

## **Support for All: the Families and Relationships Green Paper**

**A response to the Department for Children, Schools and Families  
from the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education**

***Question two: Which issues should be prioritized by Government in seeking to strengthen families and support family relationships?***

### **Introduction**

1. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) is an independent nongovernmental organisation and charity. Its corporate and individual members come from a range of places where adults learn: in local community settings, schools, further education colleges, universities, workplaces, prisons and in their own homes via technology. The ends to which NIACE activities are directed can be summarised as being to secure more, different and better quality opportunities for adult learners in the UK and across the world. It is particularly concerned to advance the interests of those who have benefited least from their initial education and training. NIACE has a specialist team working with providers who offer learning for the whole family. We welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation. Our response focuses mainly on question two, as being most pertinent to our area of expertise.
2. NIACE welcomes the timely publication of the Families and Relationships Green Paper, coming as it does, 12 years after the first government paper on the family, and drawing together government policy on the family. We are pleased to see the emphasis placed on the importance of strong family relationships as a basis for children and young people's wellbeing, and we support the Paper's vision of a family policy fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The recognition of the diversity of modern families, and the broadening of the definition of the family to explicitly include other family members is particularly welcome, as is the expectation that adults' and children's services will work more closely together. However, we see the Paper as somewhat lacking in ambition, in particular the importance placed on information and advice without a corresponding emphasis on learning, and the lack of recognition of learning as a key element in creating an environment which encourages family relationships to flourish.
3. Learning as a family provides many opportunities for building strong family relationships, while at the same time generating specific learning outcomes for adults and children leading to an improvement in skills and knowledge and the raising of aspirations for all family members. It can break the cycle of disadvantage, encourage parents to feel more confident about supporting their children and improve skills and confidence. It promotes the family as a learning environment and inspires a culture of aspiration in adults and children. This change in aspirations, supported by increased confidence and self esteem, and

improved family relationships, makes a powerful contribution to families' wellbeing, ability to thrive and develops skills for resilience<sup>1</sup>.

4. For these reasons, we would like to see learning feature more explicitly in the Green Paper, in particular learning as a family and intergenerational learning within families.

### **The role of learning in the family**

5. The Paper's first objective is for all families to have access to high quality information, advice and support. However, these alone will not remove the inequality in family trends and lift children out of poverty unless they are accompanied by support for families to access the information and services and to develop the skills to make it useful for them. A Family Financial Capability learning programme carried out in the Isle of Wight found that under-developed literacy and numeracy skills meant that families could not use a bus timetable. Developing these skills meant that they could use public transport, take the children out during the holidays and save money<sup>2</sup>.
6. The Paper recognises that parents and the home environment play a crucial role in the development of a child's literacy and numeracy skills. Equally it highlights the importance of involvement and engagement of parents in their children's learning and development, and improving the relationship between parents and their children's school. We are reassured by these recognitions, but are concerned that the connections have not been made between these and the development of adult family members' skills. Mothers, fathers, grandparents and carers who take up learning opportunities, formal or informal, for example on programmes linked to schools and children's centres, create a learning environment for their children, become involved in their children's learning and engage with the school or children's centre.

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<sup>1</sup> See: [The Learning Family: a NIACE briefing note](#) (2009)

<sup>2</sup> See [Opening the Door: case studies from the 2008/9 Family Learning Impact Funding Programmes](#), case study 1

A **Family Learning Impact Funding (FLIF)** programme in Staffordshire targeted 'at risk' families who were unemployed or on low income, had English as an additional language and no formal qualifications. All the parents were identified as having little or no relationship with the school. The course was designed to help parents with skills for life needs to become more involved with the school system and to address their needs so that they were able to support their children's learning. The learners found that they were more aware of their children's education which in turn, helped them to support their children with their learning. For example, sharing books and bedtime stories raised awareness of the benefits of reading together. Parents fed back that the relationship between themselves and their children had improved. They were made aware of the key people within the school and now felt more comfortable in approaching them. 15 of the 17 learners pursued further Skills for Life learning and some of the parents opted to do volunteer work within the school.

From [Opening the Door: case studies from the 2008/9 Family Learning Impact Funding Programmes](#), case study 2

7. There are many areas mentioned in the Paper, for which learning as a family could play an integral and important role, and indeed many where it already does:
- family SEAL involves whole families in SEAL programmes for example models developed in Wiltshire and Nottingham;
  - the Byron review emphasised the importance of giving parents the skills and confidence to manage their families' use of new technology. Intergenerational family learning gives families the opportunity to learn about new technology together and from each other, for example the Digital Families programme through the DCSF-funded Family Learning Impact Funding (FLIF) ;
  - family learning is already working with schools and children's centres to help families develop financial management skills, through FLIF;
  - family learning includes grandparents and provides ways of updating skills and where appropriate helps grandparents maintain their relationships with their grandchildren for example when parents separate;
  - Informal learning is key to engaging adults in learning, enabling them to develop skills and confidence and helping them back into work. Family learning engages parents and family members through their children, and helps to create a culture of learning and employment within the family.

### **Working together for the whole family**

8. Think Family provides the model for a joined-up and integrated approach, with adults' and children's Services working together with the whole family. Family learning works at the interface between adults' and children's services and

learning is already at the heart of the Think Family approach. However, the emphasis on parenting apparent in the Green Paper risks undermining that approach by focusing on one aspect of learning and family life. It does not recognise the importance of developing the confidence, skills and opportunities of parents and other family members. We would like to see strategies across local authorities that weave together parenting, family support and adults' and children's learning.

9. We are delighted that DCFS and BIS will be working together to ensure family learning programmes build on the success of the Family Learning and Family Learning Impact Funded programmes. Research and development we have carried out with the LSC and LSIS offers evidence of a range of positive impacts of these programmes, and in particular the bringing together of the two departments' agendas.
10. We are interested in the notion of training professionals involved with children to build and sustain an appropriate relationship with parents and other family members. NIACE has been at the forefront of developing links between the agendas of different professions involved with families, including linking quality systems<sup>3</sup> and developing joint working between children's centres and family learning<sup>4</sup>. We have developed family learning qualification units for tutors in the lifelong learning sector, designed as part of the QCF to permit professionals working alongside each other but in different roles (e.g. wider family learning, FLLN, parenting support, extended schools services, teachers) to share some of their training and development. The aim is to develop a workforce, where the family is central to its purpose, having a common qualification structure to develop mutual understanding and expertise across the whole sector.
11. We see family learning as a useful catalyst for bringing together different professions involved with children and families, and developing partnerships to support children and families. We would welcome the opportunity to explore this further with the Department.

## Conclusion

12. NIACE believes that learning in the family makes a powerful contribution to the vision outlined in this Green Paper, and we would like to see this recognized more explicitly. We would also welcome the opportunity to work with the DCFS and BIS to explore the role of family learning in developing closer working between adults' and children's services and workforces.

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<sup>3</sup> Meade, C; Kershaw, P & Lamb, P (2007) [Quality Matters: Think Family](#). Leicester: NIACE

<sup>4</sup> Meade, C; Cholmeley, K F & Thomas, M (2009) [Family learning in children's centres and extended services: a multi-agency approach](#). Leicester: NIACE