

## Introduction

Peep is a charity that trains professionals and works with families, to support children's learning. We do this largely through the Peep Learning Together Programme, which helps:

- parents and carers to improve their children's life chances, by making the most of *everyday* learning opportunities – listening, talking, playing, singing and sharing books and stories
- babies and children to make the most of their opportunities, by becoming confident communicators and active learners, ready for school
- practitioners to enhance and develop their work with parents and young children, through accredited training and resources

The Learning Together Programme focuses on five strands of learning: Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Communication and Language, Early Literacy, Early Maths and Health and Physical Development. It is underpinned by the ORIM framework (Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and a Model) developed by Professors Peter Hannon and Cathy Nutbrown.

## Peep Foster and Kinship Carers Training Course

The Peep Foster and Kinship Carers Training Course was an 11-week programme for Foster & Kinship Carers and the children aged 0-5 years old in their care, commissioned by Oxfordshire County Council. It was based on the Communication and Language Strand of the Learning Together Programme. (The term 'carers' refers to both foster and kinship carers; the term 'child/ren' refers to the child/ren being cared for.)

### Aims:

To support the carers to:

- value and extend learning opportunities in everyday life
- improve the quality of the home learning environment
- develop secure attachment relationships with their babies and children
- gain an accredited unit based on supporting their child's learning and development

### What we did:

The training course consisted of eleven 1.5 hour weekly sessions (term time only). All the carers were offered, and took up, the opportunity to complete the level 2 Peep NOCN qualification unit: *Supporting babies' and young children's communication & language development as part of everyday life*.

### Who was involved:

The course was delivered by three Peep-trained practitioners: Helen Stroudley, a Peep practitioner/trainer who worked mainly with the carers, and Sue Prosser and Paula Stallard, who worked mainly with the children. Nine carers were recruited and attended throughout the course, which was an ideal number. The number of children living with the carers changed over the duration of the course, but on average there were five in attendance each week. The carers were encouraged to attend regardless of whether they had a child with them on any particular week. Professionals from other agencies were involved in recruiting families - see below.

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## Course content:

- Session 1 – Introductory week | Non-verbal communication
- Session 2 – ORIM (Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Modelling)
- Session 3 – Treasure baskets/Heuristic play (Attention)
- Session 4 – Understanding (comprehension or receptive language)
- Session 5 – Making sense of sounds (with sounds box activity - attached)
- Session 6 – Music and singing
- Session 7 – Play & language (expressive language)
- Session 8 – Play schemas (play patterns)
- Session 9 – Books and stories (to support and enrich language)
- Session 10 – NOCN Portfolio catch up week
- Session 11 – Evaluation & Certificates

Each session had relevant handouts to support the learning, which carers frequently said that they found useful. Two examples are included in the appendices: Topic handout *The very first language* and Activity sheet *Making a magic sounds box*.

All the children and foster carers were given individual attendance certificates at the end of the course. Foster carers were also given a pair of *Singing Together* song books/CDs, and the children were given a thank you *Peep the parrot* picture book.

## Course evaluation

The carers individually completed evaluation forms at the end of the course - both for this course and for the NOCN accreditation. We also had a group discussion during the final session focusing on children's voices and observations, relationships and the home learning environment, with people adding post-it notes to a flip-chart.

## Overcoming potential barriers

We wanted to make the course as accessible as possible for carers, and the following all contributed to this:

### Active recruitment to the course

People produced a flyer about the group which professionals from other agencies actively promoted amongst potential course participants. This included Clare Campling (Programme Coordinator) from KEEP (Keeping foster carers and supported), Maggie Smith (Early Years Support) and Sarah Hazell (Primary Lead & SENCO) both from the Virtual School for Looked After Children and Care Leavers 0–25 and Christine Grandison (Foundation Years Leader) from Oxfordshire County Council. They emailed the flyers to social workers and foster carers groups, and attended local foster carers' network meetings and groups.

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*'It was felt that it was definitely well worth attending the sessions as it gave the opportunity to explain the offer in more detail and to promote the benefits of the course.'* (Christine Grandison)

Peep followed up enquires with phone conversations and emails, then sent reminder emails with directions and timings.

## Flexibility

The initial request from the commissioner was for a training course for carers with two and three year olds. However, some of the carers who were keen to attend either didn't have children at the time or they had a younger child. The flexibility that we and the commissioners had in allowing those carers to attend (and to have two practitioners supporting the children because of the number and age range) reflected the realities of foster caring, and the frequent changes within foster families.

## Session format

A key element of all Peep Learning Together sessions is talk time, where child development ideas are shared and discussed with participants. During the first half of each session, the carers had an extended talk time with the Peep trainer (Helen), based on one of the Programme's topics. Meanwhile the other Peep practitioners (Sue and Paula) worked with the children in the same room, with activities and play that supported the learning in the sessions. During the second half of the session, the carers, children and practitioners gathered together on the floor to share a story and sing songs, with actions and props.

## Carers and children attending together

Carers didn't always have a child in their care throughout the course, but everyone said that they valued having the children in the sessions. Observing and interacting with the children brought the theory to life, and felt inclusive:

*'It has worked really well – hasn't interrupted the training and discussion, but it has been fascinating to try out some of the ideas with the children and watch them develop over the weeks.'*

*'The informal atmosphere, and plenty of interaction with the children where [the Peep staff] are physically showing us what has just been discussed, has been invaluable.'*

*'Having our foster child present meant myself and my husband could attend. It was very interesting to see how the children interacted and enjoyed the group time.'*

## Strong practitioner-child relationships

The positive relationships between the children and the Peep practitioners were important in terms of the quality of the group, and the children's desire to come along.

*'Week one – children were shy/unsure, over the weeks they come in excitedly and settle straight in with [the practitioners], who were brilliant at going at the children's pace.'*

*'[Child] asks as we set off from home: 'Are we going to [practitioner's] group?'*

## Outcomes for Peep Foster and Kinship Carers training course

*'I have learnt not to give myself a hard time, I am actually doing a great job.'*

### Carers reported that they had improved their home learning environment

The learning in the group was put into action in the home. The carers in the group all said that, as a result of the group, they were more aware of the benefits of what they were doing at home, and did more of it.

*'Spending more time to sit and listen and take notice.'*

*'Using songs and stories from the sessions at home and on the way home in the car.'*

*'[The boy in my care] has enjoyed doing things at home that he has learnt here – sound box and [Singing Together] CD. [He] taught my girls new songs.'*

### Carers understood more about children's language development and how to support it

In the post course evaluation, the content of the course was reported by all the carers to be 'good' or 'excellent'. It enhanced their understanding about the importance of observing their child play, and how to support their communication and language development.

*'The content of the course made you look at the things you see and do on a daily basis, and gave me a much better understanding of the beginnings and support of communication and language.'*

*'Content on communication and language was great, thorough and covered many areas. I felt the course was very informative and interesting.'*

*'Most of the topics have come to life and I am using these at home with the children in my care, trying to take advantage of every opportunity to support their communication and language.'*

*'It has encouraged me to reflect and observe my child and think about how language is developing, and what I can do to help.'*

*'I am more intentional about using songs and books to help communication and language.'*

*'All the family have enjoyed listening to sounds as well as words with the sounds box.'*

*'The language and development in communication has come on so well since week 1.'* (carer about a child with speech and language delay)

### Carer-child attachment relationships were strengthened

The group were really supportive of each other and of the children in the group. Confidentiality was important to the foster carers and was discussed within the group.

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A central theme of the course was the importance of seeing things from the child's perspective, and the different communication strategies which can support this. The carers commented that developing this perspective had made an impact on their relationship with the child in their care by:

*'Thinking from the child's perspective on communication and having the patience to listen'*

*'Not assuming that the child understands initially what is expected of them, especially when first placed [in foster care]'*

*'Having conversations instead of questioning'*

*'It has also helped me to stop and listen more to my teenagers!'*

## There was strong group cohesion and peer support

The support and relationships within the group were very important to the carers. In keeping with their role as a combination of temporary parent and professional carer, they were particularly aware of the challenges and progress of *all* the children in the group. For instance, a baby that joined one of the carers half way through the course, was avoidant and hardly used any verbal or non-verbal cues to express his needs (e.g. suppressing his crying when he was hungry). The group were very supportive of the carer and baby by talking about attachment, supporting the carer in picking up very small non-verbal cues and reassuring her that she was doing the right thing in continuing to respond to his needs. The carers noticed and responded to his developing communication from week to week. The children were also very supportive of each other, with the older children being very caring for the younger children and handing them toys to play with etc.

The group created a safe, supportive environment in which children felt that they could express their feelings, and the carers and staff were able to contain and re-direct any challenging behaviour. Carers and staff all encouraged children to join in, whether the children displayed disruptive or withdrawn behaviour, and all the children became increasingly confident and involved over the weeks.

*'To see the 6 month old baby I look after enjoy the interactions, play with other children has been really good, you can see how he enjoys it and the stimulating environment'*

*'It was good to have good, fun, relationships with other members of the group. It was a very good learning environment. I have felt very supported here to be a foster carer.'*

*'The group relationship was very friendly and I felt comfortable and at ease.'*

*'He talks about the sessions and asks when are we coming here, and he has told me who he is going to play with'*

Foster carers' observations of the child in their care became more detailed. They also noticed and commented on the other children in the group; there was an even stronger than usual sense of mutual support and being part of a team, and they felt jointly proud and delighted when a baby said one of his first words - 'duck', as he chose a toy duck from the sound box.

*'It was lovely to hear a (very) young child come out with the word 'duck' one week, everyone cheered. He has gained more confidence and enjoyment each week.'*

Multi-agency links were maintained, with Christine, Maggie and Clare all visiting one of the Peep sessions, and the foster carers enjoyed talking with them.

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## Carers were engaged with and enjoyed the course

All of the Foster carers fed back that the group met their expectations, and that they would like another Peep training course based on any of the other learning strands. This includes the carer who said on arrival: *'It's taken me an hour to get here. It had better be good or I'm not coming back next week!'* He attended every session. Other carers' comments included:

*'Fun, informal, and informative. It has been good to be taught by [a Peep practitioner/trainer] who is friendly, respectful and listens well. She is very knowledgeable. Good to be taught by a professional in her area, not regular social services training.'*

*'I didn't know what to expect and felt pleasantly surprised at the information offered, it was interesting and fun.'*

*'Good input, practical and theoretical as well. Also, as usual, it has been great to interact with other foster carers and share experiences.'*

## Carers' worked towards NOCN accreditation

All nine foster carers started the NOCN accreditation at level 2. Seven have completed and submitted their portfolio for assessment. The remaining two are working towards completing this term, and we are offering them 1-1 support, one due to absence and one due to additional support needs (dyslexia). Qualification levels in the group ranged from CSEs (pre-GCSE) to degrees.

Working on the portfolios was useful for consolidating what we'd discussed during the sessions. It also supported carers to reflect on their learning, and the importance of the everyday learning opportunities.

The carers were very interested in the relevant background research and further reading; another time we would offer them more research papers and links for further reading. We would also offer them NOCN paperwork to complete at home rather than in the group, to give more time in the sessions.

We asked carers how they'd found the process of completing their NOCN portfolio:

*'It has been fine to do – interesting and helpful to think about the questions, and how and why I do things.'*

*'I had to take my time and thoroughly read the questions but enjoyed completing each section.'*

*'Good chance to reflect on what we have been learning – about the right level in terms of what needed to be filled in.'*

*'Fun, interesting and I'm pleased I have completed it. You can never learn enough.'*

After the course had ended we heard about a free online course called Babies in Mind (University of Warwick). We emailed all the carers about it, and two have replied to say they are doing it.

## Outcomes for children and children's voices

The People staff and carers noticed many changes in the children over the 11 weeks. All of the children grew in confidence in a group situation, and their communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, visibly developed. One child opened up to a Peep practitioner and talked about her mother and going to

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see her. The children joined in with the singing and story time. They actively enjoyed the props, and quickly became familiar with the routine of the session.

*'He seems to have really enjoyed that the grown-ups have taken the time to listen and understand what he is saying'*

*'M (aged 3) has become more confident since she came the first time – she is talking much more and loving the playtime. She often asks: 'Are we going to our group today?''*

*'Today [final session] S was reluctant to leave the car when he was told it was the last one'*

*'I've seen the involvement grow with the baby [9 months] as he now joins the group sing-a-long and likes to be in the centre. He has become more vocal and has recognised animal sounds in the box.'*

*'I observed the children learning the sounds box routine over the weeks – even the younger ones learned what to do'*

*'I have seen increased interaction with the child and the adults and other children, he is becoming more confident.'*

*'The child I look after has gradually become more confident, verbalising more week by week and [she] enjoyed interacting with adults and children alike.'*

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the Peep Training Course for Foster and Kinship Carers provided a unique chance for the carers to participate in an accredited programme of learning which developed their own skills as a 'professional parent' and was of direct benefit to the children. The fact that the children were part of the course both made it more accessible and provided significant learning opportunities for the participants.

The additional challenges of working with looked after children were met within the context of the group, where there was an open acceptance of the demands of meeting the needs of children who often have complicated backgrounds and the emotional rollercoaster as children come and go from the carer's home.

Many of the carers said that they valued the learning on this course because it could be applied to the foster children that they might work with in the future. They all said they would recommend this course.

*'The best course I have ever been on!'*

All the staff from Peep who were part of the course felt privileged to have learnt more about foster carers and their special relationship with the children in their care.

Report by Helen Stroudley, June 2016

Tel: 01865 397971 email: [helen.stroudley@peep.org.uk](mailto:helen.stroudley@peep.org.uk)