

Access for all

A literacy campaign in Birmingham is reaching out to isolated families and improving the skills of parents so they can also help their children's development, finds *Meredith Jones Russell*

One person in six in the UK has poor literacy skills, while poverty doubles the likelihood of literacy failure by the age of five. In Balsall Heath, which is located in one of the seven most deprived wards in Birmingham, 33 per cent of adults have poor literacy and 30 per cent have no qualifications.

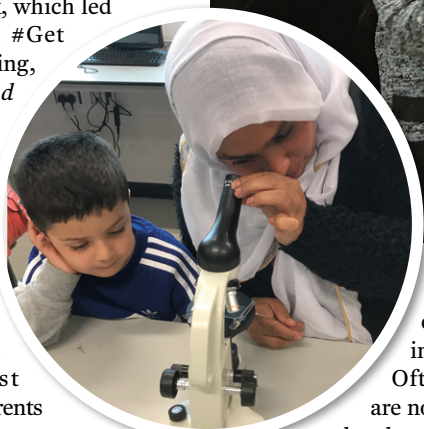
As part of its commitment to raising literacy and encouraging families to enjoy reading, St Paul's Community Development Trust, which runs Balsall Heath Children's Centre, commissioned training partner Smartlyte to develop its early years parental engagement work, which led to the campaign #GetBalsallHeathReading, a *Nursery World* Awards finalist.

Director of Smartlyte, Hafsha Shaikh, says, 'GetBalsallHeathReading aims to get parents engaged with their child rather than just involved. When parents are learning, there is a massive positive impact on the child's learning, family and their community.'

'The absence of family learning is a huge barrier to achievement. We know there is a persistent gap in the attainment of children from poorer backgrounds compared to their wealthier peers. This begins to emerge early in children's lives, continues through school and results in a considerable gap at the age of 16 and beyond.'

Tackling isolation

Families in the Balsall Heath area typically struggle to access learning opportunities. Ms Shaikh says the programme demographic is '99 per cent BAME. We have many Yemeni, Pakistani, Syrian and Somali families. They can be very isolated, and often



don't travel outside the immediate area. Often the mums are not working and they have to go to their husbands to ask for money to go to college or get other types of training. Some have been here for 30 years but never accessed tuition.'

To help combat this, Smartlyte delivers English My Way, a pre-entry ESOL programme supported by the Good Things Foundation.

The programme began in November 2016 with a class of 14 learners, predominantly women, aged between 19 and 65. Parents attend twice-weekly classes based on the principle of modelling, with effects on parental behaviour intended to be transferrable to the child, improving development. The classes take place either at Balsall Heath Children's Centre, which provides free crèche facilities, or in the local library.

MP Roger Godsiff meeting parents (above), learning together at a STEM workshop (inset) and reading at the local library (below)

Ms Shaikh says the environment is very important. 'Everyone knows the children's centre and feels comfortable there. The library is actually only five minutes away from the children's centre, but it is an old Victorian building and looks very imposing from the outside. Parents who have lived here for many years have never been in.'

'In the first week we take all the learners to get library cards to help them to feel part of it. In the second week we sign the children up too. Now, when I go in there on weekends, I see families using computers and looking at books with their children.'

Ms Shaikh says that while the focus of the programme is reading, she quickly became aware the problem was larger than just illiteracy.

'I knew they needed to be reading, but I realised it's also about communication. I knew this wouldn't develop without increasing their awareness of the world around them, so I had to get them out of the local area, and intro-



duce them to a world that is so much bigger than Balsall Heath?

At Christmas, #GetBalsallHeath Reading took 55 parents and children to see *Cinderella* at a local theatre. 'It is only ten minutes away but most families had never been,' says Ms Shaikh.

Families visited Aston University Engineering Academy for an interactive workshop on STEM, accompanied by crèche workers from the children's centre who took building bricks, hard hats and toy trucks to allow babies and toddlers to share the experience with their parents. Other visits have included the ballet, a variety of plays, and the National College of High Speed Rail to experience virtual reality.

'The parents start thinking about their children's future when they see these places,' says Ms Shaikh. 'They start thinking maybe their child could be an engineer, a scientist or a doctor.'

Last year, Smartlyte arranged for 22 families, none of whom had been to London or on a coach before, to visit the Houses of Parliament. Members of staff from the children's centre joined the trip to assist, and local primary schools agreed older children could accompany parents.

The campaign also runs democracy workshops, and held an event with local MP Roger Goddard.

'The mums all wanted to ask questions so we helped put them together, and when he came in his jaw just dropped,' Ms Shaikh remembers. 'He was expecting between six and 10 mums and he got 40. They asked about children's centres, education for their children, and all sorts of issues that affect them.'

'It is so important for the families to engage with democracy and it helps the mums be strong role models for their children.'

After parents have attended a class or event they often ask to see photos taken during the session. However, Ms Shaikh says she refuses to hand them over straight away.

'I put them up on Twitter or on our blog. That gets parents on social media, so they have to engage and learn more, as of course they have to access everything in English. We have one mum from Sudan and she says her husband, who is still over there, is always asking her what she has been doing. Now she sends him our blog. You think this won't go any further than the families you meet, but it's even going overseas.'

Ms Shaikh also presents a weekly radio show called #GetFamiliesTalking on community radio station Unity FM 93.5. 'The women who come to my lessons struggle to do any more learning in the week, but this helps them,' she explains.

'I read a story, something like an Aesop's fable, to start a dialogue about the moral, and I have a guest from the world of education, health or early years. I invite families to dial in and then they have a discussion they can carry on after the end of the show.'

Routes to employment

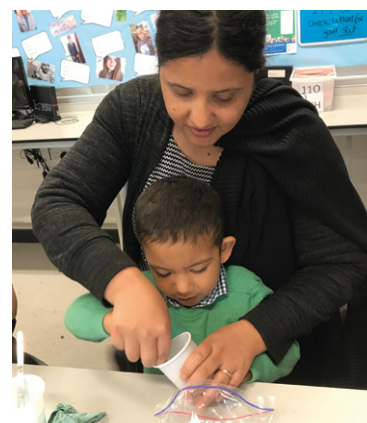
After completing English classes, parents progress to digital skills and numeracy classes and are offered first-aid, road and home safety courses as part of follow-on programmes that Smartlyte has developed to support families at home and offer pathways to employment.

The original members of classes have now started to work as mentors and volunteers to assist with new learner intakes, and will continue to meet on a more informal basis at coffee mornings to maintain their



MORE INFORMATION

- Twitter: @smartlyte.co.uk, @GetBHRReading
- www.smartlyte.co.uk
- www.stpaulstrust.org.uk/get-balsall-heath-reading
- https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org
- https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/case-studies/student-can-become-teacher-mrs-khan-learns-english-kick-start-her-career
- https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/blog/strengthening-communities-esol



The aim is parent engagement

language skills. The most recent intake in September 2017 registered 89 learners on the English My Way programme, 178 per cent of Smartlyte's target.

Co-director Salim Shaikh says it is important to move families on. 'We want to develop their employability. They can transfer the skills they are learning to make them more employable and we help them create a professional-looking CV. It is a natural continuation to move from ESOL through to IT and into employment. Things like Universal Credit, job searching and application forms are all online. Without updated reading, writing and computer skills, they can't access this. Ultimately it's all about aspiration. We want to raise aspirations for families and make them believe they can do anything. We want to take them many more rungs up the ladder much quicker than they would have gone before.'

Hafsha Shaikh agrees. 'Reading helps families access benefits, job applications, educational opportunities, anything. Once they're reading, the world is their oyster.' ■



CASE STUDY

B is a Pakistani parent with a four-year-old son. Her husband does not live with her in the UK. She has a sister in Middlesbrough and some relatives in the community. **B** has been in the UK for many years, but had no English literacy until January 2017, when she went to a local event and was invited to attend the #GetBalsallHeathReading family learning class at the children's centre.

B went to the class and participated in learning and playing with her child. She slowly developed confidence and made friends. Soon she was attending everything on offer, including holiday events at the

children's centre and library, and trips to the theatre, local university and fire station. She completes all her homework, and often says, 'I understand now that I need to learn in order to help my child.'

Recently, **B** developed a hearing problem which required medical investigation and an operation. She took the hospital appointment letters to lessons to have them explained and to check times and directions. Following the surgery, she explains, she used homework as escapism. 'I would sit and just keep writing out my name and address. Then I would get my boy

to do the same. When my eight-year-old niece came over, I would ask her to explain the other homework activities to me.'

In a recent session, the class was given a timed activity of writing out their name and address. In the past, **B** always copied this. For the first time, she wrote her name and address without any help.

B has now joined IT and maths classes, and while she says she does not have the confidence to attend college, learning at a local venue and progressing with a teacher she knows have been the key elements in allowing her to engage with learning.