



**Strengthening Relationships, Building Futures:
An Evaluation of the nia project Family Learning Programme**

Final Report

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to CWASU colleagues for their contribution to this evaluation.

We are grateful to **the nia project** staff for being welcoming and supportive throughout this evaluation, and especially Parveen Baig, Lucy Angell, Sybil, Natasha Greenway and Nicola Weller, for sharing their experiences of conceptualising, developing and implementing the Family Learning Programme. Their response to our requests for interviews, focus groups and dissemination of surveys made the evaluation process so much easier. Thanks also to all those professionals across London who responded to our survey. And of course our final thanks go to all those women who attended the focus groups and took time to complete the questionnaires and provide us with their thoughts and views about the value of the programme.

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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from an evaluation of **the nia project** Family Learning Programme (FLP). The pan-London programme delivered, from April 2008 to July 2011, family learning opportunities through play to mothers/carers and their children from black, minority ethnic and refugee (BMER) communities who are affected by domestic violence. Funded by the Big Lottery Fund, the programme developed interventions through one-off workshops and eight week programmes. The specific aims of the FLP were to enable:

- children and mothers/carers to participate and enjoy educational activities;
- children to develop skills, including language and literacy, communication, social skills and physical development, as well as increasing confidence;
- mothers/carers to develop new or existing practical skills, enabling them to support their children's learning, improve parenting skills and develop communication and self esteem;
- children and mothers to learn age appropriate safety planning skills;
- mothers/carers to interact better with their children and report an improved mother-child relationship.

The FLP especially sought to support the relationship between mothers/carers and their children in the aftermath of domestic violence. Success of the programme was seen to be: an improved relationship between mothers and their children reflected in spending quality time together and an enhanced understanding of the effects of domestic violence on children on the part of mothers/carers; mothers and children learning new skills and undertaking new activities; improved confidence and social interaction. This evaluation was commissioned by the nia project to explore both processes and outcomes of the FLP. In large part, the evaluation draws on the experiences and views of mothers who participated in the programme, staff who developed and delivered it, and the agencies who referred and formed partnerships with **the nia project** team to assess the process of implementing the programme, the value added to existing provision and the difference made to the families taking part.

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

The first section of this report provides a brief overview of research findings about the impacts of domestic violence on women, children and on the relationship between mothers and children to contextualise the FLP and its approach. The second section details the methodology for the evaluation and the third discusses the development of the FLP. Drawing on project data, the fourth section outlines engagement with the programme. Sections five and six discuss the perspectives of women and of agencies about the FLP while the final section draws the findings together and presents the key conclusions and recommendations.

CONTEXT

The effects of domestic violence on women and children are multiple and complex. There is now substantial research evidence about the wide-ranging effects of domestic violence on women and children in the short and long term, which include material and financial, health and interpersonal impacts. Research shows that women seeking support for domestic violence experience significant levels of chronic abuse, including high levels of repeated physical abuse (Coker et al, 2000; Goodman et al, 2003; Kelly et al, 1999). Studies by Robinson (2003) and Humphreys and Thiara (2002) showed that over two-thirds of victims believed they would be killed or injured by their ex/partners. The cross-over between domestic violence and sexual violence is also considerable, with studies showing this to be between 25% to 50% (Kelly et al, 1999; Robinson, 2003); a recent study shows this to be even more common among BME women (Thiara & Gill, 2011). Emotional abuse, of which controlling behaviour and jealousy is a factor, is reported by a high percentage of victims, ranging from 83% to 98% in recent studies (Thiara & Roy, 2010; Robinson, 2003) and is a significant factor in homicides (Richards & Baker, 2003; Regan et al, 2007). Harassment and stalking post-separation also feature large in victims' experiences and when coupled with physical violence is significantly associated with murder or attempted murder (Richards & Baker, 2003).

Existing literature highlights the critical role that domestic violence plays in undermining women's mental health and well-being, with overview studies reporting rates of depression of between 38% to 83%, a prevalence rate which greatly exceeds that for women in the general population (Cascardi et al, 1999; Golding, 1999). In the London study by Mooney (1993), 46% of women reported feeling depressed. Studies also point to significantly heightened rates of suicide attempts amongst women who have been the subject of domestic violence. The elevated rates of self harm particularly amongst Asian women under 30 has been highlighted in the UK (Yazdani, 1998; Soni-Raleigh, 1996; Bhugra, 1999). Research has thus clearly established a causal link between domestic violence and self-harm, depression and PTSD¹ and pointed out the disproportionate numbers of BME women affected by such issues². Certainly, for both physical and mental health, improvements occur once women are out of abuse and safe. Two recent studies have shown an improvement in women's health status after escaping situations of domestic violence (Alsaker et al, 2008; Helfrich et al, 2008).

The issue of children and domestic violence is considerable, with UNICEF estimates showing that nearly one million children in the UK have been exposed to domestic violence. Although estimates are conservative due to the under-counting of certain types of violence, a recent prevalence study shows that 14.2% of under 18's were exposed to domestic violence during their childhood and 2.9% of under 18's were exposed to domestic violence in the last year, which amounts to 260,400 and 53,810 children and young people in London respectively.

¹ For a recently published study on these issues, see Itzin C, Taket A, Barter-Godfrey S (2010) Domestic and sexual violence and abuse: findings from a Delphi expert consultation on therapeutic and treatment interventions with victims, survivors and abusers, children, adolescents, and adults. Melbourne, Australia: Deakin University.

² Key BME organisations in the UK – Southall Black Sisters and EACH - have developed models of practice with intervention with South Asian/BME women.

Again while there is a huge under-count, figures from this study show that of the police reported domestic violence incidents numbering 543,925 between 2005-09, 5,585 children and young people were subject to a child protection plan and 75% of these were affected by domestic violence (Radford et al, 2011). Existing research has further demonstrated the extent and depth of the impact of domestic violence on children, with studies consistently showing that children are present in at least 50% of households where there is domestic violence (Mullender, 2004). Research on relationship abuse conducted with young people in schools found that one fifth of girls and one in ten boys reported having witnessed domestic violence at home at some time in their lives (Barter et al, 2009). It has also been estimated that in up to half of cases the perpetrator is also physically or sexually abusing the children (Humphreys & Thiara, 2002). The effects on children include loss of family, friends and local networks which are exacerbated for BME children (for instance, through changing schools, being unable to continue in sporting and other activities, to see members of extended families) (Izzidien, 2009); social and behavioural difficulties (such as difficulty making friends, behaviour problems in class, aggression and social withdrawal); and disrupted schooling due to changes in school, school absences or being excluded as a result of behaviour (Bagshaw & Chung, 2001; Thiara & Roy, 2009; Mullender, 2004). There is, however, research knowledge which indicates that the negative consequences for children decline once they are safe and free from fear of further violence. A positive and supportive relationship with their mothers further contributes to children's ability to overcome negative effects (Hester et al, 2007). Although research consistently shows considerable adverse effects of living with domestic violence, services for children affected by domestic violence have remained limited.

As well as the effects of living with domestic violence on the emotional and psychological wellbeing of women and children, its impact on women's mothering ability as well as the relationship between children and their mothers has been acknowledged for some time (Thiara et al, 2006; Mullender et al, 2002; Morris, 2009; Radford & Hester 2006). A consistent finding of various research studies has shown the ways in which many violent men manipulate the relationship between mothers and children (Mullender et al, 2002; Humphreys et al, 2006; Morris, 2009) and that this often forms part of the perpetrators' tactics of 'coercive control' (Stark, 2007). There is much literature now which points to the ways in which abusive men use child contact arrangements to continue to further abuse and control women and to undermine the relationships between children and mothers (Radford & Hester, 2006; Aris & Harrison, 2007; Thiara, 2010). More recently there has been a focus on how being a violent father impacts on men's ability to parent their children (Harne, 2003, 2011). Thus, the conceptualisation of domestic violence as an attack on the mother-child relationship is not new but practice has been slower to respond (Humphreys et al, 2010). Research also highlights the multiple ways in which domestic violence frustrates women's performance of work involved in mothering, for which women can often blame themselves, and that many are likely to reach out to agencies when they are concerned about the children's well-being but can often be faced by mother-blaming (Radford & Hester, 2006). It has been suggested that some black and minority ethnic (BME) women may have specific experiences of mothering through domestic violence which creates particular issues within the mother-child relationship. For instance, women who experience severe violence over a longer period and extreme isolation may be denied the time to build a relationship with their children by the abusive partner and other extended family members, resulting in

children having greater attachment to grandparents (Thiara et al, 2006). It may also be harder for some BME women to access formal and informal support around some of these issues. While parenting programmes have been popular in recent years, the need for recovery work to also include joint work between mothers and their children affected by domestic violence is being recognised and some practitioners are creating settings for such mother-child work (Humphreys et al, 2010). Women's 'readiness' in engaging with joint work has been highlighted as a crucial factor in the success of interventions aimed at strengthening the relationship between women and children in the aftermath of domestic violence. The importance of addressing the particular issues for BME women and children has also been emphasised.

There is substantial research supporting the provision of work with children who have lived with gender violence including the use of play and group work (Mullender, 2004) and a range of resources have been developed (see for example, Saunders & Humphreys, 2002). Play has been shown to be vital for the development of brain function, emotional and physical health and attachment with parents/carers (Ginsburg, 2007). Play can help children express their feelings about what has happened to them and find ways to talk about this with their mothers/carers. In the light of findings which highlight that BME women may be less able to access services (Parmar, Sampson & Diamond, 2005), the Family Learning Programme provides play and group work for BME women and children in a variety of contexts, including through community groups.

The following section outlines the methodology of the evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

The evaluation methodology adopted centred on gaining the perspectives of mothers/carers to assess if and how their skills with their children had developed and/or improved, as well as their own self esteem as mothers and the relationship they have with their children. There were six strands of data collection: analysis of project data collated by the programme team; observation of play sessions; self-completion questionnaires with mothers/carers; groups discussions with mothers/carers; discussions with senior nia project staff and programme staff; short on-line questionnaire with referral agencies.

SELF-COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRES WITH MOTHERS/CARERS

Feedback from mothers/carers participating in the FLP was central to the evaluation. Self-completion questionnaires were developed in consultation with the Senior Family Learning Worker to gather data from women including: demographic data; relationship status; brief details on history of violence, including impacts on women and children; contact arrangements; help-seeking in relation to violence and/or parenting; reasons for taking part in the FLP; feedback about the FLP sessions; the difference made by the FLP to women and children and to their relationship. Questionnaires were distributed by FLP workers and 11 completed by women and returned to the evaluation team.

GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH MOTHERS

In order to gain more detailed feedback from women, three focus groups with a total of 21 mothers were held with women towards the end of eight week programmes. Women were approached by the FLP team and agreed for the evaluation team to attend at the end of their sessions. Focus group questions were linked to the five outcomes of the FLP. An attempt was made to consult a cross section of women from different programmes in different boroughs: one focus group was with Turkish speaking women in a church hall where an independent interpreter was used; one was with a mixed group of women in a children's centre; one was with a mixed group of women in a domestic violence service. Detailed notes were taken during the focus groups and analysed thematically.

OBSERVATION OF PLAY SESSIONS

Group observation was undertaken of three play sessions to form an assessment about the content and process of delivered sessions, to observe mother-child interaction and the quality of the delivery. Although the possibility of conducting an age appropriate discussion with children was considered, the young age of the children did not, in the end, make this possible. The sample of children's evaluation forms was used to supplement this data.

ANALYSIS OF PROGRAMME DATA

Project data collated by the FLP team about sessions delivered, feedback and evaluation forms, worker observation notes on families and information collected about the number of mothers/carers participating in activities, number and range of referral agencies, any reported impact on the development of skills by children and mothers/carers, any reported impact on the mother-child relationship was examined by the evaluation team. A sample of evaluation forms completed by mothers (N=29) and children (N=36) was examined to supplement the new data collected by the evaluation team.

INTERVIEWS/DISCUSSION WITH STAFF DELIVERING THE PROGRAMME

A total of five staff – senior and project – were interviewed to gain their views about the development and delivery of the FLP. The focus of the interviews with senior staff was to explore the thinking/rationale behind the development of the FLP and the perception of success. In the interviews with FLP staff, the experience of the programme in practice was explored, including: skills and training needed; planning and delivery; relationship with other agencies; issues encountered in developing and implementing; successes and challenges. Detailed notes were taken and some interviews recorded and transcribed; all were analysed thematically.

SHORT ONLINE FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE WITH KEY REFERRING AGENCIES

Short questionnaires were emailed to practitioners who had made referrals to the FLP asking about: how they found out about the FLP; referral processes; views about the value added to families and to existing provision; strengths and weaknesses of the FLP. A total of 13 completed questionnaires were returned and were analysed using SPSS.

The next section discusses the process issues encountered in the development and implementation of the FLP.

There was a gap in services, particularly where women and children who had been affected by violence may not necessarily be linking in with mainstream Family Learning programmes. (Senior Worker)

The idea for the FLP arose from the recognition within **the nia project** that there was a gap in services for BMER families affected by domestic violence who were not linking into mainstream services, including Family Learning opportunities. Moreover, issues had arisen over the years about mother-child attachment in **the nia project's** front-line work with women and children and it was increasingly recognised that space was needed where mothers and children could come together to strengthen their relationships. It was widely recognised within **the nia project** that what was needed was the provision of a supportive play space for women and children rather than punitive parenting intervention, where families were not seen to be failing but given positive support. The benefits of groups of families coming together was also considered important as a way of reducing the isolation endured during domestic violence. In particular, the 'Talking to My Mum' research and materials, for which the nia staff had received training, had influenced the conceptualisation of the FLP as well as the insight that issues for BMER families tended to be intensified, especially as they were often not accessing other provision such as Children's Centres (Humphreys et al, 2006). Hence, the FLP, as a pan-London initiative, was aimed at BMER groups but especially hard to reach families - African, Turkish and Vietnamese - affected by gendered violence, and which sits within the Family Learning³ agenda. More specifically, it was devised to deliver family learning opportunities through play to mothers/carers and their children affected by domestic violence and to enhance mother-child attachment. In applying to the Big Lottery Fund, the programme was innovative and ambitious in terms of the scale and long-term nature of the work, as well as the range of languages incorporated.

Following the successful recruitment of four FLP staff (Senior Family Learning Worker, two Family Learning Workers and a Family Learning Childcare Worker), the team was trained in the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) which provided an important grounding and enabled staff to develop activities that could link into the Early Years foundation stage. The highly experienced staff team came from a range of backgrounds and brought a mix of different skills, including in-depth knowledge and understanding of violence against women, child development, creative and arts based work with children, and understanding of family learning. In addition, staff spoke a range of languages. In considering the worker skills needed, it was suggested that a teaching background as well as experience of working with children and young people was necessary. Additional skills identified included experience in partnership and multi-agency work, knowledge and experience of child protection and safeguarding procedures, understanding of child development issues, and experience of domestic violence work with women and children.

³ Recognising that inter-generational learning can improve outcomes for families, particularly those families that are in need, Family Learning is being delivered by many local authorities, including London boroughs, and is seen to enable parents and children to learn new skills together, to promote the development of parenting skills and to re-establish the parent-child bond.

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS AND REFERRAL PATHWAYS

Since the FLP was a new initiative which targeted hard to reach families, it required intensive and extensive development work. It was also the first time that **the nia project** had delivered a family learning programme. To maximise learning early on and given **the nia project's** established links in the borough, the FLP was piloted in Hackney in partnership with a local Children's Centre which had an existing women's group whose members had been affected by domestic violence. This pilot, attended by ten women and their children, provided an important learning for the future development of FLP programmes:

Amongst the things we learnt was that we needed to create a really welcoming space and have books and toys in the centre so that mums could interact with their children while their children were playing. (Senior Worker)

Following the pilot, sessions initially planned to be two hours in duration were cut down to one and a half hours and considered to be more effective and workable – *'two hours seemed to be quite a long session but one hour wasn't long enough'*.

FLP staff started to link in with and develop partnerships with those organisations that were known to them, initially in Hackney and then in Haringey and Islington. Widespread publicity for the FLP was also carefully conducted, with staff ensuring it was targeted at a range of professionals, including domestic violence co-ordinators, children's workers, refuges, and BMER community based organisations working with families. Meetings to introduce the work of the FLP and to promote its aims were organised with a range of services in each borough:

We've done a lot of work with agencies where we've gone to the agencies and done a presentation around the work and talked about how they can talk to the families about our sessions. (Family learning Worker)

Presentations were made to a wide range of organisations and included housing based agencies, family support services, and domestic violence services, among others. However, it was reported to be harder to get referrals from generic agencies, such as housing based services, than from domestic violence support services. Youth Services were also reported to be harder to engage. Overall, though, the response from relevant agencies received by the FLP was considered to be extremely positive.

After developing the work in the three boroughs, FLP staff targeted others, a key aspect of which was contacting all Domestic Violence co-ordinators in London which resulted in a snowballing of contacts. Engagement with community organisations in the different boroughs also ensured links with a wide professional audience. Inevitably, the first programmes were found to be attended by only a few women which then, as the FLP became known, increased considerably when the programme was repeated. Whilst the widespread publicity was key to building partnerships and links, word of mouth was considered by FLP staff to be an effective way to get the programme known in the different boroughs.

In recognition of the need for intensive development work, a six month initial development stage was included in the funding bid. However, a decision was made to start a programme earlier, at three months, and to undertake development work as implementation proceeded. In doing the publicity, a decision was also taken to advertise the individual programme rather than the whole FLP service in order to focus referrals –

finding a venue, putting on the programme, then advertising it as widely as possible and linking in particularly with children's workers from refuges or places like that has worked really well. (Senior Worker)

This was in the face of the fact that the FLP staff found early on that some professionals were not referring or promoting the FLP among their clients. Since the FLP was targeted at families affected by domestic violence, some professionals working with families had found that some women either did not view and/or name their experiences as domestic violence or having moved beyond it did not *'want to be associated with other mums that are going through the same thing'*. Thus, focusing publicity on the individual programme had been to overcome some of these initial difficulties.

The two main inclusion criteria for the FLP were that families had to be from BMER groups and to have been affected by domestic violence. Although the FLP was aimed at families with historic violence and who were no longer living with the abuser, particularly to minimise risk and to ensure safety, it was recognised that some families may still have some contact with the abuser. Whilst the majority of referrals were families in this category, where there was contact with the abuser, FLP staff conducted a risk assessment with the mother/carer to ascertain the risk that participating in the programme could present to women and children. Discussions also took place in such cases with the referral agency and a social worker, if appropriate. Indeed, careful consideration was given to the referral process in order to ensure that the safety of women and children was not undermined in any way.

Given the focus on Vietnamese, Turkish and African mothers/carers and children, FLP staff worked in partnership with community groups from these communities. Different strategies, shaped by the access to services among these groups, were used to access the different groups. Thus, for instance, in targeting the Vietnamese community which was found to be *'one of the hardest communities to reach in terms of them not attending or trusting outside agencies'*, FLP staff linked in with link workers who were known to the families to gain access. Even then it was found that a lot of trust had to be built and flexibility exercised as it was found that families were amenable to day trips and one-off sessions but did not want to access the eight week programmes. In relation to Turkish families, with whom **the nia project** has developed considerable work over the years, a Turkish speaking worker was recruited who already had links with existing Turkish groups (a child care based agency and an advice and support service) in Hackney, Haringey and Islington, which helped to facilitate access – *'they have a really big clientele of Turkish women which we've been able to really take advantage of in terms of delivering programmes to Turkish speaking families'*. Having a Turkish speaking worker also meant that she was able to deliver the sessions in Turkish to non-English speaking families.

Indeed, the provision of independent interpreters to enable work with non-English speaking families, something identified in the referral form, had been written into the original funding bid by **the nia project**. This arrangement was considered to have worked well throughout the implementation of the FLP, though where women spoke some English, workers encouraged them to speak as much as possible to build their confidence.

In order to consult and get feedback from families, in the first year of the programme, five consultation events were organised to gain the views of mothers and children about the sort of activities they wanted. The flexible design of the programme – one-off sessions and eight week programmes – enabled staff to meet their funding aims but also the needs of their target families. Ongoing consultation with families to gain their views about what activities they would like to do was carried out throughout the implementation of the programme, as well as evaluation forms being completed at the end of sessions.

The FLP was delivered in 11 boroughs⁴ to a highly diverse group of BMER families. While the FLP was targeted at the three main BMER groups, it was opened out to a wider range of BMER groups and in year three to white families. In one borough, for instance, the FLP worked with traveller families. In general, the FLP involved partnerships with Children's Centres, extended schools and community groups. Partnerships with Children's Centres were especially positive because it enabled the FLP to access free venues which already contained the resources required such as toys, books and other educational learning materials. For the older age groups, community based venues were hired after being identified by partner organisations whilst work with families in refuges often took place within the refuges. Once the FLP had established a reputation, it was found that new agencies were approaching the FLP than the other way around.

PROGRAMME FORMAT AND DELIVERY

Both one-off sessions and the eight week programmes were divided according to the age of children, as follows: 0-4 years; 5-11 years; and 12-16 years. Along with content equal emphasis was given to the delivery of sessions where FLP staff worked to model 'soft skills' to families, such as positive parenting, good communication and social skills. Generally, staff worked extremely hard to create an environment where mothers and children could enhance their confidence and social skills.

The majority of sessions were, however, delivered to the 0-11 year age groups as it was found harder to engage the 12-16 years age group, with only one programme being delivered to this age category in year three.

Young people actually don't want to hang out with their parents and do activities...the young people had other things that they wanted to do, they preferred to go and play football, for instance, than come to a session. (Senior Worker)

⁴ These included Hackney, Haringey, Islington, Lewisham, Westminster, Enfield, Lambeth, Greenwich, Paddington, Newham and Ealing.

It was also more challenging for staff to organise after school events for the 5-11 years age group as children were often tired after school although the take up by this age group was high. Summer holidays and half term holidays were found to be especially suitable for one-off workshops and something greatly valued by other organisations with limited funding to arrange additional activities for families during school holidays.

A range of topics and activities were covered in the one-off sessions and eight week programmes, all of which were given different titles such as 'little explorers' for children ages 0-4 years, and included trips, arts and crafts, motivational life skills, soft play, creative dance, first aid, music, songs and rhymes, drumming, yoga, story telling, planting seeds/flowers and decorating pots, cooking, mask making, toy making, treasure/pirate hunt, using your imagination etc. In relation to the two types of delivery, the level of work required to organise and deliver an eight week programme compared to a one off workshop was reported to be considerable but it was found to be harder for families to commit to a longer programme. Consequently, when delivering eight week programmes, FLP staff developed strategies to encourage families to attend, without pressure, through weekly telephone calls reminding them the day before each session. Interestingly, those families that were found to settle in the group had found the eight weeks too short.

FLP staff used different resources for sessions depending on what was being covered. An aspect of each session was to give families resources linked to the session to continue the learning at home or continue doing the activities together at home to promote families spending time together *'doing really nice activities that have an educational aspect to them'*. This was positively received by many of the families:

One mum came back and said they've started creating window boxes with the seeds and the soil and the things we gave them...the older children we'll give them Frisbees and say 'go to the park with your mum and play frisbee'. (Family Worker)

Through planning meetings, FLP staff developed session plans based on how the aims and objectives of the session/s fitted in with the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda. However, within this there was flexibility in how families might learn, especially so that *'literacy and numeracy are developed'*. Moreover, all of the sessions were underlined by the aim of building skills to be used at home and enhancing mother-child interaction. A further aspect of the work with mothers was to develop their confidence to access local services, such as Children's Centres and other support services. The focus on safety planning within the aims of the FLP resulted in some work on safety planning being done with children so that they were able to develop these skills together with their mothers. An age appropriate and sensitive approach was adopted to carry out this work with children whilst the importance of children not intervening was underlined to mothers:

We do activities to make sure that the children, age appropriately, know what the Childline number is and they know five people who they can trust who they can speak to. So we do basic safety planning in it as well and talk to mums about the importance of children not intervening during a fight, for instance. (nia Manager)

Service user feedback was critical to the FLP's measurement of progress and success and a great deal of thought was given to developing mechanisms to do this. Staff developed a range of recording mechanisms to monitor progress and issues for families and to gain feedback from mothers and children. These included a worker observation sheet, a weekly notes form, a mother's evaluation form and a children's post-questionnaire and evaluation form. These were completed regularly and stored as part of project data. The observations by staff related to the outcomes, which were related to the ECM outcomes, and this information was included in all end of year reports to the funder. Referral registration forms, information for professionals and fliers for each session or programme were also developed. Feedback to agencies that the FLP built partnerships with was provided on a regular basis around issues such as how families were getting on and the flow of referrals.

VALUE ADDED

One of the things the professionals have said back to us is that we've been able to provide activities over the summer months or when there's school holidays because they just don't have the budget...in terms of the families who live in refuge provision It has a huge impact on them in terms of being able to do activities together. (Senior Worker)

It's a service that bridges a gap for women and children. It's supported mums and children to come to a place that's nurturing, understands their experiences but delivers key activities. (nia Manager)

All of the professionals from **the nia project** and others were asked about the value added by the FLP to existing provision and to families. All respondents spoke extremely positively about the programme. The FLP was regarded as an accessible and creative programme, in which families were keen to be involved. The creativity of sessions was seen to be particularly important in engaging families and the role of the FLP in providing learning through fun based activities for families affected by domestic violence was widely acknowledged and valued. This was seen to be something beyond the scope of existing providers which lacked the resources and skills to do similar work.

The approach of the FLP was considered to be insightful and informed about the issues for women and children affected by domestic violence. That the FLP activities had helped to build mothers' confidence around doing activities that they might not have thought about doing – such as going to the London Transport Museum, for instance – was recognised to be of great value. That women had also been supported to access other support services in their localities was also positively received by practitioners and agencies.

FLP staff modelling positive relationships in the delivery was constantly emphasised and viewed to be an important aspect of the work of the FLP, especially in creating the space for mothers to be creative with their children. Thus, staff were often *'willing to be silly, messy etc. to enable mums to feel safe to do so and encouraging mums to carry on outside of the sessions'*. Overall, the importance of creating a space for joint work and lessening isolation

through expanding their social networks and linking families with other services was repeatedly commented on as reflected in the following quote:

I think it's really important to do this work with mothers and children particularly where they've experienced domestic violence, they may not have had the opportunities or weren't allowed to do certain activities before. We know that family learning is about inter-generational learning so while outcomes are about the child's learning there is outcomes for the mums as well which are around increasing their self-esteem, getting to know their local area better or getting to know London better, making friendship networks with other families on the programme, families looking for other family learning activities within the boroughs that the local authorities might put on. I think the benefits definitely are really really high and showing from the number of referrals we've had, it shows there is a need for such a service. (Senior Worker)

Despite offering a wide range of services to women and children affected by violence, the nia project did not offer, before the FLP, any services for children and mothers to spend time together. The limited provision of joint work is true also of many other domestic violence services. By offering this space for joint work, the FLP was also commented to have added value within **the nia project**, by bringing a different skills set, with this being reflected in increased referrals from other parts of the organisation, especially the Children and Young People's Service. Women had also gone on to access other nia services and play schemes.

CHALLENGES

Despite the overall success of the FLP, some issues that were experienced as more challenging in the process of implementation were also highlighted. These included the following:

- Given the challenges of engaging the older age group, the work with older children was not developed as much as that with younger children.
- It was hard at times to create the shift from one-off taster workshops to an eight week programme and get families to commit to longer programmes. This was often for practical reasons as families that are in crisis find it harder to commit to on-going and longer programmes.
- While the pan-London reach of the FLP made it responsive to need, the FLP has not been part of a local authority structure and thus has not been strategically placed within borough processes. The pan-London nature of the work has also meant that staff had to encounter a lot of 'red tape' resulting in 'lots of toing and froing' which led to some frustration among staff who just wanted to deliver the service. To some extent this was inevitable as the programme was developed in the aftermath of 'Baby P', considered a 'touchy time', when procedures had to be closely followed.

- Although the FLP's focus on BMER families was important in addressing a gap, this was questioned by many agencies which pointed out the need for such provision for all women and children.
- Containing the work to just family learning activities was found to be difficult by staff as women often had other issues they were dealing with. For women who were not supported by any other agencies, the time with them was considered to be too short – *'it's just hi and bye'* – and more time was thought to be needed.
- The pan-London nature of the work necessitated the transportation of equipment by staff and it was suggested that having dedicated transport to move materials from venue to venue should be considered – a 'Family Learning Bus' was suggested.

KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

In considering those factors that facilitated the success of the FLP, the following were identified.

- Undertaking extensive development work and networking with agencies enabled partnerships to be embedded in the boroughs where work has been undertaken.
- Having a budget to arrange the family learning activities was critical to the success of the FLP as many other organisations, such as refuges, lack the resources (and often expertise) to arrange similar activities.
- Work with Turkish groups has been extremely successful because of the existing and new links with Turkish agencies; the appointment of the Turkish worker also made a critical difference to this success. Adopting a needs led and flexible approach with the target groups through links with existing workers and services (such as the Vietnamese and traveller groups) was also of great value.
- Having language support for families, though it was suggested that only one to two languages should be included to ensure the interpreting does not slow the group process down.
- Skilled workers with knowledge of domestic violence, child development, safety issues for women and children and insight into target communities were critical to the success of the programme.
- An agency such as **the nia project** with extensive experience of developing innovative work with regard to violence against women working in partnership with others.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE FAMILY LEARNING PROGRAMME

It was intended that the FLP would work with a total of 384 mothers/carers and 576 children through one-off 'taster' sessions and eight week programmes. Implemented between April 2008 and May 2011, the target numbers stipulated at the start of the FLP have been exceeded by far. At the end of the programme, a total of 513 mothers/carers and 811 children had participated in the FLP through 41 one-off sessions and 23 eight week programmes.

As already noted, the following outcomes were devised for the FLP:

1. Children and mothers/carers participate and report enjoying educational activities.
2. Children develop skills, including language and literacy, communication, social skills and physical development, as well as increasing confidence.
3. Mothers/carers develop new or existing practical skills, enabling them to support their children's learning, improve parenting skills and develop communication and self esteem.
4. Children and mothers learn age appropriate safety planning skills and develop an understanding of individual safety and the importance of children not intervening.
5. Mothers/carers better able to interact with their children and report an improved mother-child relationship and spend more time together playing and using home learning activities.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN

The table below presents the outcomes against the numbers of mothers and children participating in the FLP. As can be seen, the total number of mothers/carers and children far exceeded the target numbers, with numbers increasing significantly each year.

Table 1: Number of mothers/carers and children against FLP outcomes

Outcomes	Y1-mums	Y1-kids	Y2-mums	Y2-kids	Y3-mums	Y3-kids
1	67	127	172	269	274	415
2		127		269		415
3	67		172		274	
4	67	6	172	269	274	153
5	67		172		274	
Total	67	127	172	269	274 (total=513)	415 (total=811)

The following table provides a breakdown of the programmes delivered over the three years of the FLP. Again, it shows the increase in volume of programmes implemented after the first year. The increase in the eight week programmes in year three is especially notable and reflects the reputation that the FLP had established among agencies and families.

Table 2: FLP programmes delivered between 2008 and 2011

Year	One-off session	8 week programmes
Y1: 2008-09	9	3
Y2: 2009-10	16	5
Y3: 2010-11	16	15
Total	41	23

The table below provides a breakdown of FLP users by ethnicity. As noted, the FLP especially targeted African, Vietnamese and Turkish groups within its focus on BMER families. Given its popularity and the absence of similar provision, the FLP opened up to other families after feedback from agencies. This is reflected in the large numbers of other ethnicities in year three.

Table 3: FLP users* by ethnicity

Year	African	Turkish	Vietnamese	Other Ethnicity
Year 1	39	10	2	
Year 2	97	47	14	
Year 3	88	188	17	200 ⁵

* Figures include women and children

While the exact figures for the ages of children that participated in the FLP were not available, especially for years one and two, the following table presents this information where it was available.

Table 4: Ages of children participating in FLP activities

Age	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
0-4 years	37 families	60 families	206
5-11 years	30 families	48 families	94
12-16 years	-	-	34
Total	67	108	334

AGENCIES

Given the pan-London nature of the FLP, establishing links with other organisations was central to the work and success of the FLP. In the original targets, it was stipulated that 12 organisations each year would be linked to and benefit from the programmes and workshops. The FLP exceeded this figure and linked in with a wide range of organisations and groups throughout the three years. This included 19 organisations in the first year, 56 in the second and 54 organisations in the final year (129 organisations compared to the 36 stipulated).

⁵ Other ethnicities were wide ranging and as recorded by the project, included: Indian (19); Polish (18); Black Caribbean/British/Mixed Race (58); English (26); Colombian (14); White Irish (10); Latin American (20); Eastern European (8); Chinese (7); Afghani (6); Russian (4); Thai (2); Iranian (2); Iraqi (2); Portuguese (2); Spanish (2).

FEEDBACK FROM FAMILIES – ANALYSIS OF PROJECT DATA

A random sample of evaluation forms for one-off sessions and longer programmes, completed by mothers and children, and collated by the FLP were examined to supplement the questionnaires and focus groups and to gain insight into how sessions were regarded by both.

All women (N=29) were generally very positive and reported they had learnt new skills as well as met new people and made friends and that their children were happier and more confident. All said the FLP had helped them to understand how to support their children's learning, improved their parenting and communication skills, and increased their confidence. In rating how much their relationship with their children had changed since FLP in relation to interaction, communication and doing things together, the majority of women scored themselves between eight to 10, with over half rating this at 10. Women from Turkish backgrounds especially tended to report the biggest impact and change. Among the areas they wanted further support in was parenting skills, communication, confidence and reading and writing.

Of the 36 children whose feedback was examined, the overwhelming majority were extremely positive about the activities and attending the sessions. All said they wanted to do more with their mothers. This is something also supported by other research which shows that spending time with their mothers is often the most highly valued aspect of doing joint activities (Humphreys et al 2006).

Feedback from families suggests that they enjoyed the outings and outdoor based activities more than venue based sessions (see also section on mothers' perspectives).

What time and time again lots of the families say to us is what they'd really like is outings, outings that are educational, because they don't get a chance to do it themselves or they don't have the money to do it themselves and they enjoyed the days out that we do with the families. (Senior Worker)

Consequently, it was found that more families attended outdoor activities than those sessions that had a more focused and structured family learning content:

Those with a higher family learning dynamic where you've got the mum and child sitting together doing an activity seem to have the least mums coming to them or they're not as successful. However, those that we bill as an outdoor activity and then we put a learning activity in there as well, because it's an outdoor experience we seem to get more families attending. (Family Learning Worker)

Clearly, flexibility and responsiveness has been key to the success of the FLP with its target groups. In responding to the demand voiced by families for outdoor based activities, however, the FLP did not compromise its aims to provide learning to families, which it incorporated into each session.

WORKER OBSERVATIONS

FLP staff kept weekly notes on all families participating on the programmes and made observations about the development of women and children and the nature of the relationship between mothers and children. The examination of a random sample of these observations revealed the following issues:

- Close observation by staff led to encouragement of greater interaction between mothers and children, including modelling of activities by staff to encourage this. Staff tended to pick up on any issues with children's behaviour and discussed it with mothers, signposting them to other support services if this was needed.
- Women had to go to great lengths to get to sessions by public transport.
- While some mothers were accessing other activities for their children, most were unaware of services.
- Mothers frequently required support for themselves in the post-separation period.
- Children were often showing effects of domestic violence through their behaviour – clingy, under-confident, behavioural issues.
- Interaction between mothers and children frequently required attention though most women who attended programmes described themselves in the range 'quite confident' to 'very confident' (where the scale included not at all, a little, ok, quite confident and very confident) in relation to themselves as mothers.
- Children almost always enjoyed the activities, had lots of ideas for other activities and wanted to do more things with their mothers.
- It was sometimes hard for women to attend every session of the eight week programmes though they almost always said they wished it was longer.

WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES

Women's views about their experiences of the FLP and the difference made to them and their children were sought through self-completion questionnaires and focus group discussions. In total, 11 completed questionnaires were received from women and 21 participated in three focus groups. The findings from each of these are discussed below.

SELF-COMPLETION QUESTIONNAIRES

Women aged between 21 and 48 years from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds completed the questionnaires. Not all women completed all questions. As can be seen from the table below, the majority of women were in their 20's and 30's.

Table 5: Age of women completing questionnaires

Age	Number	%
21	1	9.1
27	2	18.2
28	1	9.1
29	1	9.1
33	1	9.1
34	1	9.1
36	1	9.1
37	1	9.1
43	1	9.1
48	1	9.1
Total	11	100

The ethnicity of women returning questionnaires was also diverse, as the table below shows, unsurprising as the FLP targeted a wide range of BMER groups.

Table 6: Ethnic background of women

Ethnicity	Number	%
Black British	2	18.2
Indian	2	18.2
African	1	9.1
Black Caribbean	1	9.1
Ethiopian	1	9.1
Ethiopian/Italian	1	9.1
Turkish	1	9.1
Kurdish	1	9.1
Polish	1	9.1
Total	11	100

All of the women had experienced domestic violence but only one of the 11 women was still living with the abusive partner. Of the 10 women who responded to this question, the majority of women had lived with domestic violence for four years or more (N=6), three for 1-3 years, and one woman for six months to a year. Women had experienced a range of violence, with all of the women reporting emotional abuse which took place often (N=6) and

sometimes (N=5), six women reported physical abuse which happened often (N=3) and sometimes (N=3), while only one reported frequent sexual abuse.

Women were asked about how the abuse they experienced had affected them. Women's responses (N=7) showed the following key effects:

- Loss of self-confidence and lack of self-worth and self-esteem (N=7)
- Loss of trust in others and confusion (N=2)
- Lack of independence (N=2)
- Depression, stress and headaches (N=3)
- Disrupted sleep (N=2)
- Fear (N=1)

While eight women had sought help for domestic violence prior to their contact with the FLP, only one woman had received help for parenting in the past which she had found to be very helpful. All of the 10 women who responded to the question had heard about the FLP through either an organisation they were accessing at the time or through a worker they were being supported by. Women were positive about the accessibility of the venue for FLP sessions and about their ability to participate. They were extremely positive about their enjoyment of sessions with 10 rating this as 'a lot' and one as 'quite a lot'.

Of the nine responses provided, all of the children lived with women and three had child contact arrangements in place, two of which were formal and one was informal.

Women were also asked about the effects of the abuse on their children. Of the five women who provided this information, they identified the following effects on children:

- Upset, scared and disrupted
- Anger issues
- Behavioural issues and problems at school

EXPERIENCES OF THE FLP

Women were asked about their reasons for taking part in the FLP. From their responses, it was evident that among the key reasons for women in participating in the FLP were: enjoyment for their children and seeing their children happy; spending fun and relaxed time with their children to build their relationships; helping children gain confidence and build social skills whilst having fun; building their own confidence; and wanting to have new experiences and do new activities with their children.

BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN

Women were asked about the benefits of the FLP for their children and these are presented in the table below. Significantly, this shows that the FLP was regarded by women to be of great benefit to their children.

Table 7: Benefits of FLP to children

Benefits to children	Number	%
Confidence better	11	100
More interactive with other children	9	81.8
Do more activities	9	81.8
Language skills better	7	63.6
Engage more with education activities	7	63.6
Developed new physical skills	7	63.6
Doing better at school/nursery	5	45.5

When women were asked about the difference made by the FLP to their children, 81.8% reported this as a big difference, whilst 18.2% (N=2) reported this as a small difference. All of the women responded positively to this question and identified the following additional changes in their children:

- Greater confidence and interest in new things
- Greater social interaction and wanting to go out more and do and learn new things
- More excited and happier
- Improved language and communication skills
- Greater engagement with learning and creative play

BENEFITS FOR WOMEN

Women were asked about the benefits to themselves of the FLP. The table below presents the benefits reported by women, with increased practical and creative skills, greater confidence and better communication being cited most frequently.

Table 8: Benefits of FLP for women

Benefits for women	Number	%
New skills (dance, yoga, cookery, using computer)	6	54.5
New creative activities	6	54.5
Better communication with others	5	45.5
More confidence	5	45.5
Better able to support children's learning	2	18.2

A significant number of women (60%) also said that the FLP had made them more aware of their and their children's safety. Half of the women also reported that their children were more aware of their safety as a result of the FLP sessions.

VIEW OF THEMSELVES AS A MOTHER

Women were asked about their view of themselves as a mother before and after they took part in the FLP by rating themselves on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represented 'a really good mother'. From their responses, it was evident that taking part in the FLP did not change women's view of themselves as a mother. All of the women either rated themselves as 5 (N=8) or as 4 (N=3) both before and after their participation in the FLP. Only in one case did a woman rate herself as 4 before and as 5 after. Significantly, this shows that participation in the FLP did not change women's perception of themselves as mothers. Women were also asked if their confidence as a mother had increased after their involvement in the FLP and were asked to rate this on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represented the greatest increase. Interestingly, of the 10 women who completed this question, six women (60%) stated that their confidence as a mother had increased greatly and rated this as 5 (greatest increase). Two women rated this increase in confidence as 4 (20%), whilst two women rated this increased confidence as 1 and 2 respectively. Thus, all of the responding women reported an increase in their confidence as mothers after their involvement in the FLP and for 80% of women this was significant. Hence, although women considered themselves to be good mothers both before and after their participation in the FLP, the programme did make a major difference to their confidence as mothers.

IMPACT ON RELATIONSHIP WITH CHILDREN

Women were asked if their relationships with their children had changed after their involvement in the FLP. Of the nine responses to this, only one woman said there had been no change whereas eight women reported this change as 'a lot' (N=2) and as 'a little' (N=6). Details about the ways in which their relationship had changed were also requested and included the following reported changes:

- Greater understanding of each other
- Increased communication
- Doing more activities together and going out more
- Increased listening
- Making more time for each other

Women were asked how the FLP sessions had made a difference to the ways in which they spend time with their children. The responses showed that all women reported a difference in this even if it was seen to be 'a little', reported by 72.7% (N=8), though for three women this had been 'a lot' (27.3%). Similarly, when asked if the FLP sessions had made a difference to the ways they communicated with their children, 27.3% (N=3) reported this as 'a lot' while the majority said this had been 'a little' (N=7; 63.6%) and one woman reported no difference. Sixty per cent of women also said they now do things with their children which they did not do before the FLP. This included taking children to the local park, on educational trips, swimming, doing creative and craft activities, and playing and learning games.

An important aspect of the FLP sessions is the linked learning at home that continues beyond the sessions. Nine (81.8%) of the women reported they continued to do the activities learned at home with their children.

BUILDING PRACTICAL AND CREATIVE SKILLS

Building women's practical and creative skills is a key outcome for the FLP. Among the practical skills learned by women in dealing with their children through the FLP sessions were:

- Patience
- Remaining calm
- Listening without shouting
- Not to shout but speak in firm but subtle manner
- To be more entertaining and be more creative
- Ask more questions
- Setting boundaries and a routine
- Being even more interactive
- Giving praise

Among the new creative activities learned by women to do with their children from the FLP were:

- Arts and crafts
- Dancing
- Sports and games
- Cooking and baking
- English songs
- Swimming
- Making learning more fun and enjoyable

FOCUS GROUPS

A total of 21 women took part in three separate focus groups; one focus group was with Turkish women and two focus groups were with a wide mix of women from diverse backgrounds. Women were aged between 20 and 47 though the majority were in their twenties (N=13) and thirties (N=7). Aside from the women who were Turkish (N=7), women came from the following BMER backgrounds: Eritrean (N=3); Indian (N=3); African-Caribbean (N=4); Colombian (N=1); Ethiopian (N=1); Polish (N=1); and Ugandan (N=1). All

except five Turkish women were separated from their abusers at the time of the focus groups.

Women were asked questions relating to the five outcomes and to comment on the difference that the FLP had made to them, their children and to the relationship with their children. All women were extremely positive about the FLP. In considering the reported benefits and impact of the FLP, the comments made by women in the focus groups resonated with what women had reported in the questionnaires as well as what other agencies and the nia project staff had reported. In detail, the following themes emerged from the discussion with all women in the focus groups.

- **Women were able to do things with their children for the first time**

We did yoga, baking, dancing, all the things we could not do before on our own.

I feel like a better mother now because I have learnt new things and I am doing things with my children I would never do before.

I have been living in London for 20 years but with this programme it's the first time I went to my local park.

- **Women's understanding of their children and their relationships was improved**

I realized I didn't show enough attention to my children before the programme. It helped to understand and deal with my children's behaviour.

I learnt about my children's likes and dislikes and my relationship with the children has changed. I am not getting so upset at my children's behavior, I am more positive, praising the children.

I have learnt how to listen to children and it is very important to do this I have found.

Children are more settled and not clingy and they listen to me more.

- **Women learnt new ways to engage with their children and to spend quality time with them**

My relationship with my children is better because here we do things together, we spend quality time.

I can now engage with him, before I was in a box. I didn't know how to play with him.

I am now trying to do more things with my children.

They helped with the children so I could spend quality time with each child.

- **Children learnt to interact with other children and became more confident**

He was shy and not confident first but now interacts with other children in the nursery.

My children have become more active and confident and they are able to do things on their own.

- **Women enjoyed meeting other parents which lessened their isolation**

For me it was good, it got me out of depression and the house. I've made friends, others give me tips to get on with my life and my children.

I feel more confident, we share experiences, and get advice.

Its so much more enjoyable with other parents, you get to talk and share.

- **Increased women's confidence and women were becoming more independent and informed**

I was stuck in-doors for two years with my children. I feel more confident because I get help. It's better for children to get out.

At home you just think about the domestic violence and the past but now I am more positive because I share and find out more.

I found about other things to do as a result of this.

SUMMARY

In assessing the impact of the FLP, it is evident from the evaluation findings that post-separation isolation is a significant issue for BMER women and the FLP provided an important avenue to address this. Feedback from women indicates an extremely positive reception to and impact of the FLP by those that took part in the range of activities. It was evident that women had endured domestic violence for a considerable period of time and reported many negative effects on themselves and their children. In this context, the FLP became a positive space for women and children that enabled women and children's confidence to increase, for their relationships to be strengthened, for new skills to be developed and for isolation to be reduced through engagement with other families and the activities and other services.

A significant majority of the women reported that the FLP had made a difference to their children and to them. Although the FLP did not change women's view of themselves as a mother, women reported an increase in their confidence as mothers. The impact of the FLP on the relationship between mothers and children was also considerable and reported in terms of increased communication, better listening, enhanced understanding, making more time for each other and doing more together as well as building practical and creative skills. Overall, the FLP led to an increase in confidence and resilience among both women and children.

PROFESSIONAL VIEWS

In order to access BMER women and children, the FLP aimed to work with small and medium sized community groups, domestic violence services and universal services such as children's centres, schools and PCTs. Building partnerships with other organisations was central to the work of the FLP. Whilst the majority of practitioners were reported to be extremely positive about the FLP, in order to get detailed feedback, an on-line survey was circulated to agencies across the different boroughs that had made referrals to the FLP. A total of 13 responses to the surveys were received though not all respondents answered each question. This section discusses the findings from this survey of agencies.

Overall, the 13 responses were received from agencies located in nine boroughs. The majority were either domestic violence organisations (N=6) or Children's Centres (N=4), with probation, health and a voluntary sector family support service also responding. Agencies had been in contact with the FLP between February 2009 to June 2010 and all had made between one to 40 referrals. Ten of the thirteen agencies had found the referral process straightforward, clear and simple though a small minority commented on the form being potentially confusing for families with little or no English.

VALUE OF THE FLP

Agencies were asked what value the FLP had added to existing services and service provision in their locality. For some Children's Centre, the FLP was an important follow on for women who had been part of their support groups, and gave women an opportunity to meet again whilst encouraging them to do new things with their children they would not otherwise be able to afford. For domestic violence services, it provided an important opportunity for children and mothers to have time together before moving on, offering help to families in a holistic way as well as providing rare opportunities to go on learning trips:

There are no other or very little out there who would provide this kind of family learning. It fills a big gap and families are very grateful. (Children's Centre)

This is an invaluable resource for families at our refuge. The children who come in rarely have had opportunities to go on any outings or learning trips and have often little bonding time with their mums before moving in. It adds a huge amount to these families lives. (Domestic Violence Service)

The FLP was especially valued because of the way it enabled families to spend quality time together in a thought out, accessible and safe way, giving great consideration to the safety of women and children. Facilitating women's awareness of local services and increasing their confidence to access these was another valued aspect of the FLP. Overall, it was seen by the majority of respondents as a type of service that did not exist before for families affected by domestic violence, which enabled existing services to enhance their own work through partnerships with the FLP:

There are no specific play based services for mothers and children who have experienced domestic violence. This time was precious and healing for the families

but also helped us pick up some concerns and engage more with the families.
(Children's Centre)

The women commented that [FLP] service has helped them to make positive changes in their lives and their children have benefited because mum is coping well. (Family Support Service)

The expertise and approach of the FLP staff was especially commented on by many of the responding agencies. Others were extremely positive about the organisation, planning, delivery and quality of the work delivered.

BENEFITS TO WOMEN AND CHILDREN

Agencies were asked if women and children had gained what they had hoped they would from the FLP. The 11 responses provided were all extremely positive about the benefits of the FLP for women and children and reflected the following themes:

- Women learnt new ways to play with children in a relaxed and fun way, something seen as especially important for survivors of domestic violence.
- Women and children had the chance to experience new things and expand their learning.
- Women and children were given the opportunity to rebuild and improve the quality of their relationship and develop more effective ways of communication.
- Women gained confidence to take greater control of their lives, better support children emotionally, and be informed about other sources of help.
- Women and children improved their social skills and confidence by meeting and interacting with other families and by forming relationships in the locality.

In making suggestions about improvements to the FLP, agencies thought that the programme should always be delivered in partnership with others and include better planning of pathways after the group for families. The need to be more flexible in terms of the age groups was underlined as women often have children of different ages. Agencies also articulated the need to have more in place for families affected by domestic violence, while a small minority suggested more was needed for men.

SUMMARY

All of the responding agencies recognised and underlined the value added by the FLP to existing provision for mothers and children. The FLP was particularly valued for the expertise and insight brought by staff to working positively and safely with families affected by domestic violence. Moreover, the work of existing agencies was seen to be enhanced through partnerships with the FLP.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It provides an excellent space for mothers and children to bond and grow together in safety. (Children's Centre)

FILLING A GAP IN PROVISION

Through the FLP, mothers and children experienced relaxed time together, shared learning through joint activities, spent quality time together in a supported way, children met and played with other children and had opportunities to take part in things they would not otherwise do, and were able to access other services. Women were reported to be empowered to go out of their area, use public transport, and go to places they had never been to before, all of which built women's confidence. Above all, children and their mothers spent more time together in a fun and learning environment.

The paucity of such joint work between mothers and children in the aftermath of domestic violence is well documented (Humphreys et al 2010). The FLP provides a good example of how this joint work between mothers and children affected by domestic violence to BMER families can be offered. Building on existing research and practice, the gap for the service was carefully identified by the nia project through consultation with existing groups and organisations, service users and staff and shaped the nature of the intervention. By linking in with existing policy frameworks, more specifically the family learning agenda, the FLP represents an innovative way of working with families who remain mainly locked out of mainstream provision. Through its focus on BMER families, it has been even more significant for BMER women and children who tend to be isolated and unaware of other services or opportunities for intervention. The emphasis on family learning has been important to many women from the target groups, who were, as shown by the findings, previously unfamiliar with ideas about child development prevalent in the UK, and felt inadequately equipped to help their children with homework and other issues.

FLP has also filled an important gap in existing services for BMER mothers and their children in a context where there is limited post-separation support (Thiara and Gill 2011). Through a family learning approach, it has provided an important avenue for mothers and children to lessen their isolation and strengthen their relationships, learn new skills through activities previously not done, enhance awareness of safety, and provide information about and exposure to learning and educational activities in their localities. In doing so, the FLP has helped women and children to develop their confidence, improve their social skills and learn to engage with others with greater confidence, and expand their social networks. It has met all of the aims set out in the funding application. It has also been able to reach larger numbers of women and children than stipulated and to develop innovative work with groups considered to be hard to reach.

BUILDING FUTURES

The FLP represents a rare space for joint mother and child work – *'there is nothing else like this'* - which also build women's confidence as mothers. It was considered to be invaluable

work which impacts on children view of their mothers and their future joint relationships. The FLP was considered to be a different way of doing parenting work and a positive service amidst domestic violence work for families that lack positive experiences. It develops long term skills – communication, cookery, literacy, creativity - which form a base for other things in the future.

Given the coercive control exercised by abusers over women and children in situations of domestic violence and especially the issues for BMER women who may be particularly isolated and disallowed from building bonds with their children, the role of the FLP cannot be under-estimated. The value of the FLP in enabling women to build their confidence to engage in joint activities and open up avenues for them to do things they had never done before were constant themes in the discussions with programme staff, mothers and in the feedback from agencies. It is clearly evident that the impact of the FLP on women, on children and on relationships between mothers and children was significant, especially more so because it was targeted at the groups that are often excluded from or not accessing other family learning opportunities.

Finally, working with families affected by domestic violence requires great insight and expertise. Developing learning through play with such families requires sensitivity and awareness of the complex issues faced by families in the post-separation period and which pays extra attention to their safety. To focus just on the ‘play’ element of such work without considering the safety and support elements carries the risk of potentially making this work unsafe for families. This work cannot be done by simply any worker without the knowledge and experience of violence against women work. The nia project was extremely well placed to develop and implement the FLP and it has had a close fit with existing work of the nia project, both in its work with a wide range of mothers and children and close work with Children’s Centres. However, this is an issue that would require great thought in the future if this work was to be adopted and adapted by others.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Taking into consideration the learning from its implementation, the key recommendation from the evaluation is that programmes such the Family Learning Programme for families affected by domestic violence continue to be funded at the borough level.

Based on the perspectives of the women who participated in the FLP, the agencies that referred to the FLP and the experiences of staff who developed and delivered the programme as well as the findings from the evaluation, we make recommendations for further developments in programmes such as the FLP.

- Given the strategic absence within local authority structures, the work should be limited to two boroughs in the future. This would also help to do more intensive work in fewer boroughs and build partnerships.
- Allow for intense development work and partnership building, something that needs to taken into consideration by funders who need to set realistic time-frames.

- Build pathways for families completing the FLP with partnership agencies.
- Consider employing a staff member with a teaching background along with those with expertise in violence against women.
- Longer programmes, of 12 weeks, should be considered for some families that get great value from their engagement with longer structured programmes.
- Have longer period to offer one-off workshops.
- Only have 1-2 languages if interpreters are being used.
- Offer referral to other specialised support services to pick up the intense support and advocacy work for women.

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