

Family Learning in Children's Centres, Schools and the Community: literacy, language and numeracy and the broader offer for families

Introduction

'Family learning' enables adults and children to learn together and involves explicit learning outcomes for both. It helps parents to help their children achieve, gives parents the confidence to go on learning for themselves and encourages progression to further learning. The government has given its commitment to working with its partners to widen family and intergenerational learning and to strengthen and build links between family/adult learning and the developing policies on families, parents and children. The term 'families' is used to denote intergenerational relationships in which people care for each other. The term 'parents' includes those with the main responsibility of caring for a child and is not restricted to biological parents. Most family learning is focused on families where there are children and young people. In England there has been little work that addresses the needs of older families, where there are adult children with parents in the third or fourth age of learning.

Families learning may be linked to a number of related approaches, for example:

- parental involvement,
- parenting support,
- family support,
- parenting skills.

Given the multiplicity of approaches and programmes aimed at engaging and supporting families, it makes sense to reserve the term 'family learning' specifically for those that engage children and parents in *learning together* and where there are explicit learning outcomes for both.

The history of family learning

Family learning has a rich history, drawing on a number of traditions, including adult literacy, early learning, lifelong learning, parenting, school improvement and supporting children's learning.

From the 1970s to the 1990s family literacy, language and numeracy was developed mainly within the context of adult literacy, spurred on by the 1970s literacy campaign 'On the Move'. During the 1990s research demonstrated the intergenerational

effects of poor literacy and numeracy, resulting in the decision to fund national demonstration programmes, grants to local programmes and in-depth longitudinal and case study research. Family Literacy and Family Numeracy demonstration programmes were expanded with funding from the Standards Fund in the late 1990s which came from the DfES to local authorities with support from the Basic Skills Agency (BSA). In 2000, the LSC was set up to fund Adult and Community Learning. The DfES sent Standards Fund money through the LSC and funding for family learning commenced in 2002.

A Fresh Start - Improving Literacy and Numeracy (DfEE 1999) highlighted the effectiveness of family literacy, language and numeracy programmes in engaging parents and tackling poor skills in families. This was one contributory factor which led to *Skills for Life: the national strategy for improving adult literacy and numeracy skills* (DfEE 2001) which identified parents as a priority group and promoted the expansion of family literacy, language and numeracy programmes.

The responsibility for the planning and funding of family literacy, language and numeracy transferred to the LSC in 2002, with a menu of programmes provided for local authorities. A second stream of funding for 'wider family learning' was created, encouraging local authorities to respond to the needs of families where literacy, language and numeracy were not the main aims.

Since 2000, national policy initiatives such as Sure Start Local Programmes, Extended Schools, and the national primary strategy have all stimulated the growth of family learning. *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003), the Green Paper promoting the best outcomes for children and young people, cited family learning in the core offer of children's centres, and extended schools (DfES 2004) were likewise asked to include family learning in their core offer. Finally, the government's strategies for parenting and parent support acknowledge the role of learning in families.

The richness of this tradition is a cause for celebration in that it embraces a very wide range of learners and innovatory approaches to meeting their needs. At the same time, the organic evolution of family learning means there is no single strategic approach that links the work across different strands, policy areas and departments.

Policy framework

Government policies in relation to children, parents and families are part of a vision for a socially inclusive and prosperous society. A large number of policy areas and government initiatives impact upon children, parents and families including those policies that are explicitly aimed at children and families.

Family learning has a role to play in many of these policy areas and initiatives including:

- children and families ('Every Child Matters')
- improving adult literacy, language and numeracy ('Skills for Life: the National Strategy for Improving Literacy and Numeracy')
- childcare ('Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: a ten year strategy for childcare')
- museums, libraries and archives ('Framework for the Future: Libraries, Learning and Information in the Next Decade')

- health improvement ('Choosing Health: Making Healthy Choices Easier')
- skills and economic competitiveness (('Skills: getting on in business, getting on in work')

In each policy area, the government has set itself Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets, totalling 110 across policy areas. 'Linking the Thinking in Family Learning: Embedding Family Learning Across Policy Areas' (NIACE 2006) summarises the evidence for the contribution of family learning to government targets.

Provision

In England, provision for families is part of the whole Personal and Community Development Learning offer of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) funded by the Learning and Skills Council. In 2004-05, £23 million was available for family literacy, language and numeracy programmes and £12 million was available for wider family learning programmes. As part of a key national strategy, family, literacy, language and numeracy programmes have been part of a major drive to build capacity and improve standards.

A national initiative known as *Skills for Families (2003-2005)* managed jointly by the BSA for the LSC and the Skills for Life Strategy unit aimed to develop strategic approaches to extending and embedding quality family, literacy, language and numeracy programmes through building an infrastructure, testing new approaches to programmes and training, disseminating good practice and producing useful resources for practitioners. In the first year (2003-04) 12 local authority- LSC partnerships received additional funding to build capacity, and in the second year a further 7 partnerships joined the initiative.

Wider family learning is seen by family learning practitioners as a useful way to engage parents/carers in first step learning and is widely acknowledged to contribute to a number of government strategies. There has not, however, been a key government policy driving their development in the same way that the *Skills for Life* policy has driven the development of family literacy, language and numeracy. In its guidance for local LSCs and local authorities, for example, the national LSC writes that wider family learning programmes are 'central to community capacity building and to the regeneration or renewal of neighbourhoods and communities'.

Whereas family literacy, language and numeracy programmes are taken from a menu that has been developed and piloted nationally, many wider family learning programmes are developed locally and accredited through local Open College Networks. There are also some notable national programmes, including the Workers' Educational Association's (WEA) 'Helping Your Child in School' and ContinYou's 'SHARE' programmes.

Family learning and Children's Services

The green paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES 2003) and the *Children Act* (2004) have impacted upon the location of family learning services in England as local authorities have moved towards the creation of Children's Services. Recent research undertaken by NIACE for the DfES considered the impacts of reorganisation by eliciting the views of family learning managers and co-ordinators by means of a survey sent electronically to all 150 co-ordinators in England in January 2006.

The survey had a response rate of 43.3 per cent. It found that in almost all instances family learning is situated within an Adult Education or Community Learning service or department. In terms of directorate location, twenty-seven family learning services were located within a directorate focussed on children whilst 36 were located within a directorate focussed on learning and/or culture and/or community and/or regeneration.

Directorate location appears to be the key factor in the opinions of managers in terms of the future development of the family learning service. The comments from those responding to this survey appear to suggest that it was those services within children's services that had the most to gain in terms of the partnership opportunities presented to them. Strategic positioning is a crucial factor in the successful facilitation of family learning across local authorities. Representation on committees and policy and strategy groups appears to be one way to counter the location of family learning within services and directorates with an educational or learning focus.

Evidence of impacts

There is considerable evidence of the impacts family learning makes on learners (both adults and children), on schools and on communities. It includes anecdotal evidence from small-scale evaluations, evidence from regulatory bodies such as the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) and Ofsted and larger research studies including longitudinal studies from academia and other research bodies.

The research evidence makes a strong case for the role family learning can play in supporting a range of outcomes for children, adults, families and communities in relation to development, behaviour, achievement, learning and skills, returning to employment, social inclusion and participation in cultural activities. For example, in relation to children's development, evaluation by the University of Sheffield of the Early Start programme found that there was evidence of both linguistic and cognitive development amongst the children whose parents attended the programme. This is supported by evidence from inspection such as that of the Isle of Wight LEA which was judged outstanding in 2005. Inspectors noted that the family learning activity successfully focussed on the developmental needs of children whilst practitioners consulted at recent NIACE events noted that family learning provides parents/carers with greater understanding of their child's development.

In a small number of instances the evidence on the contribution of family learning is limited, for example, in relation to health. This highlights the need for additional research to further support the case for family learning. Looking at the outcomes for children and adults together rather than focusing on only one group is another area for further research.

Quality

Learners, both adults and children, are entitled to excellent family learning provision. Indeed, the challenge of transforming public services to ensure that the lives of families and children are improved demands that services and provision are of highest quality. A key challenge in family learning is that of improving the quality across all types of provision irrespective of setting. Because a number of different approaches to family learning have developed, there is no single approach to assuring its quality.

Quality improvement frameworks and guidance materials relevant to family learning are summarised below.

Framework/guidance	What it covers
<i>Framework for the inspection of children's services</i>	Services contributing to outcomes for children
<i>National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services</i>	National Health Services and local authority services for children and mothers
<i>Framework for the inspection of schools in England from September 2005</i>	Provision in schools in England All education in the schools sector 5 - 16
<i>The Common Inspection Framework for education and training from 2005</i>	Post-16 education and training All education and training post-16
<i>National Occupational Standards in Family Learning</i>	Practitioners in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland who manage or deliver family learning provision
<i>National Occupational Standards in Working with Parents</i>	Practitioners in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland who manage or deliver parenting provision
<i>The Common Core of Skills and Knowledge for the Children's Workforce</i>	Sets out the basic skills and knowledge needed by people (including volunteers) whose work brings them into regular contact with children, young people and families. It will enable multi-disciplinary teams to work together more effectively in the interests of the child.

In addition, the new Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) has responsibility for supporting the post-16 sector in quality improvement.

The development of National Occupational Standards in Family Learning, approved by QCA in 2005, sets out the knowledge and skills expected of practitioners. The development of the standards recognises that many practitioners come into family learning from related professional fields and therefore bring a body of relevant knowledge and skills. The training model envisaged is one where practitioners can 'fill in the gaps'. The standards give training providers the framework for developing professional programmes and career progression routes. These developments will ensure that practitioners are qualified and working to commonly accepted national standards.

In 2005, the LSC asked NIACE to develop materials to support the quality improvement of family learning across all settings. *The Building Blocks of Quality in Family Learning* (NIACE 2006) was developed to support existing frameworks. In particular, the LSC hopes that the materials will support new partners or provision in new settings. Some local and regional networks are developing their own materials and approaches to monitoring and assuring quality.

Funding

Research undertaken by NIACE for the DfES outlined the complex funding environment of family learning. *Family Learning Funding: A Scoping Study* (NIACE 2005) identified as many as 30 different funding streams, both government and non-government, each with its own monitoring and reporting arrangements.

The challenges arising from such complexity in the funding of family learning include:

- information overload,
- complex arrangements for monitoring and reporting,
- reliance on time-limited project funding,
- targeting that leaves some families well served and others without adequate provision.

The major source of funding for family learning is the LSC, which set out its priorities for funding and significant reforms in the way that Personal and Community Development Learning is to be funded from 2006-07 in *Priorities for Success* (LSC 2005b) and FE in *Learning and skills – the agenda for change* (LSC 2005a). Under the new arrangements, the funding for family learning is safeguarded for 2006-07 to 2007-2008. In 2006-07, there will be £25 million for Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy and £12 million for Wider Family Learning. The funding will be allocated at regional office level based on historic levels.

Other major sources of funding include the Sure Start Unit's 'Children, Families and Parenting' Grant Programme and the Big Lottery Fund, which announced its intention to fund family learning projects under its Community Learning Programme from June 2006.

The National Family Learning Network produces a Funding Directory which is updated quarterly and can be found at www.familylearningnetwork.org.uk.

Family Learning at NIACE

Over the last year NIACE has worked with the DfES and the LSC to support the strategic development of family learning and to promote greater coherence in its development.

For the DfES, NIACE carried out research on how to create coherence among the different strands of family learning provision currently supported and promoted through a wide range of government policies and initiatives. The research, carried out between August and January 2006, mapped out the contribution of family learning to meeting the government's Public Service Agreements. It built upon an earlier piece of work for the DfES that scoped the range of funding streams for family learning. NIACE consulted with practitioners and providers of family learning and the evidence gathered is presented in a set of policy briefing papers entitled *Linking the Thinking: Embedding Family Learning across Policy Areas* (NIACE 2006).

For the LSC, NIACE consulted with stakeholders and practitioners to develop a consensus about 'the building blocks of quality' in family learning as a whole. The model and the materials developed from the research and consultation are called *The Building Blocks of Quality in Family Learning* (NIACE 2006).

The family learning team at NIACE also undertake research for organisations including UNESCO and the Local Government Association amongst others. Recent work has included a scoping study of family learning and literacy in an international context. NIACE is keen to support family learning practice and development in a wide range of contexts and undertook research in 2005 exploring the extent of family learning provision in public libraries in England.

Where to look for support

There is a developing structure of networks at national, regional and local levels for family learning practitioners. Local authorities have details of the family learning provision on offer at a local level.

The National Family Learning Network was formed in 2002 as a partnership venture by Campaign for Learning, NIACE and ContinYou. Managed by the Campaign for Learning, it organises three conferences annually, produces a quarterly newsletter and funding directory and on its website features an 'expertise exchange' highlighting where advice and support is available. The Network also supports the development of local and regional networks with advice and materials and funding directory.

The Extended Schools Support Service (TESSS), part of ContinYou, offers support to Extended Schools.

In addition, a number of national agencies work together to move the family learning agenda forward. The Campaign for Learning supports an annual National Family Learning Week showcasing the wealth of provision across England. ContinYou undertakes programme development and support, while NIACE engages in research and development, including evaluation studies, at national, regional and local levels.

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Further Reading

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Wider Reading

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This is the seventy-fourth in a series of briefing sheets, which aim to provide an introduction to a variety of lifelong learning issues. Many earlier titles in the series are still available including:

- 73. What is Dyslexia?
- 72. Funding support for adults with dyslexia
- 71. Using the ITQ in adult and community learning
- 70. Widening participation and E-learning
- 69. Older people and learning - key statistics 2005

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