

Welcome to Nursery - summary of evaluation 2007-2008

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Background to the study

Welcome to Nursery (W2N) in Solihull is a supportive programme offered to parents whose children are about to start nursery. It was originally developed and run by Sure Start Chelmsley Wood (now the Chelmsley Wood Children's Centre) in collaboration with local schools and professionals from a range of agencies.

The sessions were designed to introduce children and their families to their nursery in an informal and relaxed way. While the children explored their new environment, parents had the opportunity to explore a range of relevant topics with support and information from appropriate professionals. From the outset, there was a fundamental ethos of working in partnership with parents, for example in the parent-centred approach to delivering W2N, and the ongoing emphasis on asking for and responding to their views and experiences of participating in the programme.

W2N ran successfully for several years in a number of schools in the north of the Borough, and more recently schools in other parts of Solihull have been taking on and adapting W2N to support their families with the transition into school. Previous evaluations have provided a wealth of valuable qualitative information from parents about its benefits. This study, carried out by two Educational Psychologists during the academic year 2007-2008, set out to canvass the views of another key group of stakeholders, namely staff in schools, who play a crucial role in ensuring the success of such programmes. We also wanted to know if there were long term advantages for the children who had attended W2N, compared with those who did not.

We obtained funding from Solihull Children's Trust Board for two days consultancy time. Mairi-Ann Cullen, Senior Research Assistant at the University of Warwick kindly agreed to act as consultant to the study.

How the study was carried out

There were two aspects to the research:

1. We explored the views of staff from the five schools in the original W2N programme, on whether they thought W2N was worth sustaining, and if so, how this might best be achieved. This was done by inviting members of staff who had had relevant involvement with the W2N programme, to take part in a focus group discussion facilitated by the EP researchers in March 2008. Nine members of staff from the five schools, and one Children's Centre Manager took part. The 'notes and quotes' gathered were analysed in detail by us, and were grouped into key themes.
2. To look for long term outcomes for those children who attended W2N at the five schools, compared with those who did not, the parents of children

Findings and conclusions

- The participants in the focus group were unanimous in agreeing that W2N was worth sustaining, and they provided a rich qualitative analysis of why they thought this should be the case. A strong theme which emerged was that school staff perceived W2N to be mutually beneficial for children, parents and schools. The wide-ranging discussion about potential changes or developments that could be made to W2N in the future, illustrated the potential for tapping into the imaginative and resourceful ideas of school staff for adapting and developing W2N to suit local needs.
- The analysis of the parental questionnaires and the school data found that, by the time their children were in Year 3, there were no differences between the families in the study who attended W2N and those who did not. This was the case across a range of quantitative measures (children's attainment, attendance, and exclusions) and qualitative measures (such as parental perceptions of level of involvement with their children). However it is possible that a larger sample of the Year 3 cohort might have produced different results.

Although the evaluation did not find long term differences between those children who attended W2N and those who did not, it provided compelling evidence from staff, based on their daily experience, of the value of W2N in helping children and their parents to feel happy, secure and better prepared socially and emotionally for the transition into school. The main implication from this study and previous evaluations of W2N, is that the particular strengths of W2N lie in its ability to build partnerships with parents at a crucial early stage in their children's school career, and to promote better social and emotional adjustment of those children. Future evaluations of W2N might usefully focus more closely on the immediate benefits during the Nursery year, for example looking at measures of children's social and emotional adjustment, parents' perceptions of feeling welcomed and involved in the life of the school, and data such as attendance at parent's evenings.

In conclusion, W2N is a programme with the potential to support a number of national and local priorities, as follows:

- There is strong evidence that it supports parents and provides good opportunities for schools to build partnerships with parents at a crucial early stage;
- It offers specific support to parents at an important point of transition, with a particular focus on reassuring and supporting parents as well as increasing parental understanding and empathy with regard to the personal, social and emotional needs of their young children, and;
- It lends itself to locality based and integrated styles of working, for example through its emphasis on multi-agency co-operation, its potential as a vehicle to develop links between schools and Children's Centres, and its flexibility. Schools in the north of the Borough have valued it and demonstrated a high degree of commitment to ensuring its success. Furthermore, as locality working is developing in Solihull, there has been great interest from schools and partner agencies across the Borough in adapting W2N and developing a workable and sustainable model, which can form part of their package of support to parents.

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- Mairi-Ann Cullen, Senior Research Assistant, for her invaluable support and encouragement in designing, carrying out and analysing the research.
- Carole da Costa, for kindly providing funding for purchasing additional consultancy time.
- More generally, we wish to acknowledge our debt to the staff past and present at Sure Start Chelmsley Wood, who played such a pivotal role in developing and running W2N from the outset.

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