

Engaging parents and families

A toolkit for practitioners

Section 4: Learning at Home

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1. Background

This section aims to help practitioners to consider the barriers and challenges to learning at home. The reflective questions will allow practitioners to review and develop a Learning at Home Policy and activities.

Further information is available in the [Review of Learning at Home](#) (2018).

1.1 Learning at home

‘Learning at home is the learning which happens in the home, outdoors or in the community. It can take place through everyday activities that families already do and can overlap with aspects of organised or active learning activities’.

(Scottish Parental Involvement Officers Network, 2018)

Learning at home is the first of the three strands of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. The other strands are ‘Home/School Partnership’ and ‘Parental Representation’. Within the Act parents are entitled to receive information and support to help develop their child’s learning at home and in the community. Learning at home should also be included in the local authority’s Parental Involvement and Engagement Strategy.

Findings from the [Review of the impact of the Scottish Schools \(Parental Involvement\) Act 2006](#) showed that ‘there was confusion and a general lack of understanding among parents and staff about the difference between homework and the concept of learning at home’ (National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS), 2017, p19). Learning at home was also identified by headteachers as an area for further development (NPFS, 2017). Both practitioners and parents can have different understandings about learning at home and the [Review of Learning at Home](#) (2018) aims to provide clarity to practitioners.

From the moment they are born, children begin to absorb information and make sense of their world. As well as providing the basics for growth and development - food, comfort and security - parents as their child’s first educator also provide stimulation through everyday activities, games, rhymes and language that help a child to learn. Many of these activities are part of everyday life – preparing and eating meals together, doing the washing, shopping, watching television, visiting friends and family – but for young children they are opportunities for discovery and learning. Further information on ideas to help parents support their child’s learning at home can be found on [Parentzone Scotland](#).

Fifty percent (50%) of the language adults use is in place by the time children are three years old and 85% by the time they are five years old. These statistics emphasise the importance of parents and the home environment in supporting children's development. However, once children start school it is not always easy for parents to know how best to help their child. As children grow older it is easy to forget the strong influence that the home and the community still have on their learning and development, especially as children only spend 15% of their time in school. It is the responsibility of all practitioners and local authorities to ensure that parents are fully informed about how to support their child's learning at home.

Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings, schools, third sector and community learning and development programmes and groups can do a lot to make the links between what is being taught and learning opportunities that exist at home and in the community.

Learning at home can happen through a range of events including play, leisure activities, fun events, sports, trips, cultural or volunteering experiences and everyday family life. It can also happen through curriculum related activities, homework, reading and sharing books. Activities for learning at home can be specifically designed to enable parents to engage in their child's learning and build upon the learning from school or early learning and childcare setting. It can also provide intergenerational learning opportunities for the child, family and extended family and the community. Some families can benefit from using a family learning approach to help support them with learning at home.

Further information is available in Section 7 of the toolkit, [Review of Family Learning](#) (2016) and the [Family Learning Framework](#) (2018).

Practitioners from across Scotland have provided the following words as examples of activities and experiences of learning at home that they use in their practice:

Table 1: Examples of activities and experiences of learning at home

Acting	Exploring	Peers
Activities	Family Learning	Photography
Adventures	Fun	Playing
Baking	Games	Reading
Building	Homework	Relationships
Challenges	Housework	Sharing
Communication	Imagination	Shopping
Community	Interactive	Singing
Cooking	Intergenerational clubs	Sports
Counting	Languages	Stories
Creativity	Leisure	Talking
Cultural	Listening	Trips
Drawing	Memories	Volunteering
Eating	Model-making	Writing
Events	Outdoors	
Experiences	Partnerships	

1.2 What do we mean by the home learning environment?

Research shows that ‘when children and young people live in a supportive home learning environment, it improves children and young people’s attainment and achievement’.

(2024 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan, 2023)

The home learning environment is the combination of everything within the home and the time a child spends out and about, that affect their development and learning. This includes the availability of toys and books, outings and having space and time to learn. The most important feature though, are the people who provide the love, security, encouragement, conversation and positive role models to help children to thrive. A good home learning environment encourages children and young people to have positive attitudes to learning, to be curious, and to have confidence in themselves.

Further information can be found on [Parentzone Scotland](#) and the [Review of Learning at Home](#) (2018).

2. Barriers and challenges to learning at home

If we are going to effectively and meaningfully engage with parents on learning at home, we need to know what the barriers are. There are a number of factors which restrict a parent's ability to be more involved in their child's learning. These fluctuate from external barriers out with a parents' control to individual obstacles specific to personal life circumstances (Scottish Executive, 2005; National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017).

Table 2: Timeline of barriers and challenges to learning at home

Year	Barriers and challenges	Source
2011	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual parent and family factors • Parent-teacher factors • Child factors • Societal factors 	Hornby and Lafaele
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time, childcare, transport, knowledge, information, awareness, motivation, working patterns, English as additional language, negative experiences, perceptions, gender • Socio-economic, poverty, social inclusion, additional support needs, disabilities, parenting skills, shared parenting, mental health issues, substance misuse, offending • Information and support, effective strategies, community and family based interventions 	Scottish Executive (2005), updated by Education Scotland (2017)
2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents feel unable to engage with children's learning 	Centre for Research on Families and Relationships
2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No opportunities • Work commitments • Caring for younger children • Lack of confidence • Not aware of opportunities • Cost • Language barriers 	Parental Involvement and Engagement Census
2020-22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not allowed in setting/school • Less opportunities to build relationships and get involved in wider life of setting / school • Feelings of 'failing' children • Bereavement • Digital poverty • Balancing work/learning at home • Less opportunities to access support 	COVID-19 barriers

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changing timescales and restrictions • Mental health and wellbeing • Frustration • Anxieties • Self-isolation/shielding • Communication • Transitions • Inconsistencies • Feelings of being disconnected from setting / school • Additional support needs 	
2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are no opportunities • Work commitments • Care of younger children • Lack of confidence • Not made aware of opportunities • Cost • Lack of internet connection • Language barriers • Other reasons 	Parental Involvement and Engagement Census

Activity 1: Understanding barriers and challenges to learning at home

Purpose

To understand the barriers and challenges that parents and families might face that prevent them from supporting their child's learning at home.

External barriers to learning at home can be multifaceted. Individual barriers to learning at home can result from an individual's socio-economic circumstances such as poverty, working patterns, or social exclusion. Examples of social exclusion include families of: gypsy travelling communities; refugees; offenders; those experiencing mental ill health; teenage parents; substance misuse. Some parents also have personal assumptions about what their level of involvement or engagement in their child's learning should be (Scottish Executive, 2005).

Learning at home can include:

- learning at home/homework activities
- families learning together
- helping parents with cooking, shopping, gardening etc
- sharing learning
- decision making
- communication methods

Further information on the Parental Involvement and Engagement Census (2021/22) can be found [here](#).

Information for practitioners and educators who work with parents and families and/or who are involved in delivering training to the workforce, can be found in the [Professional Learning Guide](#) on the [Parents and Families theme page](#).

Reflective questions

- Are children and young people able to build on achievements from home and/or homework tasks with family members?
- What opportunities are there for sharing learning e.g. open days, home visits, child-led workshops, stay and play events, open afternoons, class reward systems, home-school sharing of achievements?
- What opportunities are there for families to learn together? Examples could include: family learning events, family homework club, bookbug, outdoor learning, work with fathers, gardening groups, family nurture projects?
- Do you involve parents in matters such as target setting, Getting it Right for Every Child review meetings, personal learning planning, transitions to help support learning at home?
- Are parents encouraged to support their child's learning through parents' meetings and/or working with the ELC setting or school to address any matters of concern?
- Are parents informed about what their child will be learning and how they can support this at home?
- Are parents made aware of ways that they can share information about their child's learning and achievements at home and in the community, with the ELC setting or school in easily accessible methods?
- Have you undertaken a parental needs analysis to understand barriers and challenges that parents and families might face with learning at home and identified ways to support these?
- Have parents been consulted on ways that they would like to receive information from the ELC setting or school on learning at home?
- How do parents receive information about ways in which they can support their child's learning at home? Is the information provided in a variety of accessible formats, including face-to-face, social media, online methods?

- Are parents informed and offered information about ways to access family learning and/or adult learning to build their own confidence and skills?
- How can your community partners help you to overcome the barriers and challenges to learning at home?
- How well do you pro-actively communicate with and involve all parents and families in learning at home who have shared parenting responsibilities, who work away from home, are in the armed forces or who are in prison?
- Do you involve home-link workers in taking forward learning at home initiatives?

Activity 2: Reviewing and developing a learning at home policy

Purpose

To recognise the ways that parents and families already support their child's learning at home and build upon this further.

Practitioners, educators, parents and families can all have different understandings about what learning at home is. Work should be undertaken in partnership to ensure clarity and a shared understanding. Cultural change is also required to move away from common assumptions that learning at home is confined to homework. Practitioners and educators should be cautious regarding their communications to parents and families to ensure that learning at home is not promoted solely as homework.

Evidence from the Growing Up in Scotland Study (Melhuish, 2010) suggests that children from less advantaged households are less likely to experience a wide range of 'home learning' activities than children from more advantaged households. It is important therefore that ELC settings and schools develop and regularly review their Learning at Home Policy in consultation with parents, families, children, young people, and the community to ensure that it is appropriate for your establishment.

Reflective questions

- Are parents, families, children and young people involved in co-producing and reviewing the Learning at Home Policy?
- Has a working group been organised to help review and develop the policy?

- Do you use a range of methods to gather the views of parents, families, children and young people about learning at home?
- Are there any specific support needs for children and young people and/or parents and families?
- Are you working with your community partners to help address support needs such as family learning, adult learning, literacy teams?
- Is the policy regularly reviewed and updated to meet the changing needs of the establishment and/or community?
- What are the positive elements of your current Learning at Home Policy?
- What improvements are required to improve the policy?

Activity 3: Learning at home activities

Purpose

To consider learning at home activities that will be meaningful and engage parents and families in their children's learning.

Homework is considered to be 'tasks given to pupils by their teachers to be completed outside of usual lessons (Education Endowment Foundation, 2017). Such tasks can include literacy, numeracy and activities to develop inquiry or problem solving skills. Homework can often be an additional source of stress for families with the least capacity to undertake the tasks.

Time is one of the biggest barriers for parents who are supportive of their children's learning at home. Learning at home can be more than additional school work being sent home. It should be creatively designed, innovative and able to be incorporated into life at home without requiring additional resources that some families may not have access to.

Short, focused interventions that relate directly to what is being taught and that are built on in ELC settings and schools are likely to be more effective in improving attainment than regular daily homework (Education Endowment Foundation, 2017). Additionally, the 'quality of the task set appears to be more important than quantity of work' (Education Endowment Foundation, 2017). Effective homework is linked to greater parental involvement and support.

Further information is available in the [Review of Learning at Home](#) (2018) and [Parentzone Scotland](#).

Reflective questions

- Does your establishment issue learning at home activities and if so why?
- Do families understand the value/rationale for having learning at home activities?
- What do effective learning at home activities look like in your establishment?
- How effective are the learning at home activities in helping parents engage in their child's learning at home?
- Are the learning at home activities specifically designed to enable parents to engage in their child's learning and build upon the learning from school/early learning and childcare setting?
- Do the activities provide intergenerational learning opportunities for the child, family, extended family and the community?
- Do families need support to help them with learning at home activities?
- How are families supported to recognise and make the most of the learning opportunities that exist in everyday family life?

Reading list

Education Endowment Foundation (2017), *Teaching and Learning Toolkit: An accessible summary of the international evidence on teaching 5-16 year olds*.

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/using-the-toolkits>

Education Scotland (2018), *Family Learning Framework*. Livingston. Education Scotland.

<https://education.gov.scot/resources/family-learning-framework/>

Education Scotland (2018), *Review of Learning at Home*. Livingston. Education Scotland.

<https://education.gov.scot/resources/review-of-learning-at-home/>

Melhuish, E. (2010), *Impact of the Home Learning Environment on child cognitive development: secondary analysis of data from 'Growing up in Scotland'*. Scottish Government Social Research.

<https://digital.nls.uk/pubs/scotgov/2010/impactofthehomelearningenvironment.pdf>

National Parent Forum of Scotland (2017), *Review of the impact of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006*.

<https://www.npfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/edd/2017/07/Final-E-versionpdf.pdf>

Scottish Executive (2005), *Parents' views on improving parental involvement in children's education*. Astron. Edinburgh.

Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act (2006).

http://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2006/8/pdfs/asp_20060008_en.pdf

The Scottish Government (2023), *2024 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan*. Edinburgh. APS Group Scotland.

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-national-improvement-framework-improvement-plan-2024/>

The Scottish Government (2016), *Review of Family Learning: Supporting Excellence and Equity*. Edinburgh. APS Group Scotland.

<https://education.gov.scot/resources/review-of-family-learning/>

Further information

[BBC education website](#)

[Parent Club](#)

[Parentzone Scotland](#)

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