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Confidence, collaboration and creativity – messy play at Little Waves Children’s Centre, Gosport August 2011

On a sunny afternoon in August of this year, eight mums, some of whom had never done “messy play”, are getting down and stuck in with their children – and having a lot of fun... What happened to break the habit of standing back and telling the children what not to do?



Introduction and background

Children’s attainment and parents as first educators are key themes underpinning the priorities of Little Waves Children’s Centre. The centre hosted a pilot positive deviance community coaching exercise between September and December 2010 focusing on boys’ attainment, which after initial enthusiasm, ran out of energy.

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However, one of the participants, Jez Edwards, liked the approach, asked to be trained and was given the chance to try again, learning from what had happened the first time

What was done

Positive deviance community coaching is a five step facilitation programme, which has been very successful in addressing difficult problems in the developing world. The community forms a team, defines a problem to work on and a desired outcome, finds people already in the community who have solved the problem and then enables others in the community to try out the new coping behaviours. It is not just a process – its mindset respects all participants and assumes the best of them. Leaders emerge from the group, and the group itself bonds and grows in confidence.

Jez was offered the chance of four two-hour sessions over four weeks, in August 2011. Little Waves provided a crèche for three of the sessions, and Woodward Lewis mentored and sponsored Jez through the programme. She devised a four-stage programme to match the four active stages of positive deviance and, again with the help of Little Waves, set out to recruit her own group to go through it.

What was different from the first time round?

The group and how it was recruited

The original group was the parents' forum at Little Waves – they already existed as a group and had a particular role, which supported the direction of the centre. In this case, learning from experience, Jez set out to recruit a group specifically for the programme. She had six weeks to do so. She found that traditional ways of recruiting volunteers, such as leaflets and advertisements, left her with no volunteers the week before the programme was due to start. She therefore used her social networking expertise to put the word out on Facebook. However, how she did it was important – she used her status and her own network to spread the word, and by the first session, she had eight participants, who between them had fourteen young children under five, including three sets of twins.

Having a framework that allowed the group flexibility

Jez planned the four stages in outline. As the group defined the problem to work on, and then discovered the coping strategies, she had no idea exactly what the content for each session would be, but the framework could contain and focus it, and give a sense of direction and pace for participants.

The first session was to discuss children's attainment, the fact that Gosport's outcomes were not as good as the rest of Hampshire and low in comparison to the UK average, and to see what the parents wanted to do better to support their children to achieve. They brainstormed all the possible areas, which included sleep patterns, nutrition, reading, and were asked to select the area to focus on, which turned out to be "how to be an engaged parent". When the mums interviewed each other, they settled on play as a priority, and discovered that all of them had anxieties about

messy play. *"I felt really guilty that I found playing with the twins boring"* said one mum.

Keeping the work inside the group

The first group working on children's attainment had decided to reach out to other parents to find out positive practices in supporting very young boys. To do this, the group decided to go via pre-schools but access proved very difficult, things were delayed, so the group lost momentum.

The August exercise focused on the knowledge and practices hidden in the eight mums. With more detailed enquiry in the second session, each turned out to have ideas and expertise about something.

Together, in the third session, they planned a practical messy play session for the mums and fourteen children that should:

- Get mums and children playing together
- Get the children socialising together and sharing
- Help the children be creative and spontaneous in safe surroundings
- Reduce parents' anxiety
- Stop tantrums when playtime had to stop

The mums then ran the practical session in the last week. This went extremely well, as shown in the feedback, to be found in the Appendix. *"I definitely relaxed into it and was happy to be playing alongside. I've got so much more confidence with messy play – I am covered in paint! Have really enjoyed myself and am going to make the effort to do it more often"* Measures of key outcomes, such as frequency of messy play and feelings of confidence showed steady improvement during and after the programme. The group bonded and have met together since, and have sent in photos of them doing messy play after the event.



Here is a photo of one boy playing with paint in the bath at home – another useful tip – put the nappy on the wrong way round so they can't pull them off!

Having an attainable outcome

The group, and the Children's Centre staff, wanted to focus on a range of aspects of parenting, but Jez kept the focus to one specific and attainable aspect of play that had caused a particular barrier for parents. In overcoming this one barrier, it broke down anxieties and developed confidence in the mothers.

They left wanting more, rather than with a feeling they had not achieved everything they wanted to.

What is different about "speed PD" from other programmes?

Delivery – content and style

This course enabled the mums to feel in control. They were able to choose the focus and practise what they had learned together. The feedback shows that they liked learning from others just like them. Jez only facilitated and guided, and made the sessions fun by adding games and exercises. She never actually told the mums how to do messy play – this came out of the questioning exercises.

Feedback from one of the mums on Facebook:

"the course was fab you were on our level and made us all feel relaxed and comfortable, which made the ideas flow. Messy play was great just looking at Dylan's face made it all worthwhile; defo be up for it again and I'm doing far more at home with them now thank you jez"

The other important aspect was actually putting learning into practice – doing play together encouraged all the mothers to participate actively and also helped to share the load of clearing up. They also liked positive deviance, according to comments in the on-line survey about what they liked the most:

"finding the confidence to speak out n put my ideas across the feeling of achievement in planning n achieving n seeing the results with my kids"

"learning all about positive deviance was great and i have been telling my friends about it i love the fact that just one small change can make such a big difference :) i made lots of new friends one of my new friends has just invited me and my twins to a halloween party"

Measurable outputs and outcomes to date

One key output is that all eight mums attended all the way through to the end – no-one dropped out. At least five of the eight mums are going on to do other courses at Children's Centres.

It is probably no surprise that the issues the mums wanted to focus on were very similar to the Government guidelines – so this programme helped them implement several of them including praise and play. It also helped with the Early Years Foundation Stage themes, such as Parents as Partners, the Learning Environment, Active Learning, Creativity and Critical Thinking. The event was inclusive and safe. The children demonstrated better behaviour and self-control and played well with others.

Jez measured a number of factors during the course of the programme, including confidence and changes in attitude towards the child. She also planned a follow-up session to check progress in the October half-term week, to monitor changes in

behaviour. We also conducted an interim, on-line survey to check the impact during early October. Highlights are presented in the appendix. We also asked the group to compare this programme with others they might have been on.

Main themes from group feedback

- Enjoyed the process of discovery
- Liked the positive deviance approach and wanted to try it for something else
- Built personal confidence
- Felt that the programme was fun, empowering, engaging and challenging – but also relaxing
- Liked the informality and unofficial feel – it was good that Jez felt on their level
- Built a closer community group
- Children showed different and more positive behaviour

Benefits to Little Waves

- Narrowed a gap that has a strong influence on attainment and life chances for the children, so actively contributed to Little Waves' aims
- Another option to encourage those who don't like "official" courses
- Supports Centre priorities of assisting parents to learn to be first educators and helped the parents learn how to do several of the Government "5 a day" parenting practices
- Recruitment process can be replicated for other courses to spread outreach
- Is practical and uses the Centre facilities to the full, and only requires a crèche for 3 of the 4 sessions

Conclusion



John Robinson, the Centre manager said: "At Little Waves, we consistently strive to raise awareness of the importance of positive parenting and parent child interaction from the very earliest moments of a child's life. Jez has found an effective way of spreading good parenting practice that will influence not only the parents' confidence and self esteem but ultimately the attainment and life chances of their children".

This course benefits all the key stakeholders: it helps us adapt the community coaching approach to the UK culture, it helps Children's Centres to offer another kind of peer support in a structured but flexible way, and it helps parents who don't like formal courses and who might feel insecure in a class environment. Its format can be replicated for other issues and priorities.

(Photos courtesy of Kirsty Dinning and Gemma Berry with permission)

Appendix – feedback from participants

From the feedback sheets at the end of the final, practical session:

"I came out of my shell and felt confident playing with him. I really enjoyed it and Dylan enjoyed getting all messy. He was laughing. He was very confident and enjoyed playing with the others." Emma

"I've enjoyed it, it's opened my eyes. I never did messy play before this, now I will do it several times a month" – Sarah

"I was doing messy play up to three times a month, now I plan to do it up to nine times a month. The children shared more and there were less tantrums. I shouted less, and enjoyed being with them and touching them while they played." – Julia

"I am more confident and patient with him. I'd like to learn more about Positive Deviance". Kristina

"We really enjoyed all forms of play and (I was) surprised how relaxed we both were. William is a completely different child and we have had no negative behaviour today, which is great. Thank you" – Mandy

"I definitely relaxed into it and was happy to be playing alongside. I've got so much more confidence with messy play – I am covered in paint! Have really enjoyed myself and am going to make the effort to do it more often" – Gemma

"It's kept Kalum occupied and he hasn't thrown anything! He has played quite a lot with other children. It has kept me calm and less on edge, been fantastic and I've enjoyed spending time with him." – Kirsty

From Facebook group, in response to question about whether seen as an expert or "one of us": (we promised to correct spelling!)

Nikki - As a mum and one of us, i think that made it a lot easier to open up (also the fact you're northern too helped even if you're from yorkshire lol) (i'm lancashire) yes def interested in any courses that you want to do. i also liked the back story to the course and the fact you could properly trace the origins to the theory/psychology and prove that it works and gets results am saving up for a copy of the book you mentioned too . i'm hoping i might be able to link some of what i learned with you to my psychology and sociology courses at college x

Sarah - yes i would be interested in more courses, and i saw you as one of us which i think made it easier and quicker to respond to the course and come up with some answers. it always goes better if people can relate to you as a normal person if you know what i mean lol

Kristina

Loved the little stories (as you know), I think we can all learn from it that it's not money what matters most but knowledge. The little warm up games at beginning helped to maintain the friendly atmosphere and we had lots giggles. The group was so informal, so it was easier to put out thoughts forward. Would love to do the another one as positive deviance can be used on so many aspects, endless possibilities. And of course it was a lot of fun to do the course, a great way to learn something new and share knowledge. Xx

Kirsty - I would definitely be up for some more courses xx I felt so relaxed around everyone and as Kristina said I think it was to do with the warm up games and the fact that you definitely felt like one of us

Mandy - Im with girls on this n agree with everything they've said x

Emma Me too thought the course was fab you were on our level and made us all feel relaxed and comfortable, which made the ideas flow. Messy play was great just looking at dylans face made it all worthwhile defo be up for it again and im doing far more at home with them now thank you jez x

Gemma You can count me in if it wasn't for people like you putting on these courses i wouldn't be where i am today and i wouldn't of met and made some amazing people and friends xxx

Post –event on-line survey feedback to date

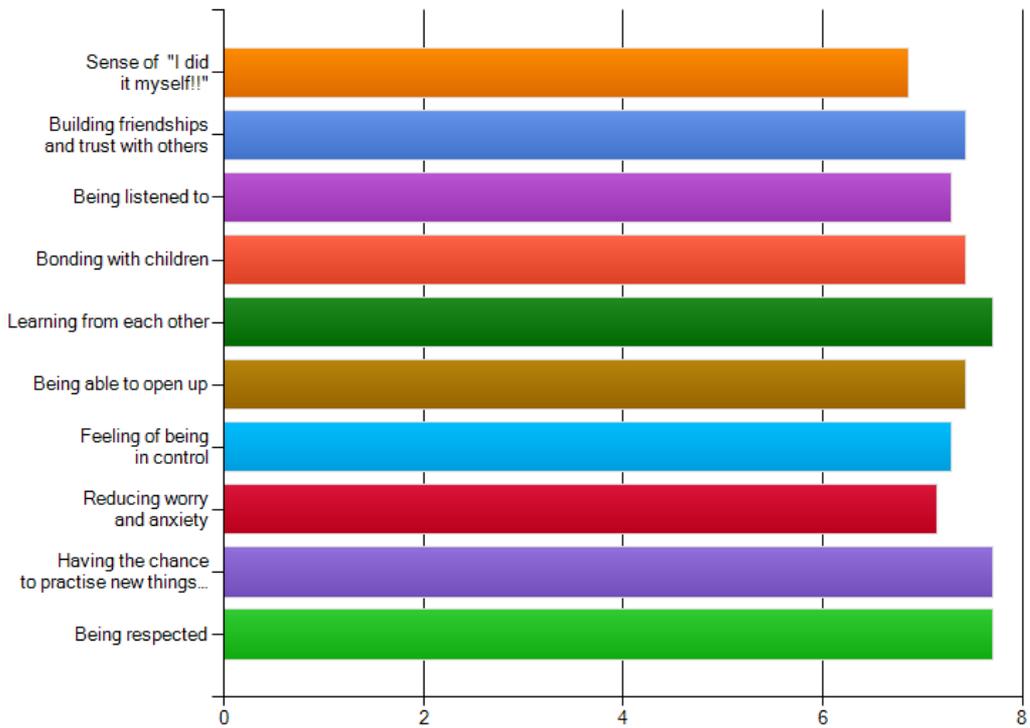
6/7 respondents had done messy play up to five times after the course, one up to nine times.

What did you most enjoy?

- Jez – she made it relaxing. Learning from things we all said, trying new ideas.
- finding the confidence to speak out n put my ideas across the feeling of achievement in planning n achieving n seeing the results with my kids
- learning all about positive deviance was great and i have been telling my friends about it i love the fact that just one small change can make such a big difference :) i made lots of new friends one of my new friends has just invited me and my twins to a halloween party
- Meeting new people making friends found it really nice to use my brain and get other ideas off of people to help develop my children through messy play.
- Found getting other people's ideas very interesting really good inter-action, The group activities were good fun and relaxed us all. The best part of the course was messy play everyone got involved and helped each other and seeing the children's faces made it all worth it! :)
- The unofficial, friendly group. Very open and I felt I can put my ideas forward.
- Relaxed atmosphere, and the journey that brought us to the conclusion (messy play)
- Confidence boost and knowledge how take the stress out of messy play.
- Meeting new people making friends found it really nice to use my brain and get other ideas off of people to help develop my children through messy play.
- more confidence, and a realisation that I can make a difference

All had been on other parenting classes before and made the following comparisons:

How far did the course achieve the following results for you? (1 is not at all, 8 is a lot)



If yes, how would you say that this course compared with others? Please select words to complete this sentence - "this course was more than others I have been on"! You can choose as many or as few as you like.

