

## Appendix 4: Literature Review

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## Introduction

The purpose of this review is to provide the groundwork for empirical research on the role of technologies in facilitating parental engagement in their children's education *and* learning in general.

This is a broad area and, as such, we divided the review into two sections:

- parental engagement, home school communications and the role of technology
- learning in families and the role of technology.

In each section, we discuss the background and policy context as well as review some of the evidence of the role of technology in each of these areas.

The first section focuses on parental engagement specifically with their children's school education. It begins by defining parental engagement and discusses education policy in relation to this. We then focus on home-school communication and, subsequently, how technology is being used to facilitate this. We end the section with a note on 'hard-to-reach' parents, exploring the different ways in which certain groups of parents may be excluded or disengaged from their children's education.

The second section covers the wider topic of parents' engagement with their children's learning. We examine the learning that takes place beyond the school, which occurs formally and informally within families. The section begins by outlining the broader picture of how families now spend their time. We define 'family learning' and 'learning in families' and outline the policy context. We also explore the barriers that some families face. We then discuss the background to formal family learning schemes and their now prominent role within the extended schools agenda. Technology plays a central role in policy in extending learning beyond the classroom. We discuss issues that relate to home access to technology and the digital divide. We end with a discussion about the informal learning that takes place in families and the role of technology in this.

Throughout this review, we focus on the barriers and challenges to parental engagement as well as parents' access and use of technology. Thus, we maintain an important focus on the inequalities of social class, ethnicity, gender and location.

It is important to note that this is not a systematic review of all available evidence on parental engagement, family learning and technology. Rather, it provides sketch of the current landscape of knowledge. For a fuller review of the literature and research

in this area, see Desforges and Abouchar's<sup>1</sup> literature review on parental involvement and Grant's review<sup>2</sup> on learning in families and digital technologies.

This literature review concludes with a summary of the implications drawn from our research.

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1 Desforges and Abouchar 2003  
2 Grant 2009

## Parental engagement, home school communications and technology

This section focuses on parental engagement policy and practice. In particular, it looks at the role of technology in enhancing the engagement of parents in their children's education, specifically in relation to their formal schooling.

Parental involvement and engagement in children's learning is recognised to be highly important within policy and practice, most recently reinforced in *Every Child Matters*,<sup>3</sup> *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All*,<sup>4</sup> and the *Children's Plan*.<sup>5</sup> Each of these pledges to increase parental involvement in schools and ensure that parents' voices are heard.

Parental involvement or engagement appears to be underpinned by two main factors. First, there is the widely held assumption that parents are a child's first teacher or 'co-educator'.<sup>6</sup> Second, there is a body of evidence that indicates parental involvement positively impacts on a child's education.<sup>7</sup> In recent policy discussions home-school relationships appear to be driven by the idea of empowering parents. Increasingly governments are '...put[ting] the parent and pupil at the centre of the system'.<sup>8</sup> There is an assumption made by policy-makers, that an informed parent is a more engaged parent. There is a belief that this parental engagement will not only raise educational attainment, but also make for more active, equal and democratic institutions.

Since 1995, Ofsted inspection guidelines have involved exploring the level of parental involvement in schools. In 1998, the Home-School Agreement (HSA) was enacted outlining the expected role of the school, the parent and the pupil.<sup>9</sup> While the HSA was criticised by some for not being mandatory,<sup>10</sup> others argue that the HSA has the potential to promote the development of two-way communication between the home and the school.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is important to recognise that parental engagement is demanding, challenging and complex. The level and type of parental involvement is shaped by socio-economic factors of the parent, such as class, gender, race and ethnicity.<sup>12</sup> This raises questions about those groups of parents that schools and policy-makers consider least involved in the education of their children.

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3 DfES 2003

4 DfES 2005b

5 DCSF 2007a

6 DfES 2006

7 Bastiani 1997, Desforges and Abouchar 2003, Hara and Burke 1998, Tomlinson 1991

8 DfES 2005b, p1

9 Bastiani and Wyse 1999, Hood 1999

10 Ouston and Hood 2000

11 Farrell and Jones 2000, p259

12 Crozier and Reay 2005, Moon and Ivins 2004, Vincent 1996

## What is parental involvement or engagement?

It is first necessary to explore what is meant by parental involvement or engagement. The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) emphasises two fundamental dimensions of parental involvement: participation in the education of their child *per se*; and/or participation in the life of the school.<sup>13</sup>

Current policy is shifting towards an emphasis on promoting parental *engagement*, which is often seen as a more encompassing term. Some activities that the literature cites as forming the basis for parental engagement include:

- attending parent-teacher conferences
- attending programmes featuring students
- engaging in volunteer activities
- providing help with homework
- discussing children's schoolwork and experiences at school
- structuring home activities.<sup>14</sup>

Some of the roles that form the basis of parental engagement, cited by this literature review, include:

- volunteering as classroom assistants
- organising events
- accepting formal positions in the governance of the school, such as becoming parent governors, joining the parent-teacher association (PTA), parents' council and school/parents' forum.

Policy suggests that, ideally, parental engagement should result in parents and teachers working in partnership for the benefit of the child.<sup>15</sup> In essence, it seems that home-school communication is at the centre of a successful school parental involvement strategy.

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13 Harris and Goodall 2007, DCSF 2008

14 Lee and Bowen 2006, p194

15 Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 1997

## Home-school communication

Government policy states, and educational research concurs, that home-school communication is important because when parents are better informed they are more able to support their children's education.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore assumed that 'un-informed parents are less able to support their children's schooling'.<sup>17</sup>

Schools communicate with parents in a variety of ways. This includes:

- parents' evenings
- informal discussion between parents and teachers
- school reports
- meetings requested by parents to talk specifically about their child
- written communication that children take home
- technologically mediated communication.

Research has found that written forms of communication are becoming increasingly popular.<sup>18</sup> However, communicating with parents through reports and newsletters has been criticised as a one-way form of communication. A study by Sure Start<sup>19</sup> identifies one-way communication as negatively impacting on parental involvement. Research suggests that home-school communication should be two-way. This is where information and knowledge flows in both directions, rather than just from school to parent.<sup>20</sup>

## The role of technology in home school communication

Technology has the potential to facilitate the involvement of parents in the education of their children. While it has opened up new possibilities, it is challenging and requires a certain level of coordination and management.<sup>21</sup>

ICT has enabled schools to provide a wide range of information to parents online. It has helped parents to make informed decisions<sup>22</sup> and provides new modes of communication to go alongside, or even replace, traditional methods, such as face-to-face meetings, telephone calls and written letters.

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16 DCSF 2007b, Desforges and Abouchar 2003, Epstein 1992, Hara and Burke 1998, Muschamp et al 2007, Reynolds 2005, Vincent 1996

17 Stern 2003, p14

18 Moon and Ivins 2004, Peters et al 2008

19 Sure Start 2007

20 DfES 2006, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation 1997, Hornby 2000.

21 Bastiani 1997, Desforges and Abouchar 2003, Fredriksson et al 2008

22 DfES 2005a

These technology-enabled modes of communication include using:

- e-mail and text messaging to communicate with parents
- school websites to display key information for parents and pupils
- e-portals (or some form of online reporting), allowing parents to monitor their children's progress, punctuality and performance
- learning platforms
- the mychildatschool.com website.<sup>23</sup>

Secondary schools now need to provide online reporting for parents by 2010, and primary schools by 2012.<sup>24</sup> To this end, some schools have adopted e-portals or learning platforms.<sup>25</sup>

Becta<sup>26</sup> identifies four key ways that ICT can contribute to improve parental engagement. ICT can:

- provide a convenient way for parents to access up-to-date information about their children's learning, anywhere and anytime
- enable parents to be more engaged with their children's learning, which drives improvement
- support more flexible working arrangements and distribution of work for staff<sup>27</sup>
- enable information to be captured more efficiently as part of learning and teaching processes that exploit technology.

Technology can also:

- increase the efficiency of school administrations and the effectiveness of school management<sup>28</sup>
- increase transparency through improved communications with pupils and parents.<sup>29</sup>

### **'Hard-to-reach' parents and barriers to parental involvement**

Schools are urged to welcome all parents.<sup>30</sup> However, evaluations of parental engagement initiatives<sup>31</sup> have recognised that parental engagement is complex and

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23 Mychildatschool.com is a national initiative that offers parents access to information on their children's progress, attendance and behaviour via the school's administration system.

24 See DCSF announcement 2008

[www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn\\_id=2008\\_0006](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/pns/DisplayPN.cgi?pn_id=2008_0006)

25 DCSF 2007c

26 Becta 2008

27 See also Fredriksson et al 2008

28 Hollingworth et al 2008, Lawson and Comber 1999

29 Somekh et al 2003

30 DfES 2005b

31 Alan et al 2007, Borg and Mayo 2001, Harris and Goodall 2007



is influenced by numerous factors. These include availability of time, transport, social and other material resources, which can create barriers to engagement.<sup>32</sup> These barriers need to be taken into account by schools and policy-makers when developing parental engagement strategies, practices and programmes.<sup>33</sup>

### **Social and economic disadvantage**

As Reynolds<sup>34</sup> notes, such barriers are more likely to be encountered by socially and economically disadvantaged parents than middle-class parents. Parental engagement is strongly linked to family income, social class, ethnicity, and previous educational experience. These parents are sometimes described as being 'hard-to-reach'. The phrase 'hard-to-reach parents' refers to those parents that schools have found to be less likely to engage in the education of their children. However, some argue that this phrase creates a deficit model of parents and that it is the school that can be 'hard-to-reach', rather than the parents themselves.<sup>35</sup>

Some of these parents face significant barriers when trying to engage in their children's education.

Time, distance and circumstance barriers include:

- work commitments
- child care for other children
- the pressures of single-parenthood
- living in a rural area
- disability or serious illnesses.

Social and cultural barriers include:

- lack of skills or knowledge
  - different cultural expectations as to who is responsible for a child's education
  - parents' concerns around their own capabilities and knowledge
  - negative experiences with education
  - lack of confidence in dealing with those in schools and authority, (especially among some working-class parents)
  - low levels of English literacy, especially among certain ethnic groups.
- Research has shown that schools have a particular difficulty in engaging

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32 Reay 1996, Reynolds 2005, Vincent 1996

33 Edwards and Warin 1999

34 Reynolds 2005

35 Crozier and Davies 2007

parents that are not fluent in the English language. It also shows that there are low levels of participation from such groups of parents.<sup>36 37</sup>

There is also the barrier of cynicism regarding parental input. Many parents perceive that they lack power to influence their children's school.<sup>38</sup>

Conversely, research suggests that middle-class families have a greater level of social and cultural capital to advance their children in the education system.<sup>39</sup>

### **School cultures, ethos and practices**

School cultures significantly impact on parents' ability and willingness to engage. There are a number of issues around this:

- the larger the school, the more impersonal it becomes and the harder it is for parents to engage<sup>40</sup>
- schools sometimes do not make it easy for parents to become involved<sup>41</sup>
- as children get older, parental involvement can be seen as an unwelcome intrusion
- teachers do not always view parental engagement as being positive<sup>42</sup>
- staff may not be trained to engage with the diverse needs of parents<sup>43</sup>
- school information can contain too much jargon<sup>44</sup>
- some members of staff may stigmatise some parents (such as single mothers, fathers or minority ethnic parents) because these parents do not appear to be actively involved<sup>45</sup>
- some minority ethnic parents feel that their involvement in school is unwelcome.<sup>46</sup>

These barriers and challenges to parental engagement have important consequences for those policies and practices aimed at engaging parents and consequently the role that technology has to play. Feinstein<sup>47</sup> suggests that there are three key policy issues that need to be addressed in order to deliver effective interactions between schools and parents. These are:

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36 Sneddon 1997

37 See Crozier 1997, Crozier 1998, Crozier 1999, Harris and Goodall 2007, Lareau 1987, Tett 2001, Vincent 2002, Vincent 2000, Williams et al 2002 for more detail.

38 Williams et al 2002

39 Di Maggio 2001, Reay 1998

40 Page et al 2009

41 DfES 2005b

42 Keating and Taylorson 1999

43 Alan et al 2007

44 Moon and Ivins 2004, Peters et al 2008

45 Issa et al 2008, Powell 1991, Reay 1996

46 Maylor et al 2005, Mirza and Reay 2000

47 Feinstein 2003

- the integration of services
- the importance of processes alongside structures
- the need for high quality interventions that are enduring, personalised, lifelong and appropriate.

These recommendations were consolidated in a joint report by the Family and Parenting Institute, the National Children's Bureau and the Institute for Education.<sup>48</sup> The report suggests that schools need to change their focus and that professionals (including teachers and headteachers) should be equipped with the skills required to respond to children, young people, parents and to the communities in which they operate. However, research suggests that interactive communication between parents and schools is still absent.<sup>49</sup>

In terms of technology, parents without adequate financial resources and technological skills are disadvantaged.<sup>50</sup> While new technologies have been found to be a more effective way of communicating with some hard-to-reach groups of parents such as fathers and non-resident parents and those in full-time work, other parents favour more traditional methods such as the telephone, letters or face-to-face meetings.<sup>51</sup>

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48 Feinstein et al 2007

49 Smith et al 2008

50 Hollingworth et al 2008

51 Peters et al 2008

## Learning in families and technology

This second section covers the wider topic of parents' engagement with their children's learning. It explores the learning that takes place beyond the school, which occurs formally and informally within families. The policy context, specifically formal family learning schemes, the extended schools agenda and the Home Access scheme (which ultimately aims to provide access to technology to all children at home) are discussed as key facilitators to learning in families with technology. The literature that emphasises the barriers to learning that some groups face and hence engaging in their children's learning is highlighted. The section concludes by discussing the role that new technologies play in family learning.

### Families and their time

When discussing learning in families it is important to take into account the changing dynamics of families in contemporary society:<sup>52</sup>

- more children now live in single parent families than ever before
- parents' working patterns have changed with more than 50 per cent of women now working either full-time or part-time
- people in Britain have the longest working hours in Europe
- the growth of the 24/7 economy means more parents now work shift work.

However, despite more mothers working, and parents working longer hours, time-use studies show that parents spend more time now with their children compared to the 1950s and 60s.<sup>53</sup>

Recent research on the role of technology in learning in families<sup>54</sup> shows that teenagers now spend the majority of their time at home on the internet. Teenagers also said that they used the internet more for socialising, play and their own research than for formal learning.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, they still reported spending time with their family (82 per cent, with the highest percentage spending five hours or more); time which may well overlap with other activities such as watching television, surfing the internet and playing computer games. This picture shows that there are opportunities for learning in families and a role for technologies within this. This is particularly the case since technologies appear to be such a central feature of contemporary home life.

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52 See Family and Parenting Institute 2005.

53 Ibid

54 Hart et al 2008

55 Ibid

## What is family learning or learning in families?

### Family learning

It is important to define what is meant by 'family learning'. Family learning is commonly used as an umbrella term for a range of programmes or initiatives. It can include formal or informal learning, lifelong or intergenerational learning, adult or family education or family literacy, language and numeracy (FLLN).

Many have offered definitions,<sup>56</sup> most relating specifically to formally funded and taught programmes. According to Ofsted,<sup>57</sup> family learning in England is that which: "concentrates on learning which brings together different family members to work on a common theme for some if not the whole programme [...] the focus is on planned activity in which adults and children come together, to work and learn collaboratively."

Implicit in the term is the idea that several different members of the family will be involved including mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, and other extended family members.<sup>58</sup> However, in practice, the adult learner in the family is usually the mother.<sup>59</sup> Attendance by fathers is rare.<sup>60</sup>

### Learning in families

'Learning in families' includes the notion of informal learning. Defining informal learning can be contentious, although it can be understood broadly as the unstructured and spontaneous learning that takes place through daily activities. These activities occur outside of formal learning environments and take place in areas such as the community or in the home. Informal learning can also include the learning that takes place through leisure activities.<sup>61</sup> Grant's<sup>62</sup> work at Futurelab, uses the term 'learning in families' to encompass a wide range of activities between parents, children and the extended family, including:

- formal, non-formal, informal
- parents and children learning together
- parents helping children learn
- parents learning from children
- parents learning skills in order to help their children learn.

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56 Horne and Haggart 2004, NIACE 2003, Ofsted 2000

57 Ofsted 2000, p5

58 Rose and Atkin 2007

59 Brooks et al 1996, Rose and Atkin 2007

60 Brooks et al 1996, Goldman 2005, Ofsted 2000

61 Coombs and Ahmed 1974

62 Grant 2009

Therefore, in this research we use the term 'learning in families', which encompasses the concept of 'family learning'. We use 'family learning' to refer to structured courses and programmes. It is to these we now turn.

### **Family learning: structured courses and programmes**

In the past decade or so, formal provision of adult and community education has been repackaged and reconceptualised, with a focus on creating a joined-up, inter-agency approach to families and their well-being. This has involved a growth in formal family learning schemes, coupled with parenting education programmes. This is embedded in the wider extended schools agenda, but all have the common aim of assisting parents and families.

Family learning programmes historically were aimed at families living in areas of heightened economic deprivation and with high levels of unemployment, as these were considered to be factors connected with low educational engagement.<sup>63</sup> Currently, in England, formal family learning programmes are funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) through adult learning. These programmes are targeted at parents with low levels of literacy and numeracy. Reaching both generations at once and engaging them in learning was a strategy designed to help break the 'cycle of disadvantage'.<sup>64</sup> Parents' involvement in their children's education and learning has been a key policy target seen to improve economic and social well-being for disadvantaged families. This is in line with the five desired outcomes of the Government's Every Child Matters agenda<sup>65</sup> and implies that family learning schemes are expected to have a knock-on effect and promote further informal learning in the family.

Family Programmes in England cover two strands: family literacy, language, numeracy (also known as FLLN) and wider family learning. The best-known early, formal programmes were the Family Literacy Schemes set up by the Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit in the mid 1990s (renamed the Basic Skills Agency). These schemes were evaluated and showed statistically significant advances in achievement in reading and writing for both parents and children.<sup>66</sup> Parents reported gains in self-esteem. They also reported that communication with their children improved, as well as communication with their children's teachers. Their success rested on a clear purpose, a focus on achievement and excellent teaching.<sup>67</sup> However, several evaluators and researchers have been sceptical of the benefits

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63 For a fuller discussion of this see Department for Education and Employment 2001, Frater 1995, OECD 1997, UNESCO 2005.

64 Desforges and Abouchar 2003, p73

65 Every Child Matters was published by the DfES (now DCSF) in 2003. Every Child Matters is a shared programme of change to improve outcomes for all children and young people. The five outcomes for children are to: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being.

66 Brooks et al 1997

67 Desforges and Abouchar 2003

that family learning programmes can bring above and beyond other basic skills programmes).<sup>68</sup>

## **Extended schools and family learning**

Current policy strategies see extended schools as a major provider of family learning schemes. An extended school works with the local authority and other partners to offer access to a range of services and activities beyond the formal curriculum.<sup>69</sup> The ultimate aim is to better support parents and families. A wider aim is to facilitate parental involvement in their children's school and learning. A recent survey of extended schools found that 34 per cent of primary schools and 20 per cent of secondary schools offered family learning on their premises.<sup>70</sup>

## **The role of extending schools' ICT facilities in family learning**

Becta<sup>71</sup> argues that the effective use of ICT can help facilitate the extended schools' agenda. Schools have been encouraged to extend their ICT facilities in order to help:

- open up facilities to the wider community
- bridge the digital divide
- build skills to raise the nations ICT capability
- develop an e-competent population
- enhance access to e-government services
- improve internet access and skills for small businesses.

The above also goes some way to supporting learning in families. Providing access to ICT and broadband facilities on or off site, has the potential to level out some of the inequalities in access and use.<sup>72</sup>

Becta<sup>73</sup> recommends that schools create opportunities for pupils and their families to learn together. It suggests that combining classes in literacy (or English as a second language) with ICT use is successful in drawing in traditionally hard-to-reach groups, particularly in deprived areas.

## **Barriers to family learning**

With the focus on targeting deprived communities for family learning schemes, there is a danger of taking a deficit approach to families who appear not to be involved in their children's formally recognised learning. While there may be a correlation between unemployment, low parental education and subsequent children's

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68 Desforges and Abouchar 2003, Hannon and Bird 2004, Hannon et al 2006, NIACE 2003

69 DCSF 2005

70 Chamberlain et al 2006

71 Becta undated

72 Hollingworth et al 2008

73 Becta undated



educational attainment, there is a danger that this then translates into a 'blame the parents' interpretation. This blame approach lacks an understanding of the structural barriers at play in relation to social class, ethnicity and language.

That is:

- some parents may feel that they lack the skills or knowledge to help their children<sup>74</sup>
- working-class families with a history of traditional manual occupations can see the formal education system as something alien and 'not for them'<sup>75</sup>
- there may be ethnic and cultural differences with different cultural expectations as to who is responsible for a child's education<sup>76</sup>
- some parents are not fluent in English<sup>77</sup>
- there may be a lack of knowledge of the education system and other social and cultural capital.<sup>78 79</sup>

This work, and others,<sup>80</sup> warns against a 'cultural imperialism' within parenting policies that imposes certain (mainly white, middle-class) values and experiences of parenting and may exclude or pathologise those who do not share this experience. Parents in the Family and Parenting Institute's (FPI) research asserted that there are many different ways to 'parent', not just, as one parent put it, the 'white middle class norm'.<sup>81</sup>

## Home access and the digital divide

Nevertheless, becoming ICT competent is an increasingly important skill, especially in light of the changing nature of the economy and the shift from an industrial and manufacturing economy to a 'knowledge-based' economy.<sup>82</sup> Despite the economic drive for technological and digital literacy, there exists a digital divide, within the UK.<sup>83</sup> ICT access and use is unevenly distributed both social and spatially.<sup>84</sup> It is strongly aligned to socio-economic status, income, gender, level of education, age, geography and ethnicity.<sup>85</sup> In essence, those seen as 'hard-to-reach' have the most difficulty in accessing technology and are therefore least likely to use it to its full potential. This further hampers their ability to engage in their children's learning and education.

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74 Williams et al 2002

75 Archer and Yamashita 2003, McDowell 2003, Nayak 2006, Reay 2001, Willis 1977

76 Issa et al 2008

77 Ibid

78 Ibid

79 See the main document for a fuller discussion on social and cultural capital.

80 Dyson and Robson 1999, Keating and Taylorson 1999

81 FPI 2005, p3

82 See Grant 2007, DCMS 2009, NACCCE 1999, Selwyn and Facer 2007

83 Sefton-Green 2004

84 Warf 2001 in Selwyn 2003

85 Selwyn 2003



Consequently, in September 2008 the Government launched the Home Access programme to provide computers and connectivity to all families with school-aged children. The scheme links with the extended schools agenda and aims to enhance children's learning at home. However, researchers have highlighted that 'the key issue is not just unequal access to computers [read technology] but rather the unequal ways that computers are *used*'.<sup>86</sup> People from different social class or socio-economic groups use technology differently and for different purposes at home (or outside of school) and this reproduces similar social inequalities.<sup>87</sup> Further research is needed to explore how technologies are used in the home by different social groups.<sup>88</sup>

### **Technology and learning in the family**

The Becta Harnessing Technology Review 2008 states that 'there is relatively little evidence to date on the use of technology to support family learning'. However, two recent reports provide an indication of the potential.<sup>89</sup> Hart and colleagues argue that there does seem to be evidence from their research 'of children and parents helping each other and learning together'.<sup>90</sup>

Ninety per cent of those surveyed in Grant's research claimed they did use technology when learning in the family. The most popular medium for family learning cited was the internet. They found that three in five parents said they would like to use technologies for learning (if they didn't use them already) or use them more (if they did use them already). While Hart found that eight out of ten children claimed to help other family members use the internet, help from parents to children was less prevalent. All parents interviewed for the study felt that it was important to help children with the internet because of its relevance in society. It was also seen by parents as a vital learning tool. However, a large percentage of children claimed that nobody helped them with the internet at home (43 per cent) and the majority of children said they would like their parents to have more time to help them. This raises key questions about the potential for children's role in teaching and facilitating learning with technology.

In order to truly investigate the learning that goes on in families, it is important to take on board examples of learning that occur beyond the classroom, often at the nexus of education, entertainment and play (for example while using video games or watching television).<sup>91</sup> A case in point is the work of Gee, who writes about video

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86 Warschauer 2003, p46, in Selwyn and Facer 2007

87 Angus, et al 2004, Grant 2007, Lee 2008

88 See Davies et al Forthcoming

89 Grant 2009, Hart et al 2008 and see Davies et al Forthcoming

90 Hart et al 2008, p7

91 Gee 2004

games and learning in the USA. He argues that what people are doing when they play computer games is often 'good learning'.<sup>92</sup>

If we are to assume that activities such as playing computer games, surfing the internet and watching television are social activities that often take place within families, then these are important areas for exploring learning in families. There is also the potential for such informal learning to be acknowledged and harnessed by the formal education system.

However, there is a tension between the possibilities for technologies to connect people and bring them together to learn (such as using the Nintendo DS and Wii) with wider anxieties about the potential for technologies to isolate people (such as children using their computers alone in their bedrooms).<sup>93</sup> FPI's research has highlighted that the way families spend time using technology is a massive change in family life. Parents specifically reported conflict between themselves and children about time and money spent on computers, mobile phones and watching TV and DVDs. It was felt that 'in many houses technology takes over from conversation' for example, and 'if children have computers and DVD players in their bedroom, family life doesn't exist'.<sup>94</sup> Yet parents also acknowledged the benefits of technology in helping their children with learning.

Similarly, as Sefton-Green notes, parents are often confused by the mixed messages surrounding the effect of ICT on young people's learning. "On the one hand much of the theory and data suggests that left to themselves, children can get a lot from experiences like games or chat rooms which periodically get slated in the press for the demonic and un-educational properties."<sup>95</sup>

It is therefore important for any research into learning in families to take into account parents' anxiety around technology, and how this anxiety may impact on the ways in which ICT is (permitted to be) used within family learning experiences.

## Summary and implications

**'Parental Involvement' and 'parental engagement'** are used inter-changeably. However, there are signs that the term, parental engagement is being employed as an 'all encompassing' term. Parental engagement takes into account the range and diversity of ways that parents can become engaged in their children's learning beyond the more visible forms, such as attending PTA meetings.

This means that this research takes a wider approach to examining the range of ways that parents may be engaged in their children's learning.

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92 Ibid, p199

93 Family and Parenting Institute 2005

94 Ibid, p5

95 Sefton-Green 2004, p31

**Home-school communication** is seen to be essential in fostering parental involvement and engagement. This refers to the broad and varied means by which information and knowledge is exchanged between the home and school that enables parents (and teachers) to help children in their learning. This is not simply relaying information, but also providing parents with access to the tools by which they can understand their children's progress at school and support them to do better.

However, home-school communication is most effective when it is two-way, allowing information and knowledge to flow from home to school as well as from school to home.

For this research, we therefore attend to how technology can support (or inhibit) more effective, two-way communication between home and school.

**Technology** is playing an increasing role in schools' strategies for engaging and communicating with parents. Technology can be exploited to provide new, more varied and flexible ways of communicating information and knowledge to parents (and vice versa). It can thus foster more effective and positive relationships between home and school.

Parental engagement is complex and influenced by numerous factors that impact on parents in unequal ways, with working-class and minority ethnic parents most likely to be negatively affected by these.

This research aims to examine how parents may experience complex barriers and the ways in which technology may overcome or inhibit these.

**'Family learning'** tends to be used to refer to formal schemes or programmes aimed at raising parents' basic skills and involve them further in their children's education. The expression **'learning in families'**, however encompasses broader learning that takes place outside of school, informally involving various different family members. This research focuses on this wider concept of informal learning in families in order to explore more fully the different spaces and relationships in which learning can occur and how technology features in this.

**Extended schools** feature prominently in the Government's drive to promote learning in families. Access to ICT facilities, classes and sessions are a key aspect of extended schools and as such are explored in this research.

With the focus of family learning and learning in families often being on those in 'deprived' communities and those parents with low levels of education, this research takes care not to promote a deficit model of such families. Instead, it pays attention to the **barriers** that certain families face to learning and to technological competency.

**New technologies** are a central feature of home life for most families. If we take a broad view of learning, which takes into account learning through play and exploration, there is certainly potential for learning in families to occur. There is a small but growing body of research that suggests that the internet is seen as a key area of learning in the home, with children often appearing as educators to adults. However, evidence also suggests that parents have clear concerns about the negative effects of technology on their children.

This research is aware of these concerns and explores the different ways in which parents see the potential for learning using technologies in the home.

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