

# Free to explore

Building on the success of Story Cafes, a new scheme combines reading with sensory experiences to engage families, says *Lindsey Symington*



**T**wo years ago, Norfolk County Council developed the Story Cafe programme, which proved itself to be a really effective model of engaging parents in their children's learning. A Story Cafe is essentially an informal story session, which takes place in a 'cafe' in an early years setting or primary school, with all the features of a cafe, like refreshments. Now, we have built on the initiative's success by developing Discovery Cafes, offering stories and sensory experiences to families with children under three. They too are a hit with parents.

The decision to extend the programme was in recognition of the importance of positive parent-child interactions, particularly during the optimal period for brain develop-

ment, from birth to age two.

The initial scheme was developed principally by Julie Westrop, senior adviser for parents and extended services at Norfolk County Council, and I worked with Julie and Marilyn Wasyliv from the early years home learning team to develop it. The key messages that we want to pass to parents through the initiative are based on *Birth to Three Matters*, the framework for working with babies and toddlers launched in 2003, and the characteristics of effective learning contained within the revised Early Years Foundation Stage.

## ROLL-OUT

Last autumn, children's centres across Norfolk were offered places on

the Discovery Cafe training programme, and in January 17 centres attended training sessions, with the offer of follow-up bespoke support.

Most of the centres rolled out a series of three Discovery Cafes before returning in March for an evaluation day. The cafes were well attended. Some were offered to families with babies, others to a wider age range. Some linked in with existing groups while others were set up specifically as Discovery Cafe sessions.

The Discovery Cafe is an opportunity for families to enjoy a story and refreshments with other families in a relaxed atmosphere, to interact with their child and enjoy, in one parent's words, 'the freedom to explore' sensory play, heuristic materials and other stimulating play, which use free and found materials and can be replicated at home.

Resources are chosen to enable staff to communicate naturally the key messages that they want to give families about their children's learning and development. Sometimes the experiences link with a story – in one session small-world animals that feature in *Dear Zoo* were included in sensory and outdoor play. They were also hidden in boxes and tins that children could open to discover what was inside.

Some children noticed the differing sounds made by plastic, wood or soft toys inside the containers, some searched for particular animals, and others built towers. The adults noticed a younger child repeatedly opening the same box and talked about 'object permanence', linking this to another resource, a home-made 'post box'.

## FORMAT

The cafe session begins with everyone coming together for a few minutes to share a story suitable for toddlers, such as *Ten in the Bed* by Penny Dale, *Yawn* by Sally Symes or *Monkey and Me* by Emily Gravett.

Staff can share the key messages at storytime or during the session. Then the accompanying resources are uncovered and children are free to explore with their parents. A healthy snack is usually offered at the same time, allowing children and adults to access it when they are ready.

A comfortable chair is often provided for mothers wishing to breast-feed without leaving the room. ➤

**Resources are chosen so that staff can naturally communicate messages about learning and development**

## WORKING WITH PARENTS

Cafes generally end with everyone coming together again briefly to celebrate families' experiences and key messages. Some centres finish with a routine which is a familiar 'ending' signal to regular centre attendees, such as a short tidy-up time followed by sitting together to sing and say goodbye or blow calming bubbles.

### BENEFITS

Discovery Cafes have been supported by Norfolk's library service staff, who have been lending books and story sacks, and sometimes reading the story. Children's centres are now including cafe sessions in their regular timetable or planning them to meet particular needs, such as transitions, holiday sessions or to support families in a refuge.

Staff report that sessions are well attended and that the flexibility to hold them outdoors, in the library, or as part of Bookstart or baby weigh-ins has led to parents accessing groups for the first time.

Practitioners have said that the sessions have resulted in more parents borrowing books and toys, a greater willingness to experiment with sensory play at home, and an interest in accessing ideas through the Norfolk County Council website and other sites such as Pinterest. Some children's centres commented that parents who were new to the area, such as traveller families and armed forces families, had enjoyed the 'pop-up' and 'drop-in' style of session.

The impact on children was an immediate enjoyment and engagement in sessions, and over time parents described an increased interest in books, and an enthusiasm for exploration of new experiences.



Children's centre managers have told us that in addition to increased attendance, and reaching more families, they are linking with other agencies more frequently. Some centres have redecorated rooms in neutral and natural colours, and planned their stay-and-play sessions around key messages for parents. This has been very well received by parents.

### CASE STUDIES

#### Norfolk's Family Nurse Partnership team

Discovery Cafe training has also been accessed by the family nurse partnership team in their work with teenage parents. Michelle Ackroyd, the Family Nurse Partnership supervisor says, 'Our work is mostly on an individual basis with our clients, but we do have some regular group sessions with parents and children, so the series of training was most useful.'

'We found the idea of including an aim for empowering family members in supporting children's learning gave us a new focus for enjoyable activities in an informal relaxed setting.'

'Team members found the information on effective learning and experiences a useful reminder for our work with parents and the fabulous ideas and resources both inspired and motivated us in our plans for our next group session, a Teddy Bears' Picnic.'

'We consistently receive positive comments from clients about our group sessions, but our hope is that following this training our sessions will be more creative and exciting and that as well as having fun our clients will have learned more about how their infants and children can learn at home and feel enabled and empowered to try more activities at home.'

#### Fakenham Gateway Children's Centre

'We first offered a Discovery Cafe last summer to further strengthen parents' and carers' understanding of children's development and the importance of talking together and sharing books,' says centre manager Janice Jackson.

'Each element of a Discovery Cafe ensures parents and children have opportunities to put into practice all they hear, see and feel in interactive and animated ways.'

'Our practitioners explain the importance of reading stories to young children and model easy-to-follow ideas so parents can replicate them at home.'



### MORE INFORMATION

- *Birth to Three Matters*, see [www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2012/04/Birth-to-Three-Matters-Booklet.pdf](http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2012/04/Birth-to-Three-Matters-Booklet.pdf) and [www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/50-years-of-ESRC/50-achievements/birth-to-three-matters.aspx](http://www.esrc.ac.uk/about-esrc/50-years-of-ESRC/50-achievements/birth-to-three-matters.aspx)
- For more on the Discovery Cafe programme and to access training, contact: [lindsey.symington@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:lindsey.symington@norfolk.gov.uk) or [marilyn.wasylw@norfolk.gov.uk](mailto:marilyn.wasylw@norfolk.gov.uk)
- For more on the original Story Cafes, see [www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1140197/positive-relationships-parents-cafe-society](http://www.nurseryworld.co.uk/nursery-world/feature/1140197/positive-relationships-parents-cafe-society)

'Sensory activities are offered to extend learning and development. Natural products and simple heuristic materials are used in all discovery experiences to demonstrate high-value tactile learning can be achieved at little cost.'

'At every Discovery Cafe, the centre gives each child a copy of the book chosen to take home with them; this embeds the learning that has been undertaken throughout the session. Parents have fed back on how much the children have enjoyed having the books at home and their engagement with reading and books.'

'Parents' comments have included:

- "I like having the children sat around for the story."
- "Lovely idea to do a Discovery Cafe. I'm sure my child will enjoy the book tonight."
- "We loved the Discovery Cafe. Lots of creative activities to do and interaction with other parents and children is always nice; thank you!"
- "He loves books and playing with other children and it will broaden his skills and experiences."
- "My little boy likes socialising... and the freedom to explore."

'Discovery Cafes are now very much a part of our centre programme. They have been so successful that we have redesigned all our centre stay-and-play sessions to reflect the interactive and engaging ethos of Discovery Cafes.'

'Parent and child attendance has increased twofold at our newly named stay-and-play groups, Discover and Do, and parents are contributing ideas and themes more frequently to shape future planning.' ■

*Lindsey Symington is an early years adviser at Norfolk County Council home learning team*