

More Than Just a Story: Building Practitioner Confidence and Child Engagement Through Narrative Props

A Case Study with Alex Leigh and Karen Fisher, Childminders in West Yorkshire
By Kate Bates, St Edmund's Early Years Stronger Practice Hub Lead



Context

Following our initial case study detailing Alex's engagement with the St Edmund's Early Years Stronger Practice Hub, this second instalment explores the natural progression of that collaboration.

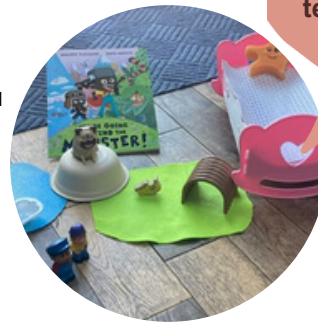
Here we share how Alex and a colleague have developed a childminder group to implement evidence-informed ideas and evaluate it's impact. The Pop-up Childminder Play and Learn Group provides a professional development opportunity for local childminders to come together to play and learn alongside their children, and also importantly with, and from, each other.

This case study explains the four-part professional development model and highlights how the first cycle in the model has transformed storytimes in childminder settings. By increasing the effective use of props, practitioners are engaging our youngest children and bringing back the joy of reading during the National Year of Reading.

Programme Model

Our Childminder Pop-up Playgroup approach was developed with the insight of local childminders and follows a unique, structured, four-part model designed to bridge theory and practice:

- **Part 1:** Childminders in a group of up to 12 receive access to a pre-recorded webinar featuring evidence-informed research alongside practical examples of how theory can be put into practice.
- **Part 2:** Childminders and their children meet for a "Stay and Play" session. This allows practitioners to discuss the research and shared learning while observing children's natural responses to resources. Each childminder receives a starter bag of resources.
- **Part 3:** In their own settings, childminders develop and use the resources shared in Part 2. They apply the new techniques in their daily routines, trying out ideas and adapting resources to meet the specific needs of their children.
- **Part 4:** The group returns for a final face-to-face session to share their journeys. Childminders are invited to share how they used the resources, talk about the impact on both their own and children's learning and identify next steps for their future practice.



"Before the sessions I had never used props, other than finger puppets, when telling stories or sharing books"

"Storytime had become really sterile. Thinking of activities and ways to bring books to life had got boring."



The 4 part model was brought to life in Cycle 1 with a focus on using props to develop storytelling in the following way...

Part 1

Research & Inspiration

Practical examples of using props to enhance storytelling, information about the ShREC approach and 'The Reading House' analogy shared via a webinar.

Part 2

Collaborative Stay & Play

Small world and messy play story scenes set up in the stay and play. Each childminder received a story sack with a book and starter low cost props.

Part 3

Implementation in Practice

Childminders and children added resources to the story sack and retold the story in a variety of ways from down at the park, to small world play, to acting out in water play.

Part 4

Reflections & Next Steps

Photographs and observations, were used to showcase the learning and fun that was had. These were collated into a booklet to show how provision was developed.

Impact



The impact of the Pop-Up Childminder Group was immediate and transformative. During the initial face-to-face session, practitioners displayed high levels of motivation, engaging in "solution-focused" conversations regarding the evidence-informed research. The "Stay and Play" environment invited children to connect while enabling adults to honestly discuss challenges in a supportive space.

Over the following four weeks, childminders creatively implemented these ideas, adapting low-cost resources to suit their specific settings. Approaches varied widely, from retelling stories at local parks to using costumes for physical acting. This culminated in a second session where children's recognition was instantaneous, settled by the "now familiar" stories and props.

The overriding impact was a surge in professional energy and motivation during a period of sector-wide challenge. Most significantly, children's learning flourished; observations captured enhanced language development, creativity, and deep engagement with narratives. This success has provided childminders with renewed focus and a powerful insight into the importance of their practice, proving that low-cost, resource-light changes can spark profound engagement and learning.

Going Forward

The success of our professional development model has inspired the expansion of the initiative, with new groups launching in Leeds and Doncaster. The evidence is clear: there is immense power in childminders collaborating to share research and creative ideas.

By the end of the first cycle, every practitioner identified unique ways to use storytelling as a tool to bridge various learning opportunities, successfully reigniting their passion for storytime. A significant motivator was the model's accessibility; providing high-quality CPD during the day alongside children in their care offers a practical solution to traditional training barriers.

As we move into the summer term, the group will carry this momentum into our next focus: Schemas. Building on their storytelling foundation, practitioners will explore these repeated patterns of behaviour to further understand and support how children learn through play.

Get Involved

If, like Alex, Karen and our Leeds-based childminders, you would like to develop your practice, connect with others, and implement evidence-informed ideas then sign up [here](#) to become a member of the St Edmund's Early Years Stronger Practice Hub.

Access **FREE** resources, webinars, training, and events. Join us and be inspired!



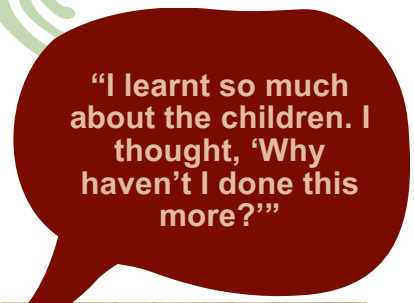
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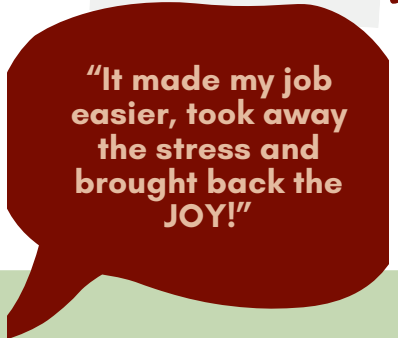
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"I learnt so much about the children. I thought, 'Why haven't I done this more?'"



"The follow up session gives you accountability. It's refreshed my mind and opened me up to new things."



"It made my job easier, took away the stress and brought back the JOY!"

