Research Summary

An Evaluation of PEEP Provision for "excluded" Families: Room to Play

Sutton Trust Evaluation Project: Phase 3

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Introduction and background

Over recent years in the United Kingdom there has been a growing emphasis on pre-school services for families, partly to enable parents to work and thus reduce the number of children growing up in poverty, and partly because of direct benefits to children themselves. Core themes in recent policy initiatives include supporting parents with a particular focus on early intervention and prevention. The Children's Plan, published in 2007 includes a range of measures aimed at improving the life chances of all children, as well as targeted interventions for more vulnerable families. Over the past decade, parenting support has been emphasized in family literacy initiatives and in programmes such as Sure Start, while parental outreach and family support services are integral elements of Children's Centres and the Extended Schools agenda.

However, there is evidence that the use of such services is in inverse relation to need. Barnes, McPherson and Senior (2006) suggest that it is often the least vulnerable families who are likely to take up the offer of help from providers. Successful engagement with "excluded" families requires time and sensitivity, and some adjustment to service provision may be needed in order to facilitate access. Taking the service to the user, rather than expecting the user to come to the provider, might help to overcome some of the difficulties experienced by "excluded" families (Doherty, Stott and Kinder, 2004; Barrett, 2008). Glennie, Treseder, Williams and Williams (2005), suggest it is equally important to locate the service in attractive premises. Success in engaging "excluded" families depends in part upon the relationship and communication skills of the professionals trying to engage them (Brocklehurst, Barlow, Kirkpatrick, Davis, and Stewart-Brown, 2004).

Room to Play

In April 2006, the Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) opened Room to Play, an innovative 'drop-in' style provision which seeks to appeal to "excluded" families who may otherwise reject a more 'obvious' form of delivery[1]. Based in a shop unit in a busy community shopping centre in one of the most deprived areas of a city in the Midlands, the drop-in aims to welcome and value all parents and carers, and to support their involvement in their child's learning. Funded by the Sutton Trust and the Garfield Weston Foundation, the project was designed to run for three years. While premises were being secured, the project initially had a temporary home in the form of a 'stall' in the shopping centre. This very prominent, open access

[1] The Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) is a birth to 5 intervention programme that aims to improve the life chances of children in disadvantaged areas by raising their educational achievement. PEEP has a commitment to supporting parents and carers in promoting their children's language, literacy, learning dispositions and self-esteem through increasingly flexible modes of delivery (the PEEP delivery spectrum includes home programmes, PEEP groups and drop-in provision). PEEP also has a long-standing commitment to research and evaluation (Evangelou, Brooks, Smith and Jennings 2005; Evangelou, Smith and Sylva, 2006; Coxon, Evangelou and Sylva, 2007).

position coincidentally proved to be a very successful way of introducing the project to local parents.

Room to Play appeals as a 'home from home' with the single rule that parents and carers are responsible for their own children at all times. It offers the usual facilities associated with a drop-in, and there are play resources and activities for children. However, the play activities on offer are part of a well-established programme (PEEP), founded on a clearly-documented, structured curriculum designed to support parents and carers in understanding and facilitating their children's learning through everyday play and interactions.
The original aims of Room to Play were:

- to engage parents who are often termed "excluded";
- to develop a model for a drop-in centre based in a neutral venue that should be easy to access for more isolated families.

The objectives of the provision were:

- to offer a welcoming, neutral place to spend time during the day;
- to provide an opportunity for parents to talk to practitioners about their children;
- to offer directed and undirected play and learning activities;
- to provide information about local services.

The ORIM framework, which underpins the PEEP curriculum was originally designed by Hannon (1995) as a means to encourage shared literacy activities between adults and children. It has been adapted by PEEP into a structure for supporting parents and carers throughout everyday life. The framework acknowledges that children need:

- **O**pportunities to learn;
- **R**ecognition and valuing of their early achievements;
- **I**nteraction with adults in learning situations;
- **M**odels of literacy and numeracy behaviours, learning strategies and dispositions.

The evaluation: Phases 1 and 2
An independent evaluation of Room to Play, commissioned by the Sutton Trust began in 2006, with Principal Investigators Dr. Evangelou and Professor Sylva from the Department of Education, University of Oxford. The study was coordinated by the PEEP Research Consortium which included representatives from PEEP and the Sutton Trust and took place in three discrete phases over the duration of the project. The evaluation consisted of two strands running concurrently:

- formative research undertaken to inform practice (strand 1);
- critical description of the project and how it is perceived by both the user and the provider in such a way that its relevance and value can be generalised to other situations (strand 2).

The aims of the two phases were:

- To 'evaluate' the first four months of the initiative against its projected aims and objectives. To identify any unexpected outcomes/successes/shortcomings;
- To provide recommendations for the next 9 months of the initiative and to offer advice on the creation of a transferable model of a drop-in centre.

- To discover as much as possible about the users of Room to Play, in order to ascertain whether the provision is indeed attracting those parents it aims to target[2].

Summary of findings from Phases 1 and 2
Preliminary findings from the first phase of the evaluation (covering the first six months of the project) showed that the project provided a distinctive welcome and homely atmosphere with the PEEP curriculum as the basis for all the play activities. It was well-used by a cross-section of the community and was effective in attracting and engaging with a number of "excluded" families. However, it was difficult to establish an objective measure of which families could be categorised by the term "excluded" and to collect robust data on patterns of attendance.

Some strengths of Room to Play included being in the right location with a highly experienced, stable and skilled staff base who were well-supported. The project was constantly evolving and allowed for experimentation. Parents felt positive about the experience and created their own social networks to support each other.

Possible threats to Room to Play included the "over-use" of the provision by different types of families; as well as a potential conflict between a comfortable and sociable environment, and one which promotes and facilitates learning. Delivering a curriculum in an unstructured setting presented some challenges. It was also noted that staff might find themselves in a social work/counselling role as opposed to an educational one. Working with children of different ages and adults with different levels of engagement was a challenge, and at times it was difficult to 'move on' those benefiting least from services.

The evaluation: Phase 3
Building on the findings of the first two phases, it was felt that the third phase of the evaluation should examine the different processes by which parents are encouraged to access other services, and the role played by the staff and the setting, as well as any other factors in facilitating this. It aimed to provide as much information as possible on the following:

- a transferable model of the intervention;
- reflections on the issues in the evaluation.

Research Methodology of Phases 1- 3
The research used both qualitative and quantitative methods. Table 1 shows the different methods employed in phases 1-3.

Table 1: Research Design of Phases 1-3 Aims, objectives and methods of the evaluation

Aims and Objectives	Methods
1. To critically describe Room to Play over three years.	• A 5 day user snapshot of Room to Play • Diary notes - research officer and staff • Observations and semi-structured interviews with staff • Interviews with users • Analysis of curriculum material
2. To identify whether target groups	• Interviews with staff

[2] The first phase avoided questioning users, acknowledging that this might potentially compromise levels of trust on the part of users in the early stages. For the second phase it was agreed that this data collection was needed to gauge whether the project was meeting its central aims and objectives.

are using Room to Play and whether they are accessing any onward services	• Analysis of PEEP's own monitoring data on usage • Interviews with users • A 5 day user snapshot of Room to Play
3. To identify other users of Room to Play	• PEEP's own monitoring data and attendance records • A 5 day user snapshot of Room to Play • Staff interviews
4. To document providers' and users' perceptions of the service	• Individual semi-structured qualitative interviews with staff and users • A 5 day user snapshot of Room to Play • Parent sketches with due regard for data protection
5. To analyse available monitoring data about service usage in relation to both target groups and other users.	• Collect data on postcodes and basic demographic information of users (including numbers of children etc) and compare with Index of Multiple Deprivation
6. To identify issues for future development and to draw conclusions, particularly in phase 3, about the performance of service.	• Interview with staff and CEO • Observations • Analysis of data collected
7. To answer the following research question: 'How successful is Room to Play in engaging its target group and what is the nature of the contact?' What are the processes that enable parents to take their first steps into the provision, and how are they encouraged to engage with other people and acquire the confidence to access the services they need?'	• Interview with staff and CEO and users • Observations • Use of 'getting in and moving on' proforma • A 5 day user snapshot of Room to Play
8. To identify what the evaluation can contribute to the development of a transferable model for a similar intervention.	• Analysis and conclusions
9. To identify what the evaluation can contribute to the development of a transferable model for an evaluation.	• Analysis and conclusions

For the second and third phases, a brief quantitative survey was designed to find out more about the users of Room to Play. This 'user snapshot' was carried out by the research officer and took place over the course of a week in Room to Play. Since anonymity is one of the defining features of the provision, parents were not asked to sign consent forms. Instead, each parent was allocated a number and the research officer signed the consent form on their behalf, after explaining the survey and answering any questions. Additional ethical approval was sought from the University's Ethics Committee for this. The small number of parents who took part in qualitative interviews also followed the same procedure for offering signed consent. These qualitative interviews were not reported as case-studies, but were instead used to create 'composite parent sketches' which preserved the anonymity of the users.

Key Findings of Phases 1-3

1. **Room to Play is 'the right space' in 'the right place' and has been successful in attracting a wide range of users**

- Locating the project in a shopping centre, where parents go already, has been a good strategy for attracting parents (particularly those who may not access other provision);
- Parents feel comfortable in the open-plan, home-from-home environment and it is important for the target group that it is open most days and for long stretches of time;
- According to PEEP's own attendance figures the project has become busier year on year, while the 2008 user snapshot showed an increase in all users, including first-time users. Although there was an increase in users in 2008, the demographics of the user snapshots of 2007 and 2008 were broadly the same**;**
- Users are from diverse linguistic, ethnic and educational backgrounds: in 2008, around a third of users were not White British;
- The user snapshot of 2008 showed that 16% of users had no qualifications, while 7% had postgraduate qualifications; 67% were full-time carers. Almost half of users came from neighbourhoods that scored highly (3 or 4) on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, while 25% of users received Income Support.

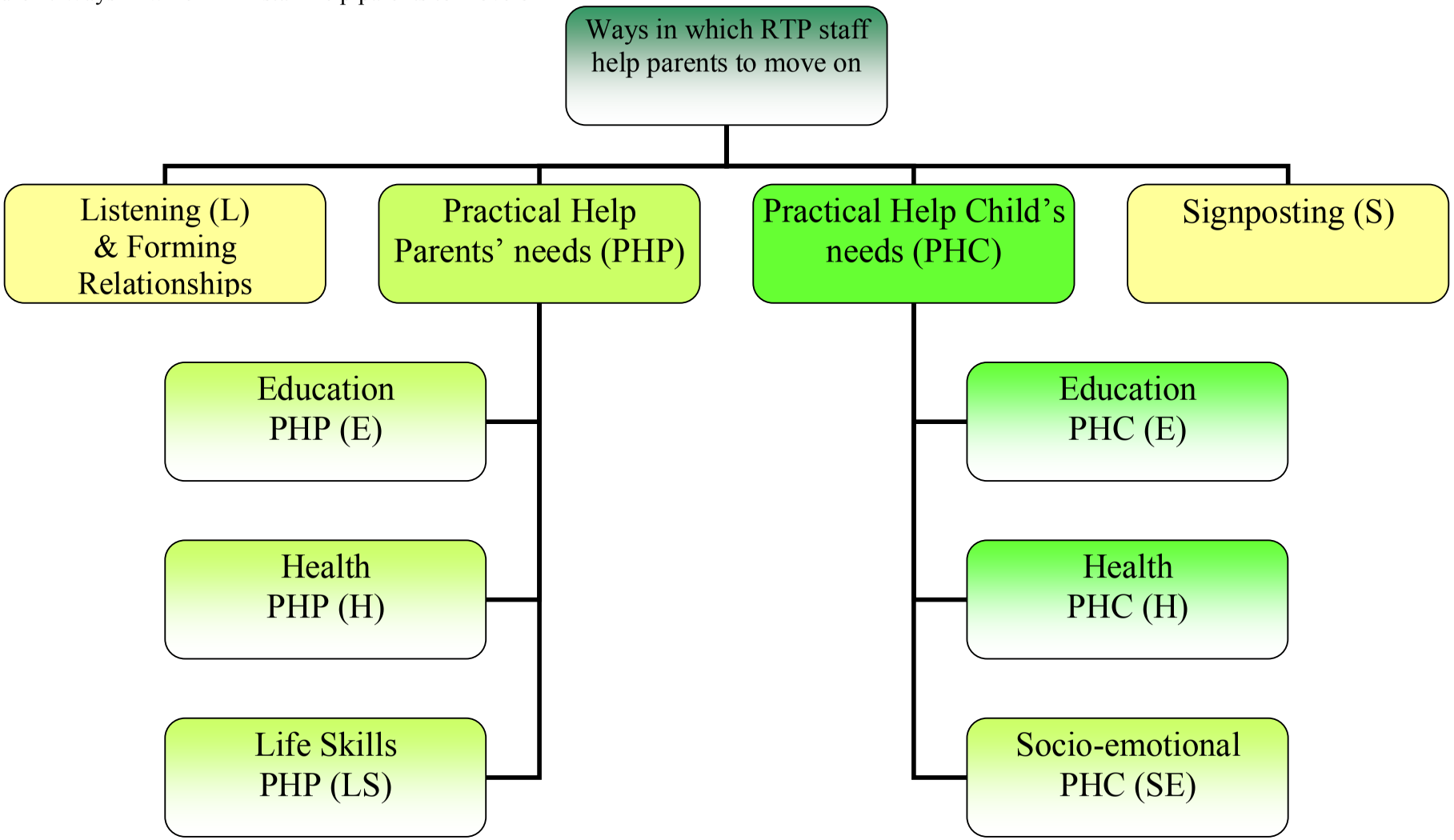
2. **Highly-skilled staff support parents in a variety of ways: relationship-building, friendships and social support are very important**

- The friendship and social support that users offer each other is a particular strength of Room to Play;
- Room to Play's stable and highly-skilled staff base has been vital to its success;
- Particular skills are needed for staff such as the ability to 'think on your feet' and deal with unpredictability in the unstructured setting;
- Working in Room to Play can have an impact on staff, who need to 'debrief' regularly. While staff have chosen not to receive counselling, they are well-supported through supervision and regular meetings, and their need for support is reviewed regularly;
- There is referral both across other PEEP forms of delivery as well as to other services, although the informal nature of these referrals and the fact that parents do not identify themselves makes it difficult to collect robust data on this;
- Although the primary role of staff is to encourage parents to engage with their children and with the PEEP curriculum, they also support parents and children in a rich variety of ways, such as listening and problem-solving, as well as signposting other services. Staff have encouraged parents to access education, and supported parents with issues such as child behaviour, accessing early years and nursery provision (Fig. 1).

3. **New experiences and messy play provided by Room to Play have proved important for parents and children, who visit Room to Play for a range of reasons**

- User snapshot surveys in 2007 and 2008 have shown that a key attraction of Room to Play for parents is its focus on 'messy play' activities to which children have restricted access at home (such as painting, and playing with play-dough, water and sand)**;**
- The more experiential activities (such as 'gloop') seem to be most successful in encouraging parents who are less able to engage with their children;
- Parents and children visit Room to Play for a range of reasons, including the atmosphere and social interaction, the facilities, including the outside play area;
- Parents and children also come to hear English spoken and to learn and practise English.

Figure 1: Ways in which RTP staff help parents to move on



4. **Implementing the PEEP curriculum within this unstructured setting has presented some challenges**
    - Room to Play offers a wide range of opportunities for parents to engage with their children through the core activities which support children's development. However, there may in some instances be a tension between encouraging parents to feel as comfortable as possible and actively engaging them in their child's learning and development in a 'structured' way;
    - Parents and children use the setting unpredictably and for different stretches of time, which has an impact on 'progression' across the curriculum;
    - Over the past three years, PEEP has recognised the need to change the way that the curriculum is planned and delivered within the flexible and unstructured setting. This is an ongoing process;
    - Simplifying the way the curriculum for Room to Play is planned, so that the main focus is on ORIM, and moving away from the concept of 'setting an agenda', which may be prescriptive, to a style of working which is more responsive, appears to be the way forward;
    - Concentrating upon developing high-quality, creative activities that are developmentally appropriate and attractive to both adult and child, as well achievable and appropriate within the flexible setting, are key concerns.

5. **A transferable model of intervention**

The following four areas were identified as core components of a transferable model, which could be taken into account for the creation of similar provision to Room to Play. While the points below can be seen as general characteristics of settings of this type, in Room to Play these are underpinned by the PEEP principles and practice.

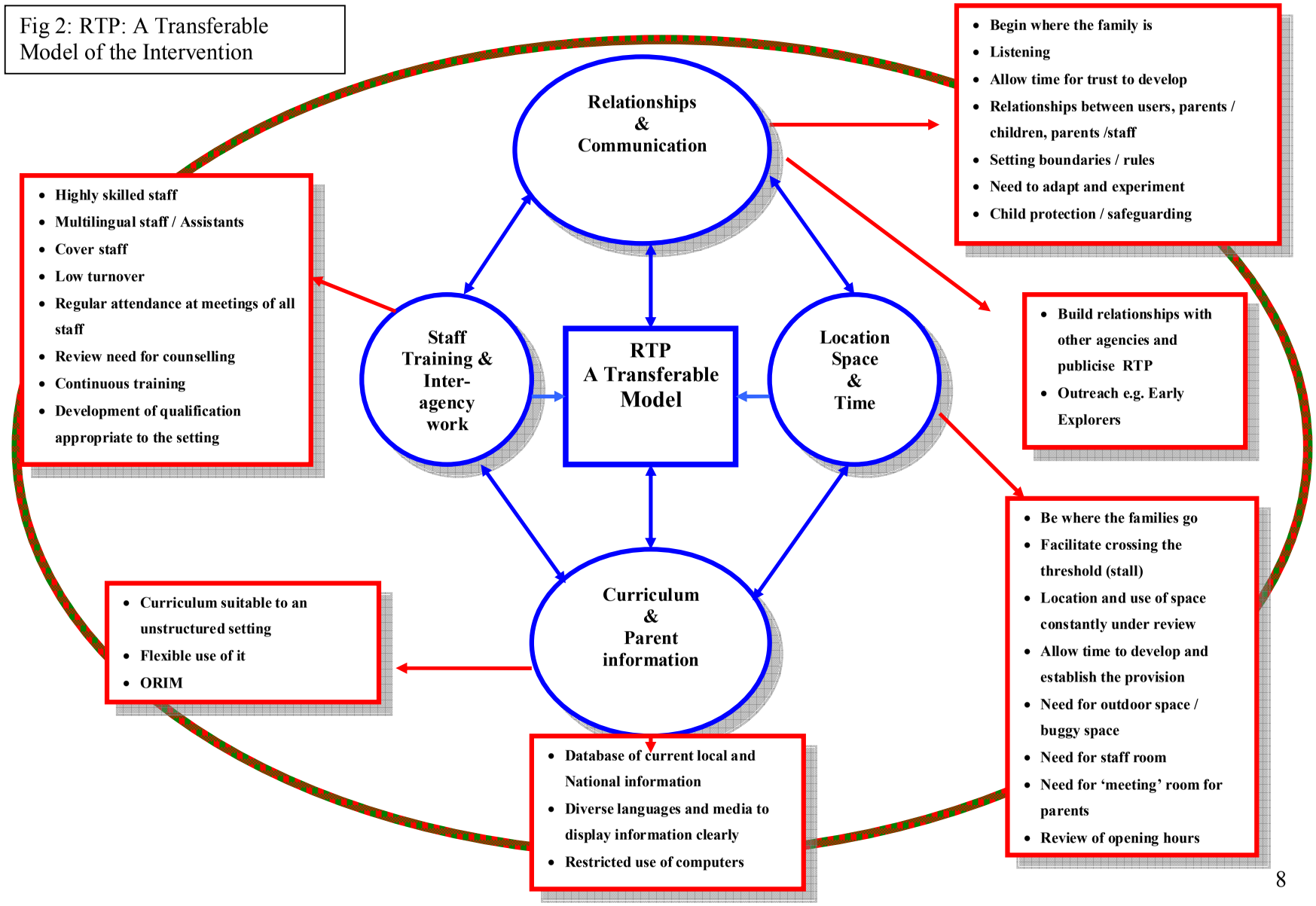
- Relationships and communication;
- Location, space and time;
- Curriculum and parent information;
- Staff, training and inter-agency work (Fig. 2).

6. **Some reflections on issues in the evaluation**

Similarly, a number of areas were identified as important to bear in mind when designing evaluations of similar provision. Clearly these issues are relevant to any evaluation, however, in the context of a flexible and anonymous drop-in that is used unpredictably by parents it is worth considering carefully the following:

- The role of the evaluator;
- Ethical issues;
- Methods and methodologies used;
- Data collection, analysis and presentation of findings (Fig. 3).

Fig 2: RTP: A Transferable Model of the Intervention



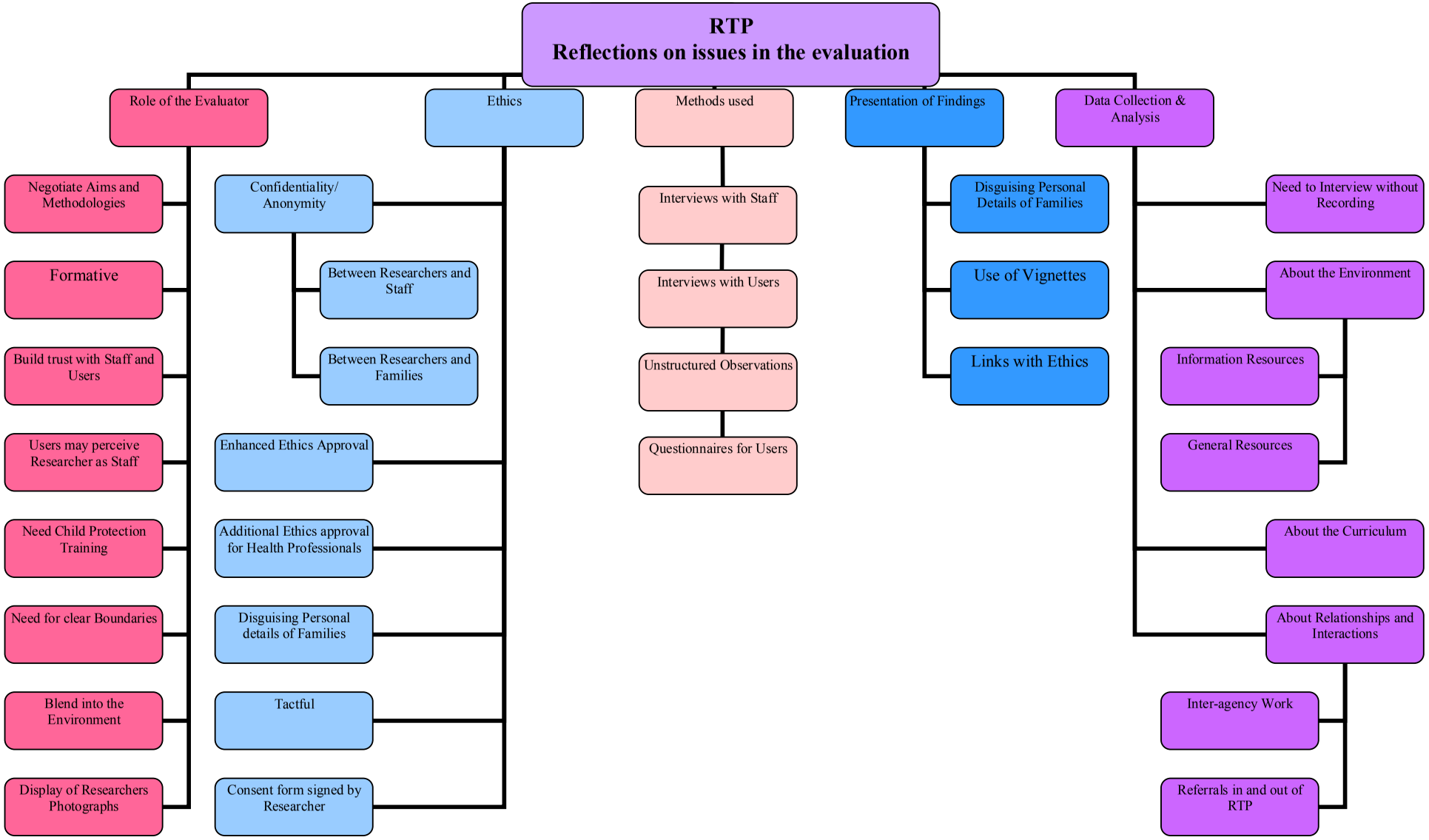


Figure 3: Room to Play: Reflections on issues in the evaluation

Conclusions

Over the past three years, Room to Play has evolved and PEEP has demonstrated flexibility and resourcefulness in experimenting with different approaches along the way. Relationship-building, friendship and social interaction have been some of the successful ways of supporting parents and children. In the case of young mothers in particular, Room to Play has empowered these parents to support each other.

The evaluation has shown that Room to Play is successful in attracting its target group as well as a wide cross-section of other users. According to PEEP's own attendance figures, Room to Play has become busier year on year. The 2008 user snapshot showed an increase in users but also an increase in first-time users. Staff in Room to Play support parents in a range of ways: there is referral both across other PEEP forms of delivery as well as to other services, although the informal nature of these referrals and the fact that parents do not identify themselves makes it difficult to collect robust data on this.

Room to Play is a friendly open-access setting that parents feel relaxed and comfortable in. However, a challenge facing drop-ins of this kind is that it is difficult to collect robust data relating to child outcomes in an anonymous 'home from home' environment which is used unpredictably by parents and children. Implementing the PEEP curriculum in this unstructured setting has also proved challenging. Particular staff skills are required for this type of flexible provision, and Room to Play's stable and highly-skilled staff base has been a vital part of its success. Staff in Room to Play support parents and children in a rich variety of ways. Helping parents to 'move on' and access other provision is a crucial part of their role.

Room to Play is very different from the other PEEP delivery modes, and it provides a considerable amount of support for parents in the form of listening and information about issues that may not be directly related to their child (such as housing and adult education). Many Room to Play parents face a number of practical problems and difficulties which need to be addressed before they can even get to the point where they can consider engaging with their child. Through its highly-skilled and non-judgemental staff base, Room to Play provides a unique setting to enable this.

However, it also appears to be the case that an open-access, anonymous setting that is available to parents for long stretches of time will be most successful in attracting "excluded" users who tend not to use other forms of provision. Room to Play is perhaps most usefully defined as a stepping stone; both as a transition to other provisions, or to a greater degree of personal choice for the parent.

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