



Learning Summary

April 2022

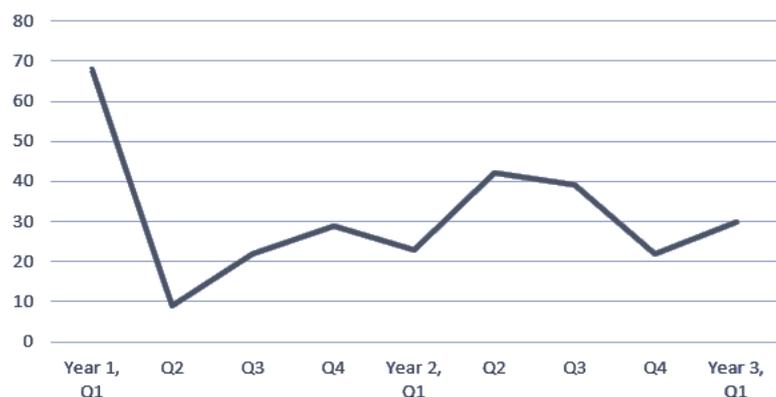
As OCF hands over the project to its expert delivery partners, we take a moment to take stock of what we've learned so far.

Growing Minds' engagement with families

In its first two years of operation, Growing Minds has engaged 247 families, with an additional 30 families taken on in the first quarter of 2022, making **277 families in total**. Uptake was relatively similar in both of our project areas: Littlemore families accounted for 67% of the cohort, and the remaining 33% of families were from Berinsfield. This is to be expected as Littlemore is a far bigger community, with approximately double the number of residents compared to Berinsfield.

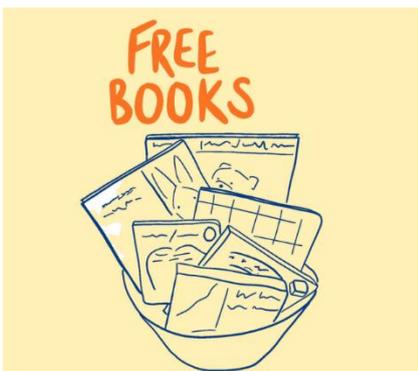
The largest uptake was in the newborn cohort (181), followed by the one year olds (51) and then two year olds (45), probably due to the increased number of contacts that families with babies have with support services (particularly health visitors and family centres), which decline as the child gets older.

Growing Minds Sign-Ups



The impact of tangible resources

By April 2022 Growing Minds families had received **3,533 Imagination Library books** for their personal libraries. This resource can really help to reduce the disadvantage gap; according to the National Literacy Trust, "children who say they have a book of their own are six times more likely to read above the level expected for their age than their peers who don't own a book".



Growing Minds offers Imagination Library books for several reasons. Partly this is to increase the resource families have in their own homes, for children to learn. They also serve as a **positive, tangible offer** to families, right at the start of their relationship with Growing Minds, and we find this helpful to **engage families** with the wider offer of support. Initially we were concerned that some families wouldn't open these books, and that's why we try to have a conversation with each family right at the start, about the support available and how that can help home-learning. Of families surveyed, **100% reported that they are sharing the books with their children**; half of these say they do this on a daily basis and the other half say they share books on a weekly basis.

"They'll send me a monthly book that is very helpful, and he's really found it good. He just can't live without books now. Yes, he has become a good reader now."

The importance of building quality relationships

We now know that a **key impact of our group and one-to-one interventions are the relationships** that we can form in and around them.

The pandemic has shown us that families really want to be engaging with practical and emotional support **in person** where possible. Caring for young children can be isolating, even without the effects of Covid-19. Lockdowns, social distancing and the general disruption to activities and services created by the pandemic have made it crystal clear how important human contact is for parents of young children (amongst others). Our Home-Start provision has really focused on building these relationships with parents in order to then support them with the specific needs of the family and children, developing relationships of trust over repeated contact.

One of the key observations of our team has been that whilst we were initially aware of the risks of 'cherry picking' families with perhaps less complex needs, **Growing Minds has successfully engaged families with highly complex needs**, and supported those families with a range of challenges.

"I think it's just nice to... just to know that somebody cares. I know (...) that sounds a bit ridiculous. But, you know, I think, particularly during lockdown, it's quite an isolated time – and you're quite isolated anyway with small kids I think, generally, because there's less you can do, less places you can go. So, yeah, I think it was just quite nice just to sort of have a friendly voice on the other end of the phone every so often."

Our Peep Learning Together Groups and other activities have also served to **strengthen peer-to-peer support networks** available to families within their own local communities. One of our services commented that the Peep groups have provided a forum that has facilitated a better quality of interaction *between* participating parents. The Growing Minds Teams have worked hard to foster these peer networks using WhatsApp and social media groups, as well as online provision where necessary. Whilst the groups are clearly a platform for engaging families in positive home-learning behaviours and discussions, we have found that families have valued the social aspect of the forums as well.

In 2022 the groups have begun to build momentum again, and from a recent survey, 72% of respondents are attending Growing Minds group sessions, all of them report that they feel positively about the groups. Ninety-two percent of respondents reported that they find themselves doing more things with their child at home or out and about, that they learned about in the sessions. **Ninety-one percent said they felt more confident supporting their child's learning and development at home after attending groups.**

"We have sung songs together, I have focused more on counting and I have explained more things to him."

"So great to spend special quality time with my son. Feels really good to do something together and focused, and lovely to be reminded of the special ways he is developing and how I can help him."

"My anxiety has got a lot worse since lockdown and I mean, I can't wait to get back to the Berin Centre, but at the same time, I'm really very anxious. But I've kind of got to a point where I just want to get back to a bit of normality, get E back into groups, socialising with babies her own age and like try and get a bit of actually hands-on support with her development. I mean, there's only so much support people can give over the phone. But it's actually having that physical support..."

Responsiveness to families' needs

We know that what Growing Minds delivers works to improve home-learning, as each intervention is tried and tested. However, the pandemic has highlighted the need for flexibility and responsiveness of family support.

It has also brought into sharper focus the reality that some families have more fundamental support needs, which need to be met in order to improve home learning for their children. **Families that are struggling to provide basic provisions are unlikely to be able to focus their time and energy on improving their home-learning environment until those basic needs are met.** During the pandemic this has been brought into sharper focus and has rightly resulted in staff supporting families with getting help for their most urgent needs first. At our Growing Minds practitioner forums, our practitioners reported the challenges around social distancing when developing trusting relationships with parents, to encourage engagement with support.

Prominent increasing areas of need for our families include support around mental health and financial hardship. Our teams have worked with a range of other providers to make referrals into specialist support services, to provide interventions in the longer term. In the shorter term they have often needed to find practical support with necessities including nappies, food etc.

"She actually brought, yeah, two packs of nappies for my little one, and I needed at that time. It was quite a struggle because, em, I'm only receiving universal credit and it was like, as you can imagine, with two kids, receiving universal credit is very like... very, em, small amount, and it's like...it's very hard to ask sometimes."

Although these urgent needs have arisen for many families, a more general appreciation of lower-level support with looking after children has been expressed around the provision of inspiring activities, play mats, ideas for activities to do at home, newsletters, online videos and cooking classes.

"Another thing that was really nice was (...) a laminated A4 sheet with ideas of activities to do at home, and actually, I think that's been one of the nicest things because it had... like it had a recipe for playdough and it had some different kind of play ideas for things... like things in the kitchen, and we did some of the things with C, and then my five-year-old as well did really like some of those ideas as well so..."

The advantages of flexibility through collaboration

The Growing Minds collaborative has been tested hugely and it has **adapted and reframed several times in order to meet the changing demands of families in lockdown**, and overcome the barriers to support (such as social distancing). There has been general agreement through our internal learning discussions that the partnership of organisations worked well together to implement the project, and in many cases to overcome challenges. Sometimes this was around sharing staff time, resources, training opportunities, and often it was around sharing innovative ideas in the partnership meetings.

There are still areas for development – our model has scope for greater flexibility in terms of staff resources, which would have been of benefit to Berinsfield particularly at some points during the pandemic. Nevertheless, it has been clear that as a collaboration we can deliver highly effective resources, activities and inspiration to families even in extreme circumstances, whilst maintaining relationships at the heart of the model.

Scaling and replicating

The intention for Growing Minds has always been for a model that could be scaled or replicated to benefit a larger cohort of families, perhaps across Oxfordshire. So far this has not been possible to test, and the pandemic has resulted in huge levels of service disruption both within our partnership and with our wider network of support services, especially given the small size of the majority of our delivery partners.

However, it remains the intention of the partners that this model should be primed for sharing, and **we have now defined the key elements of Growing Minds necessary for replication**. Primarily the tenets of the project are the interventions, including the Imagination Library Books, Peep Learning Together groups, and in-home or one-to-one support, which provides the opportunity for families to benefit from more intensive and tailored assistance. Aside from interventions, key partnerships are necessary: with Health Visitors and Birth Registrars, facilitating engagement with families right from birth; and with local community organisations holding the trust and knowledge of the needs of their community (and often also physical resources such as space).

Lastly, new areas should undertake specific approaches to support, which must be **collaborative, based on a positive asset base, preventative, place-based** and most importantly based on **high-quality relationships** of trust with families.

A note on need

Although it is impossible to determine the exact impact of the pandemic on the 'Good Level of Development' measure in Littlemore and Berinsfield, the metrics taken suggest that it has been extensive. **In 2021 only half of children starting school in Berinsfield were assessed as having a Good Level of Development, while in Littlemore, in 2021 11% of children were achieving the expected standard. This has dropped from 57% in 2019, pre-pandemic.** We cannot yet derive any meaning in terms of impact of Growing Minds, as our cohorts are not yet old enough to be starting school. However the data reinforces the evidence of need in these two areas and reflects a wider trend – disadvantaged children have dropped even further behind over the last two years. This is supported by the Education Endowment Foundation, which found that the disadvantage gap has widened by an additional month.

Refining our impact measurement

Over the course of the first two years of delivery, it has become clear that the Good Level of Development measure and Ages and Stages data is not sufficient to drive learning and detailed understanding of what particular approaches are working (or not!) and why. Going forward, partners will be using a mix of qualitative and quantitative data to inform the further refinement of the work of Growing Minds, and the indicative timetable below shows our intended learning cycle.

Impact measurement timetable	
Ongoing (monthly)	Uptake/engagement data collected
June	Case study/story collection
July	Good Level of Development data
September	Staff survey with schools on school readiness
	Annual questionnaire to Growing Minds parents
October	Collaborative learning day bringing above together
January	Learning report from above

The Growing Minds Partnership

The Berin Centre, John Henry Newman Academy, Abbey Woods Academy, Oxfordshire Health Trust, Oxfordshire Birth Registration Service, Peep, Home-Start Southern Oxfordshire, Home-Start Oxford.

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