

Study identifies why UK's most needy parents are not using early years services

November 24 2011



It is widely recognised that parent and toddler groups provide support while also improving life-chances for children from low-income families. However, new research from the University of Bristol has found that nearly a quarter of mothers' first-time visits to a group were so off-putting that they did not return to that group. One in five mothers then became afraid of attending any group.

The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and Barnardo's-funded study, carried out by Dr Sue Jones from the University's School for Policy Studies, interviewed thirty [parents](#) from a Sure Start area to identify the factors behind why some parents use early years groups regularly and others not at all.

Dr Jones, Research Associate in the University's School for Policy Studies, said: "Despite the concerns of government agencies, such as social services and education authorities, that many 'hard-to-reach' parents do not use early years groups, there has been little research into the social and psychological factors that underlie why these parents choose not to attend."

The study identified that by far the most crucial determinant in attending, was not the location or cost but how [mothers](#) thought they would get on with others in the group. This accounted for nearly half of all attractions (42 per cent) and barriers (45 per cent) to attending the 97 groups, which mothers described.

The study's key findings include:

- Nearly one in four first-time visits to early years groups were so off-putting (due to peer factors such as knowing no-one there, finding it cliquey, or not the 'right' social class) that mothers did not return to that group;
- One in five mothers interviewed were identified as group-'phobic' — strongly afraid of attending all groups after one or two bad experiences;
- Peer factors were also important for children - finding other children in the groups friendly was an attraction, finding them 'rough' was a barrier;
- Mothers were ten times more likely to go to a group more than once, if told about it by a friend or relative than if they just saw a poster or leaflet.

- Far fewer Sure Start groups were described as ‘cliquey’ (5 per cent) compared to other early years groups (24 per cent), possibly reflecting that Sure Start groups were run by paid staff, had designated ‘welcomers’, and some were short-term which stopped cliques from forming.

Dr Jones added: “My study has found that going to a group can be a daunting experience, especially if a mother doesn’t know anyone there. The mother and group need to ‘fit’ together. Mothers need to feel that others in the group are her social equals, with similar values and attitudes to child-rearing. Mothers need to feel their age, social class, and their or their child’s ethnic identity will not isolate them in a group.”

The study, from a doctoral study of thirty parents of young children from a Sure Start area, was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the charity, Barnardo’s.

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: Study identifies why UK's most needy parents are not using early years services (2011, November 24) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-11-uk-needy-parents-early-years.html>

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