

STEP Starter Sack home-play programme for Gypsy/Travellers Programme Report 2022

Background

The STEP starter sack programme is an initiative that supports the Scottish Government's commitment under the Gypsy/Traveller Action Plan (2019) to explore the barriers to Gypsy/Traveller uptake of early learning and childcare (ELC) as well as a national commitment to increasing uptake of the expanded funded entitlement of 1140 hours.

Gypsy/Travellers are from a traditionally nomadic culture. Many do not take up the offer of formal, school-based education and few participate in early learning and childcare. Families are known to lack resources at home to engage in play-based learning. Without the experiences that come through early years education, such as preparation for school, personal, social and emotional development, speech and language development, and forming relationships with peers and practitioners, both children and their families can be at a disadvantage.

Frequently reported barriers to participation have been based on cultural beliefs such as expectations that mother will take sole responsibility for all childcare. Parents also express concerns about child safety and express low levels of confidence and trust in education settings. Another known barrier is the non-recognition of Gypsy/Traveller lives and culture in the school curriculum while other histories and cultures are respectfully represented.

The National Improvement Framework for Education demonstrates that excellence and equity in education are key to realising positive outcomes for all children in Scotland. There is a need to identify ways to achieve equity of access for Gypsy/Travellers and other nomadic communities.

Programme aims and objectives

The programme aim was to ensure that every Gypsy/Traveller pre-school aged child is supported at home and in ELC settings to engage in early learning to improve life chances and help narrow the attainment gap.

The key programme objectives were:

1. To increase Gypsy/Traveller early years education uptake by raising awareness of the benefits of play and early learning.
2. To increase Gypsy/Traveller engagement with early years education by helping parents develop the skills to support their children's play and learning and by providing resources to engage in play-based activities in the home.

3. To improve representation of Gypsy/Traveller cultures in the early years curriculum by developing culturally relevant resources and raising cultural awareness across services through STEP training.
4. To improve relationships and communication between service providers and Gypsy/Traveller families.
5. To underpin all programme development with research-informed approaches by working in close partnership with communities and practitioners and by recognising and incorporating best practice in the literature.
6. To disseminate new models of partnership working between the Gypsy/Traveller community and education service providers.

Programme components

Gypsy/Traveller families received:

- The home starter sacks which include loose parts, arts and crafts materials, hand-made finger puppets and felt masks relating to culture and lifestyle, and learning activities to support play at home.
- Idea starter activities including culturally relevant learning activity cards and complimentary videos accessed through interactive QR codes.
- Support from STEP and ELC leads in the form of in-person visits, informal play sessions, a 'Welcome to your Starter Sack' card with QR code linking directly to the STEP website and STEP's interactive useful contact map.
- Information, free resources and outdoor learning ideas to extend play-based learning via STEP website and social media channels.

Education practitioners and other people who support families received:

- Training on programme implementation, play-based pedagogy and cultural relevant learning.
- The STEP Starter Sack Guide for Professionals outlining common community attitudes to learning and play-based pedagogy, values and views around education, and useful approaches to community outreach and family involvement.
- A digital repository of culturally relevant learning and teaching resources on the STEP website to support and extend early years play using Starter Sack materials.

Sustaining the programme and ensuring positive impact

STEPs programme evaluation activities in October 2022 sought feedback from education professionals, local authority programme leads and community members regarding effective programme implementation and positive impact and outcomes for the community. The following 6 key factors were observed and recorded as central to implementing and sustaining the programme:

1. Cultural relevance: Ensure representation in all areas of the school curriculum and that culture and lifestyle are valued in the life and ethos of the school
2. Relationships: In-person delivery to build trust with community members
3. Partnerships: Cross-sector collaborative approaches are required
4. Communication: Informal methods, site visits, phone calls and texts are effective
5. Community-led planning: Community members should take lead roles

6. Supporting families: Extend learning and connections between home and school

Cultural relevance

Staff highlighted the importance of demonstrating to families in person how the starter sacks were developed to be culturally relevant and that resources were created by and with the travelling community. Families described how the culturally resources were rare and therefore greatly appreciated when their culture was acknowledged. Families expressed that learning was more relatable and that their children were more engaged because the resources represented their lives, the people and the places.

‘Several families commented on how it was touching that their culture was being recognised through the sack contents and learning material’ Impact form PKC ELC staff

‘I’m new to the role so it’s taken a lot of time to get to know the families and for them to ‘let me in’. But when I took the sacks round, they couldn’t believe the pictures that were on the activity cards. The young girl picked them up and said ‘That’s my life!’ I was invited in and spent a couple of hours with the family. The young girl and the granny sat and told me stories about their lives as Travellers...with each picture, there was a new story...’ Impact Dundee, Teacher

Relationships

ELC professionals highlighted the importance of delivering the sacks in person. This distribution strategy ensured that the contents and purpose of sacks were understood by families, and that families had an opportunity to ask questions or request support if needed. Many Gypsy/Traveller families will have had negative experiences of schooling and may not trust the staff or the system. It is important to establish and maintain good relationships. Providing families with a key contact who will communicate with them about the Sacks is most effective meaning that trust can be built with the key person who can share information, support the family and answer questions. An informal face-to-face meeting also acted as a catalyst to education staff forming new and stronger connections with the Traveller community. Local authorities who made multiple site visits saw that demand for the sacks increased. Knowledge of the sacks spread via word of mouth throughout the community. Regular informal events for families to attend such as play coffee mornings were also effective.

Partnerships

Cross-sector collaborative approaches are required. It is important to involve other staff such as adult literacy teams, Health Visitors, ELC practitioners, family workers and Site managers to support families in local areas. For example, Tayside Council involved Health Visitors, Early Years Centres and Family Learning Services in their outreach strategies. These approaches can be more effective as particular organisations or sector may already have good relationships with families in their area and can ensure that these community members have the opportunity to take part in or receive information about the programme. These approaches also increase the likelihood of identifying families who may not be enrolled in school and therefore are not identifiable through SEEMIS, or families who may have stopped temporarily within the local authority.

Communication

Informal and preferred methods are most effective. Staff found that making site visits or using phone calls and texts to share information with families was preferred. Make sure families can meet a lead contact and exchange contact details. Identify the best way to make contact families. If parents are coming to a school or centre make sure that the environment is informal and viewed as a safe space to share views and needs – offer tea, snacks, toys for younger children. Ask families about their thoughts about education or early learning.

'The STEP Starter Sack programme has had a very positive impact on communication with Traveller families.' Impact form, Angus ELC staff member 3

It opened up channels of communication and strengthened relationships." ELC meeting notes PKC, ELC staff 1

'Step Starter Sacks were a great opportunity to make new connections. We delivered the sacks face-to-face. These connections mean we have better communication, stronger relationships, and increased trust. We could deliver targeted support based on what families needs' ELC meeting notes PKC, ELC staff 4

'We have quite a few new staff members therefore they hadn't had an opportunity to build up relationships with families from travelling communities in the local area. The Step starter sacks have been a great catalyst to identify traveller families in the local area as the ESC settings weren't aware of these travelling families who had children under five years. The local authority now have increased knowledge and data about families and that there are many more families than they had initially thought.' ELC meeting notes PKC, ELC staff 1

Community-led planning and dissemination

Community-led approaches ensure that the community have ownership of the programme and associated initiatives. Site based co-ordinators or a community ambassador can ensure that programmes remain relevant, continue to increase family involvement and enables community members to shape future service provision. Perth and Kinross Council adopted the strategy of appointing a community spokesperson, a mother, who's children were attending the local nursery and primary school, who met with the ELC team to explore the sack and learn about the programme, expected outcomes and benefits for families. She then visited other families on site as a known and trusted individual. She provided families with information and answered questions about the programme community member to community member.

'I contacted a family who I knew lived at Double Dykes and spoke to them about the bags. This parent had a child in the school. She spoke to a few people she knew and I arranged to go down to Double Dykes to deliver the bags. When I went down to Double Dykes, I met a few other families who were keen to receive the bags, so I arranged a day to go back with more. With another family, I know the older sibling was in school, but the younger child had not been registered for nursery, so I went out to catch the mum at the school gate.' Impact Form, PKC ELC staff 1

Support to extend learning and make connections between home and school

ELC practitioners emphasised the importance of an approach where families led play but at the same time, were supported by a staff member to guide and extend the learning home. Some local authorities adopted a blended approach of online communication and learning, with in-person and in-situ methods. Once relationships had been formed, practitioners found that they could share much more information about education with the community. This included other programmes and initiatives in which the young children, older siblings and other family members could get involved. The Sacks were also an opportunity to discuss family plans for children attending early learning /school and parents shared other educational concerns such as with older children or their own educational development.

'The SSS packs are great combined with someone to go to for guidance or support' Impact form, PKC ELC staff 1

'I think much of this is about building relationships with families and creating an ethos of respect and trust. I think the packs are a great way to start this' Impact form, PKC ELC staff 2

'We had online and face to face meetings to go over contents of packs and to share activities on STEP website that complement them. Discussion with families to see if packs `being used. Families looking for teacher led online sessions as they felt they had already done similar activities with their children. Online session with families to take place using packs and STEP website activities'. Impact form Angus, ELC staff 3

We find it was overlap with other programs going on in the school which was viewed as a great advantage. This included Book bug, Eat well, Play well. All the programs benefited, and all families benefited from each program." ELC meeting notes PKC, ELC staff 1

Post Covid, STEP starter sacks were an opportunity to re-engage families who had distanced themselves or disappeared during lockdown. Doors were metaphorically and literally opened to staff.' ELC meeting notes PKC, ELC staff 4

Recommendations for extending the programme

- Sustainability requires community-led approaches to ensure community ownership of the programme and other complimentary initiatives. Site based co-ordinators or a community ambassador should collaborate with education staff to ensure that the Starter Sack programme remains relevant, continues to increase family involvement and offers community members opportunities to take on leadership roles and shape service provision. Funding will be required for training and support of community members taking on leading roles.
- Planning should make good use of local resources and services. For example, in Dundee, a mobile Playbus visited the site regularly and was able to build on activities and extend relationships with families developed through the Step Starter Sacks. Local organisations should work together in planning and evaluating programmes, sharing findings and seeking opportunities to extend learning within the local area.
- The STEP Starter Sacks programmes create unique opportunities to build trusting relationships, particularly between educators and young mothers in the Gypsy/Traveller community. By creating opportunities to meet and build trust there have been remarkable shifts in attitudes towards education as well as uptake of places. Staff should take time to understand barriers faced by young parents, for example, low literacy levels and support them to become confident participants in their own and their children's learning.
- Participating parents should also be given opportunities to take on wider educational roles within their communities. Possibilities include running play sessions for other families on sites or within other community venues and representing the community at meetings in pre-school and play centres. Parents should be signposted and supported towards pathways to employment in education, for example, as learning assistants in pre-school settings.
- An awareness of the Gypsy/Traveller and nomadic culture is essential to enable staff to understand the barriers that families face. A programme of training should be made available in all local authority early years settings. This can be offered by STEP in partnership with community members.
- Staff and community members have requested additional themed sacks. STEP should work with curriculum planners locally and nationally to develop the programme. STEP has resources to develop two more Sacks and support programmes within the current funding agreement. These will be focussed on health, wellbeing and self-care, and outdoor learning.