

# Learning literacy together: the impact and effectiveness of family literacy on parents, children, families and schools

Executive summary - October 2009

Family literacy, language and numeracy



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**Contents**

**Foreword..... 4**

**1. Introduction..... 5**

    1.1 What is family literacy? ..... 6

    1.2 Why is family literacy important?..... 6

    1.3 Policy context..... 7

**2. Research methods and sample ..... 8**

**3. Impact on parents and children..... 9**

    3.1 Impact on skills ..... 9

    3.2 Impact on parents’ attitudes and behaviours..... 9

**4. Value for money ..... 11**

**5. Barriers to successful family literacy provision ..... 12**

**6. Key success factors for local authorities, schools and practitioners ..... 13**

## Foreword

I am delighted to be able to introduce the Executive Summary of this significant piece of research.

Since LSIS commissioned this research in 2007, a number of policy changes in relation to family learning have been implemented. These are beginning to address some of the recommendations that have been made at the end of this summary.

Family Learning Impact Funding (FLIF) announced in the Children's Plan<sup>1</sup> in December 2007, aims to increase the number of disadvantaged mothers, fathers and carers achieving qualifications and progressing. This initiative is already having a positive effect on local authorities that are striving to reach parents with low literacy, language and numeracy skills.

The FLIF programme is also helping local authority providers develop systems to collect data on children's achievement, so that they can assess the impact that improving adult literacy and numeracy skills can have on children's progress.

I am sure that this summary will be of interest to all teachers and managers involved in family learning, as it not only highlights the benefits that family literacy programmes can bring, but also makes practical suggestions as to how this provision can be improved.



**Jenny Burnette**

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<sup>1</sup> The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures, DCSF 2007

## 1. Introduction

This study confirms that family literacy programmes continue to be effective and bring benefits to parents and children that include, and go beyond, improvements in their literacy skills. The study adds to our understanding of why and how family literacy programmes work, and gives insights into how they can be improved.

This short report summarises the findings of a two-year evaluation project to assess the impact and effectiveness of family literacy programmes in England. The work was undertaken by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) and the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) for the Learning and Skills Improvement Service (LSIS). The research, which took place over 20 months from November 2007 to July 2009, aimed to assess the impact of family literacy programmes in England on the skills of parents<sup>2</sup> and their children; family relationships; progression and social mobility.

A range of short (30-49 hours) and standard (72-96 hours)<sup>3</sup> family literacy courses involving children between 3 and 7 years old were included. In specific terms the research objectives were to:

- Collect and analyse data on parents' and children's literacy skills at the beginning and end of the course
- Explore parents' perceptions of how they support their children with reading, writing, speaking and listening, and how this may change as a result of the course
- Gather and analyse data about parents' and children's perceptions of being involved in the course
- Gather data on achievements/qualifications (where appropriate) and progression
- Provide an assessment of the value for money of family literacy
- Examine the perceived impact on participants' lives – from the perspective of both participants and their tutors/teachers.

The project has also included the views and perceptions of headteachers and local authority family literacy managers.

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<sup>2</sup> The term parents is used throughout the report to mean mothers, fathers and carers

<sup>3</sup> In the LSC Guidance 2009-10, standard courses were categorised as running for 60-72 hours

## 1.1 What is family literacy?

Family literacy programmes are one element of family literacy, language and numeracy programmes (FLLN). They aim to address the intergenerational effects of poor literacy and to raise literacy standards across the generations. FLLN in turn comes under the umbrella of family learning programmes, which have the more general aim of involving adults and children in learning and of helping parents learn how to support their children's learning.

Family literacy programmes are specifically designed to enable adults and children to learn together. They aim to raise standards of literacy for both parents and children, to extend parents' skills in supporting their children's developing literacy skills, and to provide opportunities for parents to achieve literacy qualifications at an appropriate level. For many adult learners a family programme is their first step back into formal learning since their own school days, and one important motivation is the desire to offer their child support and opportunity. For many children this can provide the encouragement they need to re-engage and feel success in learning.

## 1.2 Why is family literacy important?

Research shows that socio-economic disadvantage is a key predictor of poor literacy development in children. It is also known that poor literacy is an intergenerational phenomenon<sup>4</sup>, and that having poor literacy skills impacts not only on adults' life chances but also on those of their children<sup>5</sup>.

By attending family literacy programmes, parents learn about how their children are taught and become better able to support their children's learning at home. Both parents and children enjoy their experience of learning together; parents become more closely involved with the school and relations with staff improve.

The crucial importance of the family dimension in the literacy learning of young children and parents has been well documented. A previous evaluation by Brooks and colleagues<sup>6</sup> in the mid-1990s found family literacy programmes to be associated with statistically significant advances in achievement in literacy for both parents and children. In a follow-up study<sup>7</sup>, *Family Literacy Lasts* (1997), all of these specific, and many wider, gains were being sustained two years later.

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<sup>4</sup> De Coulon, A., Meschi, E. and Vignoles, A. (2008) *Parents' Basic Skills and their Children's Test Scores*, London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

<sup>5</sup> Parsons, S. and Bynner, J. (2007) *Illuminating disadvantage: Profiling the experiences of adults with Entry level literacy or numeracy over the lifecourse*. London: National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy

<sup>6</sup> Brooks, G., Gorman, T., Harman, J., Hutchison, D. and Wilkin, A. (1996) *Family literacy works* London: Basic Skills Agency

<sup>7</sup> Brooks, G., Gorman, T., Harman, J., Hutchison, K., Moor, H. and Wilkin, A. (1997) *Family Literacy Lasts: the NFER follow-up study of the Basic Skills Agency's family literacy demonstration programmes* London: Basic Skills Agency

### 1.3 Policy context

Since 1997 there have been huge changes in the learning infrastructure for adult literacy. Through the *Skills for Life* strategy a core curriculum, subject specific teacher training, assessment materials and teaching and learning resources have all been introduced, with the aim of improving standards and bringing a new professionalism to the workforce.

The government recognises that parental education and skills are key determinants of children's attainment, and family literacy is seen as playing a key role in increasing social inclusion and reducing the intergenerational transfer of disadvantage. Since 2000 policy changes and funding have been implemented to improve family programmes nationally. The government's commitment can be seen in *The Children's Plan: Building brighter futures* and through *Skills for Life: Changing Lives*, and family literacy programmes contribute to DCSF and DIUS (now, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)) priorities set out in these and in *World Class Skills: Implementing the Leitch Review of Skills in England 2020*. Family literacy also has a key role to play in supporting the Cabinet Office's *Families at Risk* project as well as cross government initiatives on crime, employability and health. The government has also addressed standards of literacy and numeracy in English primary schools: the National Literacy Strategy was launched in 1998 and the National Numeracy Strategy in 1999.

Family Learning Impact Funding (FLIF), administered by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), has been used to complement family learning programmes to meet national and local priorities; to increase the number of hard to reach families engaged in learning, including families at risk; and to support progression and qualification achievement. £30m has been allocated over 3 years from 2008 – 2011.

## **2. Research methods and sample**

The project employed both quantitative and qualitative research methods. It used established instruments to assess progress in reading and writing; carried out classroom observations; semi-structured questionnaires with local authority managers, adult literacy tutors, early years teachers and parents; and qualitative interviews with local authority managers, adult literacy tutors, early years teachers, headteachers, children and parents.

42 local authorities, from across all nine government office regions in England, were involved in the research. A total of 74 family literacy courses were evaluated, of which 59% were short courses and 41% were standard courses. 583 parents and 527 children took part in the evaluation and were assessed on a range of areas, including their progress in reading and writing. In addition, the project interviewed or surveyed 101 of the 583 parents, plus 62 adult literacy tutors, 62 early years teachers, 33 local authority managers and nine headteachers.

94% of the parents involved were women and 78% of parents had English as their first language. The children were aged between 3 years 0 months and 6 years 11 months at the beginning of the course. 85% of them attended family literacy classes in school settings, and 12% attended nurseries. Three Children's Centres took part in the evaluation.

The average number of learners per course was around nine parents and children on both short and standard courses. The average attendance for parents and children was around 79%, and the average retention rate was around 84%.



### **3. Impact on parents and children**

#### **3.1 Impact on skills**

It should be noted that progress in adult literacy is a slow process, and an estimated 150 hours is often cited<sup>8</sup> as the time needed for an adult to move up one level in the national qualification framework. However, despite the relatively short length of these programmes, parents made progress in both writing and reading. In writing the progress was technically a statistically significant, but small gain; in reading there was a small amount of progress, but this was not technically statistically significant. In reading there seems to have been a ceiling effect at work: the average scores of some parents were already high at the beginning of the courses, leaving little room for further improvement within the range of the assessment instruments used in the research. Moreover, research by the Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning (Feinstein *et al* 2003<sup>9</sup>), has noted that changes in attitudes and behaviours in mid-adulthood tend to be rare, and so any progress at this time is notable, particularly when spread across this many parents.

Children made substantial progress in reading and in writing. Further research could compare this progress with matched-groups of children not participating in family literacy provision to ascertain the effect of the family literacy course on their progress. The courses appeared to work equally well for boys and girls, and for children with English as the first or an additional language.

The average proportion of parents achieving a qualification was 56% on short courses and 71% on standard courses. Parents attending standard courses also showed a greater amount of individual change in their perceptions of their children's literacy activities, and in their perceptions of themselves and their children as learners, on average, than parents on short courses.

#### **3.2 Impact on parents' attitudes and behaviours**

The great majority of parents prioritised their parental role, and their prime motivation for participating in family literacy for parents was to learn about the school curriculum to help them support their children's literacy skills. The majority were primarily concerned with spending quality time with their children and supporting their children's learning, rather than developing their own literacy skills. An appreciation of the benefits of developing their own literacy followed, but was not usually the starting point.

64% of parents reported that since taking a family literacy course they had become more involved in their child's pre-school or school. 76% of parents said that they had changed as a person since taking the family literacy course. This

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<sup>8</sup> Porter, K.E., Cuban, S., and Comings, J.P. (with Chase, V.) (2005) "One day I will make it": A study of adult student persistence in library literacy programs. New York: MDRC. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED484618)

<sup>9</sup> Feinstein, L., Hammond, C., Woods, L., Preston, J. and Bynner, J. (2003) *The Contribution of Adult Learning to Health and Social Capital* London: The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning

was generally expressed in terms of greater confidence, but it also meant that parents felt more capable across a range of areas.

55% of parents reported that they had been on another course since the family literacy course, and 84% said that they were thinking of taking another one. They had a generally positive view of taking a national accredited qualification.

The vast majority of parents were very positive about their experience of family literacy: 97% reported gaining some kind of benefit during the course, and 96% thought that they continued to benefit from the course three months after it had finished.

Seeking employment was not often quoted as a reason for joining a family literacy course, but many said afterwards that they thought the course had improved their options for finding work. However, many were reluctant to seek employment until their children were older and more established at school.

## 4. Value for money

It is difficult to establish what the value-added impact of these family literacy courses was over and above discrete or stand-alone literacy provision. Brooks *et al.* (2008<sup>10</sup>) argued that research has been unable to provide a definitive answer to this, and most of the benefits are qualitative rather than quantitative. The estimated costs per participant-learning hour for the programmes evaluated in this project were £7.39 for the short courses and £6.84 for standard courses<sup>11</sup>. These figures may suggest that longer family literacy programmes give better value for money than short programmes. However, we cannot exclude the possibility that this is a function of fixed start-up costs being spread over longer periods in the calculations.

Any value for money assessment of family literacy programmes must include the opportunity costs attaching to lower levels of provision. NRDC research has established that parents' levels of literacy and numeracy have a substantial impact on the cognitive and skills development of their children. In particular, parents' skill levels have a positive impact on children's cognitive skills, and this 'intergenerational transfer' is always significant, but is *particularly large for parents with low levels of qualifications*. The evidence also shows that improving skill levels *in adulthood* has a positive effect on children's skills. In other words, family literacy programmes can have a positive impact not only on parental skill levels but also, and as a result, on the skill levels of their children. The absence of family literacy programmes would therefore lead to lower levels of skills amongst children, and those lower skill levels would incur socio-economic costs throughout childhood and into adulthood. This point about opportunity costs is supported by numerous other sources, including the Bercow report, which presents evidence on the effects of poor early skills later in life, and the ICAN report, *The Costs to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication*, which documents costs to individuals, families and the country.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Brooks, G., Pahl, K., Pollard A. and Rees, F. (2008) *Effective and inclusive practices in family literacy, language and numeracy: a review of programmes and practice in the UK and internationally*. London: CfBT

<sup>11</sup> = (average available funding per course) divided by {(number of participants [parents and children, including those in the crèche]) multiplied by (contact time [average number of hours attended])}.

<sup>12</sup> See De Coulon, A., et al. (2008) *Parents' Basic Skills and their Children's Test Scores*, London: NRDC. Related evidence on the costs and knock on effects of poor levels of early skills can be found in Hartshorne, M. (2006) *The Costs to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication*, I CAN ; *The Bercow Report*,(2000) DCSF .

## 5. Barriers to successful family literacy provision

Schools were not always able to provide appropriate accommodation, for example dedicated adult teaching space. Practitioners and learners had to adapt to different spaces on different occasions. It was often harder to find space for dedicated teaching rooms and crèches in successful schools, where pupil rolls are more likely to be rising.

Many courses also suffered from poor quality resources and limited access to ICT. This was a serious concern for all respondents.

A number of factors impacted negatively on recruitment, including the recommended requirement to recruit an average of nine parents before a family literacy course can run, and the pressure for participants to take tests at Level 1 and 2, which may exclude less qualified and less confident parents. Smaller schools generally found it harder than larger schools to recruit parents to family literacy courses; they also found it more difficult to achieve a homogenous age range of children in the early years classes.

A related issue was the wide range of abilities of parents and children, with the children's family class often composed of children from a number of different school classes.

Schools were at times reluctant to release children for courses, or release children during literacy or numeracy hours.

Some practitioners lacked planning time and opportunities for relevant CPD. There were also limited opportunities for information sharing between adult literacy tutors and early years school teachers.

Few local authorities appeared to collect systematic data on the progress of family literacy children against other groups of similar children in the school and some schools did not provide local authorities with baseline data on children. This often appeared to be a consequence of the weakness of the relationship between the adult learning provider and the school. Some of the reasons teachers did not provide data, were because they were not asked, they were too busy and/or were unsure of the purpose.

Partners revealed varying perceptions of the primary purpose of family literacy activity. From a school perspective, family learning is a way of building stronger links between home and school, which can contribute to the progress of pupils who might otherwise fall behind. Adult literacy teachers however, are working to build on parents' motivation to help their children as a springboard from which to develop adult skills. They work within school environments which are not always able to allow the time and space needed to facilitate adult learning. These differing perceptions of the primary purpose of the activity can contribute to tensions where space and time are limited.

## **6. Key success factors for local authorities, schools and practitioners**

Strong leadership, with managers who had a strong educational background and were able to understand school structures, and headteachers who supported family literacy and recognised its benefits and the role of parents in children's learning.

Delivery of short ('taster') courses to encourage engagement. Also the embedding of provision as part of a wider family and adult learning programme, and including a mixture of short courses for parents who may be daunted by the commitment required to attend standard courses, which have a greater chance of maximising change and progression.

A flexible approach by local authorities to family literacy, including a willingness to maintain programmes when adult enrolments were low to keep schools engaged and allow interest in provision to grow.

The provision by local authorities of clear routes of progression which were signposted and activities and achievements were promoted through a variety of channels.

Local authorities developing strong relationships with schools; employing staff who were patient, persistent and flexible in building relationships with schools; and developing partnerships with colleges, which enabled access to good quality adult literacy tutors.

Support by local authorities for the development of family literacy programmes by providing funding for dedicated tutor and teacher time, including funds for schools to buy supply cover so that school staff could be involved in family literacy recruitment, planning and delivering family literacy, and attending training courses.

The provision of crèches during family literacy sessions could have a significant impact on parents' ability to successfully complete their course. Not having to incur any cost for their family literacy course was important for parents and a major factor in their enrolment.

Celebration assemblies held by schools where children could see their parents gaining qualifications.

Use of parent support or liaison officers who understand local parental concerns and issues to recruit parents. Also the involvement of past and present parents from family literacy courses who were asked to act as 'learning champions' to attract other parents, and to interpret into first languages if needed.

The use of local, convenient and familiar venues for courses, appropriately furnished for family literacy sessions, and with high quality resources and

materials (e.g. laminating machines and access to ICT). Ideally schools had a specially designated space for family literacy in the main school building and parents are able to continue their studies in the same building or in premises which are nearby.

The involvement of adult literacy tutors and early years teaching staff who were well-qualified and committed to family literacy; formed positive relationships with learners and had a good working partnership. It was also important that there was built in and paid time for planning between adult literacy tutors and early years teachers, both for medium-term and short-term objectives; and that adult literacy tutors and early years teachers could work together in the joint session.

Practitioners recognising that parents and children were likely to have many different understandings and cultural norms, and that many were likely to lead difficult lives.

Practitioners starting from where the parents and children were in terms of their understandings of literacy and their literacy skills; and parents-only sessions linked directly to the school curriculum and included information for parents on how, as well as what, children are taught in school.

Commitment and regular attendance from parents who formed good relationships and supported each other. Where possible adult literacy tutors were encouraged to set up learner peer support groups, which continued working together once the course has finished. Parents also needed to use the class activities with their children at home each week to support their learning.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

This project has evaluated the impact of family literacy in England and has found considerable benefits for parents, children and schools.

There is ample evidence in this report to suggest that family literacy should become a higher priority for schools and has the potential to support the achievement of the aspirations of policies such as *Reaching Out: Think Family, Every Parent Matters* and *Every Child Matters* in addition to *Skills for Life*. Family literacy courses can make a significant contribution to narrowing the gaps between the attainment of disadvantaged and vulnerable pupils and their peers and breaking the link between social disadvantage and educational achievement. Previous research<sup>13</sup> has also given strong support to the importance of parental support in raising achievement. Interventions such as family literacy courses encourage parental involvement by breaking down barriers between home and school and providing them with the understanding of their children's school work that they need to be able to play a full and positive part in their children's learning and development.

There needs to be better communication to schools of the impact that improving adult literacy skills can have on their children's progress, and of the contribution that adult literacy work can make to closing pupil attainment gaps. Family literacy funding needs to be sufficiently flexible to facilitate appropriate accommodation; adequate staffing in family literacy sessions; childcare provision; and to cater for small groups where necessary.

More guidance on accommodation would be helpful, including what local authorities should accept as being a minimum standard. When commissioning new buildings, such as Children's Centres (or refurbishments), funders should take the opportunity to include larger, purpose-built rooms, which can accommodate at least 10 adults to facilitate family literacy provision.

There needs to be more accurate interpretation of the number of learners required on short and standard courses, which many local authority managers appeared to regard as a minimum requirement rather than an average, as stated in the LSC guidance<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Desforges, C. and Abouchar, A. (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustments: A Literature Review*, Research Report 443. London: DfES.

<sup>14</sup> LSC Family Programmes Guidance 2009/10, February 2009

Consideration needs to be given to whether learners should be encouraged to take national tests only on longer courses, where time taken up with testing has less of an impact on time available for parents' learning.

Policy makers should ensure that local authorities and schools develop more robust and systematic ways of collecting data on children's progress in family literacy courses so that they are able to measure the impact of provision over time. This would show the contribution of family literacy to achieving the goals set out in policy initiatives. More effective partnerships would also likely lead to better data collection. Teachers need to understand what the data are needed for and how they will be used to support the development of the courses.

The project showed the particular effectiveness of family literacy where it was embedded in a school's core offer of family and adult learning to parents and received strong support at a senior level in the local authority and within the school.

Adult learning providers need to further develop their recruitment strategies in partnership with schools in order to more effectively reach the target learners – parents with low skills.

## **8. Further research**

Further research is needed to assess and compare the literacy progress of children who attend family literacy classes against other children within the same school. This work should use a matched-groups, quasi-experimental design to ascertain how the progress of the family literacy children compares with progress made by other children matched with similar characteristics.

A strong recommendation is the need for a longitudinal study to investigate longer-term outcomes and progression. The project would track adult participants on family literacy programmes at 6-monthly intervals over a two-year period to assess their progression to other forms of study, training and employment.

Although the research has provided evidence that many of the gains last well beyond the date the course finishes, family literacy should not be seen as a quick fix. Family literacy can help to break the intergenerational cycle of deprivation this will take time, but it may be not until the current generation of children become parents and educators themselves that the full benefits of these programmes will be seen.



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