

A note on family learning

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Rationale for family learning

The Government's Green Paper, *The Learning Age* (February, 1998) states that along with community and adult learning, family learning is "essential in the learning age".

In his influential book, *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman extols the importance of the family as a site for learning:

"Family life is our first school for emotional learning; in this intimate cauldron we learn how to feel about ourselves and how others will react to our feelings... [It] operates not just through the things parents say and do directly with children, but also in the models they offer for handling their own feelings..." pp 189-90.

From their youngest age a person is engaged in learning about their environment and other people in that environment, such as the parents in the domestic situation, will have a profound influence over not only the way the child develops but also over the shaping of their attitudes to the learning process (Innes, pp 4-5, 1999). Gorard et al. (1998) investigated learning trajectories over the life course and concluded that long-term learning identities are formed within families, a finding which is increasingly recognised – for example, a recent Demos publication describes parents as "the first and most enduring educators" (Alexander, 1997).

If a family shares goals and fosters a team spirit, individuals' motivations to learn become replaced by family based motivations. This can create a "learning buzz", which is immensely effective in motivating learning amongst all individuals in the family. On the other hand, if the child is not encouraged to learn, nor to enjoy learning, we may find that they under-achieve in the process of formal schooling. This in turn is likely to have the knock-on effect of increased levels of social exclusion as a result of lower levels of educational attainment.

Haggart (2000) in her NIACE report, *Family Legacies*, makes the point that 'family learning' is 'what people outside the family do to enable and facilitate the learning that goes on in families.' She identifies five types of family learning, the essentials of which are captured in Buffton's (1999) National Advisory Group on Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning working paper definition:

"Family learning supports efforts to raise children's achievement levels, raises expectations and aspirations of both children and adults, promotes active citizenship and, as the family group is the microcosm of the community, is community capacity building at its best..."

Parameters of family learning

The OFSTED report on family learning describes family learning as “learning which brings together different family members to work on a common theme for some, if not for the whole, of a planned programme.” (pg 5). However, in their manifesto for family learning, the Campaign for Learning suggest that definitions of family learning should go beyond this description. Family learning is mostly inter-generational. It may be formal or informal, undertaken outside formal institutions or in conjunction with them, and with or without professional support. Formal institutions include colleges and schools, libraries, community centres, arts centres, museums, and the media.

Buffton (1999 pg 12) suggests a typology of family learning that incorporates tackling individual learning needs, parental learning about issues pertinent to the family, two or more family members learning about the same topic independently, two or more family members learning together, and two or more members of a family learning together with progression routes. She adds that family learning will only bring about lasting change in attitudes to learning if its curriculum moves beyond literacy courses to a broad and balanced curriculum, introducing a wide range of new and familiar subjects.

Following the work of Bandura, it is now well established that an individual’s belief in their abilities is a very good predictor of motivation. Consequently, in order to motivate people to learn, one must play to their (self-perceived) strengths. Many parents, especially those who have had negative educational experiences, are more motivated to learn within a context in which they feel secure and confident, such as the family. In addition, parents are highly motivated to help their children (e.g., Edwards and Warin, 1999) and this motivation can lead to participation in a variety of forms of organized learning. If parents become engaged, education can change habits of parenting and break cycles of deprivation.

Family learning builds upon individuals’ strengths, aptitudes, and interests, and the diversity should be treasured.

Examples of family learning

OFSTED (2000) report that the most frequently encountered examples of family learning are family literacy schemes and emerging family numeracy programmes, funded by the Standards Fund and additional sources such as Single Regeneration Bid. Many of these programmes are targeted towards parents and children with basic skills needs. For example, an objective of the Basic Skills Agency model for family learning, derived from highly successful pilot projects (Brooks et al, 1996,1997), is to break the cycle of inter-generational educational disadvantage through targeting children and parents with basic skills needs. School teachers and Adult Basic Skills Tutors deliver learning to parents and children with basic skills needs through the primary school.

The OFSTED report adds that there is a small but significant element of family learning programmes which cover a wider curriculum: arts and crafts, Information and Communication Technology (ICT), music, cookery and language learning.

Parenting education is another form of family learning. It focuses upon helping parents to become more skilled in the role of parenting and aims to encourage community involvement in supporting children. A variety of courses to support parents in their role have been developed by a number of organisations, including the National Health Service, Workers Educational Association, local education authorities, churches and voluntary sector groups. Open College Network accreditation is offered on many of them. One example is Parent Link, developed by the voluntary organisation Parent Network, in which parents who have attended courses are encouraged to return and support other parents.

Allan (1994) warns that parenting education programmes can perpetuate dominant ideologies, and Poulin (1987) suggests that if parent education were mandatory, this could turn parenting competence into an issue of social control rather than individual responsibility.

In addition, family learning can take place informally in libraries, museums, art galleries, through discussions with other family members and friends, and so on.

Further examples of initiatives involving family learning are given in appendix 1.

Evidence relating to family learning and its benefits

The Campaign for Learning reports that its 1998 MORI survey showed that the home is the most important learning environment for UK adults. The 2000 MORI survey revealed that just over two thirds of 12 to 16 year olds rate their parents as the strongest learning influence in their lives (2000).

Parental levels of education at time of birth are “critically important factors” in determining children’s cognitive development and educational success throughout school (Roberts et al., 1999; Bynner et al., 1999). The reasons for this finding will be numerous, but one of them may be that highly educated parents tend to have positive attitudes towards learning and school.

A number of studies demonstrate that parental involvement in school has positive effects on children’s educational performances (e.g. Bynner and Steedman, 1995; Parsons and Bynner, 1998; Plowden Report, 1967; Hargreaves report for ILEA, 1984). This is partially explained by the finding that good communication between home and school determines how effectively parents and caregivers help their children, particularly for parents who lack confidence in their own (academic) abilities (e.g., Tizard et al., 1988; Rogoff, 1989; Delpit, 1995; Cuckle, 1996).

Additionally, it appears that success in school depends upon families’ positive attitudes towards learning and school (e.g., Bowman, 1994; Kagan, 1994; Ramsey and Ramsey, 1992). In an analysis of the impact of social class on education, Gorman found that parents’ attitudes towards Higher Education influenced children’s attitudes towards their education, and their chances of obtaining a degree.

There is evidence that early experience of sharing stories and books affects the progress children make at school (e.g. Wade, 1984; Wells, 1985; Toomey, 1993). Attention and concentration are additional factors, which have been shown to assist

learning in primary schools (e.g. Rowe, 1995). Most family learning projects set out to foster these experiences and qualities.

A study of the effectiveness of lifelong learning in rural Lincolnshire uncovers the mismatch of the views held by education providers and learners (Atkin, 2000). In this area there is a tradition of family learning passed down through generations, which is at odds with lifelong learning programmes that have been realized in formal education and training programmes. Learners on these (formal) courses did not see them as part of a life time of learning but rather as a means to an end of, for instance, attaining a qualification which would be recognised by employers. Evidence such as this calls for an investigation into how far lifelong learning schemes succeed when they are, and when they are not, trying to foster family learning activities.

Evaluations of family learning projects

1. The OFSTED report on family learning.

OFSTED (2000) reports that successful programmes of family learning offer good value for money and result in the following benefits:

- For parents:
 - improved competence in literacy and numeracy,
 - progression for over 50% participants to FE and training or more challenging jobs
 - increased confidence in contacts with schools, teachers, and the education system leading to becoming more active partners with schools
 - a greater understanding of child development and of the strategies that can be used to help children to learn at key points in development, improved parenting,
 - better relationships with children

- For children:
 - accelerated development of oracy and pre-literacy skills
 - improved standards in numeracy and literacy
 - positive behavioural and attitudinal changes
 - enhanced confidence and self-esteem
 - awareness that learning is a normal activity throughout life
 - pleasure from collaborative learning.

OFSTED report that in models of family learning where the curriculum is broad, providers have greater success in attracting participants from disadvantaged and under-represented groups. (pg 8).

The report also mentions that practitioners in family learning are “very dedicated” (pg 24). This is presumably because the experience of practitioners is that family learning does help families.

2. *Evaluation of Bookstart*

Bookstart was initiated in 1992 by Book Trust, working in co-operation with Birmingham Library Services, South Birmingham Health Authority and Birmingham University School of Education. It provides free books and other resources that encourage parents to share books with their children. The initiative has been evaluated from the outset and there have been a number of follow up studies (e.g. Wade and Moore, 1993; Wade and Moore, 1996a, 1996b; Moore and Wade, 1997). Research findings derived from two main sources – a longitudinal study of children and parents involved in the initial Bookstart project based in Birmingham and smaller scale evaluations of 27 individual Bookstart projects – are consistent. They demonstrate positive benefits in terms of babies' competence with books, parents' attitudes towards books, rates of library membership, and performance at KS1 in both literacy and numeracy. Additional research has been commissioned to evaluate the programme, which will be published in 2001.

3. *Evaluation of SHARE*

SHARE is a family learning initiative developed by the Community Education Development Centre (CEDC). Learning materials are provided for children and their parents to work from at home. Parents can receive accreditation through the Open College Network in relation to what they learn about how their children learn. The model was implemented at Key Stage in 6 LEAs in July 1996. It has since expanded to cover more than 40 LEAs. Key Stage 2 has now been incorporated, and implementation at Key Stage 3 is being piloted. Evaluations of the project demonstrate benefits in terms of parents' progression to further education and in terms of children's attitudes to learning and their attainment (Bastiani, 1999; Lewis, 2000).

4. *Evaluation of family literacy projects*

The Basic Skills Agency's Family Literacy Programme directed at poor reading primary school children and their parents, involves inviting parents into the school to work with their children in helping them with their reading. The NFER evaluation of the pilot programme revealed lasting improvements in reading both children and the parents (Brooks et al., 1996, 1997) that have been replicated with ethnic minority families (Brooks et al., 1999). Similar positive results were obtained for the more recent BSA Family Numeracy programme (BSA, 1998)

Grasbach and Toomey (1997) report that intergenerational family literacy programmes had benefits for children and adults in Australia.

Tett and Crowther (1998) use data from a family literacy project based in a poor working-class area in Scotland to illustrate how literacy practices of working-class families and communities can be incorporated into learning programmes. Deficit views of families at a disadvantage can be replaced by views that positively value the home culture to the benefit of both home and school.

5. *Evaluation of FAST.*

FAST (Families and Schools Together) is an early intervention preventative school-based family support programme for children identified as having behavioural

problems, which involves play therapy and family therapy. McDonald et al. (1997) evaluated the intervention and demonstrated that both children and parents benefit. Children of families who have participated in the programme have improved conduct, less anxiety and withdrawal and a better attention span, whilst participating parents are more involved in school, meet friends through the project, enter employment, return for further education, and become more involved in their communities.

6. *Analysis of family learning in museums.*

Numerous observational studies report that families in museums behave in ways that indicate that they are learning, e.g., McManus, 1994; Bitgood, 1993. However, Borun et al. (1995) review the relevant literature and conclude that “to date, no one has shown a correlation between observable behavior in the free-choice museum environment and an independent measure of learning” (pg 264). They suggest that this is because of the methodological difficulties involved in doing so.

7. *Evaluations of parenting education programmes.*

Parr (1996) reports that parents who had participated in a scheme for parents of infants called Parents in Partnership were less anxious, less vulnerable to depression, and better able to cope with parenthood than they would have been otherwise. Similarly, parents who have participated in courses organised by Parent Network had increased levels of self-esteem, lower stress and improved family relationships. In addition, the problematic behaviours of their children were moderated (Davis and Hester, 1996). Another parenting intervention, Parenting Positively has been found to improve child behaviour and reduce the chances of depression amongst mothers (Sutton, 1995). Draper et al. (1997) evaluated a 3 month parent training programme, and found that parents who had participated were more likely to take a supportive leadership role, were more likely to have age-appropriate expectations during a puzzle solving task, and their families were less likely to engage in conflict. The children had better social skills and better gross motor skills.

Child-care skills training is particularly useful for mothers with developmental disabilities, e.g , Feldman et al., 1992, who demonstrates that training led to elimination of nappy rash and cradle cap, increased weight gain and successful toilet training.

Ways forward for family learning

The OFSTED report on family learning concludes that “an evaluation of the long-term impact of family learning is long overdue” (pg 7). Such an evaluation should consist of more than a number of evaluations of the effectiveness of individual initiatives. In addition, research is required to investigate the roles of the family in learning, how motivation for learning develops, the relative impacts of different types of family learning schemes for different sorts of families – for example; more formal, top-down approaches vs. more informal, bottom-up approaches to provision, and the importance of multiple agency involvement. Much is already known in these areas, but there is a need to review this knowledge and build upon it to generate a fuller understanding of the strengths of family learning and to build a clearer vision for the future.

Most documents about family learning emphasise the need for a clear policy for family learning and more effective planning at a central level, which would result in common purposes and a shared rationale amongst family learning programmes, and co-ordinated provision responsive to local needs. For example, Buffton (1999) suggests that:

“many organisations are already active in delivering family learning – pre-school groups, adult, further and community education providers, schools, youth centres, community and voluntary organisations, libraries, museums and art centres, leisure centres, community health services, religious and cultural organisations. But these efforts are uncoordinated at both a national and a local level and often rely on short-term funding.” pg 2.

Legislation could require local authorities to demonstrate ways in which they are supporting and encouraging family learning, with the inclusion of clear strategies to ensure that provision automatically reaches those most in need of it. Further Education Colleges and Workers Education Associations could also include family learning in their strategic planning.

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Appendix

Some examples of initiatives incorporating family learning.

1. A school-based family learning project in inner London.

Some family learning projects incorporate a range of activities. For example, in a primary school in inner London, parents together with their children under school age are recruited in the morning from the playground to come to an informal coffee morning in the school. The coffee mornings are run by Adult Education tutors, who spend a lot of time planning and devising possible programmes, but the mornings are described as groups, and if an issue is brought up by parents, it will be dealt with. Subjects covered include arts and crafts, making a 999 call (basic living skills), health issues, coping with difficult behaviour (parenting), how to deal with parents' evenings (communication with the school), and designing educational games to play with children. Through this course, many parents become involved in family literacy and family numeracy programmes and progress to more advanced courses in child care and development or obtain paid employment as learning assistants in the school.

2. Provision through family learning centres.

In Gloucestershire the LEA funds 15 family learning centres, which provide pre-school learning, mother and toddler drop-ins, health visitor services, and adult education. The adult education curriculum is determined by parents using the Centres. In addition, full use is made of libraries, arts centres, community and neighbourhood centres, and adult consortia.

3. Family learning at the Pen Green Centre in Corby.

The Centre offers a wide range of accredited courses for parents and group leaders from basic skills through to 'A' levels, support with developing study skills, guidance to enable parents to recognise their existing skills - provided in such a way as to build parents' confidence and self-esteem. Courses are accredited so that parents can build up a portfolio of learning achievement. There are also groups that offer a mixture of education, support and therapy, and other groups which are for children as well as parents. Parenting education is provided through additional groups which encourage parents to reflect on their family's needs and support them in developing their own style of parenting. Creche provision is available, and groups are offered at all times of day and evening, they are short and long term, closed, open, and drop-ins.

4. 'Read and Write Together'.

Courses like 'Read and Write Together' (developed from BBC material – Guide for Parents), which encourage all parents to support their children's literacy and numeracy are also based outside schools. The 'Read and Write Together' courses provide Adult Education sessions for parents (12 to 20 hours), together with informal activities with children, e.g. trip to library, reading together. Accreditation is available via Open College Networks. Such courses could lead to activities shared by a parent and child such as those described in this extract from a parent's diary:

“Liam and mum worked out a shopping list (spelling), listing favourite foods, testing how long you could leave bread before it went mouldy (healthy eating), looking for special offers (financial literacy), weighing fruit (numeracy).”

5. SHARE and Archway.

The Community Education Development Centre (CEDC) have developed a model called SHARE, an accredited course for parents delivered by schoolteachers that provides materials for parents and children to work together at home and can also involve parents attending evening classes for a year. The Archway model in Gloucestershire has similar aims but is targeted towards parents of children who seem to be failing, and delivery is through Adult Education.

6. Bookstart.

Bookstart is a national project sponsored by Sainsbury's and supported by the National Book Trust. The aim is to encourage early book sharing by parents and their babies. Libraries and health visitors collaborate to get the message to parents, who receive a free pack containing books and information when they join the library.

7. Kent Children's University.

This offers residential learning for families with young children experiencing stress. The families spend a weekend at the county's outdoor education centre where they engage in a varied programme of activities, including outdoor pursuits, team exercises, producing a newspaper, storytelling, and eating meals together. Staff help parents to reflect on these experiences and to talk about the meanings. Follow-up work aims to consolidate some of the learning. (From Campaign for Learning, 2000).

8. Ysgol y Berwyn.

Ysgol y Berwyn is a co-educational predominantly Welsh-speaking secondary school in an agricultural area. Fifteen families have attended a Welsh medium ICT course in Farm Administration, and many parents and pupils have participated in a Family Learning 'Sheepdog Handling' course at the school. This culminated in the participants planning and staging their own Sheepdog Trial, which attracted almost 70 handlers and their dogs and looks set to become the town's major event. (From Campaign for Learning, 2000).

9. YMCA's 'Dads and Lads – For Fathers and Men Who Care'.

This project uses sport to help fathers and their sons interact and communicate better. Rather than watch from the sidelines, dads participate in team games which involve working as part of a team and having fun together while also building confidence and self esteem. (From Campaign for Learning, 2000).