

The National Basic Skills Strategy for Wales: Early Intervention and Support

Background

The Basic Skills Agency has been charged with overseeing the implementation of the Strategy on behalf of the Assembly and is working in partnership with LEAs, schools, colleges and national and local organisations. This 'cradle to grave' strategy aims to raise the standards of literacy and numeracy of children, young people and adults.

The Basic Skills Strategy is based on the premise that it is as important to prevent difficulties as it is to tackle past failure. The first goal of the strategy is to ensure that all children get a good start when they begin school. Numerous research studies indicate the critical importance of a child's earliest experiences - indeed the Sure Start programme is predicated on research into the importance of the first three years of a child's life. Researchers have considered variables such as family size, poverty, parental occupation and maternal education and have found that the most powerful factor was family support for learning - talking and playing with your child, reading to your child, singing songs and rhymes together.

For many years the Agency has developed family literacy and numeracy programmes designed to involve parents in supporting their child's language, reading writing and maths and extending their own skills. We have now developed programmes for parents of 0-3 year olds to provide information and support on talking and listening and early literacy. There are three main components to the early years strand of the Basic Skills Strategy:

- Further development of the Bookstart scheme which provides attractive books for babies in every family in Wales at the 9 month health check. We have produced a bilingual book and CD of stories, songs and rhymes to be given to parents at the 18 month health check;
- The development of the Language and Play programme to encourage parents to talk, play, read and sing to their babies and young children;

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- The development of a training programme for early years workers to promote the development of the language and literacy skills of young children. In addition, links have been established with representatives of early years services including health, speech and language, education, libraries etc.

Language and Play

The Language and Play programme is designed to give information to parents/carers of 0-3 year olds and focuses on communication, language, literacy and play. The programme is intended to complement the work currently undertaken by Mudiad Ysgolion Meithrin, Twf, Wales PPA and Sure Start. The programme is a means of reaching families outside Sure Start areas and can be used in parent and toddler groups, playgroups, clinics, family centres, nurseries and schools. Over 2000 parents and 2000 children took part in the LAP programme from January to July 2003.

Aims

- To enhance language development from 0 - 3
- To help parents explore ways of playing with and listening and talking to their children
- To familiarise parents with Welsh phrases, rhymes and songs.
- To encourage parents to share books and stories with babies and young children.
- To develop the understanding and confidence of parents

Establishing the Programme - Language and Play Grants

Funding has been allocated to each of the 22 Local Authorities in Wales for the management and delivery of the programme. Guidance from the Agency emphasises the importance of collaborative planning and each LAP Co-ordinator is expected to work closely with the Early Years and Childcare Partnerships and Sure Start Partnerships to plan the delivery of the programme in each area in Wales. An annual delivery plan is produced and monitored by BSA Link Officers.

Parents report that they have learned a great deal from the programme and are enjoying time with their children far more. We are about to commission an external evaluation on the impact of LAP on parental understanding and behaviour.

Pat Davies
Assistant Director, BSA

