

Prevention is better than a cure, the saying goes – and in the case of education, it is particularly true. This was the founding principle for the Peers Early Education Partnership, set up in Littlemore in 1995 to address the educational needs of children in South Oxford.

The initiative was the brainchild of Bernard Clarke, then head teacher at Peers School, and Michael O'Regan, one of the school's governors.

They were concerned about low literacy levels among pupils, and realised that the best way to tackle the problem was to take preventative action during pre-school years.

"I was always saying to the governors, if we are going to help these young people, we cannot wait until they are 14 – we have got to get to them much sooner," said Mr Clarke.

"My view of education has always been not about subjects and exams, although those are a reality, but about motivation and engagement. I do not believe that children are unmotivated, but it is about getting the conditions right so that they can learn.

"So, for me, it was about trying to support parents who may not have benefited from education themselves, in developing those

At the heart of PEEP lies the pioneering Learning Together programme, devised by education experts and based on the concept that getting parents involved in their children's early education fosters not only literacy and numeracy skills, but also self-esteem and a positive attitude to learning

conditions in their families and with their children."

At the heart of PEEP lies the pioneering Learning Together programme, devised by education experts and based on the concept that getting parents involved in their children's early education fosters not only literacy and numeracy skills, but also self-esteem and a positive attitude to learning.

The programme is in five stages, from babies to four-year-olds, and offers parents a clear, structured framework that helps them to interact with their children in a focused and positive way, using everyday situations in the home.

A typical PEEP session includes singing, listening to stories and looking at books, as well as a range of other activities, depending on the age group.

An important feature is the treasures box – an assortment of everyday objects, which cost nothing but provide endless fascination for babies and toddlers. The key message here is that you don't have to spend a lot of money to entertain and educate your child.

Another important feature is Talk Time, a valuable opportunity for parents to share experiences and discuss issues of concern, in a

Continued on page 37



Laying the foundations

Nicola Lisle reports on the work of the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP), which works with parents and carers to give their children the best academic start in life



From page 35

supportive and non-judgemental environment. "It works by developing parents' confidence," said Mr Clarke. "I remember going to some of the early groups and seeing mums being taught how to hold their babies, how to make noises, and interact and listen to and then sing to their children.

It is about getting those relationships and that atmosphere, and that sense of parent and child being at ease."

PEEP sessions normally take place at community centres, health clinics and drop-in centres, but home programmes are available for those who, for various reasons, are unable to attend group sessions.

Although originally envisaged as a purely local project, in the last 15 years PEEP has expanded into a nationwide programme.

A two-day PEEP for Practitioners (PFP) course was launched in 2003, and now professionals all over the UK – from teachers to health and community workers – are being trained to deliver the Learning Together programme.

"There are about 130 local authorities in the country, and PEEP has direct contact with 121 of them," said Mr Clarke, with understandable pride. "It has grown, I suppose, because of demand, and need."

Since September 2009, practitioners attending the PFP courses can register for City & Guilds accreditation, while parents and carers can gain PEEP-based Open College Network accreditation equivalent to NVQ levels 1 and 2.

Meanwhile, behind the scenes in the PEEP offices, research continues into early years development to ensure the organisation stays ahead of the game.

"The research aspect has always been very important because, as well as being rooted in

practice, that practice has to be kept informed by research and up-to-date information. That gives it credibility, not just locally, but throughout the education and early years child development world," Mr Clarke said.

The real challenge for PEEP now, though, is to cope with the current financial climate. As a registered charity, the organisation depends on obtaining grants.

"It is frustrating that in spite of all the accolades we have received, we have never managed to secure substantial long-term funding," Mr Clarke said.

"You cannot avoid cuts, but the trick is to look for opportunities within them. The importance of early years will not go away, and I think even this Government recognises that. So I sense that cuts will force us to re-evaluate the way we work, and probably change some of

the ways in which we work.

"I would not necessarily see PEEP doing things very differently, so keeping ourselves rooted with local folk, keeping the whole business informed by research, providing high quality training for practitioners and keeping our eyes on the education in the broadest sense of both children and families, keeping the motivation going for families – I think those have to be our priorities, bearing in mind that it might be done in slightly different ways. I think the key thing would be to get secure funding if we can."

■ For more information about PEEP phone 01865 397979 or 397970, e-mail info@peep.org.uk, visit the website www.peep.org.uk, or write to PO Box 1404, Oxford OX4 6XW

How PEEP reaches out to families

WHEN a young mum moved to the UK from Pakistan with a ten-month-old son, she suffered from loneliness and depression while trying to adapt to her new home – and her unhappiness was affecting her baby. Then she discovered a PEEP group in Rose Hill, and slowly her life began to improve.

"When I joined the group I came to know about the responsibilities to children, and realised that it is not enough to keep a child clean and feed him – you need to fulfil his physical and mental requirements as well.

"When I realised this I started singing poems to my child when he was bored or crying. Now my son and I had a daily routine and things were getting better for us."

After giving birth to her second child, the increasingly confident mum continued to

attend PEEP sessions.

"Now it is very easy for me to take care of my two children," she said. "They read books, they play with toys, and it happened only because of PEEP.

"Not only have my children learned lots of things, all this has created a very positive change in me as well. Now I am a confident mother. My children are confident, social and civilised.

"When my husband saw my determination he started paying attention to the children as well, which had a very positive impact on our home atmosphere."

Encouraged by her involvement with PEEP, she enrolled on an English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) course, and is also studying IT.

She said: "It is hard for me, but I want to be a really good mother for my children."