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### Recent early years library initiatives in the United Kingdom

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#### *Introduction*

There have been a number of influential initiatives which have been introduced in the UK in recent years which are helping to introduce books to babies and pre-school children.

Some of these, like Bookstart, specifically target the introduction of books to babies, via parents. Others, like Sure Start, are targeting families with children under four years of age and cover a range of aims, including improving learning. What both these schemes have done is to introduce the element of partnership involving libraries and other organisations. These partnerships are now being formalised in what are called, Early Years and Childcare Development Partnerships in which libraries are playing an important part.

#### *Bookstart*

The Bookstart scheme started in Birmingham as a pilot project in 1992 and targeted 300 families. Supported by a national organisation, the Book Trust, funding was provided to supply book bags which were given to parents when their child received their seven to nine month health check.

The project was monitored and evaluated by two institutions over a period of time and showed that:

97% of Bookstart parents joined the library against a national average of 58%

46% of Bookstart parents visit the library once a week against a national average of 11 visits per annum (i.e. 21%)

78% of parents said they read to their babies before receiving the Bookstart packs compared with 91% after

The Bookstart idea was developed and refined in other schemes until finally becoming a nationwide scheme in 1998 as a result of £6m funding from a national supermarket chain, Sainsbury's. The basic idea has remained, which is librarians and health visitors working together to introduce books to babies. A book bag is given to parents by health visitors which contains two free books for the child, plus an information pack and library joining form. Special needs children and children whose family's first language is not English are also catered for.

By the end of autumn 2000, more than 675,000 babies had been involved in Bookstart. A recent study by the Library Association found that 90% of English library authorities are now involved in Bookstart projects.

Sainsbury's funding has now finished but the Bookstart project continues to be sponsored by publishers and the Government has recently announced that it will provide funding nationally from 2004.

There are also Bookstart Plus schemes in some areas which target children older than nine months.

### ***Sure Start***

The Government is also financing another major scheme aimed at parents and children under four, called Sure Start. This scheme which runs from 2000/2004 is being funded to the sum of £540m.

The aims of Sure Start are:

*“to improve the health and well being of families and children, before and from birth, so children flourish at home and when they go to school”.*

The aim is that by 2004 there will be 500 Sure Start schemes operating in the UK, targeting parents with children from 0 – 3 years of age in areas of significant deprivation.

What Sure Start schemes do is provide parents and parents to be with better access to:

- \* family support
- \* advice on the child's development
- \* health services and early learning.

Where libraries have become involved, is in supporting the early learning part of the scheme. Working mainly through local authority education services, libraries have been able to build on, and extend, the Bookstart idea for this age group. Some library authorities, including my own, are appointing Sure Start librarians who can do follow-up work with Bookstart parents, or introduce Bookstart to the district involved. The Sure Start districts are very closely defined to areas of deprivation and may only involve 200-250 families.

There are very specific targets set by the Government to achieve the aims of Sure Start. In a recently published document outlining the latest wave of developments there is, for the first time, a target specifically for libraries:

*“increase the use of libraries by parents with young children in Sure Start areas”*

What is particularly interesting about the Sure Start scheme is the multi-agency approach involving local authorities, (libraries, education and social services), plus the National Health Service (NHS), voluntary and community services, and parents.

### ***Early Years and Childcare Development Partnerships (EYCDP)***

Set up in 1998, EYCDPs bring together voluntary, private and local authority providers who offer education and day care for children. Nursery places will be provided for all three year olds by 2004 and after school care for children up to fourteen years of age.

What EYCDPs will offer, is a free place in education or day care for every eligible three year old child. It builds on previous plans and developments for pre-school children but with the added benefit of Government money to develop better facilities.

In my own authority, the Library Service has been involved in the EYCDP since it was set up. We have received money to buy large format picture books for all our main libraries, plus child development books for early years tutors. We also run training courses for early years tutors which introduce them to picture books, the selection criteria we use, story reading and of course the services we can offer young parents.

The other areas in which library authorities have become involved is in the setting up of information databases specifically aimed at young parents.

In the Library Association survey which I mentioned earlier, it was found that more than 50% of libraries responding were involved in EYCDPs.

### ***Conclusion***

Many of these initiatives which I have mentioned overlap, but in doing so they involve library authorities in multi-agency working which has a very positive outcome.

By working with health visitors in Bookstart projects we are gaining access to young parents who might not automatically join the library.

Our involvement in Sure Start projects is helping us to target socially deprived districts and reach parents unlikely to know about the value of introducing books to their children.

Finally, our involvement in EYCDPs is enabling us to improve our early years book provision, as well as reaching the early years tutors who will spread the message of what libraries can offer. In addition, it is putting libraries at the very heart of the Government's policy to improve childcare and learning for pre-school children.