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Evaluation of the Relativity Project

Focus Group Report

March 2009



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**Centre for Health Services Studies
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Focus Group Evaluation of the Relativity Project

March 2009

1 Introduction

This report forms part of an evaluation of activities undertaken by the Relativity Project at Aylesham. The overall aim of the Relativity Project is to engage families from the Aylesham community in a variety of fun and creative activities which will broaden family learning skills and provide opportunities for all family members to get actively involved. It also aims to develop community involvement in a variety of settings and target excluded and vulnerable families.

The evaluation seeks to ascertain the extent to which the aims of the project have been achieved and consists of three main complementary approaches:

1. A work-based database has been developed consisting of client demographic and contact details, project delivery information and referral/contact with other agencies and client feedback. This will
 - a. enable the team to ensure they are reaching the appropriate target groups and monitor uptake of programmes within the overall project
 - b. measure the scope and nature of client contact
 - c. provide an overview of project content and activity levels at any point in time.
2. A questionnaire has been developed to obtain client-feedback and can be used post-activity or postal-return. This is being administered at intervals during the year to capture a range of views and experiences from different client groups about a variety of activities.
3. Focus groups are being conducted yearly for three years by an independent researcher with clients who have been involved in activities at the project. The purpose of this is to reveal more qualitative issues such as personal and family impacts, overall strengths and weaknesses of project involvement, and recommendations for improvement.

This report describes the findings of the first focus group conducted in February 2009.

2 Method

Focus groups are ideal for gaining an insight into personal impacts and experiences which more quantitative methods may fail to reveal. Kitzinger (2005)¹ describes how interaction between participants of focus groups can encourage open conversation about personal issues and permit the expression of criticism. This was important so that areas for improvement could be highlighted to the team, yet is often difficult when clients are in receipt of free services. The technique of using a focus group also encourages participation by those who would otherwise have been reluctant to talk, through the use of prompts and the creation of an informal atmosphere.

Recruitment to the project was achieved through the project team with assistance from clients, via personal contact and advertisement. Information letters and consent forms were handed to interested individuals (appendix 1). This explained the nature of involvement in the focus group, assured confidentiality and allowed potential participants to consent to take part and have the discussions taped for analysis. A total of four participants were recruited to the focus group.

The focus group schedule was developed with the project team and consisted of four key questions relating to experiences of coming to the project, what participants felt they had learned, the impact on the family of attending, their best and worst experiences, and recommendations for improvement (see appendix 2 for full list of questions and prompts).

The **data analysis** technique used was one of content analysis of the transcribed focus group discussion using the focus group schedule as a pre-determined template (Flick 1998)². This involved sorting the comments under the four main questions on the focus group schedule and developing new themes from data that did not fit into the pre-determined template. Once sorted, sub-themes were developed to compartmentalise the data into a more logical and fluent format and to promote the majority or consensual view within the group. Quotes were used liberally to rationalise the analysis and thematic generation. These were coded anonymously.

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¹ Kitzinger, J (2005) Focus groups with users and providers of health care. In Pope T & Mays C (eds.) *Qualitative Research in Health Care*. 2nd Edition. London: BMJ Publishing Group

² Flick U (1998) *Introduction to Qualitative Research* Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications

3 Findings

The findings are separated into four sections covering the following areas and end with a summary of key points:

- 3.1 Participants' understanding of the Project
- 3.2 Experiences at the Relativity Project
- 3.3 Personal and family learning experiences
- 3.4 Areas for improvement

3.1 Participants' Understanding of the Project

This first section reveals what participants understood about the purpose of the project and its overall aim. There was a keen understanding of the 'family' nature of the project in its broadest sense, with its focus on interaction with children through activities in a conducive environment:

I had a neighbour who'd just moved in, so I said to her why don't you come and bring your children, 'cause it gives you a chance, especially when you've got children of different ages, to maybe work a little bit with the older children, and they find something for the little ones to do or, it gives you a chance to spend time with the children without the interruptions you have at home. (1:1)

It is a really good opportunity for people coming into the village that have children, to do something together with their children, that just didn't exist before I don't think, you know, I mean there was always toddler groups but there's nothing that you could do with the in-between age. (2:1)

Participants were quick to highlight other added attractions, such as easy access, familiarity, and no expense:

You can say to someone 'go and use this and it's free'. (2:1)

Well my neighbour's got four children and she doesn't drive, soit's within walking distance .. and somewhere were everyone knows as well, 'cause it's easy to get to. (4:2)

Consensus was reached about the overarching aim of the project, described as a means to get families together and to counter parental 'apathy':

To get families to do things together. rather than just dumping a kid off at a toddler, lot of toddler, like a playschool or ... like a playschool, you're actually staying with the child and learning with them. (2:2)

In addition, activities were not limited to close family and this was seen as positive:

It doesn't have to be like your immediate family. (4:3).

Or it could be, you know, someone's uncle or their grandad, I think that's really good. (3:3)

3.2 Experiences at the Relativity Project

The participants expressed a broad impression of their experiences to date which were favourable. They did this through a description of activities they had attended, describing what seemed to work, and how and why it seemed to work.

3.2.1 Most Popular Activity

Participants were in agreement that pottery had so far been their favourite activity. Not only did they feel that they had learned something, but that, psychologically, absorption in the activity was definitely therapeutic and 'addictive', and pottery gave them tangible evidence of achievement

I really enjoyed the pottery 'cause it was every week and it was something to look forward to, to go along, on Thursday we do the pottery and you know it was a release for the parents to sit and do, and it makes you forget all your worries 'cause you just, you know you're just there for that time and that's it, nothing else matters (2:27)

Pottery with me, it was ongoing, creative and I felt like I was really learning something and it was you know stress free because I felt like I didn't have to clean everything up and then go home, it's just a really positive experience and that's why I keep going back for more. (31)

you actually do feel like you're learning something, taking something away with you and it's ongoing. 32

The issue of learning was important to participants and will be elaborated upon in section 3.3.

3.2.2 Skills of the Facilitators

A central focus of the discussion related to the skills of the facilitators, vital to the overall positive perception. There was an emphasis on involvement, creating an interest, getting people to enjoy themselves while learning, and the ability to connect to people of all ages without patronising them. This example refers again to the pottery groups:

I think it's interest, you know particularly the pottery, Pam and Tim are really good.... They get really small children involved and it's not in a patronising way... they are very good. (1:4)

There was particular enthusiasm for the puppet activity, something which whole families enjoyed and had the added bonus of creating an end 'product' that enabled participants to reflect on their achievements. The ability of the facilitators to induce a sense of creativity in participants was also an important ingredient of success. Despite some initial scepticism, the enthusiasm is palpable in this quote:

Oh the puppet making was brilliant, that was fantastic, and that was just, but oh it was brilliant it really was.... When they were explaining it I thought 'oh no this is not going to work' because basically what they said was "We'll split up into two groups, some make the puppets and some do the story book", everyone's gonna want to make puppets aren't they? So all the kids are like "I wanna make a puppet, I wanna make a puppet!", but when I saw them doing like voices and that and they really got into it, it was brilliant, they really enjoyed themselves, that was one of the best ones I think, was the puppets, definitely, that was great. (2:6)

The responsiveness and ability of the facilitators to observe the times when engagement was 'flagging' and maintain the levels of interest and involvement was seen as important:

At the pottery there's not that many [facilitators], but they walk around and they get you doing something and when you've done that then they come and bring something else to do, don't they? (3:5)

In addition, if younger children became restless, facilitators were quick to respond and work 'above and beyond' what was required of them:

But as far as, with the pottery, when there was ... running around Cormac bought some books, didn't he?...he done some reading with the smaller children... he didn't have to bring them books in, he didn't have to take the time to go and read to the littler ones but he did. (3:4)

.... to me that shows me that they're aware, they are actually aware of what's going on around and what's not working. (1:12)

This was equally evident with the adults; facilitators appeared to maximise learning at every opportunity with positive effects:

You're not like doing puzzles or sitting there, like I was sitting there, she's like "Right do you wanna do this now?" You can't really get out of it, but I like it! (1:5).

We've learnt a million things, ain't we? (4:5)

Even those who were a bit sceptical at first or reluctant to come were 'won over' by the facilitators through their ability to work in an organised and integrated way to benefit families. Particularly with men and older children, the key issue seemed to be getting people over the threshold; once engaged in the practical activities, commitment followed:

It was like "Why did you set me up, I'm not happy here", he was really not happy and now he's really got into the pottery and then he just kept coming back every week. Because I suppose he's enjoyed it and he's got hands-on. (4:3)

She was like "Oh I'm not going to jewellery making, I'm not going to this" but when she gets there she's fine, but she just don't like the idea. (3:25)

It just goes to show how all ages can work well together, 'cause I thought "Oh my god it's not gonna work with all these kids, all different ages", and my neighbour said the same "Oh what if one of them runs off?", that's not a problem. (1:3)

In terms of discreet characteristics of the facilitators, the importance of being in control, friendliness and attentiveness were also recognised within this exchange of views:

I mean you know when you walk in you're kind of feel that they're organised (4:12)

And welcoming (4:12)

Yeah totally. They really make a fuss of you when they see you (3:12)

And the children as well. (1:12)

In addition, familiarity was valued and created a sense of belonging:

Remembering the children's names, that's good. I think the small things as well like Cormac will remember what kind of fruit each of the boys like. (1:12)

He remembers quite a lot of things like you are important, 'cause it makes the children feel like they belong. (1:13)

Other attributes relating to patience and kindness were noted. All this maximised the potential for engagement:

Nothing is too much trouble, is it? And they're really kindI have never ever heard any of them being short or like the kids are getting on their nerves sort of thing....sometimes they just say "Hang on a minute", the kids respect them, don't they? (3:13)

They show them how to do it, they explain everything and they don't get flustered....It's just easy and relaxed isn't it? It's very relaxed, you just feel relaxed don't you, up there. (4:13)

3.2.3 The Venues

There were a variety of venues mentioned and described, depending on the activity. The café site was thought of as a 'great' venue, security and cleanliness were important criteria:

...you can lock the gate and it's clean, you know that there's nothing to worry about. (4:8)

Equally the Centre itself was considered an excellent facility, again with reference to security:

...if we're at the playroom you know that it's clean and the things are safe and people are also aware that there are children around. (2:10)

Families with smaller children however did find some difficulties with distractions:

we had play sessions at lunchtime which didn't work very well at all because it was in the playroom, and so if you had children used to going into the playroom, it's hard, the playroom's just a huge distraction ... they try to constantly play with the toys rather than you know making playdough....and it was really hard to try and say "No, you're not doing that now". So although it's a lovely room it's very hard as a venue for something specific. (2:8)

Other venues were also considered good places for activities:

Youth club they've had, we've had the science thing there, that was really good, that was perfect 'cause you could go outside in the big ball court and we done the science things, the rockets and the dangerous things we done outside, that was a good venue for that. (1:9)

And I think....we've used St Joseph's hall as well, that was really good for our robot building. (2:11)

3.2.4 Maintaining Involvement

While the attributes of the facilitators and the venues no doubt contributed towards continuing involvement, there were a number of other more personal factors that were influential. These related to enjoyment, achievement and a sense of fulfilment of the parenting role:

It's just good fun...out of the house with the kids, instead of being in the house moaning at them. (2:14)

... this half term it's been brilliant, it's felt like we've really done lots of things, we've done something every day, we're not just sitting there feeling guilty 'cause you haven't been out all day or you can't afford it. (4:14)

Yeah, and I feel like I'm actually taking something away, like I actually feel with pottery I have accomplished something. (1:14)

For others, it was the sequence of activities that maintained involvement;

And the next time was doing the pots and painting them, so there was something to come after that. I think for me that's what I do like, it'll keep me coming back. (3:15)

Again the skill of the facilitators in engendering an atmosphere of achievement and success was important in keeping people engaged in the activities:

you don't fail and that's really important (2:20)

Yeah no one feels like they are, there's no right or wrong way of doing something. (4:20)

3.3 Personal and Family Learning Experiences

This section identified the nature and consequences of the learning and development that took place, and also revealed the factors that were conducive to this learning.

3.3.1 Personal Learning and Development

With reference to personal development, participants initially linked learning to the more technical aspects of the activities and singled the science parts out as examples of where they had learned a great deal. Some of this related to gaps in their own education; for some, science as a subject had not been taught when they attended school, and they were 'spellbound' by the techniques used and the learning that had been achieved within the Relativity Project:

Just all the science things. What you just didn't know. It was just, I don't know, I really, you know, if I was younger maybe I'd go and do science 'cause it was just, it was totally ...amazing. (1:16)

Yeah, liquid nitrogen... you blew a balloon up, put it in and then it all went, all went to nothing, then it came back again. But they were telling you all about the oxygen and the, you know, it was just fascinating, amazing, it really taught you lots, you know just things and you thought "Oh wow!". It was just, blew me away, 'cause I didn't know these things. (2:16)

Encouraging experimentation with foods that they otherwise may not have had the chance to do was another positive aspect:

Trying pineapple and blueberries and things, yeah. Some people I suppose they just don't have that opportunity. ... it's encouraging trying new things. (3:18)

Ensuring that participation remained voluntary was also seen as vital:

.... it's not like you have to do something, if they say to you "Have you done this yet, do you want to make this?" and you don't have to... but it's presented in such a way that its non-threatening. (2:18)

Most participants had gained an overt appreciation of the skills of others and this seemed to have engendered a mutual momentum in self-achievement and increased confidence:

I love seeing other people's creations, I find that just amazing.....and that it's, you know if you walk round, I can't believe they're so many artistic people in this room. It's inspirational because like you know somebody made their crocodile really well and I thought I've got to copy your crocodile, so I was inspired by the way they had done it. (4:18/19)

The fact that learning took place with others also taught people other skills such as patience:

You just do it, but even though, even yourself, you learn to be a bit more patient and you learn to sort of work with other people as well 'cause it's not.... like you're on your own. (1:17)

The activities were so engaging and creative in their production that the following quote was one often voiced during the discussions:

I think half the time you don't actually realise you're actually learning. (3:17)

With references to the consequences of the learning, there was general consensus in the group that people's interest and confidence had been stimulated to such an extent that many wanted to take their learning to another stage:

I do the pottery and may consider going to an adult centre to do pottery. I think that will happen with a lot of people, I really do. (4:17)

Yeah I think I can go to Folkestone College... I wouldn't be scared, you know you have all this confidence about going in, it's not a completely new thing ... you know that you can feel OK about that. (2:21)

3.3.2 Family Learning

The individual and personal learning aspects had in turn an impact on the family learning experience and dynamic. There was a firm focus on

'achievement' and 'ability' as opposed to failure that had a very positive effect on the family:

You try to achieve things so that's good for your self esteem and for the children because you can't fail then, can you? (1:19)

There were some specific personal and social skills participants felt their children had learned through the activities:

The children have got to understand that everyone has got to use the same materials and I think that's a good thing, that's a very good thing, I think that can help with their confidence as well....go and ask for a drink and things like that (1:17)

My three year old has begun to create his own social network because he's now at nursery. We walked into the circus skills one week, and [he] kind of walked in and was like "Hey, high five!" and ... then he was just off and you know, very nice. I think actually that helps them go to nursery. (3:23)

My youngest is really clingy and she must feel comfortable there as she's not clingy there, she just goes off and does whatever. (1:24)

In addition, participants connected the development of social skills in their children with a growing sense of community:

'Cause they can build a network here at the playrooms but I think to add other kind of groups of ... children they don't maybe see at school but they then get to know outside....as an extra community. (2:23)

.... it comes down to the social skills to look around and learn from other people too ... and share, and it's that sort of community confidence. (1:24)

Once more, the skills of the facilitator however were vital for creating a secure and trustworthy environment conducive to learning:

They are so familiar with the children, but I feel comfortable about leaving the kids so it's not just up there it's anywhere now, we all feel comfortable and secure. (2:23)

I think it does come down to things like remembering their names, and the fruit they like and things like that; I think they feel like they're their friends. (4:23)

The 'fun' way in which a learning environment was created heightened the family learning experience. For example, with the puppet activity, after the puppets had been made, a show was put on that everyone participated in producing. This participant explained:

They even had a computer and the children were talking in it and it did monster sounds or a squeaky noise or an alien voice, but they were just talking in it...it was so funny, and the bloke who done that he was really patient with the children I thought as well, so young, and I thought he had a lot of patience. (1:19)

Importantly, learning the practicalities of the activities also brought about an increased awareness and understanding of mutual and beneficial learning that can take place between parent and child:

Like you're required to do some writing and also when you sit with your child, and you're helping them to do their things as well and you know you're explaining to them how to do it, or sometimes they're explaining to you how to do it, and that's the funny thing that it's, you don't realise it's when you're sitting down and you're talking to your child and learning about them as well. It does work really well. (2:20)

Consequences of the learning experience for children and parents were also positive, relating to pride and self-esteem in achievement, as these examples show:

But even to make the jewellery....you know they show you how to do it properly don't they so then we've all got these little things on our phones and things that they've made, so it's like you know, they've made that. (3:24)

But [child] was showing his friends what he's made and can say "I did that at pottery" and you know he has ownership of what he's done and he's really pleased. (2:24)

They show everyone actually, everyone who comes into the house they're like "I made this". (4:24)

Coupled with this was the realisation of the importance of spending time together in a constructive way, attributable to the activities within the Relativity Project:

I think you see how important it is that you do spend that time with them, you know whether it's one on one or all together as a family sort of thing. (1:25)

Now I can see how important it is to spend the time with them and how much it does actually mean to them, because like I say when we're at home it's all just like "Oh we'll do it later or in a minute", you never, in a minute never comes sort of thing so yeah, I do feel that it has changed. (3:27)

Participants had a clear idea of how learning from the activities permeated the home environment. For participants with young children, there was a distinction between the venues, seen as the places where specific activities

happened, and the home environment, which could be used to reinforce learning rather than duplicate activities. This participant explained:

I think I take it home in terms of I don't go home and do toy work or even playdough but I take home things, like at home I get his crocodile out and we share it positively, we talk positively about it. you know I'm not gonna beat myself up about the fact that I don't do the activities at home, you know just the kind of having that shared experience goes back home with me. (2:25)

I don't take it physically home and play and don't want to either 'cause there is a place for it and that's where it is, but I think because we've had that family experience together, that positive experience, that comes home with us definitely. (1:25)

Participants with older children saw skills being learned at venues repeated at home:

I mean like now, now my daughter's come and cooked here she cooks at home, she doesn't ask she just does it. (3:27)

This participant sums up an important outcome of the Relativity Project. The Project manages to harness and harmonise resources to create a holistic learning environment that is creative, yet subtle and unobtrusive; this results in families learning without really being aware of it:

I think that's the thing you don't realise how many skills you or your child are using. (2:19)

3.4 Areas for Improvement

This section highlights some concerns participants had about the activities and one of the venues, and sets out some recommendations for improvement.

3.4.1 Concerns about the Activities

As described in the previous sections, the overwhelming impression of the Project gleaned from the participants was positive. However, some activities did not work so well. This was in part due to the fact that they could only involve older children which created difficulties for families with infants, and that there were insufficient facilitators. This quote refers to a circus activity:

And we ended up leaving early from that one because there way no way that mine, my eldest he was three at the time, I think he was three at the time, he just couldn't, you know cope with what was being done. (2:3)

We needed more people doing it, 'cause they have done it before at the junior school..... and that was fine because there were more people. (4:6)

There was only one person on each skill, showing you how to do it. (3:6)

In addition, the popularity of the activities caused some problems; this quote refers to the puppet activity:

..... it was so full it was just, which is a shame because like the people couldn't take part.... I noticed them sort of getting turned away... which was a shame really. (4:7)

Participants described the reaction of people who were not able to take part and the consequences:

They'd be rude....they had the right hump.... I notice [name] didn't come back after that again. (1:7)

This quote perhaps shows that interest and engagement in activities among this population group can be fragile and easy to upset. However, despite this, participants in the focus group understood the reasons for turning people away and acknowledged that the facilitators were quick to respond in the best way possible under the circumstances:

... Cormac kind of gave us a bundle of stuff to go and make at home, so although we missed out the boys were fine so I didn't really mind, it's one of those things. I'd rather be turned away than not be safe in a venue. (2:7)

There was a lengthy discussion about timing of the sessions where it was difficult to gain consensus. Timing preferences were based around the age and needs of children and differed between the four participants. Some sessions clashed with the necessary routines for infants, whereas for others a degree of flexibility was permissible. It was not possible to come to some firm conclusions from this discussion.

3.4.2 Venue Concerns

There were some concerns about the facilities within the working men's club. While the convenience of it in terms of accessibility and space was acknowledged, there were wider issues voiced in the group in relation to health, safety and cleanliness that were agreed on:

it's just two minutes from my door, it's perfect, but you know you kind of walk in through people who are drinking ... they're drinking at 3 o'clock in the afternoon they're smoking outside, so you're walking through smoke thinking your children breathe smoke.....it's not very....nice. I don't really like this you know. (3:10)

The working men's club toilets, they can't reach the sinks to wash their hands....there's no soap in there anyway, there's no toilet roll, and the water it's freezing.... And there's no baby change as well...if I can't change his bum then we have to go home. (2:33)

I think in the summer it'll be a lot worse 'cause there'll be more people sitting outside. (4:10)

3.4.3 Recommendations for Improvement

- With reference to the popularity of some of the activities, participants suggested a booking system, or more sessions in both the morning and afternoon to give breadth of opportunity for access. Those who had been turned away could be offered priority for the next session.
- A specific programme of activities sent out in advance with a booking request may also assist with planning.
- Participants suggested that people would maintain interest in the Project for longer if follow-on sessions are organised. Examples of this include planned sessions for painting pottery after it had been made, or that something productive comes from an activity that can be followed up. These quotes illustrate the issues:

I did say ... about the pottery how are you gonna do the rest of it and it was like "Ummm' well we've got to take them away and get them fired".....How are we gonna do the next bit? So he's gonna have to arrange another group just so... we come back and paint. 'Cause he said we could do it at home, and I'm like not everybody's got paints at home. I know it sounded bizarre but I mean my neighbour she hasn't got no paints or anything or I don't think she'd go out and buy them. (1:15)

Yeah that's exactly it, if they were to do a photography workshop I'd like it to be six weeks away, signed up and I went along every weekand perhaps I did something at the end, rather than just kind of going and pick up. Also I'd like to find it useful - for me, something that's just one day, you don't really get that much from it, it's fun, it's fun, but I don't really feel that oh I can take that away with me now.(2:15)

- Participants suggested having an age restriction on some activities – this related to the circus activity in the main – so that the restlessness of smaller children did not affect the enjoyment and learning of older ones.
- Some participants would prefer water or milk as choices of drink for their children rather than squash.

3.5 Key Points

- Participants had a clear understanding of the purpose of the Relativity Project and what it sets out to achieve. Aspects emphasised related to the family orientation, easy access, and the fact that it was free of cost.
- Experiences of the project so far were favourable. Activities provided personal enjoyment of physical engagement resulting in a tangible product, and an appreciation of the therapeutic effects of involvement.
- The skills of the facilitators were seen as central to success. Participants spoke of their creativity, management skills, responsiveness, and their ability to engage and stimulate people's interest, even among sceptics. In addition, traits such as friendliness, familiarity and kindness were seen as key to engendering a sense of commitment and maximising every available learning opportunity.
- The venues were considered to be good secure environments and appropriate to the needs of the activities, with easy access. Participants considered the working man's club unsuitable for children for health and safety reasons.
- Participants maintained their involvement in the Project due to personal feelings of achievement and fulfilment in the parenting role. That 'success' was emphasised over 'failure' was considered pivotal.
- In terms of personal learning and development, activities bridged the gaps in participants' education and gave them opportunities that they would not otherwise have had. Factors that promoted learning were the voluntary nature of involvement, the creative way activities were produced, and gaining an appreciation of the creative skills of others. The consequences of learning were an increase in confidence, self-esteem and self-achievement, and a desire to take skills into further education.
- With family learning, participants noted an increase in their children's practical and social skills with a growing appreciation of the wider community. An understanding of the mutually beneficial nature of parent-child learning was also gained. Factors related to facilitator skills such as creating a 'fun' environment and encouraging a sense of belonging were seen as key to promoting learning. The consequences were an increase in pride and confidence in achievement. Participants used the home environment to underpin these attributes.
- Areas for improvement focused on developing strategies to prevent the disappointment of over-subscription of some activities, such as more sessions at different times or pre-booking. An age limit on some activities was also recommended. Participants also expressed a desire to have some structured follow-up for those interested in pursuing activities further.

4 Summary and Conclusions

A key aim of the Relativity Project is the contribution it makes to family learning, particularly in relation to generating an awareness among adult family members of how children learn, and how this can permeate the home environment. With reference to the discussions here, there were interwoven elements relating to the learning and development processes within the family dynamic, that stemmed from engagement in activities. But overall it was evident that, according to these participants, the project had been successful in helping them to achieve significant personal and family learning to the extent that more formal follow-on education was being considered. Significant features related to confidence and self-esteem, which appeared to be transferable to situations outside the venue environment, such as the development of social skills. Learning from the activity continued at home, but there was a clear difference between home and the setting of the activity, especially for families with younger children. For example, activities were clearly seen as taking place within the venues and the home setting was the place for reinforcement of achievement and further positive psychological 'bolstering' of confidence.

Issues relating to personal development were particularly articulated. Participants identified specific areas of skill in themselves and others; filling gaps in their own education and being encouraged to experiment with new things all brought about a keen sense of attainment. This seemed to be an important prerequisite to opening mutual channels of learning with their children. Importantly, this had been achieved through enjoyment and exposure of their creativity.

Leading on from this, intrinsic to the positive experiences of the participants were the skills of the facilitators, who appeared to fully understand and appreciate their client group and know how to gain their trust. The facilitators were able to intelligently apply theory to practice in terms of engagement, motivation and commitment to optimise the learning experience, all with participants who are traditionally hard to reach. This in turn appeared to be an important precursor to genuine involvement. Focusing on 'success' as opposed to 'failure', the facilitators' ability to anticipate difficulties and respond to needs also contributed towards a positive outcome and increased the learning potential. Through these methods, clients appeared to become committed and engaged in a sustainable way, without realising that they were learning.

This report therefore sought to ascertain participants' impressions of their experiences at the Relativity Project and gain an understanding of the extent to which the Project is meeting its aims. While the discussions provided some interesting data that illuminated on this, it must be acknowledged that the small number of participants taking part cannot be representative of the Project participation as a whole. Despite this, the data provide considerable insight into the experiences of typical families that attend that can be used as a springboard to canvas other opinion.



Dear

I am a researcher from the University of Kent and I would like to invite you to take part in a focus group discussion about your experiences with the Relativity Project. This will be held in one of the rooms at the project. Before you decide, it is important that you understand what this discussion will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the focus group discussion about?

The staff who run the Relativity Project are keen to find out your views about the project. They want to know what you think about the activities and the venue, and whether you have any suggestions for improvements. Importantly, they want to know whether you and your family have benefited in any way, but also are keen to find out about any bad experiences. This information will help them to improve the project.

If I want to take part, what do I have to do?

I would like you to join a group of other people who have been to the project (no more than 12). This will take place on **Tuesday 24th February at 12.30**. The meeting will last about an hour and be recorded with your permission, so that I can make sure I have captured all the information. The project team will provide childcare.

If you want to take part, please sign the consent form attached and give it to a member of the project team in the envelope provided. I would like to reassure you that any information that is collected about you will be strictly confidential and you will not be identified in any report.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether or not to take part, but if you do not want to take part, this will not affect you in any way. If you decide to take part but change your mind, you are free to do so, and this will also not affect you. If you would like some more information about the focus group or there is anything that is not clear, please do not hesitate to contact me on this number **01227 823878**

Yours sincerely

Jenny Billings
Senior Research Fellow
Centre for Health Service Studies
University of Kent

Consent form

Please initial the boxes on the right, write your name in capitals and sign at the bottom of the page. I would be grateful if you could give me a contact telephone number in case the meeting time is changed. Thank you.

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information letter about the focus group and have had the chance to ask questions

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason, and that I will not be affected

3. I give my permission for the meeting to be recorded

.....
(Name of Person – please print)

.....
(Signature)

Telephone Number.....

**Relativity Project
Focus Group Evaluation Schedule**



Warm-up question: If you were to describe the project to someone unfamiliar with it, what would you say?

1 What has been your experience of coming to the Relativity Project so far?

- What do you think the purpose of the project is?
- How did you find out about it and why did you come?
- What activities have you come to?
- Describe what you thought of them
- What do you think about the ...venue, facilities, facilitators
- Has attending had any effect on you or your family's social life? (*prompts: more friends, social activity etc*)
- For those who have attended more than once, what keeps you coming back?
- For those who did not come to other activities – why was that?

2 Thinking about the activities, I'd like to know more about what you have learned

- Any new skills (*prompts: physical, psychological*)?
- What helped you to learn?
- Describe any good or bad effects this new learning has had on you.
- If you don't think you have learned much, why is this?
- If you get any additional information about or from the activities, how is it used?
- Have you thought about going on to do any further courses/education at all?

3 Tell me about the family experience of coming to the project

- How did your children feel about coming?
- What did your children think about the activities?
- What sorts of things have they learned? What helped? If not much learned, why was this?
- How easy/difficult was it getting them to come?
- What has been the experience for you, being together with your child during the activities? Have you learned anything? (*prompt: understanding how children learn*)
- Have there been any changes to the relationship you have with your child (good or bad)? (*prompts: communication, learning opportunities/interaction at home, doing things together*)

4 I would now like to get an idea of the best things about your experiences, and things that weren't so good.

Go round the group and each participant says one good and one bad thing. (Prompts: activities, facilitators, environment, access, family issues, form filling)

How could things be improved? (*Prompt: any other activities?*)