedback

*'The teacher had such good communication skills, the sessions are creative and very friendly'*

Parent final feedback

young babies showing more listening behaviours, making eye contact, anticipating repeated parts of games by excitement or eye contact  
babies and toddlers imitating and anticipating gestures and sounds accompanying songs or stories  
babies and toddlers remembering words and sounds and repeating them at other times / initiating singing, reading (bringing book to be read), and new games and naming characters and things in books  
extended vocabulary (e.g. colours, animals, activities)  
babies and toddlers actively interacting more with other children and adults  
becoming calmer during reading together, better 'bonding' (e.g. eye contact, cuddling), becoming absorbed in tasks for longer, tasks becoming 'fun' (e.g. putting toys away)  
improved relationship with sibling as they play the new games / read together  
better manipulative skills (holding and moving things, catching), strength  
better physical coordination (keeping rhythm, dancing, jumping, reaching)  
babies and toddlers laughing, smiling during sessions

Participants made many comments reflecting new awareness and confidence about the positive roles they could play:

less worried or anxious about child's behaviour or developmental 'milestones'  
being more comfortable when child interacting with other children, valuing babies' social time more as well as one-to-one with adults, less worried about 'sharing' issues  
wanting to do more / identifying barriers  
recognising value of reading stories for siblings as well / as a more attractive (because more structured) activity for dads

Parents and carers made many emotional responses in their feedback, mainly thanks and positive expressions about enjoying the sessions for themselves and their child. These included:

enjoying being with their child more

*'We thoroughly enjoyed the sessions and I didn't feel it could have been better'*

Parent final feedback

*'Working with toddlers every session has to be modified and adapted continually every time - micro adjustments depending on group dynamics and the children and parents' moods'*

Creative play arts therapist interview

enjoying the sessions, enjoying meeting other parents  
parent and child more comfortable and confident in Library,  
new 'fun' tasks 'make life easier at home',  
high level of engagement and pleasure from the sessions,  
wanting further sessions  
positively acknowledging their own learning

Comments about the course delivery were extremely positive, identifying that the mix of hands on activities - when children's responses could be observed - with new knowledge and understanding about developmental stages and their link to school readiness, was very effective. Positive comments about the course came from participants with a range of starting points: *'I have been a childminder for years and familiar with EYFS but I learnt a lot more more about my community and I'd like further similar training and to bring my childminder children here'* (Participant final feedback). Staff too recorded their own development: *'I've learnt to ask more and check why people might be reluctant, and respect this - for example, a parent who hated paint because it seems 'dirty' to her, I no longer assume it is due to a lack of confidence or a superficial reason'*. (Creative play art therapist interview).

## THE CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF CO-CREATION

*'Obstacles to co-creation are fundamentally divergent interest (co-creation of experts, not of everyone), lack of time (co-creation takes time, and people are short of time), and power structures and hierarchies (it is rare that the people themselves are given real power).'*  
Geoff Mulgan (NESTA)

There were two aspects to the co-creation process:

1. parents and children co-developed and continuously trialled the new resources with the support of the play and creative art therapist and artist in the workshop sessions
2. Library, Nursery, Children's Centre staff and volunteers gave input on the resources and how they could be implemented through informal interviews and at four training sessions.

### PARENT AND CHILDREN'S CO-CREATION

This process shaped the content and delivery of the project. Its success depended to a large extent on the skill and flexibility of the play and creative art therapist, who was able to adjust the workshop sessions in response to parents' feedback



throughout and recommend consequent modifications to the resource pack based on parent feedback. This process led to the production of a set of resources which were deemed much more 'fit for purpose' than would otherwise have been the case by parents, staff and partners.

*'Does it matter that we're not experts or anything? Surely you know best?'*

Parent comment at initial co-creation focus group

There were two main challenges to co-creation:

- parents' lack of confidence in their own expertise or confidence that they would genuinely be listened to in the process
- the difficulty of establishing a coherent participant group

In the initial participant focus group some parents expressed lack of confidence in their own skills and an unfamiliarity with being consulted: *'I wouldn't want to say if I didn't like something though because if you're putting on activities and stuff it wouldn't be nice'*.

This was sometimes expressed as the expectation that the sessions would be a one-way learning process. Consequently, as the sessions started this reluctance to engage with co-creation necessitated considerable ingenuity and persistence on the part of the play and creative art therapist and no doubt slowed down or reduced the impact of the process. It was only through the process of seeing the resources continually modified in response to previous feedback that most parents became more fully engaged.

*'It's good you are asking and not telling'*

*'Yes, I think it would be a fun thing to do'*

*I think it would be good to get dads in because we don't get so much input'*

Parents' comment at initial co-creation focus group

Other parents embraced the process from the start: *'Yes, most family learning stuff is like 'do this, do that' and you feel like you are the kid or something, so yes, I think being able to say what we think is a positive thing'*, with some definite caveats probably characteristic of the needs of this target group:

*'I think as long as it's not like hard work or anything it would be good to say what works and what doesn't. I mean, if you were going to make us write loads about it or spend ages on it that wouldn't work for me 'cos I don't have the time'*.

Co-creation is a more demanding process for participants as well as deliverers. In this case, participants' lack of confidence in the process or their own ability, particularly a lack of understanding of or confidence of the role of babies and children in the process, perhaps coupled sometimes with a

*“Add online ideas for follow-up or places that do free activities”*

*‘I see myself getting together with other mums and using the resources for an activity session like this one’*

*‘The Library is fine, but could they be picked up from other places too for people who can’t get to the Library?’*

Parents’ comments on the resources

*‘I’d like there to be some information in the pack for how it helps with her learning so I know how to do it to get the best out of it for her’*

*‘I think physical things are best. I’m sick of looking at little screens all the time’*

*‘I want photographs or pictures or stuff in my language’*

*‘I worry about borrowing them in case anything gets lost or damaged’*

*‘As long as it’s different stuff from what you would have at home’*

Examples of parent feedback on resources

cultural attitude towards time-keeping, meant that attendance was both sporadic and ‘casual’. Late coming, often associated with the demands of childcare and domestic responsibilities, was endemic. Parents also commented that having their babies and toddlers at the same session was often difficult and prevented them giving full attention to the specific developmental issues of each. Ready Steady Library project staff also commented that ‘toddlers’ tended to be from a younger cohort than in the past - in this project the average age was 14 months - possibly because more toddlers aged about two are attending nursery (as a result of the Think2 initiative).

Although session content was continually adapted to meet changing participant needs, the overall impact of these factors was to lessen or slow down the formation of a coherent discussion group and sense of a joint purposeful endeavour.

Some co-creation took place less formally with two local nurseries and RSL project staff have begun to explore these, and Health Visitor clinics as possible future sites for sessions. Similarly, parents and staff discussed creche provision which would enable parents of more than one child to attend the age appropriate session with only that aged child.

Notwithstanding these issues, the majority of participants responded enthusiastically to the co-creation process once underway, making relevant suggestions for adapting physical content and implementation processes which were adopted for the final launch. For example, parents commented that the original plastic boxes for the resources were difficult to carry, so soft but robust plastic bags with buggy-friendly handles were sourced: *‘This not only made them more usable, but seeing their idea implanted was empowering and made parents feel listened to and more confident’*. (Partner interview)

In addition, feedback from partners was wholly positive about the impact of the process. Children’s Centre Early Years Co-ordinator Jayne Rooke commented: *‘Our volunteers who attended the sessions felt they had gained a real understanding of activities which support Early Years development and how children best learn - including their own babies and children who attended... the course gave them the confidence to lead activities here’*.

## **CO-CREATION WITH STAFF, PARTNERS AND VOLUNTEERS**

*'I now feel part of a network'*

Participant at staff co-creation session

*'Volunteers and early years providers were very interested in the project at the training and could see its potential. One volunteer has been very active in booking boxes. Too early to comment further. We will be promoting it at this library'*

Online survey response

The session:

- *Fun, easy to follow ideas*
- *Useful hands-on games*
- *Lots of ideas for me to take back*
- *Really clear guidance with a sprinkling of fun practical ideas*

The resources:

- *These packs will help us bond with families and pre-school children*
- *The content is appropriate*
- *These will help engage families who don't usually engage*
- *A lovely concept that will help raise Early Years standards in education*

Participants' feedback at staff and partner co-creation session

*'It will extend the range and reach of our offer. I hope that through us it will reach families who need that extra bit of help in a friendly non establishment way'*

Online survey response

*'It's been a really positive, successful project that I hope we'll run again'*

Non-project Library staff member

These multi-agency sessions attracted a wide range of participants and the opportunity to adapt the resources and their implementation was enthusiastically welcomed: *'This session is ideally timed within the project and there's real value in getting different agencies and groups together like this'* (Nursery staff member).

*'There were 24 attending at Burton this morning and 26 at Newcastle Library in the afternoon. It was a real mix: a few Library staff but mostly family support workers, nursery staff, domestic abuse support workers, speech and language therapists, SEN staff, teachers, people who run playgroups or family activity volunteers.'* (RSL activity report)

Sessions were run by the play and creative art therapist following a similar model as the parent sessions, i.e. hands-on activities using the resources coupled with reflective discussion. The practical implications of parents' suggestions from the workshops were discussed, adapted and adopted - such as the proposal to book the resources through the Library for use in Children's Centres, extended at this session to suggest booking Library Volunteers to introduce the resources in non-Library settings. Content of the boxes was thoroughly examined and critiqued. *'Two of the hand puppets were criticised for old-fashioned stereotyping so these were changed'* (Children's Centre staff member). The question of whether 'very vulnerable' families would try to sell the resources was discussed and a number of safeguards mentioned (limits on the e-readers rendering them unusable outside the project; using the activity bags within settings rather than at home) which confirmed that the project was flexible enough to meet a range of needs in its implementation.

Feedback about the activity bags themselves was very positive, confirming that the model worked and linking it to the needs of the wide range of settings represented.

## **THE QUALITY OF THE PARTNERSHIP**

There were two parts to the Ready Steady Library partnership: the formal project application, planning and managing

partnership represented on the project management board; and a wider, less formal partnership with many organisations and individuals involved with Early Years and working or volunteering in Staffordshire. As well as the evaluations discussed above, two online surveys were circulated, the first as a baseline of partner expectations which was shared during the project to confirm its direction; and the second (which included Library Staff) as a review at project end, completed by 20 people.

The online surveys suggested a high level of engagement, enthusiasm and thoughtfulness about the project and few unresolved concerns about its quality, impact or the roll out of new resources. Most respondents felt that the partnership had been well managed by Liz Gardner, was effective and good at problem solving, that monitoring requirements were feasible and the project team had been good at communicating. Of key partners, almost all felt that they were able to make significant contributions and had their suggestions acted upon. The diverse project team cut across professional cultures yet all agreed that, after some initial doubts, that the Library-led collaboration was a success. All agreed that the project contributed to their own organisation's aims and that their organisation would like to extend into a future collaboration.

It was important for future planning to explore how the project sat in the wider Library Service. Of Staffordshire Library service staff (not on the project team) who completed the online survey, none reported they had to make rota changes or take on extra work because of the project and they all felt it had been worth 'any extra effort

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### **The Project Board**

Sue Ball, Stock Services and Activities Manager, Staffordshire Libraries

Helen Gill, District Commissioning Lead, Staffordshire County Council

Natasha Moody, Early Years Commissioning Manager, Staffordshire County Council

### **The Project Team**

Liz Gardner, Stock Service and Activities Officer, Staffordshire Libraries

Dr Sue Challis, Evaluation and Research is at [www.suechallis.co.uk](http://www.suechallis.co.uk)

Ian Burley, Community Support Officer, Staffordshire Libraries

Jacqui Shankly, Moonbeams Therapeutic Play & Creative Arts is at [www.moonbeamsplaytherapy.co.uk](http://www.moonbeamsplaytherapy.co.uk)

Jayne Rooke, East Staffordshire Children's Centre Co-ordinator

Sarah Edgerton, Early Years Co-ordination Manager, Staffordshire County Council

Sarah Morley, Design For A Day is at [www.designforaday.co.uk](http://www.designforaday.co.uk)

Steve Smallman, SB Illustration is at [www.stevesmallman.co.uk](http://www.stevesmallman.co.uk)

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Anglesey Primary Academy, Burton

Arch, North Staffordshire

Ark Nursery, Glascote

Barnardo's East Staffordshire

Beanstalk East Staffordshire

Branston Parish Council

Burton Albion Community Trust

Burton Caribbean Association

Burton Pakistani Community Association

Burton and South Derbyshire College

Burton and Swadlincote Natural Parents  
Carers Hub East Staffordshire  
Caroline Wedd  
Citizens Advice Mid Staffordshire  
Changes Health and Wellbeing  
East Staffordshire Early Years District Advisory Board  
East Staffordshire Borough Council  
East Staffordshire Children's Centre  
East Staffordshire Family Support Services  
Eton and Horninglow Parish Council  
Family Nurse Partnership, East Staffordshire  
Glascote Pre School  
H & H Spalding Books  
Hill Street Community Centre, Burton  
Honeypots Day Nursery, Burton  
Josie Suggate, Education Mentor, Virtual School for Looked After Children  
Kings Bromley Playgroup  
Kip McGrath Education Centre, Burton  
Kiddiwinks Nursery, Burton  
Little Scholars Nursery, Burton  
Meadowside Leisure Centre, Burton  
MIND, East Staffordshire  
Natalie Parker, Children's Centre volunteer  
Naila Ahmed, Toolbox @ South Staffordshire Network for Mental Health  
Peters Ltd  
Princess Street Enterprise Centre, Burton  
Queen's Street Community Hall, Burton  
Rolleston Pre-School  
Scientia Academy, Burton  
Shobnall Parish Council  
SSAFA The Armed Forces Charity  
Staffordshire Chambers of Commerce

Staffordshire County Council Think2 team

Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service

Staffordshire ICT Team

Staffordshire Safeguarding Children's Board

Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent NHS Trust

Stretton Parish Council

Support Staffordshire (East Staffordshire)

Synergy Print

The Firs Day Nursery, Burton

Tiny Toez, Newcastle-under-Lyme

William Shrewsbury Nursery, Burton

This is Part 2 of a two part report