

The Open Kindergarten approach to early years family support originated in Sweden and has been widely adopted across the Nordic countries. Open Kindergartens provide low-threshold support for families, firmly embedding parent-led and rights-based approaches in line with the UNCRC. This pilot project explored whether this form of universal provision for families could be adapted to Scotland to support parents and carers with children aged 0-3 years. A project evaluation was conducted by the University of Stirling.

## Outputs (March 2019 - April 2020)



Trialled at **two** early years settings in Midlothian and Edinburgh



**Two** Open Kindergarten practitioners – one supporting families at each site



**Two** drop-in sessions at each site per week (lasting 2 hours)



**51** families attended drop-in sessions to access professional and peer-to-peer support



**18** families engaged in outreach activity and home visits to build relationships

### Targeted sessions looking at a range of parent-identified topics



Baby Weaning



Sleep



Infant First Aid



Speech & Language Development



Play

## Key Elements of the Open Kindergarten Approach

### *It is person-centred, relaxed and informal*

A key aim of the Open Kindergarten model is to achieve a person-centred approach. Practitioners managed to cultivate a relaxed setting in which parents and carers felt safe to share their knowledge and personal experiences. Many parents commented on the relaxed nature of the sessions and both practitioners reported that their groups had achieved a 'family feel'.

### *It is parent-led*

Crucial to the Open Kindergarten approach is that it is parent led and unstructured. The parent-led approach meant that the activities offered were tailored to those attending, enabling a more targeted response to supporting individual parents and carers' needs.

### *The open-door policy*

The open-door policy meant that parents and carers could access it without other professional involvement, and without stigma.

### *It is free*

Drop-in sessions were free to attend, and free, healthy drinks and snacks were provided. At one site free bus transport was also offered to families. Providing a completely free service reduced barriers to participation.

### *The practitioner's approach*

The approach requires warmth, authenticity, active listening and receptiveness on the part of the practitioner. The skills, qualities and approach adopted by the practitioner were key to making Open Kindergarten pilot projects a success.

Image courtesy of Midlothian Sure Start ▶





## Key findings from the project evaluation:

### Open Kindergarten filled a service gap

Parents and carers talked about the importance of the Open Kindergarten, which was often the only service that they accessed. Many of the parents and carers accessing Open Kindergarten had significant support needs, and the flexible open-door approach met those needs in ways that other provisions did not.

### The project provided support for parents and carers experiencing mental health challenges, including feeling overwhelmed or isolated

A number of attendees were experiencing mental health challenges and Open Kindergarten provided valuable support for these parents and carers. Whilst the nature of these challenges varied considerably, they all reported a sense of isolation, feeling overwhelmed, and needing some respite from their childcare responsibilities. Open Kindergarten was able to address these needs.

### Open Kindergarten provided essential peer support for parents and carers

The peer support offered at Open Kindergarten sessions was considered invaluable by many parents and carers. As well as offering respite, it provided a kind and receptive space that helped them to cope with some of their day-to-day pressures. The informal parenting support available was seen as being far more appropriate to the needs of the parents and carers than more formal support options.

### Provided important opportunities for children to play and interact

A key component of the Open Kindergarten model is that it enables interaction and play opportunities for young children. Parents and carers appreciated the opportunity for their child to meet infant peers and many reported that they lacked such opportunities away elsewhere. Some parents felt the interaction at Open Kindergarten had the potential to address concerns they had about the linguistic development of their children.

### The skills and experience of the practitioners were vital in building relationships with parents and carers

At both settings, attendance grew by word-of-mouth and led to Open Kindergarten becoming an embedded community resource. The time, skills and experience of the practitioners were invaluable in building relationships with families and making Open Kindergarten a success. Home visits and outreach work provided an opportunity for practitioners to make new links with parents and carers.



**“There is people worse off than me but I would put myself on the poverty line... there’s just not enough money... I have to pay my rent off universal credits. I pay my council tax and there is weeks where I have to go to the food bank. And it’s mortifying. 100% it’s mortifying. But this is why it’s good why this is free because if it wasnae free I wouldnae be here because I wouldn’t be able to afford it.”**

(Parent)

**“At the moment I still struggle with depression, but to have this is a lifeline. It gets me out of the house. These four walls keep closing me in.”**

(Parent)

#### Project Partners



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