



Evaluation for Investing in Children membership

The Learning Library

The Learning Library is a charity that was established in 1986. The idea came out of the need for children and young people with disabilities to have access to suitable toys and specialist equipment, resources that could be used at home.

The Learning Library is a lending library, lending

- Musical instruments
- Jigsaws – from 6 to 1000 pieces
- Games – educational and fun
- Soft play and tactile
- Construction
- Lets pretend and imaginary play
- Stacking, threading, shape sorters
- Activity toys
- Outdoor – slides, swings, swingball, specialist trikes
- Specialist toys – switches and sensory lights
- Computer software – including switch operated programs

The Learning Library has restricted funding and therefore is only available in some parts of County Durham and Darlington. A small staff team manage to maintain and provide this valuable service to families.

This small team keep a huge amount of toys and resources in their premises at Sedgefield which is provided by Sedgefield Borough Council, as well as resources in the East, housed in Thornley Community Centre. The team keep account of all the toys and resources - anything and everything you could imagine. They keep them all catalogued, all clean and in good working order and ensure that the families receive a good service by providing the best they can for the children and young people they work for.

The Learning Library will also provide resources to schools where they can, including: musical instruments, items of interest, puzzles, jigsaws, games, soft toys, trampolines - the list is endless.

All of the workers are interested in the families they meet and through their knowledge of the child and family they can support the children by providing toys and games that the children can play with and learn from.

Evidence of dialogue and change is provided by some of the families who are members of the Learning Library.

Visit 1 – Alison Longstaff and Serena

Visit 2 – Nadine and parents Michelle and Jez

Visit 3 – Robert and Dean

Visit 1 – Alison Longstaff and Serena

Serena is 6 ½ years old and has autism. Alison, Serena's Mam told me how important the Learning Library is to Serena and the family, not only with the resources they provide but also because of the support from staff.

Alison started by telling me that not many people are consistent visitors to her home. Serena does not enjoy 'new visitors' but because Josie is a familiar face it helps Serena be more confident around people.

When Serena was first diagnosed with autism, the family bought lots of toys, which Serena didn't play with, so they wasted lots of money. The Learning Library has provided lots of toys on a regular basis. The workers from the Learning Library have a vast knowledge and expertise of the toys and the resources they have, to support parents in choosing toys that can help and stimulate their children.

Alison said that Serena was a late talker. Josie bought puppets to "make conversation" with Serena, which really helped. As a consequence, "Boo" was Serena's first word.

At the moment Serena is working on numbers. Josie has brought a variety of resources for Serena to play with and enjoy learning her numbers.

Alison also highlighted a few other things which make this service invaluable to her.

- Serena does not like going on buses. Her behaviour gets disruptive because she doesn't like being on the bus. Alison and Serena have been thrown off buses, so now they just don't use buses. Which means, Alison can't go looking for toys because Serena doesn't settle.
- The Learning Library include other children in the family. Karly the newest edition is enjoying a baby gym.
- The Learning Library will provide more expensive and bigger toys. Serena wanted a swing and the family borrowed one from the Learning Library.

Alison said the Learning Library is invaluable – and then some!

Visit 2 – Nadine and parents Michelle and Jez

I smiled throughout the whole visit with Nadine. Nadine is a beautiful, happy little girl who was very happy to see Josie. As I sat and chatted with the family, Nadine joined in and played with some of the toys she has on loan from the Learning Library.

Nadine has a range of specialist books with raised items and braille text. There was a picture, some text and the raised object shape which Nadine was able to feel. "It's a comb," she told me. These books are called 'Choosy Charlie' books.

Michelle told me the Learning Library have been able to provide the family with specialist toys. Michelle and Jez have been able to ask for specific things for Nadine. Josie has brought catalogues, and Michelle has been sent catalogues from other organisations where she has been able to request things from. Michelle said, "we couldn't do without them, if it hadn't been for the library and the catalogues we wouldn't have known what to buy!" Michelle was also keen to point out "it's stuff you can't buy in the shops. It also means we can get to try stuff and see if Nadine likes it and then we can buy it!" (Evidence of dialogue and change.)

At the moment Nadine also has a wooden puzzle, a puzzle with bits to move and bits to turn. Nadine has had jigsaws, big wooden jigsaws that when you replace the shape it makes the noise of the animal. Michelle also told me about the flash cards they have used which have been used to support Nadine in making choices, about food and about clothing.

The Learning Library was able to provide the family with a specially adapted bike for a while. Although Nadine is unable to walk yet she was more than able to manage the bike. From this the Learning Library provided a bike especially adapted and the right size for Nadine. This will be a long-term loan until Nadine grows out of it.

Please see photograph below.



Michelle told me that Josie comes every four weeks.

- If Nadine likes the toys then the family keep them longer.
- If Nadine needs anything in the meantime, Michelle can just ring.
- Josie knows Nadine, Michelle told me that she finds that this means that she can talk stuff through with Josie about Nadine.
- Other siblings can use and play with toys.

Nadine, Michelle and Jez all appreciate the Learning Library.

Visit 3 – Robert and Dean

Thornley Learning Library is based in the east of the county. Joy is the lone worker who supports the families. Joy has approx 100+ families that are members of the Learning Library that are resourced from the base at Thornley Community Centre. Joy took me to meet with Robert, the parent of Dean, a little boy diagnosed with autism and echolalia.

On the 20th November I visited Dean's home and talked at length with Robert about how the Learning Library is of vital importance to the family in providing games, toys and learning aids for Robert and his wife to play and share with Dean.

On this visit Joy had brought along games which could help Dean to make sentences.

Some magnetic words

Letters

Spelling games.

Robert told me that Joy knows what kind of things they are interested in and will also bring things along that Dean might like to try. "As a family we are working on Dean's reading, that's why Joy has brought along games which will encourage Dean to read."

This in itself is made more difficult for the family because Robert is visually impaired and his wife is blind. The Learning Library have equipped the family computer with the Supernova programme in order that the family can use the computer and Dean can play computer games with the help of Robert.

Robert told me that "it isn't easy finding equipment and games in the shops, I can't always see them, so I don't know what is suitable."

Robert listed lots of the games and resources the family have borrowed at different times.

Books with large print

Resources with body parts -

Pop up pirates - when the family were working on sharing

Books on tapes

Volcanoes and dinosaurs

I asked if Robert went to the local library to borrow the story tapes and the books.

He said "no! It's not worth it because we are so frightened that Dean rips the books and spoils them, this is a cost that we couldn't afford. With the Learning Library, it's not that we don't take care but we know that it won't be a big issue if anything gets damaged, it just gets replaced."

Robert continued saying that “the Learning Library support the parents to be able to support their child.”

All of the staff team at The Learning Library are sensitive to the needs of the children and the families that they work with; they take into account everyone’s way of dealing and coping with where they are. For example:

They have two small vans that they use to carry resources to and from the family homes. The vans have no markings or identification so that a discreet service can be received if that is what the family want.

All of the workers I met with were lovely. They work with a passion about the service they provide for children, young people and their families. They work sensitively with the children, young people and their families and they take time to get to know the children and their families in order to provide them with the best resources possible. With the evidence that I have collected I think these testimonies more than demonstrate the dialogue that goes on with the service provider and the users of the service.

It is only by spending time communicating with the children and the families that the Learning Library is able to provide such a relevant and highly-valued service. This is evidence of dialogue. Also, the fact that the Learning Library staff involve children and families in the process of choosing new equipment, is evidence of their willingness to change. In respect of all the hard work of the team and with the wholehearted support of the children and families I met with, I have no hesitation in recommending that The Learning Library receive their Investing in Children membership.

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Investing in Children
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