

## Sure Start children's centres

Sure Start is a government initiative to bring together education, childcare, health and family support to give every child the best start in life. Sure Start children's centres are building on existing work of local programmes and aim to provide integrated services within communities. By 2010 the government aims to have 3,500 children's centres established. Children's centres (and previously local programmes) run a variety of initiatives to improve and assess the language skills of young children living in disadvantaged areas, some of which are featured below. For more information visit [www.surestart.gov.uk](http://www.surestart.gov.uk) email [info.surestart@dfes.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:info.surestart@dfes.gsi.gov.uk) or phone their Public Enquiry Unit on 0870 0002288.

[Sure Start in England](#)

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### England

**Barrow-in-Furness** has created Chatterbox, a special parent and toddler group to develop children's speech through play.

**Bassetlaw west** run Sure Tots, an active physical play programme for young children that emphasises learning by moving, with the parent/carer helping the child. The session starts with action songs and rhymes encouraging social interaction and continues with movement on, off and with equipment based on themes such as 'over and under', 'in and out' and 'jumping'. Sessions with the 2+ age group also focus on active listening.

Speech and language therapists and early years support workers from the **Beaumont Leys and Stocking Farm Sure Start Children's Centre** have developed two leaflets to encourage parents to think about the way that they use television with their children. Sure Start staff and parents looked at the current research, and the results of a survey of local parents' views about watching television with their children, and decided to produce a leaflet for children under two, and a leaflet for children over two.

During the first week of April 2006 the 25 nursery settings and play groups in the Beaumont Leys area, totalling 400 children, took part in the launch of the leaflets. Each setting held one session to carry out an activity to help promote the messages in the leaflets - making the most of watching television or promoting activities to carry out instead. In one nursery all the staff and children dressed up as their favourite television character whilst others invited parents in to take part in a variety of activities from cooking to making Easter bonnets. All children were given a goody bag to take home containing an activity to carry out with their parents instead of watching television. The organisers commented: "Our aim is not to make parents feel guilty - but to encourage them to think about TV, good and bad!"

In **Bedfordshire**, 'Talk Together', a series of 5 leaflets and posters, has been produced. The leaflets are called 'Baby talk,' 'Sharing songs and rhymes,' '10 tips to talking,' 'Ditch the dummy' and 'Is TV all bad?'. These have been distributed to health visitors, early years education establishments as well as all children's centres. A second project 'Sing Together' is a box of resources and tips folder to help develop music and rhyme within all children's centres in Bedfordshire. The boxes contain a wealth of resources including teddies, dance scarves, bowls and spoons, instruments

etc. as well as a tips folder containing ideas of songs to sing with each of the objects, such as tips for setting up a music and rhyme group.

**Bilston & Ettingshall** have established 'Look Who's Talking' groups with a weekly topic such as eye contact, turn taking, listening/attention, play, imitation and sound making. Each week's session has a welcome and goodbye song, a nursery rhyme slot, a toy-making slot (e.g. baby's first book, peek-a-boo mask, shakers) and every session has some free-play where staff can demonstrate ways of developing the particular skill with a range of toys. Amongst the free gifts to attendees are a tape and booklet of action songs and rhymes.

**Blackpool's Grange Park** run 'Talktime' sessions, encouraging parents to talk and play with their children, sing nursery rhymes and read books. Worksheets for activities and discussions are being created for use at Mother and Toddler Groups as well.

**Blaydon Winlaton** Sure Start have a monthly 'Baby Bites' group, which is introduced to parents as a weaning group but goes much further with practical advice on general health and development, food-tasting sessions, FAQs and role-play to highlight communication and speech and language development. The group is led by a nursery nurse, with contributions from a health visitor, dental nurse, speech and language therapist, catering manager and midwife, depending on availability. The speech and language therapist uses role-play and humour to illustrate a few simple messages about communication - she and a partner act out some very unsatisfactory feeding scenarios in which she, as a very large baby, is fed by her 'mother'. The sketches include:

- Mum having a conversation with a neighbour while feeding baby - no attention or eye contact - baby cries.
- Mum putting on a video to 'amuse' baby while feeding - baby is distracted and the opportunity for communication is missed.
- Baby is playing with toys on high chair tray. Baby not interested in food or Mum's chat.
- Mum feeds silently. Baby loses interest in food and Mum.
- Mum keeps up constant chatter, no opportunity for baby to respond.
- Mum in a hurry, feeds too fast - not picking up cues when baby is ready for next spoonful. Baby 'chokes'.
- Finally, the ideal session. Mum is attentive, attuned, minimises distractions, times feeding well, has a 'conversation' with baby involving turn-taking, talks about the food, is relaxed and happy herself.

During the sketches the parents are asked to suggest ways to help the mother. After the last sketch, parents are asked 'what was different this time?'. Ideas are noted on a flip chart. 'Baby Bites' reaches a wide cross-section of parents as weaning is something many parents worry about. It is very informal, beginning with a buffet for parents.

**Briercliffe** Sure Start Children's Centre in **Scarborough** run 'Bond With Your Bump' sessions to help mothers bond with their unborn child. Playing music, talking with their bump and introducing fathers and siblings help mothers begin to bond and build attachment and prepare for the baby's arrival. A resource pack has also been developed for other professionals across the region.

**Brighton and Hove** Sure Start groups share knowledge and skills to run weekly speech and language sessions and train staff. Groups have been filmed to show staff where their verbal and non-verbal communication was particularly helpful to the children.

**Brighton and Hove Central** Sure Start has produced the *Why don't you?* booklet of play ideas for babies and young children. Created by speech and language therapist Susan Duffy, and Jan Sinkfield of Playlink, the booklet includes a range of play ideas for different age groups up to four years.

**Bulwell** Sure Start in **Nottingham** have set up 'Wonder Tots', a weekly group for parents, carers and their children aged one-to-two to develop the children's early language skills. The sessions are run by a Speech and Language Therapist and a specialist in early play and language, using materials provided by Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP). At each session information is shared with parents on the current topic, new songs and rhymes are learnt, a fun activity is demonstrated and prepared for taking home, friendships are developed among parents and toddlers and an age appropriate book and toy are borrowed by each child.

In **Camden**, children's centre staff received training from the SLT service in Kentish Town, reported the *RCSLT bulletin*. The training aimed to improve staff's interactions, knowledge and skills and ability to support children in settings. After the training, staff co-ran language groups with an SLT to get hands-on experience of supporting children's language development. All staff reported an increase in confidence and skills with video recording of sessions also helping staff to be self-reflective and identify areas for improvement.

*(Extracted from RCSLT bulletin, July 2008).*

**Cannock Chase in Staffordshire** give all parents a booklet called *Please Talk To Me!* on their first visit. The book focuses on children from birth to nine months, highlighting that it is never too early to talk to your baby. It gives lots of ideas on how to communicate with your child at all times of the day.

Sue Rogers, speech and language therapist at Sure Start **Cauldwell**, and Mary Lusby, speech and language therapist assistant, carried out a Talk To Your Baby Buggy Survey amongst parents at Sure Start Cauldwell in Bedford. They used the survey form featured on the Talk To Your Baby website as part of Talk To Your Baby's campaign to make cheaper, pusher-facing buggies accessible to all families. Sue and Mary talked informally to individual parents who attended various Sure Start groups and asked if they would fill in the survey. This approach created opportunities for discussion about early communication and interaction with babies and very young children. A total of 17 surveys were completed and the results and comments were submitted to Talk To Your Baby.

**Central Hartlepool** run 'Chattersacks', a pioneering project which enables nursery children to take home an activity sack containing books, a toy or game, a nursery rhyme and lots of ideas on things to see and do. The sacks are designed to support young children's early language development. Six nurseries are currently involved but the project will extend to local schools. Sure Start are responsible for maintaining the sacks, replacing books and games and adjusting the goodies in the sacks to suit the cultural make-up of different areas.

**Chatham** Sure Start focus on music and percussion to build early language skills in a fun and active way. This active participation helps children to focus their attention, listen and concentrate for longer. Music allows interaction at a nonverbal level, which

enables children with delayed communication skills and reluctant talkers to join in with others long before they may do so verbally. Tactile songs, circle songs and bouncing songs are used to build the adult/child bond.

**Corby** Sure Start run a lunchtime club, once a week, where parents, children and professionals bring in a packed lunch, sit on the floor and share food and chat together. This is followed by a 30-minute activity, such as baking gingerbread men, based on Sure Start Speech and Language Targets.

**Eastbourne** run two groups. 'Babbletime' is for parents and babies from birth to one year. It is aimed at encouraging early interaction between carer and baby, demonstrating fun ways parents can help their baby's communication development through music and rhymes. 'Chattertots' is for toddlers aged one to three years and their parents, and is a session of music, rhymes and language games to show the fun to be had in encouraging a child's speech and language skills.

**Elland**, near Halifax, run weekly storytime, music time and bounce and rhyme time sessions in two libraries, highlighting listening skills for both children and parents.

The 'Chatterkids: making speech easier to reach' programme was developed in the Sure Start areas of **Gateshead**. It was developed by Beryl Hylton Downing, Speech & Language Therapy Co-ordinator, Gateshead Children's Centres, and Andrea Herron, Family Centre Worker, Gateshead Council, in order to:

1. Engage 'hard-to-reach' families whose children are particularly at risk.
2. Help parents and early years practitioners facilitate communication.
3. Identify children whose communication difficulties are severe enough to need specialist intervention.
4. Fast-track those children to receive timely therapy, or in-depth developmental assessment, via the Child Development Team.

A key feature in the emergence and development of 'Chatterkids' was the close collaboration between the Sure Start SLT and Social Services staff of the local Family Centres, who are intimately embedded in the community and can enable families that might not otherwise consider NHS help, to accept it for their children's communication difficulties. 'Chatterkids' Language Group is cheap to run, and is enjoyed by children, parents and workers alike. It has a very high reliability rating in determining those children who have additional needs. Further strands of work have taken the 'Chatterkids' method into school nurseries and the new Children's Centres. In the pursuance of mainstreaming, the team is developing a strategy for integrated front-line working, so that families can access services in the most appropriate context.

**Goldington and Putnoe** children's centres in Bedfordshire have established sessions which focus on developing language in different ways. 'ChatterTots', 'Baby Boogie' and 'Once Upon a Time' look at language through sharing books, playing and singing.

**Haringey's** Sure Start local programme has funded the creation of *Walking through the jungle*, a CD with popular children's songs translated into nine different languages including Romanian, Somali, Urdu and Afrikaans. The CD was produced as part of the storysack project at Pembury Baby & Toddler Group. All of the translations were done by parents and members of the group.

**Lambeth** ran an intensive 'Baby Talk Time' health promotion campaign in Gipsy Hill which had a preventative focus and targeted children under 18 months. The

campaign is being extended to all Sure Start projects within Lambeth with a month of health promotion activity which will involve a combination of attending local community groups and venues such as mother & toddler groups, local children's centres as well as some specific events.

**Manchester** run 'Babblegroups', starting the sessions with a giggle and encouraging eye contact, signing, body language and general communication between carer and child.

**Manchester Central** is running a joint Sure Start venture between Speech and Language Therapists and the library service to promote story bags in 12 libraries across the city. The bags include CDs in various languages, and the bags emphasise language enhancement. Each bag has a particular theme (for example, bedtime) and contains a book, a tape, a toy, an activity sheet, ideas for language enhancement, and ways to extend experiences beyond the bag. There are 40 bags per library, and all families with children under four years can access them, as well as child care practitioners in the city.

**Middleton** Sure Start run a 'Baby Bonding' project which aims to promote and support healthy early attachments between infants and their carers. Implemented by health visitors, a nursery nurse, midwife and psychologist, 'Baby Bonding' is introduced to women during pregnancy by the midwife with a special leaflet. Women who are likely to experience difficulties in their relationship with their baby are offered therapeutic help during pregnancy. Families are given a special booklet to help them to 'read' their babies' cues and to help them to communicate and interact with their babies. The interaction between the baby and their main carer is assessed at five to six weeks after birth. Careful feedback is given involving the carer and the family receives a copy of a video to keep. Any support, advice or interventions needed to assist the developing relationship are arranged. Babies and carers are seen again routinely at seven to nine months and at 12 to 13 months when a full assessment of the relationship is done. Various measures are taken during the process such as maternal depression, carer self-esteem, carer social support and parenting stress levels.

**Netherley Valley** Sure Start in Liverpool has a 'Chatterbox Team' in local primary and nursery schools, trained to introduce guidance for all parents on how to develop their child's language, listening and communication skills. The ten local people have received accredited training, working closely with speech and language therapists. They also ran informal workshops over the summer during the Play and Stay month. In addition, the team is working with mixed ability groups in nursery and reception classes, with all the work being evaluated to check the children's progress.

**Newham's** eight Sure Start projects have merged with Early Years and Childcare to create 'Early Start', a service available to all families in the area with children under-five. 'Early Start' runs 'For Baby and Me', a group for parents and babies under-one. Each weekly session focuses on one of the senses (e.g. sight, taste, smell), with activities to encourage interaction, and advice on language development. 'Early Start' Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs) also run 'Sign and Speak' (baby signing for babies up to 18 months old) and work with the 'Early Start' psychology team to deliver baby massage with an emphasis on early communication for mums who may be needing a bit more support. The SLTs also work with the Community Nutrition Service to deliver programmes such as 'Food Fun', 'Teddy Bears Picnic' and 'Making Sense', which combines advice on healthy eating with tips on good parent/child interaction.

**Update:** A change in service provision was introduced for a number of reasons including low attendance, the groups being perceived as for children with speech and language difficulties, mainstreaming of other groups and child carer interaction (CCI) therapy showing as impacting on children's communication skills.

A new group – 'Brain Power' was created, which introduces CCI principles to parents such as observe, wait, listen, following the child's lead, turn taking, copying and adding and expanding language (from Hanen). The name of the group aims to reflect the need to develop good speaking and listening skills to help future learning. The group tried to appeal to parents who did not have concerns about their child's language development, but wanted new communication strategies and techniques. The feedback from the evaluation was positive, with carers being able to name more strategies and found that feedback on their own communication techniques was useful. Children also made good progress during the five-week sessions. (Extracted from RCSLT bulletin, May 2008)

**Northampton's** mobile book and toy library adopts a different theme for its promotions and is now using Talk To Your Baby as one of its themes.

**North Northamptonshire** children's centres have developed a short training session for children's centre workers, which aims to teach them more about the importance of communication, and how their centre can achieve a 'whole centre communication strategy.' They cover talking to babies (and bumps), the importance of books, pusher facing buggies, dummies, bottles, music, singing, identifying communication difficulties and more.

**Northolt** children's drop-in centre particularly encourages dads to be involved and talk with their babies, bringing their own approach to interacting with their child. Outdoor play is also encouraged. Slogans such as 'back to sleep, tummy to play' are used to help parents remember the importance of physical play. Booklets are given out at each health visitor's visit, such as *Babies for Beginners*, and *Terrific Twos* which includes an early learning section with communication tips. 'Action Song Stories Rhymes' sessions are also run at the local library.

**Northumberland, Tyneside and West Durham**, in collaboration with the Countryside Agency's Greenstart project, uses the natural environment to promote early learning, stimulate language skills and encourage interaction between parents and children. Research by the Countryside Agency suggests that children who spend more time outdoors have increased independence and self-reliance, have a greater sense of freedom and have a greater ability to think creatively. Hundreds of families on the Sure Start scheme have been digging allotments, planting trees and going on woodland walks around the towns and villages. Children take part in all sorts of activities such as making bird puppets, building nests, going on worm hunts and finding out how birds fly. The activities emphasise discovery, questioning and play and, according to Greenstart Coordinator Caroline Jackson, have resulted in "improved communication skills and creativity".

**North Washington in Sunderland** has an integrated approach to promoting young children's communication skills through 'Talk Talk' sessions for parents, alongside open access play activities and training for nursery staff.

**Ocean Estate in Tower Hamlets, London**, has developed the 'Kheli-Boli' project, meaning 'Play-Talk' in Sylheti. It uses themed bags - containing books, toys and activities - to promote early language development in families where English is a second language, and make the link between the culture experienced at home and

the expectations of an English nursery setting. The activities have also proved useful in helping speech and language therapists identify children in need of specialist intervention. The idea was based on the 'Bangla Bag' scheme developed by the Sunderland ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) team.

**Partington and Carrington** run a 'dummy' project to raise awareness among parents on how dummies and bottles can impair communication and language skills. All nursery children in local schools and family centres receive an information flyer outlining the disadvantages of dummies, which includes helpful hints for parents on how to wean their child off the dummy. It also invites parents to exchange their child's dummy or bottle for a gift.

**Queensbridge and Dalston** has created six 'Talking With Your Baby' bookmarks for different age groups, each covering 'things you can expect', 'talking hints' and 'fun and games'. They are available in English, Turkish and Bengali. These are given out on home visits, at events, and by other early years staff. They are also trialling 'Babies Babble, Toddlers Talk' groups, which are being run by students who will be evaluating the work.

**Roehampton** has a 'Chatterbox' group, organised with speech and language therapy, health visitors and the Newborn Carers & Nannies Employment Bureau (NNEB). It is open to all and aimed at children 18-24 months and their parents. They sing, talk and read stories together, as well as having time to play.

**Rowner in Gosport**, Hampshire, run a 'Play and Learn Scheme' (PALS), a programme which involves working for one hour each week with a family and their new born baby.

**Shelten, Cobridge and Hanley** run language groups alongside nursery staff, with the aim of enabling a member of staff to facilitate children's language development through small group interaction without the presence of a Speech and Language Therapist. For one morning or afternoon a week, the Sure Start Speech and Language Therapist attends a nursery and implements the language group programme with six to eight children and one member of the nursery staff. Each session focuses on a certain vocabulary topic as well as other developmental skills such as listening and looking, turn taking and enjoying communication. The groups run for six consecutive weeks. After this period the group equipment is loaned out to the nursery so the group can continue with the nursery staff member.

Sure Start **Stockwell**, in conjunction with partners LLU+ at London South Bank University, has produced a video and booklet to show the advantages of speaking more than one language to children. *Viva o Portugues!* is for Portuguese-speaking parents and carers, educators, health professionals and community workers, offering guidance and stimulating discussion on how to raise a child to speak both Portuguese and English. It is available to all schools and professionals in Lambeth, and can be loaned from LLU+ resources centre. Contact [llupluspdc@lsbu.ac.uk](mailto:llupluspdc@lsbu.ac.uk).

**Wakefield's** Sunshine Library is the country's first Sure Start purpose-built library for under-fours. Local nursery school children attend in groups, and enjoy storytime sessions and 'Cyber Tots' IT sessions. A great deal of outreach work goes on in women's centres and parents and tots groups in local halls. The library also does training for other library staff, and many parents are encouraged to move on to computer classes and other training for themselves.

**Westgate**, Newcastle-upon-Tyne has created Before Words, an information resource in the form of a set of sheets in strip cartoon format to be used with parents, families

and early years workers to support very early communication skills, covering the first twelve months of a child's life. This guidance developed further into images on postcards, posters, height chart and a colouring book, and a baby changing mat will follow. See [www.beforewords.co.uk](http://www.beforewords.co.uk).

**Westminster** have made some posters promoting adult/child interaction, all with the strap line "playing with your child makes all the difference". One large poster features four photographs, and each of those photographs has a smaller poster of its own highlighting talking, playing, looking and reading.

**Weston Rhyn's** have set up 'Bumps and Babies', a group for pregnant women and new parents. With input from a home visitor, the parents have devised a ten-session plan: meet a health visitor; play and development; sleeping and crying; caring for toddlers' and babies' teeth; baby massage; baby talk (with speech and language therapy); relationships and home safety; appropriate weaning, cook and taste sessions; pamper sessions (manicure, make-up); and 'help to quit' sessions around smoking and relaxation." (Upstart, April/May 2003.

Eastfield Children's Centre in **Wolverhampton** run a variety of groups to help young children's language development including 'Early Communication Skills' group, about parent-child interaction, 'Baby Massage', 'Chatterbox' and 'Dad's and Kid's Story time'.

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## Wales

Speech and Language Therapists working for Sure Start in the Princess of Wales hospital, **Bridgend**, are promoting 'Baby's First Word'. They talked to ten libraries across the county, and set up displays for parents to complete first word stories. They provided information leaflets for parents, and visited three 'Bounce and Rhyme' sessions in the libraries. In addition, they organised a stand in their hospital foyer, a stand in a large retail outlet centre, and at an Open Day in a teenage mothers' project. They had balloons and stickers printed asking "What is your baby saying?", and wore tee shirts with the same logo. They received good coverage on local radio and in local papers.

In **Caerphilly**, Sure Start and the Welsh National Assembly's Joint Working Special Grant are funding the 'Super Shell-by' project, which aims to improve nursery children's speech, language and behaviour by spotting problems at an early age. The project is based around a hand-puppet, 'Little Turtle', who learns how to behave with the help of 'Wise Old Turtle' and a host of animal friends. Support workers armed with hand puppets share stories about 'Little Turtle'. Each child takes a turn to be a 'turtle time helper' and wins praise for cooperation. Children with speech and language problems are put on a speech and language programme. An advisory teacher to the scheme says that most are being taken off by the end of the year, which shows early intervention is working. It is a joint project between different sections of the education department at Caerphilly County Borough Council, working with speech therapy and health services. Workshops have attracted high attendance and mums and dads have started to follow up with 'Little Turtle' sessions at home.

**Rhondda Cynon Taff** Sure Start has set up 'Talkabout', a project to raise awareness among parents of the need to keep talking with their children - and they start encouraging parents even before their baby is born. It is not a remedial service, but aims instead to promote parent-child communication as a positive experience for all

families and as a route to tackling language delay in young children. 'Talkabout' helps parents find creative ways to support their child's language development. Sessions are informal and use a variety of activities to show how sound, music, facial expressions and voices all help nourish a child's communication skills. Parents might learn songs or nursery rhymes, make a simple shaker out of household objects (talking to their child as they do so), play basic games like 'peekaboo' and 'claphands', and make books using freezer bags containing photographs of their children, family, friends and pets. The 'Talkabout' team uses other services as a doorway for introducing their sessions; for example, they might lead ante-natal class or run a 10-week mother and toddler group where they can give examples of good parent-child communication while offering other services.