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### Provider influence on the early home learning environment (EHLE)

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For further information about the study, please contact Anne Page at the Family and Parenting Institute.

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE). The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

#### Terms used in the report

Throughout the report we refer to parents and staff or providers in settings. Ninety-six per cent of parents who took part in the study were mothers and ninety-nine per cent of providers were female.

## Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) from the Family and Parenting Institute in partnership with the Campaign for Learning, to help identify what nurseries and other early years settings could do to better support parents to develop their children's learning at home. The research analyses this issue using both quantitative and qualitative data.

The aim of the study is to help identify which strategies are most effective in supporting parents to give their child the best start in early home learning.

The findings identify best practice, help quantify the benefits of support to parents and offer suggestions about how to make best use of resources at a time of financial constraint.

The study was complex in design to allow for a 360 degree snapshot view of how much early home learning parents engage in before and after children aged 2-4 started in a funded childcare place. The rich data we collected, both quantitative and qualitative, has provided insights into parents' own views about early home learning and the help they would like from staff in early years settings. The study shows that the majority of parents maintain the same level of early home learning once their child starts in a funded childcare place, but that parents in families where adults are not in employment actually do **less** early home learning once their child starts in a funded childcare place. This strongly suggests that effective parental engagement should be focussed on maintaining existing levels of early home learning and preventing parents from doing less early home learning activities with their children. Early years settings should target parents from households where adults are not in employment.

Evidence (Gutman and Feinstein, 2007; Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) suggests that parental involvement in early learning has a greater impact on children's well-being and achievement than any other factor, such as family income, parental education or school environment. Supporting parents to help them provide a positive home learning environment is therefore a vital part of improving outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The sample was made up of parents drawn from 12 local authorities and covering the mixed economy of providers including childminders, private and voluntary sector nurseries and pre-schools, school based nurseries and children's centres.

Initially 558 parents volunteered to take part.<sup>1</sup> Of these, 61 per cent actually participated in baseline interviews. The study is based on interviews with 339 parents and carers immediately before their child started in a funded childcare place. These parents were then contacted six months later to be re-interviewed. Interviews at this follow-up stage were obtained with 223 parents, an attrition rate of 34%.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The research was based on a 'self-selecting' sample of parents and setting staff who agreed to participate. This is common to most social research. In the case of parents the study obtained data from a good range of different ethnic and social-economic groups, with a slight over-representation of some BME groups in comparison to the UK population. Overall parents in this study reported relatively high levels of early home learning activity but there were subgroup differences.

<sup>2</sup> Attrition or 'drop-out' rates vary greatly between studies and can relate to the groups being studied, the methods used, amount and type of data collected and resources available to track respondents. As a telephone survey with no direct face to face contact with respondents, moderate to high rates of attrition (circa 30%) were expected for this study. There were 134 settings at baseline in the study, attended by 339 children; at follow-up there were 223 children attending 107 settings. The reduction was the result of the number of parents leaving the project.

In addition, information collected from participating early years settings was used to classify the providers in relation to the amount of early home learning support they offered to parents.<sup>3</sup>

The Early Home Learning Index<sup>4</sup> was used as the principal measure of the early home learning environment in this study, but parents were also asked more directly about what changes they thought had occurred in the early home learning activities they did with their child. The research highlighted that parents self-reported an increase in the range of home learning activities that they undertook with their child in the first six months after their child had started in a funded childcare place. The difference between parents' responses to direct questions in interviews and the overall findings can be explained by parents having a much wider concept of early home learning than just the seven activities included in the EHLE index, which are:

- Parent reading to the child
- Parent taking their child to the library
- Child playing with letters
- Parent helping their child to learn the alphabet
- Parent teaching their child numbers or counting
- Parent teach their child songs, poems or nursery rhymes
- Child painting or drawing at home.

The important role played by parents in taking an interest in their child's early learning, providing early learning materials and activities at home and spending time on helping their child to learn about letters and numbers is recognised in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Previous research (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Feinstein et al, 2004) shows that supporting parents to improve the learning that goes on at home will have a major impact on child outcomes, including school readiness and attainment and achievement up to the age of at least 16. This study suggests that more effective help for parents of pre-school children can be achieved with a minimal input of resources day to day e.g. ensuring brief individual conversations with parents happen each day at drop-off and pick-up. However, it's important to note that some investment in effective leadership and culture change is likely to be required for all practitioners in all settings to offer cost-effective support for parents more effectively.

This report aims to develop this understanding and make some significant suggestions for low-cost but high-impact changes in practice.

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<sup>3</sup> These levels of support are described in detail in the methodology section on page 35.

<sup>4</sup> Early home learning activities known to be strongly linked to later educational outcomes can be measured by the Early Home Learning Environment Index, such as reading to a child, playing with numbers and letters, drawing and going to the library.

## Key findings

There were a number of key findings which could influence practice:

### **Getting more impact from existing staff through culture change to promote good practice and occasional in-house training sessions<sup>5</sup>**

There is significant scope to improve staff awareness of the importance of engaging with parents about early home learning. This could be achieved at little or no cost by ensuring that all staff are confident to provide early home learning information and advice.

Confident staff are more likely to readily engage with parents on a day-to-day basis by welcoming them into settings and explaining face to face what parents can do at home.

And, there should be a real enthusiasm for this because staff themselves feel they lack training. One-third of practitioners would like more help and information about engaging parents in early home learning.

This work is being carried out by some practitioners at minimal cost because it mostly involves integrating small changes into everyday practitioner styles and behaviour.

### **The EYFS supports early home learning (EHL)**

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has an important and influential role in engaging parents in home learning. The EYFS structure was viewed as a 'bridge' to those parents who are seen as needing encouragement to be more involved in their child's learning.

This study found that parents or carers needing more support are most likely to be living in families where no parent or carer works full time. These parents and carers are most likely to do less early home learning activities once their child started in a funded childcare place. The EYFS could be used as a tool for engaging with this group of parents and carers.

### **Doing more to spread best practice will also support EHL**

Some nurseries and other providers working with parents, including 'hard-to-reach' groups such as parents newly arrived in the UK or fathers, also demonstrated best practice in supporting early home learning which could be shared more widely at relatively low cost apart from the associated indirect cost of ensuring effective leadership in early years settings.<sup>6</sup> Practitioners could do this by visiting best-practice settings to see how they work with parents; or video clips could be made available on a key website for practitioners such as the Department for Education website and the Family and Parenting Institute website.

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<sup>5</sup> See Part 2: Technical Report A Section A2 Observations Report, pages 14-31, for more detail about findings regarding staff confidence and knowledge of early home learning.

<sup>6</sup> For more detail and examples, see Part 1 pages 49-54 and Part 2 pages 14-31

## Other findings

Parents were keen to help their children learn, and wanted more information. There seems to be significant scope to work with them to raise awareness of what works best to give their child the best possible start in learning and in life.

All parents in the study were involved in some basic home learning with their children even before their child starts a free nursery place, but there are differences between socio-economic groups, which broadly are differences relating to the number of children in the household and parents' or carers' level of educational qualifications.

The research showed that childcare providers involved in this research were raising parents' awareness of how to help facilitate their children's early home learning.

But, some parents may need reminding about how important early home learning is to raise the level of EHL. Interviews with parents show that although some parents do more activities with their child after their child has started in a funded place, some parents do less, thinking that their child has become more independent after starting childcare or that this is now more the role of the nursery than parents. Providers could ensure they reinforce a single key message about EHL over time by suggesting and explaining a variety of home learning activities.

Parents, staff and managers have different definitions of early home learning. For example, practitioners did not share a single definition of the early home learning environment. All practitioners did share a basic definition of EHL as interaction between parent and child in a way that enables the child to learn.

Parents talked about a wider range of early home learning activities than included in the EHLE index e.g. learning through play, helping with domestic chores or outdoor activities. This suggests that parents see a wide variety of early home learning activities as benefitting their child. Some parents thought they could play a role in early home learning by doing different kinds of activities to those provided by the setting e.g. outdoor play, tree climbing, riding bikes, sports sessions.

And, settings could make sure that parents know how to incorporate the seven key activities identified in the EPPE study (Sylva et al., 2004) into a wider range of activities e.g. numbers and letters can be part of outings to the park, nature walks, shopping and so on. This would ensure that the key activities identified in the EPPE study as improving children's educational attainment and achievement at school up to the age of 16 are integrated into the wider range of early home learning activities that parents see as important to provide.

It is also important to consider the pressures on parents and which groups need more support:

Parents in families where no adult works full time need more encouragement to be involved in early home learning because the study shows this is the group most likely to do less early home learning once their child starts at a funded childcare place e.g. providers could carry out home visits or organise activities at the nursery for the whole family to join in.

Time was also mentioned by parents as a constraint to the amount of early home learning activities they undertake with their child. There was an increase in frequency of activities where parents were working fewer hours than before their child started a funded childcare place. However, there was a decrease in frequency both where parents were working more hours or where the child was spending more time at the childcare setting. An additional reason for increased frequency of activities was parents wanting to prepare their child for school.

When their child started an early years setting, parents' highest priority in terms of staff qualities at the setting was the ability to care for their child rather than advice on home learning. But when parents were asked what they would like from staff in settings, they wanted more information about what their children should be doing at different ages and stages and what activities parents can do at home. This showed that although parents do not appear to prioritise advice on home learning as an expectation of staff, they do want it.

*“(I would like staff to give) more information about what level they should be at, such as how much they should know about numbers and shapes.”*

*“I’d like them to tell me what he has been doing each day so I can reinforce what he is doing at nursery at home.”*

*A series of longitudinal case studies which formed part of this research illustrate the role that older siblings can play in home learning. Not all home learning is parent-led and some home learning activities could be directed to include children learning together, where appropriate, as well as parent-led activities that would be suitable for more than one child and children of different ages. This would enable siblings to learn positively from each other e.g. where an older child helps a younger child become more confident or an older child practises reading aloud and a younger child listens at the same time.*

## **Policy context**

The Coalition Government's programme states that strong and stable families are the bedrock of a strong and stable society. The Government is reviewing practice and wants to focus support where it is most needed, to make best use of the available resources.

There are three key priorities for the Coalition Government with regards to public services, including support for families and parents and therefore including early home learning:

- Better return from spending on services

- Focus on family poverty

- Support for family stability.

The Government has said that it is going to introduce 4,200 new health visitors, working with re-focused Sure Start children's centres to lead and deliver the Healthy Child Programme, alongside GPs, outreach workers and other early years professionals.

## **Methodology**

The research used both quantitative and qualitative techniques and information from parents, childcare staff and managers to build a 360-degree picture of changes in early home learning.

### **Quantitative research**

Surveys of parents and staff in early years provision were used to achieve the following:

- establish a baseline of early home learning activity carried out by parents which was happening at the beginning of the study before their children started in a free childcare place;

- carry out follow-up surveys after six months to analyse changes in early home learning behaviour when children take up a free funded place at an early years setting;

- undertake controlled analysis for various differences among parents, within settings to identify possible biases;

- carry out structured observations of parent-staff communication at pick-up and drop-off times in a sample of early years settings.

### **Qualitative research**

Case studies were developed with parents to paint a fuller picture of their experience and tracking if and how any changes to home learning occurred over six months.

Interviews were carried out with practitioners and managers at early years setting.

Open-ended questions were asked in the surveys to provide more information about parents' and practitioners' attitudes.

## **Influence of early years settings on early home learning**

This section is based on data from the before (baseline) and after (follow-up) interviews with parents. The study overall shows that there was no significant increase in early home learning but there was a significant decrease for one group of parents, those families where no parent or carer works full time.

Most parents, however, did report a sense of doing more early home learning activities than six months earlier. It is probable that this parental sense of a general increase in 'home learning' activity reported by the parents was due to an increase in the diversity of activities parents do with their children, as it was not apparent in terms of any reported increase in early home learning activities known to be strongly linked to later educational outcomes **as measured by the EHLE index**, such as reading to the child and playing with numbers and letters.

Although some parents did more activities with their child after their child started in a funded place, some parents did less with their child because of their child's perceived independence after starting childcare and an awareness of needing to prepare their child for school. This suggests the need to reinforce the importance of continuous parental input in learning and that staff should address this with parents.

## **Parents' views of settings and staff qualities**

Parents' views of the early years settings' staff qualities six months after their child started in a free nursery place indicated their expectations involved care of their child, rather than prioritising advice on home learning. Parents judged that staff had performed better on the areas that parents had identified as important whereas the areas that parents gave a lower priority – including the provision of home learning support – were rated less positively.

## **Engaging parents in early home learning**

Managers of early years settings indicated that they view communicating individually with parents as a far more effective means of engaging parents in their children's learning activity than providing written information and resources. Staff reported that inviting parents into the settings was a successful parental engagement method, which could be facilitated by an open-door policy whereby staff are available to talk briefly to parents who drop in at any time; making use of drop-off and pick-up time and Stay and Play sessions.

Significant barriers to engaging parents were identified by staff as:

- parents' lack of time;
- dislike of an educational environment based on parents' own school experiences;
- a lack of confidence among some parents;
- parents having English as an additional language.

Managers also thought that inviting parents into the setting was the most effective way of involving parents in home learning. This was backed up by the amount of regular daily sharing of a child's learning that goes on in early years settings and the number of managers who cited their relationship with parents as the key thing in their setting that encouraged parents' involvement in home learning. None of the parents in the study reported being unwilling to go into their child's early years centre, but a few parents taking part in the case studies reported that early years settings attached to primary schools did not routinely invite parents in every day.

## **Staff perceptions of the EYFS in supporting early home learning**

The great majority of early years' managers thought that the EYFS was helpful in several respects:

- it created a partnership between parents and practitioner by emphasising the roles of both parents and practitioners in developing early home learning;
- it heightened staff's awareness of the importance of a good relationship between themselves and parents;
- it gave staff confidence to talk about early learning with parents;
- it aided discussion between staff and parents about their child's learning and development;
- it promoted the parent–key worker relationship.

Practitioners found that the legal requirement to work with parents served as a practical incentive and they liked having the references to working with parents. They identified the emphasis in EYFS on home learning and bringing parents into the settings as important. They also found sharing targets for achievement and EYFS resources with parents was helpful in supporting early home learning.

The EYFS requires that each child must be assigned a key worker. This helped to support work with parents. Most practitioners felt that being a key worker helped them build a better relationship with parents by promoting better contact with families as a whole, rather than just the child. Managers were also positive about key workers' importance in facilitating relationships with the child's family and improved communication about the child's needs and learning.

Parents also had overwhelmingly positive attitudes to key workers: key workers were regarded as a trusted source of information about their child's development who were able to identify and communicate any questions or anxieties they may have about the child.

The EYFS process was frequently cited by early years staff as having an influential role in getting less-involved parents<sup>7</sup> more interested in their child's learning. The EYFS provides a formal structure that helps staff to talk to parents through the requirement for parents to be involved in observations of their child in the home and through the completion and required feedback for learning journeys and journals.

There were a number of other comments by managers about the EYFS. A few settings managers said that the EYFS was 'flawed' or 'intrusive'. One manager preferred to use a more detailed recording system and another manager thought the EYFS structure was overly prescriptive. A few managers said they were already doing everything included in the EYFS to engage parents.

## **Parents' perception of home learning activity**

The research highlighted that parents felt that they had increased the home learning activities that they undertook with their child six months after their child had started in a funded childcare place. The study overall shows that there was no significant increase in early home learning but there was a significant decrease for one group of parents, those families where no parent or carer works full time. This section addresses parents self-reported early home learning activities. The difference between parents

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<sup>7</sup> Practitioners perceived some parents to be less involved with the early years setting and the early home learning activities offered. In contrast, the study showed that nearly two-thirds of parents saw themselves as doing more general early home learning activities six months after their child started in a funded childcare place.

responses in interviews and the overall findings can be explained by parents having a much wider concept of early home learning than just the seven activities included in the EHLE index.

A considerable number of parents (44%) reported increasing the number of activities<sup>8</sup> they had carried out with their child at home since their child started in a free childcare place. The frequency of activities also increased for just over a third of those parents (37%) and the number of activities also increased with two-thirds (67%) of those parents reporting starting new or different activities since their child started at the funded childcare place.

The main reasons that parents gave for increasing the range of activities were

- attending the childcare setting;
- advice from providers;
- more time or family circumstances had changed;
- the weather and/or holidays had increased opportunities.

In cases where parents indicated they had decreased the amount of activities they engaged in with their child this was often attributed to having less time, or their child's growing independence.

The in-depth case study interviews with a group of parents showed that families have different approaches to early home learning. It also demonstrated that parents' interests and ambitions for their child guide early home learning activities.

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<sup>8</sup> The number of activities was wider than the seven key EHLEI activities identified in the EPPE study as having an influence on later cognitive outcomes.

### **Additional Information**

The full report can be accessed at <http://www.education.gov.uk/publications/>

Further information about this research can be obtained from  
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