

Review of Learning at Home

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3. What is learning at home?

Parents have a vital role in a child's learning and development throughout their lives. Early learning and childcare settings, schools and communities can also play a key part in recognising, developing and resourcing this.

Scottish definition of 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 can happen through a range of events including play, leisure activities, fun events, sports, trips, cultural or volunteering experiences. 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 (see Section 3.2).

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:



3.1 Why is learning at home important?

Children in Scotland only spend around 15 per cent of their waking hours in school. The remaining 85 per cent of children's time is spent at home or in their communities and this presents a potentially significant opportunity for learning (OECD, 2014). Around 80 per cent of the difference in how well children do at school depends on what happens outside the school gates and so learning at home is crucial for children to learn and develop (Rasbash et al, 2010; Save the Children, 2013).

What families do has a greater influence on a child's learning than who they are or their socio-economic status. Parenting and children's activities in the early years are highlighted in various research studies as making a significant difference to longer term outcomes for children (Melhuish, 2010). Providing information for parents on the importance of learning at home is therefore crucial, especially during the early years. The various ways that learning at home impacts on children, as identified in research, include:

- a child's early learning
- later achievements
- nurture
- resilience
- wellbeing
- social mobility
- skills for life

Building strong relationships and developing an understanding between home and school supports children's learning. Information shared by parents with their child's setting/school helps practitioners to then adapt their approach to suit the learning needs of pupils. The partnership working between parents and settings/schools also allows potential difficulties and opportunities to be identified at an early stage and to build a holistic picture of a child's progress and achievements (Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act Guidance, 2006). The better the information that settings and schools provide, the more parents can support their children's learning at home (Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act Guidance, 2006).

3.2 Review of evidence

'Effective parental involvement programmes are among the interventions that can help to close the attainment gap associated with pupils from economically disadvantaged households. Such programmes focus on helping parents to use appropriate strategies to support their child's learning at home'.

(Sosu and Ellis, 2014)

Background

Evidence from the Growing Up in Scotland Study (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. In comparison, children who experience a wide range of activities such as being read to, singing, nursery rhymes and drawing from an early age, score higher in cognitive ability tests at age 3 than children with less experience of these activities.

Local Authorities have a duty under the Act to include learning at home in their Parental Involvement Strategy. Settings and schools have a responsibility to help make the links between what is being taught and learning opportunities that exist at home and in the community. They also have a particular role in helping parents to continue learning at home with their child.

The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 recognises the vital role that parents and families play in children's learning and development. Within the Act, parents are entitled to receive information and support to help develop their child's learning at home and in the community. Parents have a key role in providing the cornerstones to allow their child to learn, grow and develop through everyday stimulating activities such as games, rhymes and language.

'A growing body of research suggests that good parenting skills and a supportive home learning environment are positively associated with children's early achievements and wellbeing'.

(Economic and Social Research Council, 2012)

The influence of the home learning environment is 'over and above that of standard measures of family socio-demographic factors such as parental education, socio-economic status and income' (Growing up in Scotland Study, 2010, p3). Providing a 'supportive home learning environment is also positively associated with children's early achievements and wellbeing' (ESRC, 2012, p1; Kluczniok et al, 2013; Clarke and Younas, 2017). Parental support of 'learning within the home environment.....makes the maximum difference to achievement' and raising attainment more than parents supporting school activities (Harris and Goodall, 2007). However, the home learning environment is multi-dimensional and it is important to define the individual contributions that it makes to children's learning and development as well as to outcomes (Hartas, 2012).

Increasing the 'frequency' of parental engagement with learning at home 'cannot counteract the impact of the socio-economic gap on child outcomes' (Hartas, 2011, p909). There are a range of background variables such as socio-economic status, parental education and family size which can affect the impact on a family and the home learning environment. Regardless of this, parental engagement in learning at home, parental attitudes and behaviours can overcome these background variables and are crucial to a child's achievement (Cole, 2011).

Developing a nurturing relationship between parents and their child helps support their emotional and social development. This can be through responding to their needs but also through smiling, touching, body language and eye contact. Responding to a child in this way has a range of benefits. These include developing problem solving skills, emotional communication, establishing future emotions, behaviours and helps build relationships as they grow and develop. Setting individual and appropriate boundaries and routines is important for every child. This includes encouraging relevant sleep patterns, healthy eating, personal hygiene and exercise. Building on the attachment between a parent and their child is a two-way process. Parents who respond to their child's needs through listening carefully will help their child to foster a secure attachment and develop their communication skills for life.

Obtaining further information about a child's physical, emotional, cognitive (thinking skills), social development and needs enables parents to understand the various stages of a child's learning journey. Improving the quality of the home learning environment and changing parenting behaviours is therefore a key step in helping to close the attainment gap (ESRC, 2012). Helping parents to learn at home with their child especially during the early years, has in previous studies predicted academic outcomes up to age 16 (Sammons et al, 2015).

Parents and families can engage in a range of activities in the home learning environment as part of the everyday characteristics of family life. These may include 'time spent reading to children or encouraging children to read, the activities and materials available to children, access to resources such as computers and visits to museums and libraries and other sources of learning' (Clarke and Younas, 2017). This investment of parental and family time in the home learning environment has been shown to 'significantly aid children's development....and also helps with literacy' and mathematics performance (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001; Reynolds et al, 2008). Engagement with and being actively involved in other learning activities such as gardening, baking, cooking and outdoor learning can instil motivation, curiosity, the value of learning as well as a desire to learn in children (Clarke and Younas, 2017).

Longitudinal studies provide the research evidence which confirms that stimulation through a rich home learning environment is associated with children's better cognitive development and

achievement, especially during early childhood (GUS 2010; Cole 2011; Baker 2015). The home learning and communication environment for babies and toddlers impacts on their acquisition of language and performance when starting school and is associated with later educational attainment (Hamer, 2012).

Factors that have been shown to positively influence a child's communication include early ownership of books, attendance at an early learning and childcare setting and a range of learning at home activities (Law et al, 2011). The activities shown to help children and raise attainment include (Law et al, 2011):

- the child playing with letters/numbers at home - linked with attainment in all measures
- a child's attention being drawn to sounds, letters - linked to literacy skills, early number skills and non-verbal attainment
- parents reading with their child – linked with higher scores in all outcomes
- visits to the library, museums, galleries – linked to positive association with language, literacy and early number attainment at school entry
- parents helping their child with a range of activities, having toys available - predictors of the child's expressive vocabulary
- parents helping their child to learn songs or nursery rhymes – linked to a significant positive impact on language scores when starting school
- encouraging and helping your child to cook a meal and/or set the table
- allowing your child to help you with DIY jobs around the house
- researching a topic of interest on the internet, in a library or from other sources
- helping your child to learn about political parties before they go to vote
- working together with your child on different activities eg gardening, baking
- showing your child how to play a musical instrument

'What parents do in terms of educational activities and parenting style' is considered to make a difference across a range of areas including behaviours and higher cognitive assessments. The home learning environment, family routines and psychosocial environmental factors are important to help close the 'gaps' in early child development (ESRC, 2012). Children who do not have a stimulating home learning environment are considered to be 'more responsive to high quality pre-school provision than those from homes that had high levels of stimulation and intellectual challenge' (Sylva et al, 2012).

Effectiveness of learning at home

'...income alone is not enough to reduce socio-economic inequalities in children's literacy and social skills development. Supporting the development of parents' capabilities through access to education and training is crucial'.

(Hartas, 2011)

Learning at home is an important part of learning through everyday routine activities. Parental investment in learning at home is considered to 'make a positive contribution to child development by enhancing skills such as organisation, planning and monitoring and language that are conducive to learning, as well as motivation towards learning by developing academic interests and making connections between curriculum subjects and everyday experiences' (Hartas, 2011, p909). However, this can be dependent on various factors. Parental behaviour, parenting practices, positive parenting experiences and the ways in which parents interact with their child all play a contributing role to the effectiveness of learning at home and to promote better longer term outcomes (Sylva et al 2012; ESRC, 2012; Sylva et al 2014).

The effectiveness of learning at home can, according to Hartas (2011) depend on 'how well equipped parents are, educationally and financially to maximise the learning experiences for their children' (p910). It can also depend on the 'how', the 'quality of interactions' and 'under what socio-economic circumstances' that parents support their child's learning at home (Hartas, 2011). Consideration needs to be given to developing partnerships with parents and families and providing advice and support to help them maximise opportunities for their child to learn at home.

Impacts of learning at home can be influenced by 'parents' capacity to invest in financial and intellectual resources' (Hartas, 2011, p910). Careful consideration should be given to the types of learning activities that are used by settings/schools to ensure that monetary capacity does not impact on the intended outcomes or increase inequity amongst families.

Learning at home activities can help strengthen a child's capacity to accomplish skills and tasks. Engaging in frequent learning at home stimulated activities that include informal numeracy experiences has been shown to advance maths skills (Baker, 2015). Stimulation through learning at home is also 'positively related to cognitive development, especially during early childhood' (Baker, 2015).

Although learning at home does have a positive impact on academic areas, measuring the effectiveness on a child's 'literacy and social development may take time to materialise into observable outcomes' (Hartas, 2011, p910). Nonetheless, investing frequently in learning at home alone will not resolve the socio-economic gap on children's development (Hartas, 2011). Practitioners and parents need to be aware of the 'impact of parent-child communication and in particular, the influence of the home learning and communication environment in the early years' (Hamer, 2012).

Supporting parents to help their child's learning at home

Supporting parents to help them with their child's learning at home 'is a vital part of improving outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds'.

(Hunt et al, 2011, p6)

Communicating and listening to parents can often be a strong focus for settings/schools but studies continue to show that there are improvements to be made to support parents in helping their children learn at home (Sylva, 2012). A study by Hunt et al (2011) highlighted that although the majority of parents maintain the same level of early learning at home after their child starts an early learning and childcare setting, families where adults are not employed actually do less. Raising awareness of the importance of maintaining levels of learning at home across families particularly in the early years requires an on-going focus, even though a child is attending an early learning and childcare setting. Further information is also required to explain, for example, that learning at home does not always require to be parent-led and some activities could include children learning together (Hunt et al, 2011).

Interventions which have had a positive impact on reducing the attainment gap are those which 'focus on helping parents to use appropriate strategies to support their children's learning at home' (Sosu and Ellis, 2014, p25). This is as opposed to merely seeking to raise parental aspirations for their child's education. Practitioners should ensure that they continually reinforce not just the message about the importance of learning at home but also provide an explanation of the range and variety of learning at home activities at different ages and stages. Inviting parents into settings/schools, building relationships and regular sharing of children's learning can help encourage and promote learning at home (Hunt et al, 2011). This approach can also help outline the roles of parents and practitioners around learning at home.

Supporting parents and families to help them engage in their child's learning should be a key priority and involve multi-layered interventions. These interventions should use an assets based approach and begin by 'building on the families' strengths' as well as encouraging and utilising the skills of parents (Hartas, 2011, p911). Such interventions should take account of the diverse ways in which parents interact and learn together with their child (Hartas, 2011).

Consideration should also be given to improving staff awareness of the importance of engaging with parents on learning at home. Settings and schools should ensure that staff are confident in providing information and advice on learning at home (Hunt et al, 2011).

A family learning approach

Family learning as an approach is not a new concept but one which helps break cycles of poverty and disadvantage amongst communities whilst at the same time enhancing the intergenerational transfer of skills from the parent to the child and the child to the parent (Family Learning Review, 2016). Research evidence shows that family learning is reaching those who are more likely to be living in the most deprived Index of Multiple Deprivation deciles, in receipt of benefits, from an ethnic minority background, less likely to be educated to degree level, working part time and who are female (Harding and Ghezalayagh, 2014). Family learning has long-term benefits as it affects behaviours and attitudes to learning across the whole family (van Steensel et al, 2011).

Supporting, equipping and building capacity amongst Scotland's parents to capitalise on children's opportunities for learning is key in raising attainment and closing the poverty-related attainment gap. A family learning approach can be a catalyst in helping adults take up adult learning courses, training opportunities, gain employment or attain new skills. This in turn positively impacts on children's individual attainment, their aspirations and personal learning journey (Family Learning Review, 2016). Family learning also facilitates increased parental participation and engagement. Further information can be found in the [Review of Family Learning](#) (2016) and the [Family Learning Framework](#) (2018).

3.3 What are the barriers to learning at home?

'Evidence 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'.

(Hunt et al, 2011)

Parents

Parents have outlined a number of factors which they feel restricts their ability to be more involved in their child's learning (Scottish Executive, 2005). These fluctuate from external barriers outwith a parents' control to individual obstacles specific to personal life circumstances (Scottish Executive, 2005).

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. Some parents also have personal assumptions about what their level of involvement or engagement in their child's learning should be (Scottish Executive, 2005). This should not be confused with the myth of 'poverty aspiration' which suggests that a child's 'less successful progress in education' is a result of 'their and/or their parents' poor aspirations' (Treanor, 2017, p1). Evidence from the Growing up in Scotland Study (In Treanor, 2017) and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2011) suggests that children living in poverty do not start with low expectations and they have the same hopes and dreams as all children. Aspirations can

however, reflect the ‘expectations and constraints inherent within their setting, rather than a free choice of desired outcome’ (Treanor, 2017, p1). In communities where there are multiple levels of deprivation, aspirations of parents for their children are high but they ‘feel unable to engage with their child’s learning in the home and feel inadequate in their knowledge and experience to help their children’ (Treanor, 2017, p1).

Clear alignment between parents’ aspirations for their child and what the child aspires to themselves, was a finding from a previous study (Kintrea et al, 2011). Supporting aspirations, however, meant ‘working with parents as well as young people, particularly where parents face disadvantage themselves’ (Kintrea et al, 2011, p70). Parental knowledge in how to make aspirations real and obtainable was considered to be the missing element (CRFR, 2017).



*The contents of this table have been adapted from the Scottish Executive’s (2005) ‘Parents’ Views on Improving Parental Involvement in Children’s Education’ and the National Parent Forum of Scotland’s (2017) ‘Review of the impact of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006’.

Parents and families can at times need support from practitioners to help them support their child’s learning at home and to understand the curriculum (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). Establishing a meaningful relationship between families and the setting/school is a necessary starting point and one which should be a two-way communications process. Focusing on the principles of learning at home thereafter will help build on the relationship and interactions between home and the setting/school, as well as being of benefit to families.

Furthermore, parents may need help and support to understand the learning that is going on in the setting/school. Settings/schools also require to know from parents and families, about the learning taking place at home as well as the home learning environment.

Homework

‘Schools whose pupils do homework tend to be more successful’.

([Education Endowment Foundation](#), 2017)

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.

Findings in a review of best practice in parental engagement (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011), with parents of children aged 9-13, showed that:

- 84% of parents reported that their child's school provided them with little or no resources to help support their child's learning at home.
- 84% of parents reported that their child asks for help and advice with school work and revision at least once a week.
- 79% of children report that they would like their parents to know more about what they are learning in class so they can provide more support outside the classroom.
- 53% of parents reported being asked for help most days or every day.
- 22% of parents reported that they frequently found themselves unable to help children with homework because they didn't understand the topic being learned in class.
- 81% of parents would welcome support and guidance on how best to support their child's learning at home.

Extensive studies have been undertaken on the subject of homework. Many of these studies have considered the correlation between homework and the school's performance. Debates continue as to whether homework is the reason why schools perform better and are more successful rather than other school related factors. Indeed, following a number of reviews and meta-analyses, 'there is stronger evidence that it [homework] is helpful at secondary level but there is much less evidence of benefit at primary level' (Education Endowment Foundation, 2017; Hattie, 2008).

Time spent doing homework in secondary school has not only been a 'strong predictor of better attainment and progress' it has also 'influenced better social-behavioural outcomes' (Sylva et al, 2012). For secondary school pupils, home remains strong and significant while also being likely to 'increase opportunities for learning, provide opportunities for practice and also feedback when assessed, and encourage independent study skills and responsibility' (Sylva et al, 2014).

Short focused interventions that relate directly to what is being taught and that are built on in settings/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. Nonetheless, at times, the purpose of homework is quite often not clear to children. Where schools do move away from prescribed homework tasks, towards more learning at home tasks, this is not always communicated to parents in a way that is easy to understand. Care should be taken by practitioners to ensure that they share with parents and families the reasons why schools are changing their approach as well as explaining the intended learning outcomes.

A study ordered by the House of Commons (2014) looked at the number of evenings per week that young people in England spent doing homework and the progress they made. Findings from the study showed that less advantaged students often had no place at home to do their homework. Providing space and time at the end of the school day for children and young people to complete their homework was identified from the study as a possible solution to this.

Cultural change is required to move away from common assumptions that learning at home is confined purely to homework. Furthermore, practitioners should be cautious regarding their communications to parents to ensure that learning at home is also not promoted solely as homework.

Overcoming the barriers to learning at home

Overcoming the barriers to learning at home and building the capacity of parents may require a move away from more traditional methods. The early engagement process with parents and techniques used are crucial in developing relationships and trust which is a motivating factor in

families who ordinarily may not be engaged. Practitioners should also ensure that they take a sensitive approach to working with families and ensure that this is a genuinely collaborative and user led process. Working in collaboration with parents, families and partners on learning at home is essential to ensure that this improves outcomes for children, reduces inequity and closes the attainment gap. Findings from the NPFS Review (2017) suggests that parents of children with additional support needs require help with learning at home (NPFS, 2017).

Other factors which can impact on families and learning at home can include:

- Protected characteristics*
- Literacy difficulties
- English speakers of other languages (ESOL)
- Caring responsibilities
- Service families
- Absent or displaced parents
- Parental confidence

*Protected characteristics are the nine groups protected under the [Equality Act 2010](#). They are: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation.

The increased focus and promotion of learning at home has been a positive outcome of the Parental Involvement Act (NPFS, 2017). All settings/schools should continue to make the links between what is being taught in settings/schools and the learning opportunities that exist at home and in the community. Links should also be made to help parents understand how learning at home continues to impact throughout all stages of a child's learning journey including into the secondary school years and beyond. Overcoming the barriers to learning at home is crucial in helping children to learn and develop. Schools and settings can address this using their existing resources and creative approaches to help change pre-existing cultural notions about learning at home. Practitioners do require to have clarity on what learning at home is and how they can support parents and families with this.

[Read, Write, Count](#) is a national initiative which aims to build on the success of the [PlayTalkRead](#) and [Bookbug](#) programmes in the early years through encouraging parents and families to include easy and fun reading, writing and counting activities in their everyday lives. The Read, Write, Count campaign endeavours to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of Scotland's children by providing advice and support for the families of children in primaries 1, 2 and 3. Settings/schools can use this national resource to engage parents and help them use the materials at home as a focus of school learning tasks.

Practitioners may also wish to consider, in consultation with parents and parent councils, the need for further information on the various topics being taught in settings/schools to enable families to continue these discussions and support their child's learning at home (NPFS, 2017).

3.4 Workforce development

Building the capacity of Scotland's parents to improve the life chances of children and young people is key to raising attainment. There are a range of practitioners who can help build parental capacity and who have a key role to play in learning at home. These practitioners can come from a variety of backgrounds and sectors including community learning and development, life-long learning, third sector, early learning and childcare settings, schools, local authorities, family support, home-school link workers, health and social workers.

It is important that practitioners take time to understand the individual needs of families, community demographics and allow time and space to develop and build relationships. It can be

too easy to make assumptions about parents and families without having a holistic overview of their individual circumstances. Families need to feel valued, understood and listened to.

To help build the capacity of parents, practitioners working with families may wish to consider continuous professional development in: family learning; adult learning approaches; engaging parents; and/or any other relevant training.

3.5 Summary

The aim of this review is to provide information and clarity for practitioners about learning at home. There are key elements that have emerged which are of relevance to policy makers, practitioners and researchers. The review of evidence is strong in highlighting that learning at home is an important element to help close the attainment gap. Learning at home can in itself entail relatively low or no cost activities which provides longer term impacts up to age 16.

Although national and international research on learning at home has been considered, it should be recognised that the scope of this Review is limited to reviewing evidence from the available literature. Consideration has not been given to obtaining wider evidence that would have been gathered through consultation with practitioners, parents/families or children and young people. Further research is also required along with more Scottish longitudinal studies on the impact of learning at home.

Practitioners should consider moving proactively into a phase of building learning partnerships with parents and partners. Additionally, practitioners should encourage and provide greater opportunities for parents and families to learn at home with their child. Parents, families, communities and partners should be involved in developing learning at home policies or strategies in schools and settings. Links to case studies on the National Improvement Hub have been provided in Section 4 to exemplify how learning at home is working in practice.