

Early Years Outreach Practice

Supporting early years practitioners working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families with transferable ideas for other outreach early years workers

This document was first published in 2007 when Government initiatives and funding were available to support work with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. Although these initiatives and funding are no longer available, the case studies, reflections and resources from the work carried out still provide practical ideas which are transferable to practice with families who are excluded, difficult to reach or disengaged from early years services.

The document looks at how partnership working can support families in accessing services available to them. Carrying out joint visits (p10) can offer families a range of advice and support but this should be assessed as to whether it is practical and appropriate. One parent stated that

“There were three of them at my door at the same time, I did want to talk to the health visitor but I couldn’t talk about what I needed to talk about in front of the other two ladies. I never asked them in, I wasn’t being rude, but I don’t have the room in the trailer, do I?”

The document also looks at how we can engage the whole family, linking with adult learning providers (p16) offering play activities for the children and adult learning activities for the children.

Many traveller families do not access early years provision because the lack of stability in their lifestyle. How can we make our services more available to these families so that they feel that they can attend even if only for a short time. Contact sheets (p13 and appendix 2B) can record information about professional contacts that the family have made which they can pass on when they move.

The Development of Outreach Work Model (p20) could easily be adapted to audit how you work with families seen to be difficult to engage.

Chapter 4 explains how the EYFS can support practitioners in breaking down barriers and building relationships with Gypsy and Traveller communities. But this can be extended to include all minority groups, difficult to reach and disengaged families by looking at how our provisions reflect families in the community. Useful tools that can support this work are listed on p39-40.

Additional resources used in the programmes detailed in the document are included in the appendices from page 50.

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/early-years-outreach-practice-supporting-yearly-years-practitioners-working-gypsy-roma-and>

https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Developing_Trust.pdf -

Developing Trust explains the possible context of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and considerations for settings of families who choose for their child to attend ahead of the statutory school age. There are case studies and considerations for settings to meet the needs of the child and the parents to build trusting relationships. Some of these messages will also be useful to consider for all children from a range of family and cultural contexts.



Many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents prefer not to send their children to school before they reach statutory school age, the term following the child's fifth birthday. Reasons for this will vary within individual families but, for many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, early childcare has been seen as the responsibility of the family and, in particular, the mother. It may be felt inappropriate or unsafe for anyone outside the community to be looking after the children. Trust is certainly a very important aspect of working with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. Because these families are among those least likely to take up their free entitlement to Early Years provision, whether because of high mobility, lack of trust or lack of information, it is likely that their children will have had less time in EYFS provision than most other children. This means they will have had less time to become familiar with the way provision is organised and structured and to understand what the expectations of them as young learners are.

Another factor that may affect outcomes at the end of the EYFS is that the assessment processes are based on practitioners' judgements. As a result of low take-up and high mobility, there is less time for practitioners to get to know a child from the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, to identify what the child already knows and assess what the child can do. All assessments are to some extent culturally biased; children may be assessed on skills they do not have, while not having an appropriate context in which to display those skills they do have. Practitioners may have less knowledge and understanding about Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families than about those from other backgrounds; parents from these families may be reticent in offering information about their children.

What takes place in the home influences what children value and how they react to the experiences offered to them in a setting. If parents do not appear to value aspects of Early Years provision then children are likely to lose their enthusiasm. Practitioners throughout the EYFS need to ensure that they get to know the fears and aspirations of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, in order to create an environment in which they feel included and able to 'opt in' to the provision, wanting their children to achieve well within it. Developing trusting relationships in order to engage families is an essential part of our work. Families have to be certain that the specialists are working in the best interests of the children and see the benefit of the provision in order to engage with it.

Most of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in Early Years settings are likely to speak English as their home language, the exceptions to this being European Roma, who may record their home language as Polish, Slovak or another European language. However, many English and Irish Gypsy and Traveller families will use Romani or Gaelic languages among themselves, usually interspersed with English and with varying degrees of fluency. Some children entering Early Years settings may use words and phrases that are unfamiliar to their peers and practitioners.

Practitioners should never underestimate the influence they can have on the lives of children and families. While the role of setting leaders and managers is vital for policy change, all practitioners have a responsibility to reflect on their own practice and can:

- ensure that they provide a learning environment in which Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and their families feel welcomed, respected and valued;
- enter into genuine partnerships by creating a space for dialogue – listening to the voices of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and their parents;
- provide a rich learning environment with relevant, culturally reflective resources, creative and challenging learning opportunities;
- recognise that good teaching is a vital ingredient in achievement and ensure that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children experience good role-models in all areas of learning and development;
- include positive role-models where possible from the Traveller community to be involved in the setting; Displaying resources that reflect different cultures will demonstrate a setting's positive attitudes to all cultures, including those of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. This helps to make families feel valued and that their culture is respected; it is a good starting point to help develop a dialogue.
- develop patience, understanding, respect, adaptability and flexibility and be prepared to think of different ways to engage with families and to meet their needs;
- keep careful records of children's progress from entry to the setting, ensuring that expectations and progress of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children is in line with other groups, and investigating possible causes where variance arises; consider assessment procedures – checking that observational assessments of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are fair, honest and free from influences of stereotyping;
- reflect honestly on personal attitudes, feelings, preconceptions and tendencies to stereotype, challenging negative attitudes within the setting (this is both possible and necessary);
- encourage families to ascribe to the appropriate group by ensuring a positive attitude to diversity and encouraging pride in all heritages; Some Gypsy, Roma or Traveller parents will have unhappy memories of school themselves; practitioners need to recognise the very real fears of those parents about discrimination, negative stereotyping and racist bullying, which they may have experienced first-hand.
- recognise the status of Gypsy, Roma and Travellers of Irish Heritage within the Race Relations Amendment Act (2000); make race equality and cultural diversity training a priority for whole-setting professional development; review and implement, monitor and evaluate their race equality policy;

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents may also need additional reassurance about security of the premises, indoors and out, to allay their genuine fear of 'child stealing'. Safety and trust are two of the pivotal concepts that practitioners need to address in order to establish positive relationships with these groups.

Home visiting can be very beneficial in forging positive relationships with families. Do you offer home visits to all your families including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families?

How do you know what the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families in your locality think about early years provision?

How does your setting show that it welcomes Traveller families? As a practitioner, what would you prioritise in order to create an enabling environment for the children for a short time? Traveller children are often used to outdoor play; the indoor pre-school environment may be unfamiliar or overwhelming.

Have you considered celebrating Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month (GRTHM), whether or not there are currently any children from these communities in your setting? Think creatively about the environment, experiences and activities you have on offer to ensure they meet the needs of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children; share different artefacts, foods, music and clothes, and talk about each other's practices, habits and rituals;

What are the benefits of having dolls and puppets that reflect the ethnicities of children in your setting, and children who are not in your setting? Ensure role-play areas incorporate play themes that engage Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children;

In what ways do you ease the transitions between home and your setting, and between settings for children and parents who are least familiar or comfortable with Early Years provision and school settings? The demands of unfamiliar learning styles may be particularly challenging for Traveller children: for example, sitting on a carpet and listening to verbal instructions about an activity may not be as natural as standing next to an adult, watching and copying them. Practitioners need to recognise that the same learning outcome can occur through different learning styles.

Are office staff prepared to 'go the extra mile' in taking telephone calls and reassuring Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents their children are settled? How do you meet the diverse needs of children and parents as they adjust to their new situation? How do you introduce children to a diversity of lifestyles?

How do you sensitively acknowledge and encourage linguistic diversity, sharing words and phrases from languages and dialects other than standard English?

Do parents and carers in your setting feel able to say to say: 'This is what I feel, this is what I want,' are you, 'open to discussion'?

Do Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents in your setting feel 'ownership' of the settling-in process?

Are policies and procedures screened for cultural bias and revisited in terms of their impact and outcomes for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups? Does our everyday professional practice reflect our policies?

- Do we create opportunities for two-way learning, knowledge and expertise between Gypsy, Roma and Traveller parents and practitioners? Do we rely too heavily on newsletters and other written material to communicate with parents who may not be literate? What other means of communication can we use?

A resource to support the delivery of training in
Gypsy/Roma and Traveller Culture for Early Years
Settings

<https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/node/1649/pdf/1649.pdf>

