

Café society

Norfolk's Story Café programme is proving a hugely effective way of engaging parents in their children's learning. Programme developers *Julie Westrop* and *Mandy Lowe* and teacher *Nicky Hudson* offer some insight into how they are making it a success

As early years practitioners, we are all too aware of the importance of the home learning environment – and the challenges of engaging parents in their children's learning. One way that is proving really appealing to a wide range of parents is Norfolk's Story Cafés.

A Story Café is essentially an informal story session, which takes place – as the name suggests – in a 'café' created in an early years setting or primary school, with all the features expected of a café, such as all-important refreshments. The cafés are run by staff as often as is practicable and desirable for the setting and families.

The lead shares a story and talks about the pleasure to be gained from books and sharing books, with key messages passed on by modelling and participation, as opposed to a presentation. Activities follow and, as parental confidence grows, more advice on supporting language development (see case study).

The café programme was developed in response to frustrations on the part of both practitioners and parents. Practitioners often felt thwarted in their efforts to engage and support all their families, while parents often felt that too many assumptions were made about their knowledge and confidence in supporting their children's learning.

Summing up the challenge of engaging parents and the success of the cafés, one infant school head teacher says, 'We have always struggled in the past to get parents in – no matter what we offered them. There is something special about the café that attracts parents; it is relaxed, parents know what to expect, and no one is putting any demands on them that they don't feel comfortable with. They enjoy the time with their child, and the children are responding positively to them.'

'We have seen parents here who we would never have expected to come – they haven't engaged readily with other services or us in the past. I have been amazed by what talents some parents have shared with us. It has been a chance for them to shine. I think it takes them back to their own school experiences.'

The café programme started in 2009 with a pilot in primary schools and spread rapidly in Norfolk and the UK. The cafés were then rolled out through a comprehensive and well-received training programme on family engagement and home learning. The early years module focused on supporting early language development and a love of books.

Over the years, the cafés have attracted positive comments in Ofsted inspection reports. For example, one school report, for Kings Lynn Nursery School, notes, 'The school has very strong relationships with parents... Parents are enthusiastic about the benefits of the Story Café for parents, children and community tolerance and understanding.'

Meanwhile, childminder Sally Lee's recent glowing report notes, 'The childminder makes exceptionally good use of story sacks or the Story Café they attend, to focus activities and children's learning.'

Settings running cafés comment on their effectiveness, how well attended they are – even in settings where engaging parents has been highly challenging – and how much fun they are.

Their benefits are numerous for the children, as home and setting come together and learning is complementary and embedded. Parents and other family members report increased confidence and understanding of how children learn, and adopting more active approaches to supporting learning. Many of the parents have gone on to advance their own learning or to volunteer in the setting.



Rainbow Café sessions at Magdalen Gates Pre-School, led by Nicky Hudson (top right), are informal and relaxed

The settings report improved models of partnership working with their families and a real sense of working together as co-educators.

CASE STUDY: MAGDALEN GATES PRE-SCHOOL

We launched our Rainbow Café in 2009 after evaluating our provision for family involvement in early language through the National Literacy Trust's Early Reading Connects scheme, writes **Nicky Hudson**.

Through the café, we aim to engage as many families as possible in their children's learning from an early age. More specifically, we use it to help us work in partnership with families to support early language acquisition, by promoting and encouraging a love of stories and books through play.

We develop this engagement by supporting parents and communicating with them, modelling to them how their children can learn at home, allowing them to make decisions about their children's learning, and by bridging social gaps. To be effective, we make sure our café sessions:

- are informal and relaxed
- promote a love of stories and books
- enable and empower families
- value and respect parents
- offer quality time for parent and child together





- model to parents how children learn and could learn at home
- have a facilitator with enough time to plan, resource and lead
- are free to all families who attend our pre-school.

Norfolk County Council's inspirational Story Café training revealed some interesting statistics that inspired us to work hard on the project to make a difference for our children. These included the fact that:

- only 20 per cent of a 0- to 16-year-olds' waking hours are spent in education – the other 80 per cent are spent in the family
- the average adult reading age in the UK is that of a nine- to ten-year-old
- enjoying and sharing books from the earliest age motivates children to value reading
- one in three children do not own a book
- one in three children do not have someone who shares a story with them.

Our café sessions, initially funded

by a small grant from the National Lottery and for the past two years by small grants from the Norfolk Community Foundation, are each based around a story.

In one session, we read *Dear Zoo* by Rod Campbell. Twenty-two families arrived – a record number – and as they arrived children could explore props that inspire talk and play related to the story.

When parents, carers and children have settled down on the carpet, I read the story. I involve everyone in the storytelling, using props to help children visualise the story and encouraging them to make signs and the noises of the animals in the book.

Next, parents and children make their own story props from resources provided and sit around in a circle of tables, which helps them to get to know each other. In the *Dear Zoo* session, families made stick puppets of the animals in the story and decorated a bag for taking home their props.

Families then have some refreshments – tea, coffee, milk, water and a healthy snack for the children such as grapes or pitta bread and cucumber.

During this break, families can choose a Story Sack or Talking Tent to borrow for a fortnight. A Story Sack consists of a bag with a book, props and games related to the story, while



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a Talking Tent is a bag containing a pop-up tent, blanket, books and a torch.

Then everyone comes back together on the carpet to show what they have made. We tell the story again, with the children using the props.

Children are awarded a certificate of attendance and take home a 'family challenge'. Parents and carers fill in an evaluation of the session. Comments include:

- 'I think the Rainbow Café is a lovely idea and gives parents the opportunity to think about home learning ideas.'
- 'I thought the whole morning was fantastic and look forward to the next Rainbow Café.'
- 'The Story Sacks are great.'
- 'A lovely opportunity to meet other parents in a relaxed, informal and child-friendly atmosphere.'
- 'My child loved the Talking Tent we borrowed last time so much we went out and bought our own pop-up tent!'

We know these sessions are making a difference. The day after our session based on *Shark in the Park* by Nick Sharratt, children who had attended the session were recreating the story in their play at pre-school, asking to make sharks and pretending to look through a telescope to see if there is 'a shark in the park'.

Some families benefit from these sessions over several years, as their younger children come along with their family to Rainbow Café then move up to pre-school themselves. One family has brought along all three of their children.

By inviting along guests such as a community librarian, we also encourage families to use their local library, borrowing books for free and opening up an amazing world of stories and knowledge to their children.

I write a blog based on inspiring a love of stories in families and settings at www.itsallaboutstories.blogspot.co.uk. It now has a Facebook page, too, and is on Pinterest (www.pinterest.com/allaboutstories). ■

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