

The Toybox Project

Belfast, Northern Ireland

by Elizabeth Herndon

The Toybox Project is a rights-based service development model which aims to significantly reduce social and educational inequalities experienced by young Traveller children through an outreach play-based early intervention service provided in partnership with children and parents. Early Years – the organisation for young children (formerly NIPPA), is responsible for the operational implementation of the project.

Travellers are a distinct ethnic group within Irish society. Their lifestyle and culture, based on a nomadic tradition, sets them apart from the settled population. They are widely acknowledged as one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Irish society. While many Travellers still live in trailers, some Travellers now live in settled accommodation.

The Toybox Project supports a full-time Project Co-ordinator and nine Outreach Play workers plus a part-time administrator. Emphasising its regional character, the project operates in Armagh/Dungannon, Ballymena/Magherafelt, Belfast, Coalisland/Dungannon, Derry, Omagh/Strabane, Newry/South Armagh, and Newry.



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Service delivery focuses on the work of the Toybox workers who visit Traveller families in their own homes on a weekly basis, bringing with them a box of toys, art materials, books, and natural materials. The Toybox Project worker provides children with an eagerness to learn by sharing control, focusing on their strengths, and supporting them in their play activities. They observe, listen, encourage, and extend the children's play which leads to problem solving and enhances their social, emotional, and cognitive skills.

During the weekly sessions, the Toybox worker establishes a relationship with each family, provides toys and materials for play activities that challenge each child's ability, and supports their emerging interests and skills. They are a positive role model for parents and support them in enrolling their children in preschool or nursery. They build the confidence and capacity of parents to engage positively with preschools to support their child's education.

Discussions to establish a Toybox project for Traveller children aged 0-4

years began in 2000 between Save the Children, Early Years, and the Traveller Movement Northern Ireland. The contexts for the project proposed were the increasingly positive policy environment for Traveller issues signaled by the establishment of a government Promoting Social Inclusion initiative at the end of 1999; and the Department of Education (Northern Ireland) New Targeting Social Need statistics which indicated Traveller children were significantly under represented in take up of preschool provision. To this was added the empirical awareness of Traveller Support Groups and teachers that Traveller children's readiness to learn at the point of entry into primary school was generally less than that of Settled children, and that this deficit constituted a real inequality and impact widened over time.

The project aimed to reach out to the Traveller population across nearly all of Northern Ireland, it also aimed additionally to actively promote their enrolment in preschool settings. As the project has developed, it has increasingly developed its own evidence-based approach to practice based on the evolving needs of the project.

Initial funding came from the Northern Ireland Executive Fund for Children and Save the Children. A total grant of £503,400 was received for the first three years of the project with Save the Children providing additional funding of £60,000. Following this period, on-going funding has been provided by The Children's Fund and the NI Department of Education Sustainability Fund.

By the end of January 2009, 131 families and 164 children were currently on the programme and the total number of children who have accessed the project to date is 415. At any given time, around 140 children and their families are engaged with Toybox. The project has comprehensively passed its target figure of 150 contacts. The project has also made a significant and sustained impact in terms of its support for Traveller parents' learning and self confidence.

In terms of service delivery, the Toybox project has been a very successful project in engaging Traveller families and supporting the development of Traveller children through play. Furthermore, it has been very successful at filling the gap and being a catalyst between Traveller families and statutory support services, health visitors, social workers, and others in the statutory sector. The

project is innovative in both its strategic structure and its operational implementation, and it represents a potentially successful model for child development for other disadvantaged groups. The two most influential aspects toward the success of Toybox have been the building up of confidence and relationships between Toybox workers and Traveller parents and the bringing of the project into the homes of Travellers. Through the process, social, economic, and physical barriers are removed which would otherwise restrict their participation in preschool provision.

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