

- ★ extending experiences and accompanying the child – parents were quick to think about and show children new ways to approach things. They were also willing to follow their children's interest and give them the time and space to explore things;
- ★ asking the child's view – parents seemed interested in what their children were thinking and feeling about things;
- ★ encouraging autonomy – parents encouraged their children to make choices and decisions;
- ★ boundary setting/encouraging risk-taking – parents seem to know when to step in and how to encourage their children to have a go;
- ★ judicious use of experience of failure/making mistakes – parents supported their children's right to experiment, to make mistakes and occasionally experience failure.

### Comments from Carol, a parent

"It has made me look at everything that my child does in a different light. I find that I don't get so irritated when she's making a mess, etc. When she shows an interest in doing something, I now try to make more of an effort to accommodate her needs. I find that I appreciate her being at this particular age much more."

### Comments from Carol's key worker, Angela

"The daily exchanges I've had with Carol have offered me strategies for working with Natalie in the nursery and wonderful ideas and insights into what Natalie does with her parents. I have found that we can share ideas openly and our relationship has grown and we're able to jointly support Natalie's learning."

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## Parental involvement in education

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### AIM

*To plan an Early Years curriculum by improving the dialogue between Early Years practitioners and parents, by raising parental expectations and by finding out how and what young children learn at home.*

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ When staff are given appropriate time out to take part in their own training/planning sessions, they have been excited and enthusiastic about the research process. They "own" the research work and see how it enables them to build more effective relationships with parents and become more intellectually rigorous in their planning for children's learning.
- ★ Watching and analysing the video clips has helped staff and parents become more aware of the styles of engagement they use with different children. We have been able to develop a framework of eight effective adult teaching strategies.
- ★ The interactive CD-Rom and subsequent use of video material has greatly supported parents', teachers' and nursery nurses' understanding of children's learning.
- ★ The relationship between staff and project parents has developed considerably. The level of discussion between key worker and parent in relation to their child's cognitive and affective needs has been enhanced through a focused information exchange using diaries, video recordings and the parent research support group.
- ★ Encouraging parents to be active partners in the research process really works. Parents sustained their involvement despite, in some cases, major changes in family circumstances.
- ★ Parents can pass on critical information to staff about the patterns of their children's play and their children's interests at home. Planning for children learning in the nursery has become increasingly rich and is much more relevant to the children's home context. Staff are able to focus closely on children's specific concerns and extend their learning.
- ★ Project parents have expressed the view that the project has significantly improved their relationship with their children.

*A research project commissioned by the Teacher Training Agency  
 as part of the Teacher Research Grant Scheme 1996/97*

## Background

The belief that parental involvement is critical in education is well supported in Government reports and research. In 1995, Meade pointed out, “Whilst significant data indicates young children benefit when their parents are involved in their education, young child educators are not yet clear just how parental involvement actually benefits children in nursery settings.” As a staff group we believe that parents, whatever their circumstances, are deeply committed to their own children’s learning.

## Aims of the research

- ★ to find more effective ways of improving the dialogue between Early Years practitioners and parents;
- ★ to raise parental expectations;
- ★ to find out how and what children are learning at home and to discover ways of using this information to plan appropriate teaching and learning experiences for young children.

## The research in context

Pen Green is a multi-disciplinary centre for under-5s and their families in Corby, a former steel town, where high-quality nursery education and care are offered alongside parent education and family support services. It is funded by the LEA and Social Services departments. Staff recognise parents’ role as their child’s primary educator and know that most parents are deeply committed to supporting their children’s learning. Around 300 parents use the Centre on a daily basis and attend groups and courses. These range from baby massage and aromatherapy sessions to Open University Community Education study groups or more formal courses such as A level English.

The TTA research at Pen Green had as its focus “Parents’ Involvement in their Children’s Learning”. We wanted to develop an effective

dialogue with parents about their children’s learning at home and at nursery. We felt very accountable to the parents and didn’t want them to feel like passive victims of the research process. We wanted our research methods to be positive for all the

*“We are now extending our use of video to develop our understanding of adult interventions.”*

participants. We wanted to focus on questions that were important to both the parents and the staff and we wanted to provide data that was open to and interpreted by everyone involved. We also wanted to produce results which would help us to improve our practice as early childhood educators and parents.

At Pen Green, teachers and nursery nurses act as key workers for small groups of children in the nursery. Both professional groups have similar responsibilities for the education and care of the children and are given the generic title of “family worker”. Nursery nurses are offered high levels of in-service training to enable them to take on such an enhanced role and some have additional qualifications such as the DPQS or are undertaking a distance-learning BA Early Years.

Parents are also encouraged to be actively involved in the nursery and undertake training in nursery education, childcare and parent education. The Centre is an NVQ Assessment Centre so parents can be accredited up to Level 3 NVQ.

## The research, development and training base

Building on this long tradition of parental involvement, a practitioner research base was established at Pen Green in February 1996 as a partnership between parents, practitioners and researchers in higher education. At Pen Green, the staff, like early childhood educators in Reggio Emilio and Sweden are convinced that “pedagogic practice demands continuous adaptation and reflection if it is to evolve.” Research at Pen Green focuses on:

- ★ developing an effective model for working with parents;
- ★ developing parents’ interest in their children’s learning;
- ★ developing a collaborative research partnership with parents.

*“We wanted to focus on questions that were important to both the parents and the staff.”*

Staff at Pen Green believe that our research methods should be:

- ★ positive for all the participants;
- ★ provide data that is open to, accountable to, and interpreted by all the participants;
- ★ focused on questions that participants themselves, parents, children and staff are asking;
- ★ based on a relationship of trust where people’s answers are believed;
- ★ producing results which are about improving practice at home and at nursery or at least sustaining it.

## Methods

Staff and parents were involved in a pilot project throughout the summer with support from the Open University. They produced a CD-Rom of video clips. These video clips were of parents working with their children at home and at nursery and of nursery staff involving parents and children in the nursery.

The CD-Rom was then used as part of a training programme with twenty nursery parents.

Parents agreed to take part in the research project because they wanted to be more involved in their children’s learning at home and in the nursery.

The research contract with parents was that the data would always be analysed jointly by both parents and nursery staff.

Research project parents filled in questionnaires, kept research diaries and exchanged information with nursery staff. Some parents attended a support group and made videos of their children at home. Nursery staff were offered support and training in the use of video for collecting data on adult teaching styles.

Nursery staff and parents were filmed working with the project children in nursery. These video clips were then analysed by staff and parents in informal extended discussion groups.

## Framework of effective adult teaching strategies

From our detailed analysis of 24 hours of video clips we were able to arrive at a framework of eight effective adult teaching strategies:

- 1 Subtle intervention
- 2 Knowledge of child’s embedded context and ability to recall child’s previous experience
- 3 Affirmation of child through facial expression and physical closeness
- 4 Encouraging children to make choices and decisions
- 5 Adult supporting child to take appropriate risks
- 6 Encouraging children to go beyond the adult’s own knowledge base and accompany them into new experiences
- 7 Adult has an awareness of the impact of their own attitudes and beliefs and how these might affect the child’s learning
- 8 Adult demonstrates learning as a partnership. Adult is committed to own learning and generates a spirit of enquiry.

We are now extending our use of video to develop our understanding of adult interventions. We are analysing new video data using these eight categories.

## Parents engaging children in learning experiences

From our observations, we noticed that there were eight key features to the behaviour parents exhibited with their children in the nursery and at home:

- ★ anticipation – parents seemed intuitively to know what to do next when a child needed something physically or emotionally;
- ★ recall – the parents could share past experiences and relate them to what the children were doing or saying now while they played;
- ★ mirroring experience through language – parents would verbally reflect back to the children what they were doing;

*“Parents are also encouraged to be actively involved in the nursery and undertake training in nursery education, childcare and parent education.”*