

The Learning Family: a NIACE briefing note

July 2009

What is the learning family?

In the learning family every member is a lifelong learner in their own right however, it is much more than a collection of individuals on learning programmes: the intergenerational combination of encouragement and involvement in each other's learning activities by all family members raises aspirations and creates a long-term change in the culture and patterns of learning. Such a family supports parents, grandparents and wider family members to be active participants in their children's learning as well as learners in their own right: both elements are crucial in building resilience in families, in creating community well-being, economic prosperity and social cohesion.

By learning we mean both formal and informal learning this includes volunteering, learning from others, practical training, informal adult learning as well as the more formal activities in school, work related and further and higher education. Our definition of family is broad and inclusive and recognises the changing demography of family life in the UK today; we include carers and those in the roles of corporate parents.

Why is it important?

Family forms are dynamic and diverse and the UK faces a new challenge to build and sustain family and kinship networks that are meaningful for a population which, compared to previous generations, can expect increasing longevity; has a relatively low birthrate overall; has greater gender equity; is more geographically mobile; sees less stigma in ending fractured relationships, involves greater contact with other cultures, is adopting to new employment patterns and contains more people living alone. Both positive and negative effects flow from family relationships. Much detailed research¹ highlights the critical role that parents play in supporting their children's learning and the key relationship in early years with parents, in particular, mother's, educational qualification levels. The impact of the combined factors of the children's and the adults' learning is far too important to be lost between policy

See the range of publications at <http://www.niace.org.uk/development-and-research/programmes-of-work/family-learning> for a detailed exploration of the research.

areas and hence NIACE is promoting greater understanding of the concept of the learning family and advocating for policy changes to ensure this happens.

How does it sit within a wider community?

Families do not function in isolation, the wider community plays a critical part both for families with positive experiences of learning and particular in filling the gaps for those with more negative experiences. A learning community shares informal skills and expertise between generations and different parts of the community as its members become more involved in civic engagement and strive to ensure that is a better place to live and work. The new focus on informal adult learning aims to make new links across communities and organisations and provide a greater recognition of the value of this form of learning. On a converging policy track it is being advocated that the issues of young people not engaged in education, employment or training should be dealt with at a much earlier stage: at the critical time when a young person disengages from learning, whether that is at the age of three or thirteen.² It is unrealistic to see schools as the only solution, we need to involve families and communities as an integrated element of this strategy.

Why doesn't it happen at the moment?

Whilst advances have been made around integrated service provision in relation to children and young people, we still have an overload of initiatives that are disjointed and do not provide the holistic approach needed to create effective learning families. Current practice and policy settles around activity and funding streams, and, although many of these are very effective in their own right, the lack of a holistic approach means that the synergy and added value between activities are often lost. We are missing potential opportunities to raise aspirations and build long term changes in attitudes to learning.

For example, the government rightly places a high policy priority on working with parents, this crosses a number of disciplines and areas: parental involvement and engagement in schools and children's education, parenting support programmes, child poverty initiatives, health initiatives, family learning programmes with parents and children learning together and in their own right. These are a mix of universal and targeted programmes, with much of the targeted provision aimed at the same group of families seen to be at risk. Whilst the *Think Family* initiative from the Cabinet Office and DCSF has improved the chances of a "no wrong door" approach and more effective referrals across services for families at risk in the social care field, to date, this has not followed through into the learning arena.

²

See LGA and Centre for Social Justice (2009) Hidden Talents: re-engaging young people

What policy changes do we need to make it happen?

In order to promote effective learning families, we believe that the following goals need to be achieved:

- establish an effective method of ensuring that the learning needs of adult family members are considered alongside that of the children – for joint family activities this could follow a similar method to that of lead practitioner for children;
- ensure that this approach recognising the role of parents as adult learners in their own right is promoted in all family-related policy initiatives;
- ensure that the benefits of a wider ranging curriculum on formal, informal and volunteering opportunities that promote learning and resilience in families and related communities is recognised and adopted within funding and curriculum framework regimes;
- include learning as a family as a critical component within the parenting support agenda by making it a requirement that it is included in every local authority parenting support strategy;
- build on the approach adopted by the Learning and Skills Council for the DCSF funded Family Learning Impact Funding and ensure that the wider recognition of outcomes of learning across the personal, social, educational and economic areas of family life are recognised, recorded and celebrated;
- subject to the format of national indicators following the next comprehensive spending review, ensure that the contribution and economic value of this approach is recognised within any the new system;
- ensure that all professionals working with children and families on learning and social care activities have a shared understanding through initial training and on-going continuing professional development of the impact and benefit of developing a changed culture of learning.

It should be noted that these are not costly policy reforms but are aimed at ensuring effective coherence between existing activities and ensuring a long term approach to changing the culture of learning in the England and Wales.

For more information on this briefing please contact familylearning@niace.org.uk.

NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources. You can find NIACE online at www.niace.org.uk

The family learning team at NIACE works to support the development of a broad vision of intergenerational learning opportunities for all families. For more information is available at <http://www.niace.org.uk/development-and-research/programmes-of-work/family-learning> or contact familylearning@niace.org.uk

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