

3. WHAT IS FAMILY LEARNING?

Family learning encourages family members to learn together as and within a family, with a focus on intergenerational learning. Family learning activities can also be specifically designed to enable parents to learn how to support their children's learning.

'Family learning is a powerful method of engagement and learning which can foster positive attitudes towards life-long learning, promote socio-economic resilience and challenge educational disadvantage.'

(Scottish Family Learning Network, 2016)

There are eight values that underpin the family learning [National Occupational Standards](#). These are:

- Family learning recognises the role of the parent as the first educator.
- Family learning is inclusive and is to be offered as a universal provision with open access.
- Family learning recognises and values diversity of culture, race, relationships and beliefs.
- Equal partnership is the basis for all developments in family learning; all learners and educators, regardless of generation, recognise that learners and educators can frequently exchange ideas.
- Family learning recognises that it is acceptable to make mistakes, which are part of the process of reflective learning.
- Achievements within family learning benefit the wider learning community through promoting change and empowering individuals and communities.
- Family learning raises aspirations and all outcomes of the process, including those which may not be overt, are of equal significance and importance.
- Family learning operates within a culture of mutual respect for individuals, communities, colleagues and organisations.

Family learning programmes are designed to engage adults and children to learn together, as and within a family, through quality formal or informal programmes. These programmes may comprise family literacy, language and numeracy and wider family learning outcomes. They may also include family learning for health and wellbeing, science, and parenting skills which can 'equate to capacity building in its purest sense' (Cooper, 2011, p4).

3.1 Why is family learning important?

Children in Scotland spend approximately 15% of their waking hours in school (OECD, 2014). The remaining 85% of children's time is spent at home or in their communities and this presents a potentially significant opportunity for learning. Equipping, supporting and building the capacity of Scotland's parents to maximise children's opportunities for learning is key to raising attainment.

For many adults a family learning programme can be the first step to taking up further adult learning and training opportunities, gaining a job or developing new skills. For children, this can have a positive impact on their individual attainment and learning journey (Harding et al, 2013).

A wide range of evidence shows family learning to be an effective way of promoting and facilitating increased parental participation and engagement with the school (Mackenzie, 2010). Family learning has also shown to improve school attendance, reduce persistent absenteeism and improve pupils' attainment. Wider outcomes are shown through skills development, employability, progression into work, interactions within the family, as well as improvements in parental confidence and parenting skills. It is important, however, to understand the differences between family learning and parental involvement and engagement. Family learning programmes can be a conduit to increasing parental involvement and engagement in the life of the school and in children's learning at home. Programmes can also be independent of school activity and focus on wider family and community needs such as health and wellbeing and community capacity building.

A family learning approach is successful in influencing not just children and families but those who can appear to be further away from being involved in any form of their own and their children's learning. Successful family learning programmes include work with the way dads and male carers learn and engage with their children (Giles, 2011). Specifically-designed programmes have also improved the literacy, language and numeracy skills of adults and children from Gypsy/Traveller families (Taylor and Hrubciak, 2009). It should be noted that family literacy courses, whilst offering a win-win situation for parents, children and families are also of benefit to schools and teachers, they enhance parent-school relationships and increase home-school partnerships (Swain, 2009; Swain et al, 2015).

3.2 How will family learning help to achieve excellence and equity for all children and adults?

'Engaging the most disadvantaged parents in their children's education, while simultaneously offering them the chance to learn themselves, can improve pupils' attainment by 15 percentage points and improve a child's reading age by six months'.

[\(National Institute of Adult Continuing Education \(NIACE\), 2013\)](#)

Family learning supports children to achieve the highest standards whilst reducing inequity and closing the attainment gap (NIACE, 2013). Educational interventions involving the whole family make a significant difference not only to the aspirations and attainment of children, but also to the skills, confidence and ambition of their parents. Family learning has long-term benefits as it affects behaviours and attitudes to learning across the whole family (van Steensel et al, 2011).

The information gathered in this document has informed our knowledge of where family learning is strong and how evidence-based programmes are achieving an impact.

3.3 Review of evidence

'I've seen such a change in her in just a few weeks. She's listening and joining in much more'.

[\(Learn with Fred\)](#)

Background

Key findings from the [Scottish Survey of Adult Literacies](#) (2009) suggest that approximately one quarter of the Scottish population (26.7%) may face occasional challenges and constrained opportunities due to their literacy difficulties although they will generally cope with their day-to-day lives. Within this quarter of the population, 3.6% (one person in 28) faces serious challenges in their literacy practices. Similarly, the findings of the [Growing Up in Scotland](#) study (Scottish Executive, 2011) show:

- The largest differences in ability are between children whose parents have higher and lower educational qualifications. At age five, compared with children whose parents have no qualifications, those with a degree-educated parent are around 18 months ahead on vocabulary and around 13 months ahead on problem solving.
- Children from less advantaged households are less likely to experience a wide range of 'home learning' activities than children from more advantaged households.
- Children who experience a wide range of activities like being read to, singing nursery rhymes and drawing from an early age, score higher in cognitive ability tests at age three than children with less experience of these activities.

Families from disadvantaged backgrounds tend to have lower parental literacy levels, poorer health, more exposure to crime, stress, less access to good after school programmes and less security from stable employment (House of Commons, 2014). None of these in themselves influence low achievement, neither is family background in itself a barrier to achievement (House of Commons, 2014). Families who are given the opportunity can achieve and learn. This is evidenced in the Growing Up in Scotland study above. Although endeavours have been made to link aspiration with family background that leads to attainment, it has not been possible to find causality (House of Commons, 2014). Evidence does show that there are correlations between aspiration and attainment (House of Commons, 2014). Research also suggests that families from disadvantaged backgrounds have high aspirations but they need the information and understanding on how to mobilise these effectively to achieve better outcomes for children (House of Commons, 2014).

Home and family influences can be associated with underachievement as children and young people spend the majority of their time outwith school. Research shows that around 80% of the difference in how well children do at school depends on what happens outside the school gates (Rabash et al, 2010; Save the Children, 2013). Providing a 'stimulating learning environment outside of school can be crucial for children's educational achievement, as well as for their social and emotional development' (Save the Children, 2013, p13). Children do tend to succeed where families are 'supportive and demanding' therefore creating a 'culture of much higher expectations for young people, both in our homes and in our schools' (House of Commons, 2014, p29).

Early intervention work with families with a view to preventing difficulties later on is an international discussion. Nonetheless, provision for families is viewed as the means to secure 'social order and economic success' (Nutbrown et al, 2015). There is a danger in perceiving early intervention as a 'series of programmes targeted to address potential deficit' and miss the opportunity to 'embrace the importance of well-informed and confident practitioners working holistically with families' (Nutbrown et al, 2015). Family learning derives from a 'wealth model' which builds upon existing skills, knowledge and experience (NIACE, 2013). Reaching disadvantaged families through family learning has benefits that are shown to last beyond the duration of the intervention (Goodall et al, 2011). Family learning also has the potential to allow practitioners to 'refocus their provision and develop more relevant, high quality learning opportunities for families' as well as develop effective planning. This is key in times of financial restraints (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013).

Ensuring that Scotland's parents have the skills, knowledge and respect to provide support and maximise children's opportunities for learning is essential. A foundational belief of contemporary family learning programmes is the idea that 'parents need to be literate and that through the intergenerational transfer of skills and attitudes, the parents' education can influence the subsequent educational achievement of their children' (Sticht, 2010). Such a view is supported by the Growing Up in Scotland study and is particularly important given that a child's network of support begins in the family with their parents (National Parenting Strategy, 2012, p13).

Benefits of family learning programmes

Family learning focuses on 'improving the life chances of disadvantaged families' (Harding and Ghezalayagh, 2014, p10). It should be recognised that family learning is a single intervention but one which can be delivered in a range of ways and settings. Family learning produces multiple outcomes for parents, children, families and communities. 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). The early engagement process and techniques are crucial in developing relationships and trust which is a motivating factor in families who ordinarily would not be engaged in learning outcomes.

Learning outcomes and benefits resulting from family learning can be categorised into five areas: new skills; increased confidence and understanding; improved communication; changed behaviours; and changed relationships with the community and family (Fairfax-Cholmeley and Meade, 2009). Family learning outcomes can be varied within a programme and individuals within the family. The primary outcomes of programmes are as a result of discussions with families and members of the community to identify needs. Secondary outcomes often emerge as a by-product during the programme.

Family learning as an intervention aims to help parents and children learn together as and within a family across generations. Through embedding changes in attitudes, behaviours, understanding and skills within the family, family learning reduces the cost of supporting vulnerable families and gives them the resources to take advantage of available opportunities (NIACE, 2013).

Working with parents and families to resolve problems contributes to the creation of a better environment for the child not just in the short term but through providing sustainable solutions to enable families to help themselves, thereby preventing costly interventions being necessary in the future (NIACE, 2011). Working with families should not be confused with 'doing unto them' but rather working collaboratively together 'with them'. Supporting children's long-term success requires intervention beyond the early years. Real success and intervention to achieve longer-term gains in achievement is obtained through helping parents 'enhance what happens at home' (Nutbrown et al, 2015, p266; Harris and Goodall, 2007).

For many adults a family learning programme can be the first step to taking up further adult learning and training opportunities or gaining employment (Swain, 2009). Motivations for attending programmes are wide ranging and include 'personal progression, personal wellbeing, social and community aspects, work and employability and improvements in parenting and relationships with children and other family members' (Harding et al, 2013, p10). Although impacts can be more related to 'soft' areas, there are tangible results such as gaining qualifications or employment (Harding et al, 2013). 'Gaining employment and skills for employment is a recognised key benefit and progression outcome for parents and carers who engage in Family Learning programmes' (Robey et al, 2016, p8). Attendees at family learning programmes not only benefit from the programme intentions and their original motivations for signing up, they also benefit from 'unintended' impacts. These include personal wellbeing, switching off from stresses of daily life, an opportunity to keep their minds active, improvements in family relationships, ability to share new skills or knowledge with other family members, as well as wider social and community benefits (Harding et al, 2013).

For children, family learning impacts on their own attainment and personal learning journey. Research evidence shows 'family learning could increase the overall level of children's development by as much as fifteen percentage points for those from disadvantaged groups and provide an average reading improvement equivalent to six months of reading age' (NIACE, 2013, p9). Children benefit more widely from being involved in family learning. Such benefits have in previous studies included children being more settled in class, having improved relationships with peers and teachers, improved communication, interpersonal skills and self-confidence (Ofsted, 2009; UNESCO, 2015). Children's reading scores are also positively improved through family literacy programmes (Swain et al, 2015).

Family learning is a cost effective and sustainable approach which helps to break the cycle of the 'long tail of underperformance' through helping adults and children improve their skills, increase their confidence and self-esteem and has positive impacts on health and wellbeing, employability, community engagement and routes out of poverty (Ofsted, 2013, p4; UNESCO, 2015). Family learning 'is part of a cost-effective solution' whereby a 'learning family is one where both adults and children engage in learning, share their learning, and the confidence and skills increase for both, leading to raised aspirations, better attainment and strengthened family relationships' (NIACE, 2011, p3).

Families may also benefit from being in 'a familiar school-based location' which is 'in a convenient location within a trusted set up' (Buttrick and Parkinson, 2013, p53). At the same time, children and young people benefit from learning outwith the school environment (Buttrick and Parkinson, 2013).

A recent study of adult literacy in England urged the UK Government to invest and promote family learning schemes where the learning outcomes are intended for parents and their children which result in a culture of improved learning in the family (House of Commons, 2014, p39). Addressing issues within families and working with them to develop positive attitudes to learning is crucial to making the 'step changes' required (NIACE, 2013). Closing the attainment gap is a key driver in Scottish education and one which can be assisted through family learning to help create a culture of aspiration in Scottish families (NIACE, 2013). Scottish Government policy drivers in the National Improvement Framework and the Scottish Attainment Challenge, aim to reach the most disadvantaged families and deliver early intervention and prevention programmes such as family learning.

Workforce development

Ensuring that the workforce is developed and equipped to work with families is an ongoing challenge. This is especially the case given that family circumstances and methods of communication can change rapidly through developing technology and other societal and economic influences. Previous research suggests that many practitioners do not have appropriate skills, knowledge and confidence to work with parents, particularly those from deprived communities. Research calls for training or continuous professional development (Dyson, 2007). By developing course guidelines and learning materials, practitioners can gain the skills and confidence to work with disadvantaged families and provide increased motivation to retain families who may not normally engage (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013).

It should be noted, however, that skills and knowledge to work with families can be transferable. This is particularly true of community learning and development and adult learning practitioners who are trained in community and family engagement and the social practice model. Their engagement with communities and families is about building relationships and trust and they start from a wealth model. This is a fundamental part of the family learning approach.

Family literacy programmes

Despite the range of studies carried out, research often illustrates the 'scope of the problem, without pointing to solutions' (Carpentieri, 2013, p544). More is known about the importance of literacy and less about the impacts of programmes or the mechanisms that drive impacts. Family literacy is 'based on the most ancient of educational traditions: intergenerational learning' which is rooted in all cultures (UNESCO, 2015, p7). Through family literacy and learning, adults and children are presented with the opportunity to 'become independent, proactive lifelong learners' (UNESCO, 2015, p7).

Family literacy programmes focus on supporting an identified need with the family in relation to literacy. It also puts 'the family at the heart of the educational enterprise and increases parental appreciation of their central role in their child's education in general, and literacy development in particular' (Swain et al, 2015).

Family literacy could be for the whole family or the child and/or parent as individuals but with a whole family impact. It is widely believed that there is an intergenerational transfer of skills from the parent to the child and the child to the parent. This could be both positive and negative but 'family literacy plays a key role in increasing social inclusion and reducing the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage' (Swain, 2009). In terms of social return on investment, family literacy programmes are relatively inexpensive not least because they can often occur outwith school hours (Carpentieri, 2013).

Family literacy programmes also aim to 'increase parents' capacity to support their children's literacy development through mechanisms such as improving parents' confidence in and attitudes towards reading with their children and improving the home learning environment and general parenting skills' (Carpentieri, 2013, p548; Swain et al, 2015).

Interventions based on service delivery are inevitably complex and require complex evaluation methodologies and theories (Carpentieri, 2013). Changes in families take place over a longer period of time and as each one is at a different stage, it is difficult to measure. Research on the results of family-centred literacy programmes show that there are immediate benefits as well as a longer-term impact for both children and adults (Brooks et al, 2008; Carpentieri et al, 2011; Hayes, 2006; Tuckett, 2004; UNESCO, 2015).

Family numeracy programmes

Family numeracy programmes focus on supporting an identified need with the family in relation to numeracy. Again this could be for the whole family or the child and/or parent as individuals but with a whole family impact. As with family literacy programmes, it is widely believed that there is an intergenerational transfer of skills from the parent to the child and that this can be positive or negative.

The majority of family learning evaluations have focused on family literacy with very few looking at family numeracy (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2012). Research that has been carried out, considered 'Family Numeracy Adds On' (Brooks and Hutchison, 2002), and 'Family mathematics/numeracy: identifying the impact of supporting parents in developing their children's mathematical skills' (Ashton et al, 2011). Key findings suggest that parents were unclear about current teaching methods and had to rely on their children explaining these, often with difficulty (Ashton et al, 2011).

Participating in mathematical approaches 'allows parents to be more positive and understand their value' (Ashton et al, 2011). Older studies (Abreu and Cline, 2005) have considered the impact of children's home culture on their maths learning in school. Teaching children at home was found to be difficult and parents needed support both with the way that maths is taught and strategies to bridge the home/school gap (Abreu and Cline, 2005).

Family learning ESOL

Family learning ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) programmes are promoted as an important means of bringing about social inclusion. Current policy and practice supports the involvement of parents in their child's learning. Despite this, language skills and cultural diversity can be a barrier and restrict access to and influence in educational institutions. ESOL family learning programmes seek to remove those barriers and support families to learn together, impacting on the child and parents' learning and reduce the large numbers of those who do not reach their potential (Johnson, 1985; Ward, 2008). In addition to reducing social isolation for some families, it also supports parents to access further training and development as well as the employment market.

Scotland has an increasing responsibility for refugee children and families. Some children will enter the country without family members. These children will be the responsibility of the local authority who will act as a Corporate Parent.

The Scottish Government summarises three key elements of corporate parenting In [These Are Our Bairns: A Guide for Community Planning Partnerships](#) (2008) as:

- The statutory duty on all parts of a local authority to co-operate in promoting the welfare of children and young people who are looked after by them, and a duty on other agencies to co-operate with councils in fulfilling that duty.
- Co-ordinating the activities of the many different professionals and carers who are involved in a child or young person's life, and taking a strategic, child-centred approach to service delivery.
- Shifting the emphasis from 'corporate' to 'parenting', taking all actions necessary to promote and support the physical, emotional, social and cognitive development of a child from infancy to adulthood.

Parental involvement and family learning

Parental involvement in schools is well documented as are the barriers to becoming involved. For those parents who have had negative experiences of school and lack the confidence to re-engage with education, family learning offers a more comfortable approach. It enables parents to cross the school gates, participate, allow their curiosity for learning to be re-awakened whilst at the same time, they are able to reinforce the importance of learning to their children (Hartley, 2006).

It is important to understand that family learning is not parental involvement. Family learning is an approach to engage families in learning but it can also happen independently from the school environment. Some families need a step before engaging with the school for parental involvement to be effective.

Evaluating programmes

A simplistic focus on evaluating family literacy programmes can distract policy makers from its longer-term impacts across a number of policy areas (Carpentieri, 2013). Evaluating family literacy programmes often involves pre and post-tests of children's and adults' literacy at the start and end of a programme. Although there is evidence from the programmes that there is an impact on literacy, the wider and longer-term impacts are not always captured (Carpentieri, 2013). Furthermore, longitudinal evaluation can be difficult in terms of tracking individuals over a period of time, as well as being too drawn out for policy makers. Carpentieri suggests that 'if improving literacy is an investment worth making, then so too is improved programme evaluation' (2013, p553). However, it is important to note that the relationship of cause and effect are complicated and that inputs are also important to the process. There has to be trust in inputs as some outcomes are more long term.

The desire to help their children with learning often motivates parents to re-engage in learning themselves. By encouraging and valuing all forms of learning (formal, non-formal and informal), overcoming artificial barriers between home, school and community, and breaking down divisions between generations, a family literacy and learning approach supports the development of literacy and other skills for all age groups.

Monitoring and evaluating the quality and impact of family learning is generally undertaken through questionnaires and course feedback at the time. Yet few schools and practitioners track the longer-term impact of family learning programmes on the standards achieved by children (Estyn, 2012). Although 'robust evidence is beginning to appear that involvement in family learning activity has an impact on measurable outcomes for the children involved' (Mackenzie 2010, p55), further Scottish research is still required.

Policies and strategies

The various outcomes of family learning in general means that it can be a catalyst for changes in cross-cutting social, educational and economic policy areas. Given that parents, children and families are a common denominator in so many cross-cutting policies and agendas, increasing learning within this is 'the catalyst for wide-ranging changes, not just related to skills and qualifications but also in terms of community cohesion and wellbeing' (Lamb, 2007, p17). Integrating family learning into policies and strategies to raise attainment, ensure cross-departmental outcomes and narrow the gap between the lowest and highest achievers is a key finding in an inquiry into family learning in England and Wales (NIACE, 2013). Having the right to be part of a learning family is also considered in the inquiry. In Scotland, family learning is embedded into a number of cross-cutting policies and strategies. However, there is no single policy that pulls together family learning outcomes to provide a wider picture on the effectiveness and impact of this approach.

Research calls for family learning to be 'built into the core offer of early years provision and seen as an effective use of school funding, to ensure that the parents and carers of children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are offered high-quality family learning opportunities' (NIACE, 2013, p11). Other criticisms around funding suggest that there is a need to 'rebalance the current funding skew in expenditure between primary and secondary schools, and to significantly increase the front-loading of school funding' (Save the Children, 2013, p19). Regularly reviewing the funding for, and supply of, family learning against potential demand is also suggested.

Previous research highlights that 'international comparisons, the early appearance of the attainment gap and the economic pressure on the parents of young children', show the potential need for a change in the structure of our educational system to achieve fair chances (Save the Children, 2013, p18). Eradicating educational disadvantage, especially amongst the disadvantaged, requires tangible policies and bold action (Save the Children, 2013). While it is acknowledged that there are pockets of good practice across the country, there is a call for 'a national strategy to bring it all together' (Murtagh, 2010, p42).

3.4 Summary

The aim of this report is to provide an in-depth review looking at the available evidence on family learning. Although current national and international research on family learning has been considered, it should be recognised that the scope of this Review is relatively narrow. It was not intended to consider family learning in its widest sense and it is therefore limited to reviewing evidence from the available literature. Consideration has also not been given to obtaining wider evidence that would have been gathered through consultation with practitioners, parents/families or children and young people.

Despite the relatively narrow scope, there are key messages that have emerged from the Review which are of relevance to policy makers, practitioners and researchers. The review of evidence is strong in highlighting that family learning reaches the most disadvantaged, helps close the attainment gap and has lasting effects beyond the duration of the intervention. Although family learning in itself is relatively low cost and provides a high social rate of return, qualified practitioners are required in the field to tailor and deliver programmes. Evidence-based research should influence the design of family learning programmes. These should be piloted before being rolled out on a wider scale.

There is a need for further data and evidence gathering to identify needs, trends and to help inform future policy developments and drivers for change. Such policy developments need to be cross-cutting and are required to be at the forefront at a national and local level. Further research is required along with more longitudinal evaluations on the impact of family learning across Scotland (van Steensel, 2011).