

# Provider influence on the early home learning environment (EHLE)

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

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## List of abbreviations

BME	Black and minority ethnic
DfE	Department for Education
ECERS	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale
EHL	early home learning
EHLE	early home learning environment
EHLEI	Early Home Learning Environment Index
ELPP	Early Learning Parent Partnership
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project
EYES	Early Years Extended Services
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYHLEI	Early Years Home Learning Environment Index
FPI	Family and Parenting Institute
HLE	home learning environment
MBAD	Making a Big Difference
NESS	National Evaluation of Sure Start
PCCIS	Parent Child Care Interaction Scale
PEEL	Parents as Partners in Early Learning

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For further information about the study, please contact Anne Page at the Family and Parenting Institute.

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## **Terms used in the report**

Throughout the report we refer to parents and staff or providers in settings. Ninety-six per cent of parents who took part in the study were mothers and ninety-nine per cent of providers were female.

# Executive summary

## Introduction

This research was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) from the Family and Parenting Institute in partnership with the Campaign for Learning, to help identify what nurseries and other early years settings could do to better support parents to develop their children's learning at home. The research analyses this issue using both quantitative and qualitative data.

The aim of the study is to help identify which strategies are most effective in supporting parents to give their child the best start in early home learning.

The findings identify best practice, help quantify the benefits of support to parents and offer suggestions about how to make best use of resources at a time of financial constraint.

The study was complex in design to allow for a 360 degree snapshot view of how much early home learning parents engage in before and after children aged 2-4 started in a funded childcare place. The rich data we collected, both quantitative and qualitative, has provided insights into parents' own views about early home learning and the help they would like from staff in early years settings. The study shows that the majority of parents maintain the same level of early home learning once their child starts in a funded childcare place, but that parents in families where adults are not in employment actually do **less** early home learning once their child starts in a funded childcare place. This strongly suggests that effective parental engagement should be focussed on maintaining existing levels of early home learning and preventing parents from doing less early home learning activities with their children. Early years settings should target parents from households where adults are not in employment.

Evidence (Gutman and Feinstein, 2007; Sylva *et al.*, 2004; Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) suggests that parental involvement in early learning has a greater impact on children's well-being and achievement than any other factor, such as family income, parental education or school environment. Supporting parents to help them provide a positive home learning environment is therefore a vital part of improving outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The sample was made up of parents drawn from 12 local authorities and covering the mixed economy of providers including childminders, private and voluntary sector nurseries and pre-schools, school based nurseries and children's centres.

Initially 558 parents volunteered to take part<sup>1</sup>. Of these, 61 per cent actually participated in baseline interviews. The study is based on interviews with 339 parents and carers immediately before their child started in a funded childcare place. These parents were

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<sup>1</sup> The research was based on a 'self-selecting' sample of parents and setting staff who agreed to participate. This is common to most social research. In the case of parents the study obtained data from a good range of different ethnic and social-economic groups, with a slight over-representation of some BME groups in comparison to the UK population. Overall parents in this study reported relatively high levels of early home learning activity but there were subgroup differences.

then contacted six months later to be re-interviewed. Interviews at this follow-up stage were obtained with 223 parents, an attrition rate of 34%<sup>2</sup>. In addition, information collected from participating early years settings was used to classify the providers in relation to the amount of early home learning support they offered to parents.<sup>3</sup>

The Early Home Learning Index<sup>4</sup> was used as the principal measure of the early home learning environment in this study, but parents were also asked more directly about what changes they thought had occurred in the early home learning activities they did with their child. The research highlighted that parents self-reported an increase in the range of home learning activities that they undertook with their child in the first six months after their child had started in a funded childcare place. The difference between parents' responses to direct questions in interviews and the overall findings can be explained by parents having a much wider concept of early home learning than just the seven activities included in the EHLE index, which are:

- Parent reading to the child
- Parent taking their child to the library
- Child playing with letters
- Parent helping their child to learn the alphabet
- Parent teaching their child numbers or counting
- Parent teach their child songs, poems or nursery rhymes
- Child painting or drawing at home.

The important role played by parents in taking an interest in their child's early learning, providing early learning materials and activities at home and spending time on helping their child to learn about letters and numbers is recognised in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).

Previous research (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Feinstein et al, 2004) shows that supporting parents to improve the learning that goes on at home will have a major impact on child outcomes, including school readiness and attainment and achievement up to the age of at least 16. This study suggests that more effective help for parents of pre-school children can be achieved with a minimal input of resources day to day e.g. ensuring brief individual conversations with parents happen each day at drop-off and pick-up. However, it's important to note that some investment in effective leadership and culture change is likely to be required for all practitioners in all settings to offer cost-effective support for parents more effectively.

This report aims to develop this understanding and make some significant suggestions for low-cost but high-impact changes in practice.

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<sup>2</sup> Attrition or 'drop-out' rates vary greatly between studies and can relate to the groups being studied, the methods used, amount and type of data collected and resources available to track respondents. As a telephone survey with no direct face to face contact with respondents, moderate to high rates of attrition (circa 30%) were expected for this study. There were 134 settings at baseline in the study, attended by 339 children; at follow-up there were 223 children attending 107 settings. The reduction was the result of the number of parents leaving the project.

<sup>3</sup> These levels of support are described in detail in the methodology section on page 35.

<sup>4</sup> Early home learning activities known to be strongly linked to later educational outcomes can be measured by the Early Home Learning Environment Index, such as reading to a child, playing with numbers and letters, drawing and going to the library.

## Key findings

There were a number of key findings which could influence practice:

### **Getting more impact from existing staff through culture change to promote good practice and occasional in-house training sessions<sup>5</sup>**

- There is significant scope to improve staff awareness of the importance of engaging with parents about early home learning. This could be achieved at little or no cost by ensuring that all staff are confident to provide early home learning information and advice.
- Confident staff are more likely to readily engage with parents on a day-to-day basis by welcoming them into settings and explaining face to face what parents can do at home.
- And, there should be a real enthusiasm for this because staff themselves feel they lack training. One-third of practitioners would like more help and information about engaging parents in early home learning.
- This work is being carried out by some practitioners at minimal cost because it mostly involves integrating small changes into everyday practitioner styles and behaviour.

### **The EYFS supports early home learning (EHL)**

- The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) has an important and influential role in engaging parents in home learning. The EYFS structure was viewed as a 'bridge' to those parents who are seen as needing encouragement to be more involved in their child's learning.
- This study found that parents or carers needing more support are most likely to be living in families where no parent or carer works full time. These parents and carers are most likely to do less early home learning activities once their child started in a funded childcare place. The EYFS could be used as a tool for engaging with this group of parents and carers.

### **Doing more to spread best practice will also support EHL**

- Some nurseries and other providers working with parents, including 'hard-to-reach' groups such as parents newly arrived in the UK or fathers, also demonstrated best practice in supporting early home learning which could be shared more widely at relatively low cost apart from the associated indirect cost of ensuring effective leadership in early years settings.<sup>6</sup> Practitioners could do this by visiting best-practice settings to see how they work with parents; or video clips could be made available on a key website for practitioners such as the Department for Education website and the Family and Parenting Institute website.

## Other findings

Parents were keen to help their children learn, and wanted more information. There seems to be significant scope to work with them to raise awareness of what works best to give their child the best possible start in learning and in life.

- All parents in the study were involved in some basic home learning with their children even before their child starts a free nursery place, but there are differences between socio-economic groups, which broadly are differences relating to the number of children in the household and parents' or carers' level of educational qualifications.

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<sup>5</sup> See Part 2: Technical Report A Section A2 Observations Report, pages 14-31, for more detail about findings regarding staff confidence and knowledge of early home learning.

<sup>6</sup> For more detail and examples, see Part 1 pages 49-54 and Part 2 pages 14-31

- The research showed that childcare providers involved in this research were raising parents' awareness of how to help facilitate their children's early home learning.
- But, some parents may need reminding about how important early home learning is to raise the level of EHL. Interviews with parents show that although some parents do more activities with their child after their child has started in a funded place, some parents do less, thinking that their child has become more independent after starting childcare or that this is now more the role of the nursery than parents. Providers could ensure they reinforce a single key message about EHL over time by suggesting and explaining a variety of home learning activities.
- Parents, staff and managers have different definitions of early home learning. For example, practitioners did not share a single definition of the early home learning environment. All practitioners did share a basic definition of EHL as interaction between parent and child in a way that enables the child to learn.
- Parents talked about a wider range of early home learning activities than included in the EHLE index e.g. learning through play, helping with domestic chores or outdoor activities. This suggests that parents see a wide variety of early home learning activities as benefitting their child. Some parents thought they could play a role in early home learning by doing different kinds of activities to those provided by the setting e.g. outdoor play, tree climbing, riding bikes, sports sessions.
- And, settings could make sure that parents know how to incorporate the seven key activities identified in the EPPE study (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) into a wider range of activities e.g. numbers and letters can be part of outings to the park, nature walks, shopping and so on. This would ensure that the key activities identified in the EPPE study as improving children's educational attainment and achievement at school up to the age of 16 are integrated into the wider range of early home learning activities that parents see as important to provide.

It is also important to consider the pressures on parents and which groups need more support:

- Parents in families where no adult works full time need more encouragement to be involved in early home learning because the study shows this is the group most likely to do less early home learning once their child starts at a funded childcare place e.g. providers could carry out home visits or organise activities at the nursery for the whole family to join in.
- Time was also mentioned by parents as a constraint to the amount of early home learning activities they undertake with their child. There was an increase in frequency of activities where parents were working fewer hours than before their child started a funded childcare place. However, there was a decrease in frequency both where parents were working more hours or where the child was spending more time at the childcare setting. An additional reason for increased frequency of activities was parents wanting to prepare their child for school.
- When their child started an early years setting, parents' highest priority in terms of staff qualities at the setting was the ability to care for their child rather than advice on home learning. But when parents were asked what they would like from staff in settings, they wanted more information about what their children should be doing at different ages and stages and what activities parents can do at home. This showed

that although parents do not appear to prioritise advice on home learning as an expectation of staff, they do want it.

*“(I would like staff to give) more information about what level they should be at, such as how much they should know about numbers and shapes.”*

*“I’d like them to tell me what he has been doing each day so I can reinforce what he is doing at nursery at home.”*

- A series of longitudinal case studies which formed part of this research illustrate the role that older siblings can play in home learning. Not all home learning is parent-led and some home learning activities could be directed to include children learning together, where appropriate, as well as parent-led activities that would be suitable for more than one child and children of different ages. This would enable siblings to learn positively from each other e.g. where an older child helps a younger child become more confident or an older child practises reading aloud and a younger child listens at the same time.

## **Policy context**

The Coalition Government’s programme states that strong and stable families are the bedrock of a strong and stable society. The Government is reviewing practice and wants to focus support where it is most needed, to make best use of the available resources.

There are three key priorities for the Coalition Government with regards to public services, including support for families and parents and therefore including early home learning:

- Better return from spending on services
- Focus on family poverty
- Support for family stability.

The Government has said that it is going to introduce 4,200 new health visitors, working with re-focused Sure Start children’s centres to lead and deliver the Healthy Child Programme, alongside GPs, outreach workers and other early years professionals.

## **Methodology**

The research used both quantitative and qualitative techniques and information from parents, childcare staff and managers to build a 360-degree picture of changes in early home learning.

### **Quantitative research**

Surveys of parents and staff in early years provision were used to achieve the following:

- establish a baseline of early home learning activity carried out by parents which was happening at the beginning of the study before their children started in a free childcare place;
- carry out follow-up surveys after six months to analyse changes in early home learning behaviour when children take up a free funded place at an early years setting;
- undertake controlled analysis for various differences among parents, within settings to identify possible biases;

- carry out structured observations of parent-staff communication at pick-up and drop-off times in a sample of early years settings.

### **Qualitative research**

- Case studies were developed with parents to paint a fuller picture of their experience and tracking if and how any changes to home learning occurred over six months.
- Interviews were carried out with practitioners and managers at early years setting.
- Open-ended questions were asked in the surveys to provide more information about parents' and practitioners' attitudes.

## **Influence of early years settings on early home learning**

This section is based on data from the before (baseline) and after (follow-up) interviews with parents. The study overall shows that there was no significant increase in early home learning but there was a significant decrease for one group of parents, those families where no parent or carer works full time.

Most parents, however, did report a sense of doing more early home learning activities than six months earlier. It is probable that this parental sense of a general increase in 'home learning' activity reported by the parents was due to an increase in the diversity of activities parents do with their children, as it was not apparent in terms of any reported increase in early home learning activities known to be strongly linked to later educational outcomes **as measured by the EHLE index**, such as reading to the child and playing with numbers and letters.

Although some parents did more activities with their child after their child started in a funded place, some parents did less with their child because of their child's perceived independence after starting childcare and an awareness of needing to prepare their child for school. This suggests the need to reinforce the importance of continuous parental input in learning and that staff should address this with parents.

### **Parents' views of settings and staff qualities**

Parents' views of the early years settings' staff qualities six months after their child started in a free nursery place indicated their expectations involved care of their child, rather than prioritising advice on home learning. Parents judged that staff had performed better on the areas that parents had identified as important whereas the areas that parents gave a lower priority – including the provision of home learning support – were rated less positively.

### **Engaging parents in early home learning**

Managers of early years settings indicated that they view communicating individually with parents as a far more effective means of engaging parents in their children's learning activity than providing written information and resources. Staff reported that inviting parents into the settings was a successful parental engagement method, which could be facilitated by an open-door policy whereby staff are available to talk briefly to parents who drop in at any time; making use of drop-off and pick-up time and Stay and Play sessions.

Significant barriers to engaging parents were identified by staff as:

- parents' lack of time;
- dislike of an educational environment based on parents' own school experiences;
- a lack of confidence among some parents;
- parents having English as an additional language.

Managers also thought that inviting parents into the setting was the most effective way of involving parents in home learning. This was backed up by the amount of regular daily sharing of a child's learning that goes on in early years settings and the number of managers who cited their relationship with parents as the key thing in their setting that encouraged parents' involvement in home learning. None of the parents in the study reported being unwilling to go into their child's early years centre, but a few parents taking part in the case studies reported that early years settings attached to primary schools did not routinely invite parents in every day.

### **Staff perceptions of the EYFS in supporting early home learning**

The great majority of early years' managers thought that the EYFS was helpful in several respects:

- it created a partnership between parents and practitioner by emphasising the roles of both parents and practitioners in developing early home learning;
- it heightened staff's awareness of the importance of a good relationship between themselves and parents;
- it gave staff confidence to talk about early learning with parents;
- it aided discussion between staff and parents about their child's learning and development;
- it promoted the parent–key worker relationship.

Practitioners found that the legal requirement to work with parents served as a practical incentive and they liked having the references to working with parents. They identified the emphasis in EYFS on home learning and bringing parents into the settings as important. They also found sharing targets for achievement and EYFS resources with parents was helpful in supporting early home learning.

The EYFS requires that each child must be assigned a key worker. This helped to support work with parents. Most practitioners felt that being a key worker helped them build a better relationship with parents by promoting better contact with families as a whole, rather than just the child. Managers were also positive about key workers' importance in facilitating relationships with the child's family and improved communication about the child's needs and learning.

Parents also had overwhelmingly positive attitudes to key workers: key workers were regarded as a trusted source of information about their child's development who were able to identify and communicate any questions or anxieties they may have about the child.

The EYFS process was frequently cited by early years staff as having an influential role in getting less-involved parents<sup>7</sup> more interested in their child's learning. The EYFS provides a formal structure that helps staff to talk to parents through the requirement for parents to be involved in observations of their child in the home and through the completion and required feedback for learning journeys and journals.

There were a number of other comments by managers about the EYFS. A few settings managers said that the EYFS was 'flawed' or 'intrusive'. One manager preferred to use a more detailed recording system and another manager thought the EYFS structure was overly prescriptive. A few managers said they were already doing everything included in the EYFS to engage parents.

### **Parents' perception of home learning activity**

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<sup>7</sup> Practitioners perceived some parents to be less involved with the early years setting and the early home learning activities offered. In contrast, the study showed that nearly two-thirds of parents saw themselves as doing more general early home learning activities six months after their child started in a funded childcare place.

The research highlighted that parents felt that they had increased the home learning activities that they undertook with their child six months after their child had started in a funded childcare place. The study overall shows that there was no significant increase in early home learning but there was a significant decrease for one group of parents, those families where no parent or carer works full time. This section addresses parents self-reported early home learning activities. The difference between parents responses in interviews and the overall findings can be explained by parents having a much wider concept of early home learning than just the seven activities included in the EHLE index.

A considerable number of parents (44%) reported increasing the number of activities<sup>8</sup> they had carried out with their child at home since their child started in a free childcare place. The frequency of activities also increased for just over a third of those parents (37%) and the number of activities also increased with two-thirds (67%) of those parents reporting starting new or different activities since their child started at the funded childcare place.

The main reasons that parents gave for increasing the range of activities were

- attending the childcare setting;
- advice from providers;
- more time or family circumstances had changed;
- the weather and/or holidays had increased opportunities.

In cases where parents indicated they had decreased the amount of activities they engaged in with their child this was often attributed to having less time, or their child's growing independence.

The in-depth case study interviews with a group of parents showed that families have different approaches to early home learning. It also demonstrated that parents' interests and ambitions for their child guide early home learning activities.

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<sup>8</sup> The number of activities was wider than the seven key EHLEI activities identified in the EPPE study as having an influence on later cognitive outcomes.

## Introduction

Parents<sup>9</sup> are children's first and most effective motivators for learning. The key to keeping young children's natural curiosity alive is for parents to take an interest in everything their child does and to talk about it together (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Evidence (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003) shows that there is a positive impact on children's development and on their education where parents or carers have higher aspirations for their children and engage actively with them through conversation, reading and play. And, research commissioned by FPI also shows that many parents benefit from sharing with other parents ideas and practical tips (findings from the Early Learning Parent Partnership (ELPP) project 2008).

This study was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) from the Family and Parenting Institute in partnership with the Campaign for Learning to help identify which strategies are most effective in supporting parents to give their child the best start in early home learning. The research builds on the results of previous studies, including the Early Years Partnership Project (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008).

In this study, there appears to be an assumed common purpose between parents and providers. The interests of the child are at the heart of this common purpose.<sup>10</sup> The case studies carried out with 12 parents as part of this study show that some parents also have high aspirations for their child.

The research focused on parents,<sup>11</sup> childminders, nurseries and pre-schools with children aged two, three and four taking up funded childcare places in January and April 2010. It tried to identify those practices and qualities of childcare professionals that were associated with increased levels of parental engagement in home learning activities with their children.

The research aimed to collect several different types of data to construct a detailed 360-degree picture of the practices and approaches associated with changes in parents' home learning environment (HLE) activities. It aimed to provide a robust picture of the strategies and best practice that can be most efficiently and effectively replicated.

The research collected a range of data using:

- structured telephone interviews with providers and parents;
- an email questionnaire for childcare setting managers;
- structured observational data and observational scales;
- structured observations of provider–parent interactions at drop-off and pick-up times.

Case studies of HLE activities will be undertaken across a six-month period with a small group of parents.

The research asked a series of specific questions:

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<sup>9</sup> Throughout the report we refer to parents and staff or providers in settings. Ninety-six per cent of parents who took part in the study were mothers and ninety-nine per cent of providers were female.

<sup>10</sup> Table 1.1 on page 19 shows the high number of settings offering targeted support to groups of vulnerable parents

<sup>11</sup> The majority of parents taking part in the study were mothers. A few fathers and grandparents were included where they provided most of the care for their child and were the person in most contact with the child's early years setting.

- Which qualities and behaviours of providers are most effective in supporting parents to enrich their home learning environment?
- What kinds of interactions are deliverable by different kinds of provider?
- Do different types of interventions by providers have a demonstrable impact on the home learning environment?
- What qualities and behaviours do practitioners demonstrate to engage with parents and influence the home learning environment?
- Which behaviours demonstrated by practitioners (e.g. pick-up and drop-off type interactions with parents or a clear set of expectations on a parent such as a home-school agreement) have a positive and measurable influence on improving parents' approaches to the home learning environment?
- Do any groups of parents need particular consideration (fathers, BME, single parents, very young parents, children with disability or special educational needs)?
- Is there evidence that practice differs by type of provider, such as between childminders, different types of nursery or pre-school?
- What is the capacity of providers to provide the support required to significantly influence home learning?
- Are there best practice and case studies to share with practitioners?

This study used the Early Home Learning Environment Index (EHLEI) as a measure of early home learning activities. This is an aggregate score of the *frequency* with which seven cognitively orientated activities<sup>12</sup> involving the child take place in the home. It has featured as a key component in previous research, such as the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project (EPPE) (Melhuish *et al.*, 2001). The seven activities included in the EHLEI are:

- Parent reading to the child
- Parent taking their child to the library
- Child playing with letters
- Parent helping their child to learn the alphabet
- Parent teaching their child numbers or counting
- Parent teaching their child songs, poems or nursery rhymes
- Child painting or drawing at home.

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<sup>12</sup> A recent paper (Dearden *et al.*, 2011) analyses evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study to show that differences in the HLE at age three explain about a sixth of the gap in later cognitive outcomes. A much bigger proportion of the socio-economic gap is related to other aspects of family background e.g. mother's age, family size.

# 1. Findings

*\* These findings have been compiled from all sections of the study.*

41 per cent of parents<sup>13</sup> reported that staff at their child's childcare setting had offered help or given information or support that had changed how they helped their child at home. This suggests that what providers do to promote EHL is effective in influencing the early home learning environment for nearly half of parents.

61 per cent of parents had attended an event at their childcare centre since the start of their child's funded childcare place. These were events such as 'Stay and Play', 'open day' or a trip out arranged by the setting. Home learning activities were suggested to just over half of these parents when they attended events and, 97 per cent of parents attending events had tried home learning activities that were suggested at these events. This suggests that attending an event for parents at an early years setting is very effective in influencing the early home learning environment for nearly two-thirds of parents. Two reasons for this could be that parents find the social aspect enjoyable and like the peer learning element of the events. Settings offered a wide range of support activities focused on early home learning, from home visits and one-to-one coaching, to special events and sessions and provision of different kinds of materials.

Settings on average reported carrying out at least six different activities to support EHL and 15 per cent of settings did nine or more different support activities.

81 per cent of providers gave examples of a positive impact on levels of early home learning by engaging with parents. The three most frequently used methods were providing activities for parents to do at home (a third), talking with parents (a quarter) and showing parents how to do early learning activities with their children (a quarter).

35 per cent of early years staff feel very qualified or informed and 40 per cent feel quite qualified to convince parents that they have a role to play in early home learning.

33 per cent of providers thought that EHL was about partnership with parents and providing information. For most providers, learning took place within a range of activities which sometimes included reading and counting but also included play. There was no single definition of the early home learning environment, although all perceived it as an interaction between parent and child that facilitates the child's learning. Two providers were specific about the type of learning activities contained within the EHLEI, i.e. reading.

41 per cent of early years staff feel very confident and 38 per cent feel quite confident about engaging parents in early home learning.

32 per cent of early years staff feel that their training and information needs about early home learning are not being met.

The most striking findings from the study related to differences between what was measured using the Early Home Learning Environment Index (EHLEI),<sup>14</sup> different family circumstances,

<sup>13</sup> Throughout the report we refer to parents and staff or providers in settings. Ninety-six per cent of parents who took part in the study were mothers and ninety-nine per cent of providers were female.

<sup>14</sup> Visits to the library, reading, letters, ABC, numbers, nursery rhymes, drawing.

how parents understand and describe early home learning activities and staff confidence. These included the findings that:

- **Parents use a wide definition of early home learning** that includes many activities outside the seven items included in the index (EHLEI). Sometimes a wide range of activities at home is encouraged by settings. Yet it is only the seven key activities in the index (EHLEI) that were shown by the EPPE study (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) to impact on cognitive outcomes in later school life.
- **Parents may need more information or help** to understand why these seven activities are most important for school readiness and educational achievement and attainment.
- **A third of early years practitioners feel they need more help and information on engaging parents in early home learning** to increase their confidence in day-to-day relationship-building with parents. Only one-third of practitioners felt very confident about promoting early home learning as part of their work.

**Most parents maintained a consistent level of early home learning activity over the six-month period of the study.** There was no overall general increase in early home learning activity as measured by the index (EHLEI). However, a sub-group of parents *reduced* the level of early home learning activities, as measured by the index, after six months. These were parents or carers in households where no adult was working full time, compared to households where at least one adult was working full time. It appears that at least one adult in the household working full time is associated with a consistent early home learning environment over a period of six months, and where no adult is working with a comparative reduction.

- **Most parents said they did more general early home learning activities when their child started in a funded childcare place.** Sixty-seven per cent of parents reported introducing new activities (see Table 6.4.6). The difference between this reported increase of activity and the consistency of activities measured in parents' index (EHLEI) scores may be explained by parents doing, or describing, more activities that are outside the scope of the seven activities included in the index (EHLEI).
- **There are different definitions of early home learning in use by staff and managers.** Practitioners in this study were not using one single definition of the early home learning environment, although all perceived it as an interaction between parent and child that facilitates the child's learning. A few providers were specific about the type of learning activities contained within the EHLEI, i.e. reading, whereas for most providers learning took place within a range of activities which sometimes included reading and counting but also included play. For over a third of providers, the focus was on the role that childcare settings have in helping parents to provide early home learning activities.

There are differences within and between households as to what the term 'home learning' means and involves. For some families, home learning is considered to be of low priority, as illustrated by the following examples from childcare staff members:

*"Some parents like to drop their children and rush off – for a number of reasons. They don't have time to discuss things or their own experience of school makes them want to get out of school as soon as possible."* (staff interview)

*"It is an issue of time. If they have younger children they find it difficult to share their time with both children. Working parents have limited time with their child."* (staff interview)

Time was also mentioned as a constraint by parents. There was **an increase** in frequency of activities where parents were working fewer hours than before and **a decrease** in the frequency both where parents were working more hours or where the child was spending more time at the childcare setting. An additional reason given for increased frequency of activities was preparing for school.

Staff could do more home visits and plan, with families, a strategy of home learning that takes into account individual family circumstances and resources. Where there are older siblings, home learning activities could be devised to capitalise on how siblings play together to include children learning together. Staff in some settings could also take account of individual parents who may feel uncomfortable coming into a nursery or who lack confidence by acknowledging that early home learning help can be introduced gradually and increased over time. All of these measures could be readily incorporated into existing practice in early years settings, for example, by extending the range of practitioner interactions with parents, inviting parents to feedback to staff or adding a short section to existing information on early years learning activities.

The extent to which nursery staff and other staff in childcare provision were raising parents' awareness of how to help facilitate their children's early home learning is striking. The following were typical of the positive responses made by parents about the role that staff played in helping their child to learn:

*"It's an important role. They always tell you something you can do to carry on at home."* (parent interview)

*"They help me understand that his natural ability to learn is what I should be supporting at home and how I can do it."* (parent interview).

Table 1.1 on page 19 of this report shows that the majority of settings targeted support at parents on lower incomes but only around half of settings target support at working parents and parents whose first language is not English. Targeted support for lone parents appears to be carried out even less frequently. This could be because the most frequent support, identified as affordable home learning activities, can be easily accessible to all parents, whereas targeted support for particular groups of parents, e.g. lone parents, has to be tailored to a specific group of parents and offered in an accessible, non-stigmatising way. The following are examples of what some settings have been doing to support specific groups of parents

*"(We have) a group called 'Flying Solo' for lone parents with an outreach support worker who identifies needs and signposts on."*

*"All signage, books, resources and notes are in other languages. We have a large multicultural staff."*

*“We have started Saturday sessions for working parents starting with Stay and Play and then going on to themed ones that are based on EYFS.”*

*“Activities we suggest involve using everyday objects such as encouraging them to make play dough rather than buy it. All the family days are free to attend.”*

Implementing the legal requirements and the practice guidance for the EYFS was found to be beneficial by most childcare managers and staff and to engage parents in home learning. The EYFS structure is viewed as a ‘bridge’ to those parents who are less readily involved in their child’s learning by establishing a dialogue between parents and staff about the child’s learning as a regular and routine part of early years care and education.

Having a key worker is important to parents as they benefit from feedback, information and ideas about their child’s learning and being a key worker is valued by staff as it helps them to build a better relationship with parents by promoting contact with families.

*“Whether it fails or succeeds for a child is based on how committed that person, that key worker is, how passionate that person is.”* (case study parent)

*“Having contact with a specific group of parents helps me to keep day-to-day contact with parents.”* (childcare staff member)

There were particular benefits to having a key worker among families which had lower awareness of early home learning, although the support from staff was helping all parents. Most parents’ reported that staff explain how they are working with each child to support his/her development. A few parents found that help with behaviour management and giving their child more encouragement was important so that their child could take part in more early home learning activities.

*“I want them to discuss things with me and how problems with behaviour could be helped.”* (parent interview)

**Table 1.1 The percentage of early years settings who said that their settings offered targeted support to particular groups of parents**

<b>Parent group</b>	<b>Percentage of settings that target home learning work at different parent groups</b>
Lone parents	27%
Working parents	52%
English not first language	52%
Affordable home learning activities e.g. using everyday household items for play and learning such as pots and pans, wooden spoon, pegs, empty cereal boxes	85%

Inviting parents into settings for a variety of activities and as helpers was also seen as important. One manager felt that inviting parents into settings gave parents “*a further angle on early learning and play*”. Another manager explained that parents are asked to “*volunteer their time in tasks that staff know they would feel capable, happy and confident in doing*”. The following table illustrates the range of methods employed in the 39 settings where observational visits took place: that is, methods to encourage parents into early years settings (some settings employed more than one method).

**Table 1.2 Range of methods employed to encourage parents into centres**

Having parents as volunteers/helpers	14 settings
Having guest mornings/skill sharing for parents	11 settings
Having open sessions/open-door policy	9 settings
Stay and Play sessions where parents come together with their young child	7 settings
Coffee mornings/afternoons	2 settings

## 2. Policy and practice recommendations

Some of these findings are particularly significant in the current policy climate, where targeted spending and value for money are priorities. A series of policy and practice recommendations can be made based on the results of the research.

### Communicating with parents

- **Staff, and especially key workers, could be required to offer parents information on home learning activities** and parents could be made aware that they can ask for information on this at any time e.g. by including it in the EYFS requirements.
- Information sheets and books sent home by settings seem to influence greater involvement in home learning activities amongst some parents, but not all parents, along with a sense of ‘needing’ to do more as children progress towards school. **Settings could be encouraged to send books and information sheets home to parents wherever possible and in particular parents could be sent books and information sheets aimed at getting children ready for school.**

Parents who feel their children need less home learning involvement from them, because of their child’s increased independence, may benefit from the childcare setting providing ideas for encouraging their child’s learning and development in less structured or formal ways than they may have previously used. For example, case study 9 (see Part 2, the technical report) shows that one father, who was very keen on receiving advice about how to improve things for his son’s learning and development, spent time on a seaside holiday teaching his son orienteering, distinguishing different types of fish and learning about high and low tide. This would have included numbers and letters and could also include drawing and a visit to the library before or after the trip to the seaside. This kind of activity is not part of the EHLE index but it is seen as important by settings and parents. Parents could be reminded about how to incorporate the seven EHLE index activities (counting, letters and so on) into a very wide range of activities, alongside reminding parents about the **benefits of continued involvement in home learning.**

- **Staff could ensure that they communicate with parents** as frequently as possible and give the level of feedback that parents want, including giving more information on the kinds of activities children of different ages are encouraged to do in the setting.
- **Staff could offer workshops for parents** covering common behaviour and socialisation difficulties with strategies for parents to try at home, as well as sessions about such topics as ‘Reading with your child’, which are already offered as part of EYFS.
- **Key workers could build on the close relationship that they have formed with parents** to give parents ideas about what they could do with their child at home to complement the learning and development that takes place within the childcare setting.
- **Centres could establish regular meetings between key worker and parent.**
- **Key workers could give a clear message that fathers have an important role to play in early home learning.** The fathers who took part in the case studies

understood the importance of early home learning and wanted more information. The parents in the study said that they usually divided activities routinely so that mothers and fathers were involved in different activities with their children. The division was made according to each parent's interests and knowledge.

## **Staff training to build good relationships with parents**

- **Staff could be made aware of the importance of their relationship with parents.** Traditionally, staff in childcare settings have focused their attention on the children in their care rather than on children *and* their parents. Therefore, there may need to be a greater acknowledgement of the importance of parents in children's early learning so that all staff become confident about working with parents to encourage early home learning.
- **Early years settings could make the most of potential contact opportunities with parents**, such as having an open-door policy, using drop-off and pick-up times and Stay and Play sessions to communicate the benefits of home learning to parents. Parents in the study said they felt more welcome in their child's early years centre when staff have time to talk briefly on a daily basis. Not every nursery has an open-door policy in practice. The case studies (see Part 2: Technical Report A) indicate that nurseries that are attached to primary schools tend to bring the children out as the parents arrive.
- **Early years settings could consider using examples and cases where staff had an impact on home learning to develop good practice amongst staff.**
- **Early years settings could identify where there are gaps in the support that they provide for particular groups of parents** and try to devise ways of targeting support to these groups such as: making home visits to parents where no one is working full time; increasing flexibility of parental access to settings and their staff for working parents, including phone, text and email for parents to contact staff; and ensuring that support and resources are offered in appropriate languages.

## **EYFS**

- **Early years settings need the EYFS or a similar structure as a 'bridge' to those parents who are less readily involved in their child's learning.**
- **There could be a case for early years settings monitoring early home learning more widely through the EYFS.** This would give settings baseline measures to assess their work against. Asking parents about changes in how much they do at home with their child could be a simple way of gaining important information on which parents need additional support.
- Strong, effective leadership will be needed in settings to give all staff the confidence and knowledge required to work effectively with parents on a daily basis.

## Recognise the realities of family life

**Early years settings could address barriers to engaging parents in home learning**, such as: lack of parental time; parents' negative experiences of schools; parents' lack of confidence or lack of understanding of learning; parents' lack of resources; parents' English language difficulties; and parents' reluctance to engage in home learning. The open-door policies operated by the best-practice settings in this study enabled many of these barriers to gradually be overcome.

- **Staff could encourage parents to carry out learning activities with their child that can be incorporated into domestic chores or which can involve other members of the family.**
- Siblings may play a role in the home learning environment, through exposing younger children to a different range of activities and therefore stimulating interest, and by their impact on the time parents have for home learning with younger children. To help involve children of different ages together at home, **early home learning support and advice could be tailored towards appropriate activities that can include older and younger siblings and which capitalise on the beneficial aspects of siblings being present e.g. siblings may be more motivated to learn about some activities from each other.**
- **Staff could become more proactive in finding out from parents** what help they want from staff to support them with home learning. It needs to be acknowledged that parents have individual needs and circumstances that may require different levels of information and/or support.
- **Some early years settings could do more to engage less-involved parents in home learning.** This may be by creating activities that will not be time consuming or expensive for parents and can be incorporated into everyday life. It might also be by doing more to make less-confident parents feel more welcome in settings.
- **Consideration needs to be given to working parents** who may need a specific approach by childcare staff and managers to encourage involvement in their child's learning that allows for the competing demands on their time.

## 3. Potential for more effective practice in early years settings

### 3.1 The benefits of early home learning advice

The research shows the benefits of staff offering advice and encouragement to parents to help them facilitate early home learning.

Examples of staff being perceived as helpful to parents included:

- **Giving information and resources**  
*"They gave me computer sites to go on that she goes on at school."  
"...how to make play dough."*
- **Giving ideas for learning activities**  
*"...how to use what is available in the home to help him learn rather than buy expensive toys."*
- **Giving feedback to support home learning**  
*"We had feedback that he liked counting so we do that more."*
- **Helped with behaviour difficulties**  
*"They gave advice on how to manage his behaviour that is related to Autistic Spectrum Disorder."*

#### Case study 1

Carena is white, 21, and lives with her unemployed partner and her two sons (the oldest, Daniel, is aged three years and the youngest is eight months). She has basic qualifications to GCSE level. The family is in receipt of state benefits and lives in a privately rented house in a town in the Midlands.

The nursery organises drop-in sessions to inform parents about activities they can do at home as part of a joined-up approach designed to increase the likelihood of the children doing similar things at home and school:

*"Like snakes and ladders, counting games and like stuff on... like teach him, like you can teach him to add, to use like snooker or hop scotch. As well, we've made him some cards to use like snap with letters as well."*

#### Case study 2

Shevana is a 31-year-old Pakistani mother who lives in a small city with her Pakistani husband and their daughter, aged seven, and their son, Masood, aged three. They own their house. English is Shevana's first language and the family also speak Punjabi at home. Shevana is educated to A-level standard and looks after the children full time.

The nursery involved Shevana early on in observing and recording activities that Masood did at home as part of the EYFS. Shevana found the observation exercise helpful in linking nursery and home:

*"They tell me what he likes to spend a lot of time in. Obviously, I know that he likes his*

*painting and that he likes to play outdoors but then I find out what other things that he may be interested in which I could maybe incorporate doing at home with him as well.”*

Shevana feels that it is important for childcare settings to keep parents informed about what activities are taking place there so that parents can try similar things at home if they want to.

When asked what they would like from staff, over half of parents wanted more information about what children should be doing at their age and what activities parents can do with them at home. This finding suggests that although parents do not appear to prioritise advice on home learning as an expectation of staff, they do want it. Some parents also expressed a desire for more communication from the staff and more feedback on how their child is progressing.

While all early years settings in the study provided a basic level of support to promote early home learning, nearly three-quarters of centres (72%) were providing a high level of early home learning support for parents (see Section 6.1) that could be spread more widely as best-practice models. This is important because it helps to ensure that early home learning continues at the same level when a family takes up a funded childcare place. Full details of these examples of best practice can be found in Part 2: Technical Report A.

**Example 1**

Some settings run taster courses or events that focus on getting parents involved in their child’s learning. Specific sessions that were mentioned include: Play and Learn sessions; Twilight Workshops in the evening; and special event days to talk about areas of learning such as reading.

**Example 2**

Some settings give children resources that request feedback from parents. A pre-school and nursery attached to a primary school sends home news sheets via email which parents fill in. This lets the setting know what successes parents and children have had at home. This setting has found using email in this way has been very successful as all but one of the parents uses email.

**Example 3**

The manager of a private nursery felt that the setting’s ‘Out and About’ projects, e.g. inviting families to join in a local nature walk, “*build bonds of understanding and trust*” and “*serve as a springboard to home learning and other learning activities*” through building confidence. It was thought that these projects were effective in engaging the hardest-to-reach parents.

The findings about the benefits of helping parents with early home learning in this study support the evidence from previous research.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Parenting behaviour influences children’s development from birth (Gutman and Feinstein, 2007; Feinstein, 2003); fathers have an important role to play (Flouri and Buchanan, 2001) the influence of the home is ‘enduring, pervasive and direct’ (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003) that parents do is more important than who they are (Sylva *et al.*, 2004); it is possible to engage vulnerable parents and improve the home learning environment (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008).

### 3.2 Is there a basic level of advice and support all parents would benefit from even in a targeted model of service provision?

The research shows that all types of families say they benefit from advice and help from staff. Nearly two-thirds of parents attend meetings and events at their child's early years setting. And nearly two-thirds of those parents act on the advice and information they receive at these events; see Table 3.2.1 below.

**Table 3.2.1 Childcare staff's rating of parents' willingness to engage in home learning in their setting**

Degree of willingness	Percentage of staff
Very willing	26%
Somewhat willing	66%
Indifferent	7%
Very unwilling	2%
Total	101%, due to rounding

A basic level of advice could be provided for little or no additional cost by incorporating advice on early home learning into commissioning frameworks and/or existing staff training.

The case study below shows how a setting in a disadvantaged area is using all the early home learning engagement strategies at their disposal to provide a welcoming environment for parents. Early home learning can be discussed on a daily basis at the setting with individual parents, according to their own circumstances and interests.

#### **Case study**

This large, busy and well-resourced nursery school is part of a children's centre and primary school in an inner-city area of a large city. It caters for a significant population of immigrant parents and parents with literacy difficulties. The nursery therefore focuses on giving information to parents verbally such as explaining each day what will be happening in the nursery that day and in the near future. The children's centre also runs a variety of classes within the community to help parents improve their skills so that they can understand what their children are doing and how they can help their children. The manager thought that sessions for parents on maths and English in particular were very successful. The nursery also consults parents about their learning needs so that they can help their children and a recent consultation resulted in parents being able to access an ICT suite and courses were set up to enable parents to gain an understanding of ICT. Early home learning information is displayed on notice boards and on a display rack in the reception area. The nursery has an ethos that does not specify 'home learning' with parents but rather emphasises the value of learning through play. This is achieved by educating, where necessary, and involving parents so that they acquire the skills to help their children. Like many other settings, they also run a weekly book club.

Parents are given a home booklet which tells them what they need to know about the nursery. As there are up to 38 languages spoken by the children and parents, translations of the booklet are limited. As parental literacy is also an issue, imparting information verbally dominates. Parents are involved in their children's learning in a variety of ways, including being involved in the settling-in process for their child and in having access to particular days

and taster courses that focus on parents improving their knowledge and understanding. Parents are also involved in keeping learning journals for their children as well as folders for days out to museums, etc. The children's centre also has an outreach worker who does a lot of group work with fathers.

Alongside the informal day-to-day relaying of information to parents, information on children's learning is shared formally when the nursery closes for one day a year, which helps prepare teachers when parents have a 45-minute slot with them.

Parents are involved in the decision-making process and evaluation of the nursery. This is both informally through day-to-day communication between staff and parents and more formally when the governor's chair and vice-chair visit the setting every year. The chair and vice-chair spend time talking with parents about what they want and getting their views on the overall direction of the setting.

What was distinctive about this setting were the variety of days arranged for parents to go along and get involved, the participation of a significant number of fathers, and what the staff considered to be a high level of trust between the parents and staff.

## 4. Policy context and research background

The Government is committed to creating a family-friendly UK. Families are the bedrock of society – yet bringing up children today can be harder than ever, with many parents facing new challenges.

### The challenge for families

Parents are bringing up children in a rapidly changing world. Many feel discontinuity with previous generations, with changes in the way we live affecting family life in fundamental ways, such as fewer parents having extended families living nearby.

Many parents want to balance work and family life, yet time can be a big pressure, with many families struggling to find enough time to do it all, juggling complicated childcare arrangements.

The recent recession has hit families hard (Family and Parenting Institute, 2010). Nevertheless, there have been some positive developments for children's outcomes. Working mothers now spend more time with their children and are more involved in their education than three decades ago – even against the backdrop of increased numbers of mothers in work. The time spent by working mothers with their children grew from fewer than 40 minutes per day in 1974/75 to more than 90 minutes in 1999. In terms of fathers, there was a 200 per cent increase in the time that they actively engage with children between 1974 and 2000 (Hunt, 2009).

### The Government's early years strategy

The Coalition agreement published in May 2010 includes increased support for early years provision, particularly for children in disadvantaged families:

- free nursery care for pre-school children to be provided by a diverse range of providers, with a greater gender balance in the early years workforce;
- Sure Start to be taken back to its original purpose of early intervention, increasing its focus on the neediest families, and involving organisations with a track record of supporting families;
- introduce 4,200 new health visitors, working with re-focused Sure Start children's centres to lead and deliver the Healthy Child Programme, alongside GPs' outreach workers and other early years professionals;
- an investigation into a new approach to helping families with multiple problems.

As part of the Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, the Government announced that the offer of funded nursery places for 15 hours a week, already in place for three- and four-year-olds, would be extended to all two-year-olds from disadvantaged families. This policy built on existing provision for the most deprived 15 per cent of two-year-olds.

### Policy in development

The importance of early home learning and good parenting is a key priority. In her report of the Early Years Foundation Stage published in March 2011, Dame Clare Tickell identified the importance of involving parents and carers in their child's learning and looking at how

best practitioners could provide support for home learning. Dame Clare's recommendations are currently being considered by Government, who will be publishing their response to the report later this year.

## Evidence from previous research

There is an overwhelming body of evidence showing the benefits of supporting home learning. Parental involvement in early learning as part of daily family life at home has a greater impact on children's well-being and achievement than any other factor, such as poverty, parental education or, later on, school environment.

Supporting parents to provide a positive home learning environment is a vital part of improving outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The majority of best practice identified in the study can be integrated into everyday practice by making small changes in practitioner behaviour and actions that make a big difference to parents. This suggests it may also be a very cost effective intervention once staff focus on effecting change and improving practice.

### Key findings from previous research

In addition to the body of evidence referred to earlier in this report in Section 3.2, further studies have found that the first three years are especially important for rapid brain development, that parents who take an interest in their child's learning can make a difference to attainment up to 16 and that parents' own level of qualifications is also a factor.

- There is increasing awareness that the first three years provide a window of opportunity for the development of vision, hearing, language, emotions and motor skills (Roberts, 2009).
- The home learning environment and parents' highest qualification level were the most important predictors of attainment in reading and maths in Year 5 (Sammons *et al.*, 2007).
- The most powerful parental input for attainment at age 16 is parental interest in education (Feinstein *et al.*, 1999).

The evidence from the influential Desforges Review and subsequent research (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2007) into parental engagement shows:

- Children's optimal early home learning experiences depend on whether parents are actively interested, engaged and talking on a daily basis to each child about the child's interests.
- The quality and content of fathers' involvement matter more for children's outcomes than the quantity of time fathers spend with their children (Goldman, 2005).
- It is possible to engage vulnerable parents and improve the home learning environment (Evangelou *et al.*, 2008).
- Valuable though it is, parents' involvement in nursery or school life, governing bodies, PTAs, parents' fora or fundraising activities is not the same thing as engaging with a child's learning. The two sets of behaviour may or may not be present in the same families (Reynolds, 2006).

### Characteristics of involved parents

It is possible to identify some of the characteristics of parents who are more confident and involved with their child's early development. It is also interesting to note that these do not necessarily overlap with the most advantaged groups, indicating the scope for work to encourage a greater number of parents from all groups to do more to support their child's development.

A recent survey (TNS-BMRB for DfE, 2010) showed that most parents (93%) were confident when caring for their children. Confidence was highest for full-time working parents, parents of children aged 16-17 and amongst parents who left the education system at a later age (aged 22 or over).

In contrast, levels of confidence were lowest amongst parents who did not speak English as a first language (80%). Yet when it came to involvement in their children's learning, there was a wider variation between parents.

Most parents (91%) felt confident in their ability to support their child's learning and development, but the age of a child and parents' age on leaving school influenced confidence levels. For example, parents of younger children (10 or under) (95%) and those with more experience of the educational system (terminal education age of 19 or older) (94%) were more likely than average to feel confident.

The most involved parents tended to:

- be higher earners from a higher social class;
- be mothers with higher level educational qualifications;
- be married or cohabiting couples who live in two-parent households;
- have lower material deprivation;
- be mothers with good physical and mental health;
- have younger children;
- have children who take a very active role in communicating with parents about schools.

(Desforges *et al.*, 2003).

In addition, Peters *et al.* (2007) characterised the 'involved' parent as more likely to:

- be a woman;
- have a child with a Special Educational Needs statement;
- be from a black or black British background,

when compared to:

- men;
- parents who left education at a younger age;
- parents from white or Asian backgrounds.

### **Practitioners and early home learning**

The relationship between parent and practitioner is at the heart of effective services to involve parents in their children's early learning. For a parent who lacks the confidence and trust to access services, forming a warm and positive relationship with a practitioner can be the bridge to available help and information (Roberts, 2009).

A key aim of this study is to provide more information about how practitioners influence early home learning outside of the hours a child spends at nursery or in daycare provision.

## 5. Methodology

This report is based on interviews conducted with parents and staff, alongside online surveys completed by managers, observations and longitudinal case studies of 12 families. Datasets from each of these elements of the study were linked in order to provide a broad overall view of the practitioners' influence on the children's early home learning environment.

### Interviews with parents

The study was based on a sample of parents drawn from 12 local authorities and covering the mixed economy of providers including childminders, private and voluntary sector nurseries and pre-schools as well as school-based nurseries and children's centres run by local authorities. Initially, 558 parents volunteered<sup>16</sup> to take part. Of these, 61 per cent actually participated in baseline interviews. Consequently, the sample comprised 339 parents at baseline and 223 at follow-up, an attrition rate of 34 per cent.<sup>17</sup> All parents were offered an incentive of a £20 voucher to complete both interviews.

The purpose of the interviews with parents was to provide 'before' and 'after' data on early home learning activities, attitudes and background variables for a range of parents with two-, three- and four-year-old children about to start in a funded childcare place and again 4-6 months after starting. Other data on the childcare provision was also collected. All the data together has been used to assess the impact of:

- attendance at a setting;
- qualities and behaviours of staff;
- the setting as a whole on the early home learning environment of these children.

Lists of early years provision in each of the 12 participating local authorities were drawn up from Children's Information Services data. Recommendations of settings with promising practice in parental engagement were provided by local authority parenting leads. Local authorities chosen to participate were drawn from those which were part of one or more of the following schemes and initiatives: Early Years Extended Services (EYES), Programme-0-7 partnership pilots, and the Making a Big Difference (MBAD) and buddying schemes.

Nurseries and other early years settings were contacted by post and then by telephone to determine their interest in participating in the study. To be eligible to participate settings needed to offer funded childcare places to two-, three- or four-year-olds; to have children starting in a funded place for the first time in either or both January and April 2010 and be willing to distribute invitation letters to eligible parents.

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<sup>16</sup> The research was based on a 'self-selecting' sample of parents and setting staff who agreed to participate. This is common to most social research. In the case of parents the study obtained data from a good range of different ethnic and social-economic groups, with a slight over-representation of some BME groups in comparison to the UK population as a whole. Overall, parents in this study reported relatively high levels of early home learning activity but there were sub-group differences. Most participating settings also reported high levels of early home learning support.

<sup>17</sup> Attrition or 'drop-out' rates vary greatly between studies and can relate to the groups being studied, the methods used, amount and type of data collected and resources available to track respondents. As a telephone survey with no direct face-to-face contact with respondents, moderate to high rates of attrition (circa 30%) were expected for this study. Section 1 in Part 2: Technical Report A gives further details of the parents who dropped out between baseline and follow-up.

Early years settings which agreed to participate were then sent letters and information sheets to give out to parents. To be eligible, parents or carers had to be the main person in the family who was or would be in contact with the child's nursery or other provider, usually being the main person involved in dropping off and collecting the child. Interested parents then contacted the research team directly via a dedicated telephone line or by returning a consent form and contact details sheet to a freepost address. This provided confidentiality of participation so that staff would not be aware which parents were participating in the study.

Baseline interviews with parents, before their child started at nursery or with another provider, were conducted, over the telephone, between October 2009 and January 2010 for those with children starting in a funded childcare place in January 2010. They were carried out between January and March 2010 for those parents with children starting in a funded childcare place in April 2010.

A separate group of parents were interviewed only at the follow-up stage of the project. This was to provide a way of assessing if being part of the study itself caused parents to change the amount, type or frequency of EHL activities irrespective of any influence of their childcare setting. We compared EHLEI scores amongst these parents with those of parents in the main study at follow-up. We found no significant difference between the EHLEI scores of these two groups. We have referred to this group of 'follow-up only' parents throughout this report as a 'comparison' group rather than a 'control' group as, although they were used to 'control' for (i.e. analyse evidence for) the effects of participating in the research itself, they did not conform to the strict definition of a control group, were not randomised into this group, and were not part of the evaluation of an intervention.

In addition, the design of all parts of the study was also piloted with small groups of parents and providers before use.

The content of the interviews with parents included:

- extensive family and child demographics;
- significant recent life events (e.g. divorce, bereavement, house move);
- health data;
- childcare history;
- use of health and education services;,
- early home learning and play activities, their frequency and who is engaged in them;
- attitudes to early home learning;
- the perceived role of parent and childcare provider;
- confidence in helping the child to learn;
- sources of information on early home learning and developmental issues;
- personal qualities expected/required of childcare providers; and
- perceived barriers to parents doing more home learning activities with their child.

In order to look at whether early years settings had impacted on the early home learning environments of children in the sample, a range of measures of the early home learning environment were needed. Some of these measures were qualitative, such as parents' descriptions of what they did at home to support their children's learning and development. A quantitative measure of the early home learning environment was also used: the Early Home Learning Environment Index (EHLEI). This enabled researchers to accurately measure any change in early home learning environments before and six months after children started in a funded childcare place. This measure was selected because it is the most widely used and robust quantitative measure available and has been shown to predict longer-term educational outcomes for children.

The early years home learning environment index (EYHLEI) was developed by the EPPE study. The EYHLEI includes a series of questions which ask about the frequency of seven different activities such as reading to a child and teaching them about numbers. The EYHLEI can be summated to form a scale that ranges from 0 to 49, where higher scores mean a larger number and more frequent home learning activities.

The research also included a follow-up stage, to provide a fuller picture of early home learning. Parents received a follow-up telephone interview at four to six months after their first 'baseline' interview. Follow-up interviews included the same questions as the baseline interviews, to measure changes in attitudes and behaviours and some additional questions asking parents about their contact with and attitudes towards settings since their child started in a funded childcare place. Parents were also asked how much they attributed any changes they had made to what they did at home with their child to the work of the setting or to assistance from individual staff members.

## **Interviews with childcare setting staff**

Interviews with childcare staff provided first-hand information on the educational background and views of staff from the same providers where parents were selected. This information was used to understand key staff attributes and attitudes associated with both the extent of early home learning support provided by nurseries or other providers (how many events/activities and types of support they offered). They also examined providers' effectiveness in promoting early home learning to parents, as measured by the degree to which parents whose children attended those settings increased early home learning activities between baseline and follow-up.

Interviews with up to two staff were sought in all providers recruited to the study. To be included, staff had to work with children aged two to four and have regular (ideally daily) contact with parents. They also had to be involved in some form of early home learning activity with parents (from talking to parents informally on an ad hoc basis to being involved in particular events or types of support). All participating providers were invited to involve staff in the study and offer at least one member of staff to be interviewed. Interviews were obtained with 69 members of staff from 40 organisations across the mixed economy of provision. The questions for childcare staff were designed to mirror those asked of parents to enable comparisons to be made between parent and staff views on key issues. Interviews with staff covered:

- qualifications and background;
- understanding of the importance of the early home learning environment (EHLE);
- work of the setting to engage parents and improve the HLE;
- examples/cases where providers have had impact on EHLE/parental engagement and confidence to engage and support parents in EHLE;
- facilitators and barriers to engaging parents;
- training undertaken and required in working with parents;
- support/ supervision received and required for working with parents;
- perceptions of their own interactions with parents.

## Email survey of managers of early years provision

An online survey of all the providers' managers was conducted in order to gain an overview of early home learning support, and management and organisational issues such as adoption of a parental engagement policy.

Information from this survey was also used to classify the providers in relation to the amount of early home learning support they offered. Nurseries, children's centres and other providers were classified as: 'high level' if managers reported that they provided either or both home visits to parents and one-to-one coaching on early home learning (with or without other types of less-intensive early home learning support); 'medium level' if they did not provide home visits or one-to-one coaching but offered some group-based face-to-face support on early home learning (with or without other less-intensive support); and 'low level' if they provided only 'hands-off' support such as leaflets and website information. This classification and the numbers of activities and support offered were used to test if effectiveness in improving the early home learning environment was related to any particular type of approach or the intensity of support, or to other factors.

Respondents had to be the current manager of a provider that had been recruited to the study. Questions for managers included:

- qualifications, length of time in role and in childcare sector;
- size and type of provision;
- number and qualifications of staff;
- participation in local and national initiatives (e.g. Buddying schemes);
- understanding of and use of the term 'early home learning';
- early home learning support offered;
- perceived gaps in the support offered (e.g. for particular groups such as fathers, BME parents).

## Observations of early years provision

Visits to a sample of settings involved in the study offered important behavioural data on how early home learning support was provided. This part of the study aimed to give a 'parents-eye view' of what it is like to attend provision, what information is readily available for parents and how staff interact with them at drop-off and pick-up times on a daily basis.

During drop-off and pick-up periods, the visiting team member observed a member of staff who had already been interviewed for the study. Using a specially adapted and piloted version of an established measure of staff–parent communication (the Parent Child Care Interaction Scale, PCCIS, Fletcher and Perlman, 1992) a detailed checklist of types of behaviour and communication interactions between that staff member and parents were coded. Further details of the methods used for this part of the study are in Part 2: Technical Report.

Researchers interviewed staff they had observed and the manager, to collect data on management issues and the provider's facilities that could have a bearing on early home learning support. Questions were taken from the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. Revised Edition* (ECERS – Harms *et al.*, 1998) and additional questions on early home learning work were added. Questions covered were:

- if and what kind of written information about early home learning was given to parents;

- ways that parents could be involved in their child's learning at the nursery or other provider;
- information-sharing with parents;
- parent visits to the nursery or other provider and parent involvement in decision making and evaluating the provider's work;
- available space for individual parent/staff meetings or for parent group meetings.

Questions to observed staff covered:

- opportunities to share information on children with parents and other staff;
- planning time for early home learning work;
- team decision making on who to deliver early home learning support;
- types of events and support offered;
- perceived relationship with parents and perceived interest of parents in early home learning.

Managers and observed staff were also asked if they could identify one key thing that they thought their provider did to encourage parents' involvement in home learning. Detailed notes were also made by all researchers of their overall assessment of interaction with parents seen, visible information and resources for parents and of the appearance of the nursery or other provision and any other relevant information obtained or observed during their visit. Two observers made the first visits to settings in order to enable cross-checking and standardisation of data collection from the observations visits.

## **Longitudinal case studies of parents**

This part of the study provided in-depth, qualitative information on early home learning; how this fits into family life; and insights into what makes it develop or decline over the first six months in a funded childcare place.

The study obtained 12 case studies of parents of two- to four-year-olds from the main sample with special emphasis on parents from disadvantaged backgrounds. These included parents on a low income, parents who had left school at an early age or parents newly arrived in the UK, and those with the lowest early home learning index scores (the scores were taken from parents' baseline telephone interviews), i.e. those who did the least home learning activities with their children at the start of the study.

Fifteen parents, to allow for drop-out, were recruited from different local authorities, including fathers, BME parents and parents on low incomes. Parents were recruited via email and telephone contact after initial consent forms had been received.

Researchers visited the parents involved in this part of the study and supplied them with a digital children's camera. They explained how the camera works, how parents could view photos and videos they had taken using the LCD display on the back of the camera, and different secure ways of sending photos and videos to the research team. Parents were asked to use the camera to take photos or videos of their child (or to allow the child to do this if they wished) of 'play and learning' activities at home during the month. Parents could choose when and what photos to take. Asking parents to record activities in this way is common to a number of studies including some of the Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) pilots; and has been successfully used with young parents (Green, 2007) and parents of children with Down's Syndrome (Lassetter *et al.*, 2007). Similar work where children use cameras has also been conducted (e.g. Clarke and Moss, 2001) and this study draws in particular on the methodological framework known as the Mosaic approach, which

enables young children to record important details of their daily lives (Clark, 2005). A teddy bear was also provided to give a focus for photos if required. This technique proved effective in a previous study of home learning (e.g. Gooch, 2002).

No minimum number of photos or video clips was required but a guide on maximum numbers was suggested to avoid very large numbers of photos and clips being sent back. (Researchers were concerned that this might make interviews very long and potentially burdensome to participants and they also wanted to help focus participants on recording relevant activities.)

Parents were interviewed over the telephone on four occasions, each a month apart between February and May 2010. During the interviews parents were asked to view that month's photos at the same time as the researcher. The photographs formed a shared starting point for the interviews. Parents were questioned about the activities shown in the photos and videos and about activities carried out during the previous month. They were asked why these things were done; what responses the child had to them; how the parent felt about them and their benefits; what role outside influences, including the childcare provision, played; how likely they were to do these activities again; and what influenced the amount and variety of things they did with their child.

Each month parents were asked to reflect on: any changes in what they had done with their child; any new activities they had tried; any information or support on early home learning received or sought from the childcare provider or elsewhere; and any events attended that had had an influence on their activities. Final interviews, at the end of the four-month period also included questions on how and why activities might have changed since the child started in their funded childcare place and since the interviews began. They also asked what more childcare staff could do to support them in early home learning, the single most important things childcare providers could do to support early home learning and the single most important quality for childcare staff to have to be successful in getting parents interested in early home learning.

## 6. Findings from key sections of the dataset

### 6.1 How much do key background characteristics explain the differences in HLE scores at baseline?

Parents' involvement in early home learning activities as measured by the Early Home Learning Environment index (EHLEI) were measured on two occasions: prior to their child attending a funded place in a pre-school setting – the 'baseline score'; and after the child had spent four to six months at the setting – the 'follow-up score'.

In order to explore the factors associated with baseline EHLE activity amongst parents/carers, and any subsequent change in EHLE activity across the study period, analyses were undertaken involving a set of background characteristics of parents, children, households and settings. This data came from the interviews conducted with parents and those conducted with managers of settings. The full list of the background characteristics appears in Table 6.1.1.

The characteristics include those associated with the parent/ carer, such as their highest qualification; child characteristics, such as birthweight; household characteristics, such as household work status (i.e. if there was any adult in employment); and setting characteristics', particularly the 'intensity' of settings' support for home learning – low, medium, or high (see below).

The inclusion of background characteristics allowed for the identification of the kind of parent/carer or setting factors associated with any increase or decrease of early home learning activity in the EHLE Index over time and for the formulation of a possible explanation for any such change, in terms, for example, of education levels of parents.

The settings' intensity classifications were arrived at in the following manner. Settings classified as 'high intensity' were those reporting the use of more tailored and personalised one-to-one methods of supporting early home learning, such as individual coaching and home visits, with or without other less-intensive approaches. Settings classified as 'medium intensity' used group-based approaches, for example, covering early home learning in Stay and Play sessions, with or without other less-intensive approaches. Those settings classified as 'low intensity' used only relatively hands-off approaches, such as providing website information or leaflets on early home learning. A high, medium or low intensity classification was assigned to all settings where the manager/head completed the relevant questionnaire.

**Table 6.1.1 Background characteristics included in the baseline and follow-up EHLEI score analysis**

<b>Parental Characteristics</b>	<b>Child Characteristics</b>	<b>Household Characteristics</b>	<b>Setting Characteristics</b>
Age	Age	Annual household income	Number of previous settings attended
English as a first language	Birthweight	Household work Status – full time or not full time	Intensity of involvement with parents concerning HLE
Receipt of benefits	Number of children in household	Family structure – single or couple	
Relationship to child	Gender		
Ethnicity			
Educational attainment			
Cognitive difficulties			

The mean, standard deviations and frequencies for the parents' baseline EHLEI scores by differing background characteristics are presented in the tables section of Part 2: Technical Report. This data was analysed using a statistical method (multilevel modelling) which allowed researchers to consider what impact these factors have collectively and individually on EHLEI scores. The detailed output from the analysis of baseline EHLEI scores is presented in the tables section of Part 2 of the report (see separate document).

**Baseline EHLE measure: significant effects**

The average baseline EHLEI score for the entire sample with a valid score (313) was 30.72 (s.d: 8.47).<sup>18</sup> The analysis indicated significant differences for baseline EHLEI scores in the case of two groups:

- number of children in the household: parents who only had one child in the household had higher EHLEI scores compared to those with two children;
- parental educational attainment: parents with degrees had higher EHLEI scores compared to those with no qualifications at all, or only with GCSE level qualifications.

<sup>18</sup> S.d. is the standard deviation: this is a measure of how much variation or spread there is, in all the data points in the sample, from the mean of the sample. When the standard deviation is low then the data points tend to be concentrated around the mean; when high, the data points occur over a larger range of values. There are no absolutes in terms of what is a high or low standard deviation-this is relative to what the standard deviation is being compared to and what scale the variable in question is measured on and how much we expect or accept that peoples scores will vary on a measure. The value a standard deviation can take is limited to the scale of measurement being used. For example, in a measure of length, that can range from 0 to 1000cm the standard deviation can potentially take any value between 0 and 1000 but on a measure such as the EHLEI which can have values of 0 to 49 standard deviation can only take a values up to 49 and on a 5 point scale of agreement from strongly agree to strongly disagree standard deviation can only take values up to 5 and so on.. Whether a standard deviation is high or low can be considered when comparing scores from two groups using the same measure. For example, if fathers EHLEI scores had a standard deviation of 12 and mothers had a standard deviation of 8 we could say that there was a higher amount of variation amongst fathers scores because their standard deviation was higher.

### *Number of children in household*

The results indicated a positive impact on EHLEI scores in cases where there was only one child in the household (n = 106; mean EHLEI score: 32.63; s.d. 8.18) as opposed to two – the comparison group (n = 139; mean EHLEI score: 30.12; s.d. 8.77): with an effect size<sup>19</sup> of 0.34.

### *Parental educational attainment*

Parents whose highest qualification was a degree or above had higher EHLEI scores (n = 109; mean EHLEI score: 31.94; s.d. 8.43), in contrast with the comparison group, those who had the lowest qualifications: none/GCSE only (n = 75; mean EHLEI score: 29.37; s.d. 8.75). This difference had an associated effect size of 0.39.

The finding that higher qualifications are associated with comparatively greater levels of EHLE activity is consistent with findings from the EPPE project (Melhuish, *et al.*, 2001) .

## **6.2 How much do key family background variables explain differences in HLE scores at follow-up?**

How the background characteristics presented in Table 6.1.1 were associated with EHLE activity at follow-up was examined.

An overview of Early Home Learning Environment Index scores across all parents and for key groups of parents is presented in Sections 1 and 4 of Part 2: Technical Report which accompanies this report along with further details of the analysis undertaken.

The average EHLEI score at follow up was 30.44 (s.d. 8.00, based on 213 parents or carers). Scores did not vary significantly by the intensity of support offered by the setting attended. This suggests that even after four to six months of attendance the influence of the setting is slight; it also indicates the continued importance of individuals' background characteristics in accounting for EHLEI scores.

### **Follow-up EHLE measure: significant effects**

However, the analysis indicated significant differences for follow-up EHLE scores in the following case:

- Household work status: families without an adult in full-time employment had significantly lower EHLEI scores than those with at least one adult in full time employment.

### *Household work status*

Household work status indicates whether a member of the household was in full-time employment or not. Families *without* an adult in full-time employment (including both lone parents and couple families) had lower EHLEI scores (n = 70; mean EHLEI score: 27.46; s.d: 8.15) compared to families (including both lone parents and couple families) with at least one member in full-time employment (n = 135; mean EHLEI score: 31.82; s.d: 7.58), with an effect size of -0.63.

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<sup>19</sup> Effect size quantifies the difference between two groups; each effect size is the size of the difference between the 'experimental' group and the comparison. An effect size is exactly equivalent to a 'Z-score' of a standard Normal distribution (Coe, 2001). In some cases effect sizes can be large but actually be associated with small groups of individuals and so will not necessarily be associated with statistically significant differences. Small in the context of this report can be considered to be between 0.2 – 0.3, medium around 0.5, and large 0.8 and above.

### **6.3 How much does HLE change between baseline and follow-up and what background variables are associated with this change?**

As well as looking at EHLEI scores recorded at two different time points, the research also looked at the difference between those scores directly, and how much scores may have changed.

Statistical modelling techniques were used to see whether there was a significant change in parents' EHLEI scores between baseline and follow-up, and secondly, if in addition to this, there were significant differences between the amount of change between different groups of parents.

The research found that there was no statistically significant difference between the group mean EHLEI scores at baseline (mean 30.62, s.d. 8.21) and follow-up (mean 30.52, s.d. 7.97). (The research examined data from those parents/carers with valid EHLEI scores at both baseline and follow-up (n = 198).

The implication is that, as a whole, parents show a consistency in the frequency of their EHLE activity between starting in a funded childcare place and four to six months afterwards. Or, put another way, parents' relatively high scores on starting in a funded childcare place are maintained throughout the first four to six months, regardless of the settings intensity of EHLE support.

The researchers acknowledge that for many of the children in the sample their funded childcare place was not their first contact with that provider. Nor was this contact necessarily their first one with other formal childcare settings and any of these settings may have had an impact on children's home learning environment. To try to control for this, childcare history was included in the research models.

Another issue is that there is also the possibility of a 'ceiling effect' where the key influences on early home learning environments may have occurred before the study. As a result, parents may already be highly engaged in home learning activities, scoring towards the top of our measure of the EHL environment and therefore with little 'room for improvement'.

Yet another issue to consider was that changes to the early home learning environment may occur within four to six months in a funded place but not be sustained beyond six months.

There are, however, differences between particular sub-groups of parents that are considered below, although these are not on a scale great enough to result in general shift in EHLEI scores between baseline and follow-up for all parents.

#### **Sub-group findings**

When data from different groups of parents was examined the most straightforward predictor of parents/carers' follow-up HLE activity was their baseline HLE activity, which was highly significant ( $p < 0.001$ ). This showed that most parents/carers did not change the level of their EHLE activity to any great extent during the study period, regardless of the intensity of the setting they attended. The setting factors again had little impact on parents' scores: with an Inter Class Correlation of only 0.14. However, there were two particular groups where the differences were significant, even taking into account their level of EHLE activity at baseline:

- child's age: parents of older children in the sample had lower EHLEI scores compared to those with younger children;

- household work status: families without at least one adult in full-time employment had significantly lower EHLEI scores than those with at least one adult in full-time employment.

#### *Child's age*

Taking into account baseline EHLEI scores, parents of older children aged four years (n = 30) had reduced EHLEI scores after six months compared to parents of children aged three (n = 141), with an associated effect size of -0.46. The baseline mean for parents of four-year-olds was 31.60 (s.d: 7.18) and their follow-up mean was 28.23 (s.d: 5.88). The implication was that for older children the kinds of activities in the EHLEI may reduce over time. One possible reason for this could be that some of the activities in the EHLEI such as 'playing with numbers and letters' tend to occur mostly with younger children and are seen as of slightly less relevance or interest to children of four, presumably as these activities become less age-appropriate.

#### *Household work status*

This characteristic indicates whether at least one member of the household was in full-time employment or not. This showed a statistically significant impact by follow-up EHLEI scores for families *without* at least one member in full-time employment (including both lone parents and couple families). These families had lower EHLEI scores (n = 67; mean EHLEI score: 27.91; s.d: 8.03) compared to families (including both lone parents and couple families) with at least one member in full-time employment (n = 135; mean EHLEI score: 31.80; s.d: 7.66) (including both lone parents and couple families), with an effect size of -0.53.

The findings indicate that parents/carers in families without at least one individual in full-time employment engage in comparatively less EHLE activity than families where there is someone in employment at the time their child enters a funded place. They have also significantly reduced their level of EHLE activity in the four to six months that follow their child starting in a funded place.

The EHLE index was used as the principal measure of the early home learning environment in this study but parents were also asked more directly about what changes they thought had occurred in the EHL activities they did with their child. In the following section we explore what parents said about changes to the early home learning environment and how these responses relate to their scores on the EHLE index.

## **6.4 Parents and early home learning: reported changes after six months in a funded childcare place**

In this section we will look at parents' activities with their child at home six months after starting a funded childcare place. This is based on parents' responses to direct questions on changes in EHL activity. Three aspects of change are considered:

- change in the amount of activities that parents have done with their child at home (these may be the same type of activities as before, such as reading or counting, but more or less of them);
- change in how often parents have done activities with their child at home;
- change in the introduction of new or different activities between baseline and follow-up at six months.

### **Changes in the number of activities that parents have done with their child at home**

Encouragingly, there was a considerable increase in the amount of activities that parents self-reported<sup>20</sup> having done with their children at home between the baseline interview before their child started in a funded childcare place and the follow-up interview six months later.

**Table 6.4.1: Change in reported *amount* of home learning activities between baseline and follow-up**

Increased the amount of activities	44% of parents
Amount of activities stayed the same	42% of parents
Decreased the amount of activities	14% of parents
Total	100%

Table 6.4.1 indicates that parents perceived themselves as having carried out more activities with their child than is evident in the difference between EHLE Index scores at baseline and follow-up. As most parents reported introducing new or different activities (see Table 6.4.5), the higher increase in activities than is evident in the EHLE Index scores may be explained by parents carrying out more activities that are not ‘counted’ within the EHLE Index.

When the change in amount of home learning activities is considered alongside the EHLE Index scores of the parents (Table 6.4.2 below), it can be seen that those parents who identified themselves as having ‘stayed the same’, had the highest EHLE Index scores at follow-up, as they did at baseline. However, analysis did not indicate any statistically significant differences between those parents who claimed to have ‘decreased’, ‘stayed the same’ or ‘increased’ their early home learning activities at either baseline or follow-up. Furthermore, analysis did not indicate any statistically significant difference *within* any of the groups between their scores at baseline and follow-up.

**Table 6.4.2: Parental perceptions of change in amount of EHLE activities and baseline and follow-up EHLE Index scores**

Parental Identification	n	Mean Baseline EHLE Index score (s.d.)	Mean Follow-up EHLE Index score (s.d.)
Decreased	32	30.89 (6.38)	28.65 (7.90)
Same	80	31.40 (7.97)	30.99 (7.55)
Increased	87	30.00 (9.12)	30.76 (8.36)

Examples of why parents reported that they had increased activities include:

- **As a result of the setting:**  
“Her concentration has improved since starting nursery.”
- **Their child developing and being able to do more:**  
“T is initiating it and the family is getting more involved.”
- **Having more time/change in family circumstances:**

<sup>20</sup> The study overall shows that there was no significant increase in early home learning but there was a significant decrease for one group of parents, those families where no parent or carer works full time. The difference between parents’ self-reported responses in interviews and the overall findings can be explained by parents having a much wider concept of early home learning than just the seven activities included in the EHLEI.

*“Because we were homeless and we are more settled now.”*

- **Because of the weather and holidays:**  
*“Because of the summer you are able to do more on the holidays.”<sup>21</sup>*
- **The impact of the research study:**  
*“After I did the last survey it made me aware of all the things I need to do with my child.”*

Examples of why parents decreased activities include:

- **Having less time:**  
*“My husband and I are now employed full time. Before, I was at home.”*
- **Their child needing less from the parent:**  
*“He doesn’t need me as much. He plays more independently now he is getting older.”*
- **The weather:**  
*“The weather is getting worse so I can’t get outside with him.”*  
(see footnote 19)

### **Changes in how often parents had done activities with their child at home**

Just over a third of parents had increased how often they have carried out activities with their child at home but just over half of the parents had not made any change.

**Table 6.4.3 Change in reported frequency of engaging in home learning activities between baseline and follow-up**

Increased how often activities were done	37%
No change in how often activities were done	52%
Decreased how often activities were done	11%
Total	100%

When the change in frequency of home learning activities is considered alongside the EHLE Index scores of the parents (Table 6.4.4 below), it can be seen that those that identified themselves as having ‘stayed the same’, in terms of the frequency with which they engaged in EHLE activities with their child, had the highest ELHEI scores both at baseline and follow-up. Analysis indicated that at follow-up, but not baseline, this group had significantly higher scores than the ‘decreased’ group:  $F(d.f. 2, 190) = 3.75, p < 0.05$ .

Additional analysis indicated that only the ‘decreased’ group had shown a statistically significant change in their EHLE Index scores, specifically a reduction in EHLE Index scores from baseline to follow-up:  $t(d.f. 20) = 4.17, p < 0.001$ . It is possible to conclude from these findings that the reduction in the ‘decreased’ group’s EHLE Index scores is due to a change within the ‘decreased’ group, rather than any increase in any other groups’ scores. In other words, parents who feel they are doing less than they used to with their child do seem to have reduced the frequency of precisely those activities which are measured by the EHLE Index and which are associated with longer-term educational outcomes. It could be argued, then, that a sense of ‘doing less’ with one’s child is a good proxy measure for the EHLEI.

<sup>21</sup> Parents were interviewed in May-July 2010 and in October-November 2010, depending on whether their child had started in a funded childcare place in January 2010 or April 2010.

There is a strong case for early years settings monitoring EHL more widely. This would give settings baseline measures to assess their work against. If early years settings want and are able to do this, asking parents about changes in how much they do at home with their child could be a simple and cost-effective way of gaining important information on which parents need additional support.

**Table 6.4.4: Parental perceptions of change in the frequency of EHLE activities and baseline and follow-up EHLE Index scores**

Parental Identification	n	Mean Baseline EHLE Index score (s.d.)	Mean Follow-up EHLE Index score (s.d.)
Decreased	21	30.10 (6.36)	26.24 (8.78)
Same	100	31.25 (8.24)	31.38 (7.77)
Increased	72	29.68 (8.92)	30.38 (8.20)

Reasons for changing the frequency of home learning activities were, in many cases, similar or identical to those given for changing the amount of activities undertaken. Most of the responses for increased frequency of activities focused on the child being older and wanting to do more learning activities at home:

*“She is more confident with numbers and singing. She wants to show me and do role play, doing baking and shopping. So I do more activities with her.”*

However, as with the amount of activities, some parents had decreased the frequency of activities between baseline and follow-up because of their child’s increased independence:

*“Her older siblings do things with her and she is more settled and creative. She can use glue, etc and is more confident. She asks for things to do. I no longer need to structure activities for her.”*

**Parents’ introduction of new or different activities**

Two-thirds of parents had started doing new or different activities with their child since their child started at the funded childcare place.

**Table 6.4.5 Change in reported introduction of new or different activities between baseline and follow-up**

Parents had started doing new/different activities with their child	67%
Parents had not started doing new/different activities with their child	33%
Total	100%

When the change in whether parents had introduced new or different activities was considered alongside the EHLE Index scores of the parents (Table 6.4.6 below), it can be seen that those parents who identified themselves as having adopted ‘no new activities’, at follow-up had the highest ELHI scores at baseline, and lowest EHLE Index scores at follow-up, compared to those parents who identified themselves as having adopted ‘new activities’. However, analysis did not indicate any statistically significant differences between parents who identified themselves as adopting new activities and those who didn’t. Furthermore, analysis did not indicate any statistically significant difference *within* either of the groups between their scores at baseline and follow-up.

**Table 6.4.6: Parental statements of whether they have adopted new EHLE activities and EHLE Index scores**

Parental Identification	n	Mean Baseline EHLE Index score (s.d.)	Mean Follow-up EHLE Index score (s.d.)
No new activities	64	31.50 (8.63)	29.68 (8.39)
New activities	123	30.02 (8.10)	30.89 (7.82)

There was a wide range of activities that parents had started doing including:

- **More traditional learning activities:**<sup>22</sup>  
*“The nursery sent books home with him so we read to him and with him.”*
- **More domestic activities:**  
*“Helping cooking, helping with housework, helping decorate.”*  
*“Helping me with the washing, putting things on the clothes line.”*
- **More outdoor activities:**  
*“Bike, trampoline and gardening.”*  
*“We go to children’s farms, art galleries and take the bus into town.”*
- **More sport or physical activities:**  
*“Sports like badminton and also going to the water parks.”*

## 6.5 Parent views of early years settings: changes after six months

The research examined how important early home learning support is to parents compared to other aspects of pre-school provision. It also examined how much parents feel support is provided at their provision after six months. The chapter also identifies the kinds of learning activities parents expect of the childcare setting and how parents rate the staff.

### Parental ratings of childcare staff qualities

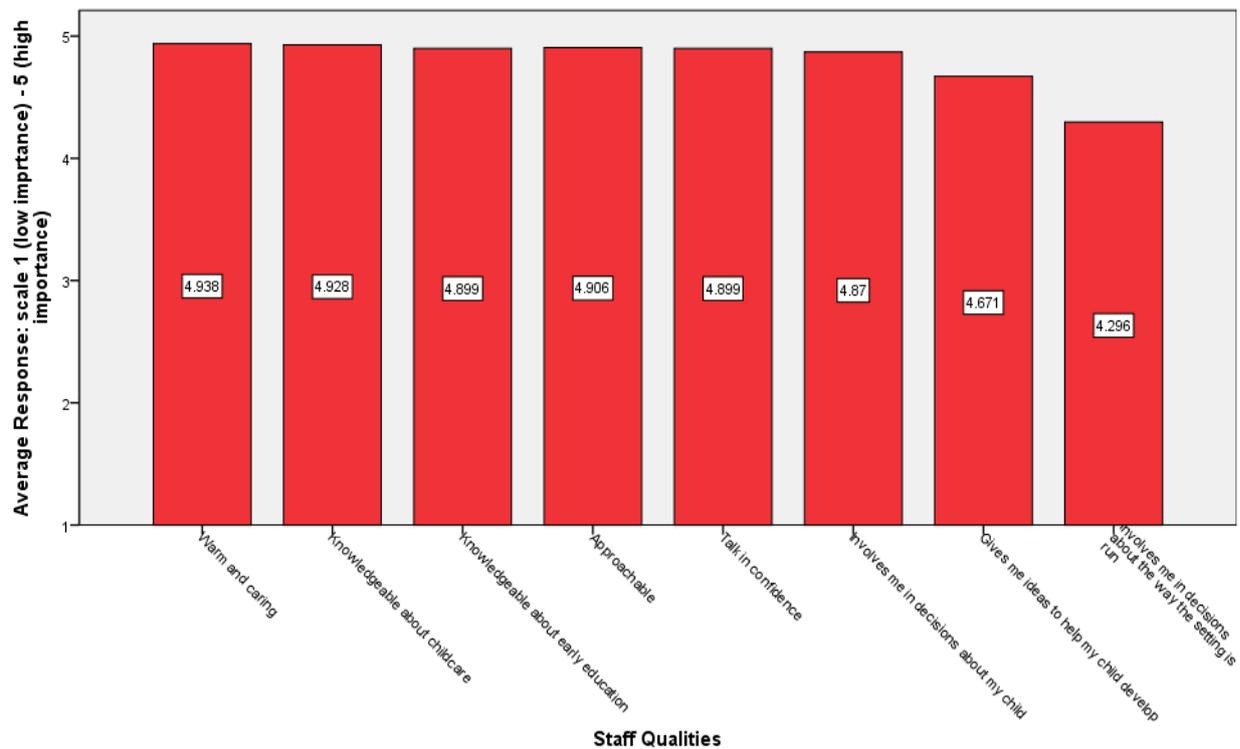
Parents were asked to rate the importance of key aspects of members of staff’s work with children to determine the priority they give to early home learning support using the following aspects of childcare:

- knowledge about childcare;
- knowledge about early education;
- whether the staff are warm and caring;
- whether the staff are approachable and would talk to the parent;
- whether the parent could talk to staff in confidence about her/his child;
- whether the staff give ideas on what the parent could do to help her/his child develop;
- whether the staff include the parent in decisions about her/his child;
- whether the staff include the parent in decisions made about the way the provision is run.

Parents were asked to rate on the scale of 5 being ‘very important’ to 1 being ‘not at all important’.

<sup>22</sup> Such as counting, ABC, letters, numbers, reading, writing, drawing.

**Figure 6.5.1 Parents' rating of the importance of staff qualities at baseline**

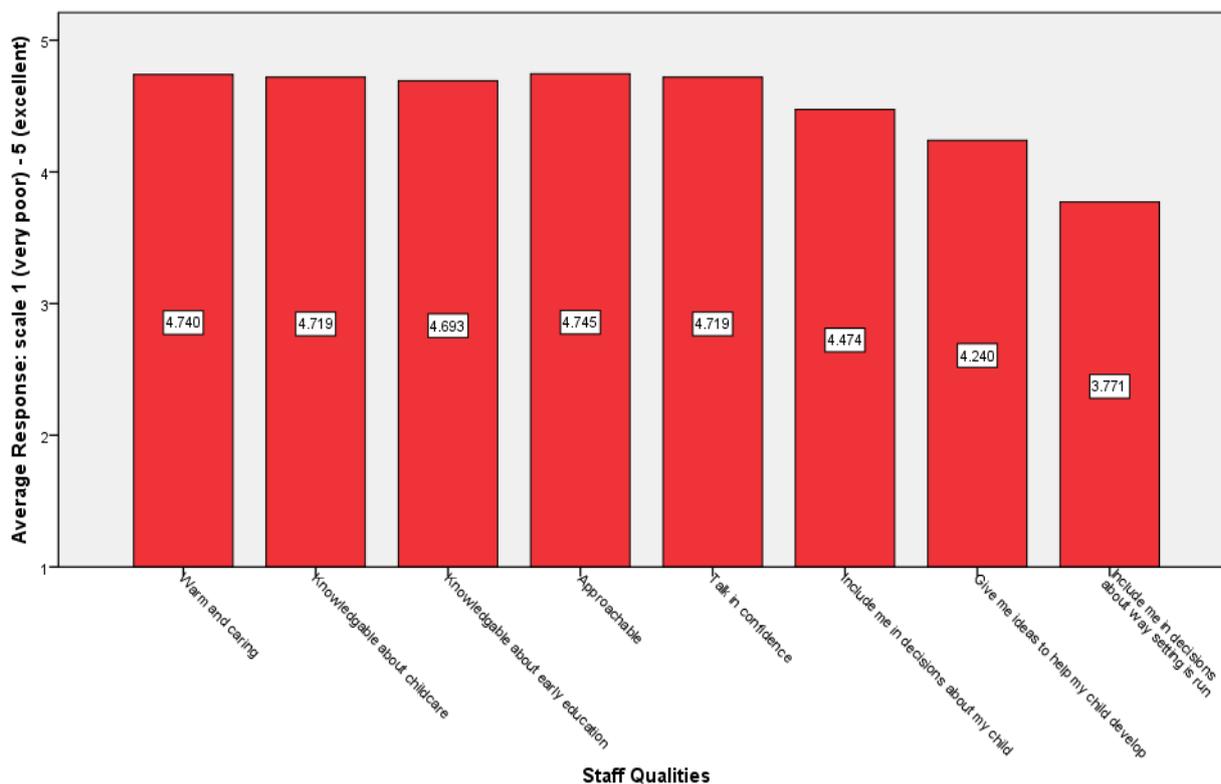


Parents rated both the staff qualities of being 'warm and caring' and 'knowledgeable about childcare' as significantly more important than these three qualities: 'staff give me ideas to help my child develop', 'staff include me in decisions about my child', and 'staff include me in decisions about the way the provision is run'.

Parents' views of staff qualities at baseline indicate their expectations involve care of their child, rather than prioritising support for home learning.

At the follow-up interview parents were asked to rate the staff on the same aspects of childcare but on the following scale: 5=excellent; 4=good; 3=fair; 2=poor, 1=very poor.

**Figure 6.5.2 Parental ratings of staff at follow-up after six months**



At this point all other qualities were rated significantly higher than: ‘staff give me ideas to help my child develop’; ‘staff include me in decisions about my child’; and ‘staff include me in decisions about the way the setting is run’.

Parents’ views of the setting staff’s qualities at follow-up indicate that, after six months, parents judge those qualities identified as important at baseline to have been better realised than those judged of lower importance. This included provision of home learning support: although this was seen as neither being of high priority nor having been effectively realised, compared to other qualities such as childcare or educational expertise within the provision.

These findings suggest that the lower expectations of support for home learning that parents had may be reflected in their rating of the home learning support they received.

**Parental assessment of staff interaction with them concerning their child**

Eighty-five per cent of parents agreed that staff had explained how they were working with their child to support his/her development.

**Table 6.5.3: Parental views of how often someone from the provider asks about their child’s activities, interests and behaviour at home**

At least once a week	28%
At least once a month	29%
At least four times a year	20%
At least once a year	9%
Never	14%
Total	100%

**Table 6.5.4: Parental views on how often staff share information with them about how their child is developing and what he/she is learning**

At least once a week	55%
At least once a month	14%
At least four times a year	20%
At least once a year	5.5%
Never	5.5%
Total	100%

**The role that parents think staff play in helping their child to learn and what they would like the staff to do**

There was mostly positive feedback from parents about the role that staff played in helping their children to learn. The following are typical of the positive comments parents made:

*“They are really good. He is loud and they done an egg timer<sup>23</sup> and made sure I was doing the same at home. I would like them to carry on as they are.”*

*“They are good at providing feedback. They pick up on issues such as her problems with speech.”*

*“They are brilliant. Helping him to share, painting, numbers and songs. Their homework packs once a week are useful.”*

*“They help me understand that his natural ability to learn is what I should be supporting at home and how I can do it.”*

However, a few parents reported negative experiences and a very small number of parents did not want the staff to support home learning.

The following are typical of the negative comments parents made:

*“What I would like them to do is very different to what they do. I would like them to give some feedback on how he is doing so I could perhaps link it with what we do at home.”*

*“The setting needs to improve communication, consistency with targets and home-setting relationships.”*

*“At the moment there isn’t a role but I would like it. It would be good if they shared how they do things as they are trained and have specialist skills.”*

The parents who did not want the setting to have this role gave the following reasons:

*“They don’t at all [give help with early home learning] and I don’t want them to. I’m more qualified than most of the staff at the nursery.”*

*“The staff don’t have that role but they probably would if I asked. I am quite confident in what I do already.”*

<sup>23</sup> An egg timer can be used to moderate young children’s behaviour by showing the child when it is time to stop and do a different activity. For example, using this method both at home and at school helps children become ready for school with its demands for longer periods of concentration or sitting in one place.

### What parents would like staff in settings to do

Despite the positive feedback from parents about the role that staff played, there were still requests for more input. Just over two-thirds of parents would like more information and help from staff. The table below shows the kind of things that parents would like staff in settings to do (some parents requested more than one form of input from staff).

**Table 6.5.5: What parents would like staff in settings to do**

What staff could do	Number of parents
Parents already satisfied with the role of staff	79
Provide more information about what their child is doing, or could or should be doing	30
Provide more information on activities their child could do at home	22
Communicate more with parents about their child	20
Provide more feedback about their child and his/her learning	23
Provide support with their child's socialisation, confidence or behaviour	12
Other individualised support for parent or child	22

The following comments from parents illustrate what they would like from staff:

- **Provide more information:**  
*“Give parents more ideas about activities they can do at home with their child. More information about what level they should be at such as how much they should know about numbers and shapes.”*  
*“Advice about the early years curriculum and how to get ready for school and different ways to learn the alphabet and read and write.”*  
*“Share activities that I can do at home with A. More home visits would be good.”*
- **Give more feedback:**  
*“Sit with me and say if they have any concerns and let me know if I can be working with my child at home on anything.”*  
*“I’d like them to tell me what he has been doing each day so I can reinforce what he is doing at nursery at home.”*
- **Help with behaviour and socialisation:**  
*“Work together on a routine for your child. And it’s important to agree on values so that the child doesn’t learn any bad habits whilst at nursery.”*  
*“I want them to help his attitude to learn and to enjoy the process. The learning itself is less important right now.”*
- **Communicate more:**  
*“Communicate more with me. Talk to me more often.”*  
*“I would like to have more information or communication by email and letter.”*
- **Give their child more encouragement:**  
*“Develop his interests in learning at school.”*  
*“Encouragement and praise to ensure she is learning.”*

## **What staff have done that has changed what parents do at home with their child to help them learn**

Forty-one per cent of parents reported that staff at their child's provider had said something or given information or help that had changed how they helped their child at home.

Examples of what staff had done included:

- **Given information and resources:**  
*"Gave information on helping children learn through play."  
"They gave me computer sites to go on."  
"Books and activity information sheets. For example, how to make play dough."*
- **Given ideas for learning activities:**  
*"Counting – lining up segments to do adding and taking away."  
"They have parent forum meetings and one of their staff members talked about how to use what is available in the home to help him learn rather than buy expensive toys."  
"Incorporating learning into everyday activities like learning about letters."*
- **Given feedback to support home learning:**  
*"At parents' evening found out that they do more work on numbers rather than the alphabet so they asked parents to focus on this area as well."  
"We had feedback that he liked counting so we do that more. He found it hard to share with other children so we have concentrated more on this."  
"Gave me feedback about my child being more likely to play indoors so I take her to the park to encourage her to play outside."*
- **Helped with behaviour difficulties:**  
*"He went through a stage of wanting to become a mermaid. The setting suggested he could be a mermaid at certain times of the day and the rest he had to be a boy. This helped him overcome his anger at being called a boy and was a very effective strategy."  
"They gave advice on how to manage his behaviour that is related to Autistic Spectrum Disorder."*

## **6.6 Engaging parents in early home learning**

Another aspect of the research study was to find out from managers and staff within settings what they think are successful ways of involving and engaging parents in home learning. This section begins by summarising the information provided by managers during the observations of 39 settings. (These findings are explained in more detail in Part 2: Technical Report A.)

The research focused on engaging parents in settings; staff assessment of the most successful parental engagement methods; and the perceived barriers to engaging parents in improving home learning. It also cites examples of where staff felt they had an impact on home learning through parental engagement.

The research also identified examples of what settings do to promote home learning with respect to particular, and perhaps disadvantaged, groups of parents: lone parents; working parents; parents for whom English is an additional or second language (EAL); and parents who need affordable home learning activities.

## **How settings involve parents in home learning**

Managers gave a number of examples of how settings go about involving parents in home learning when they spoke to researchers during the observation visits to early years settings. Some centres used more than one method.

### **1. General written information**

The most popular method (12 settings) was through weekly handouts and/or newsletters, giving suggestions for home learning to enable parents to model activities that were taking place in the settings. This method was closely followed by the implementation of the EYFS (10 settings) and lending books and/or resources (nine settings).

### **2. Involving parents in their child's learning at the setting**

By far the most popular way of involving parents in their child's learning was to invite them into the settings (28 settings). This was seen as a way for parents to see play as learning. Other methods were courses and/or workshops (10 settings); providing materials to take home (nine settings); having organised trips out (eight settings); and through the implementation of the EYFS (seven settings). Making home visits was found useful by two settings.

### **3. Sharing information about their child's learning**

The main methods for sharing information were doing this informally on an ad-hoc or day-to-day basis (23 settings); via organised meetings or written feedback (22 settings); through the EYFS process of using journal and parent observations.

Managers were also asked for the key thing that their setting did to encourage parental involvement in home learning. The main responses were: the setting's relationship with parents (15 settings); providing materials and resources (nine settings); holding events (five settings); and the EYFS (five settings).

Two key themes emerged from this part of the research: the significance of the relationship between the setting and parents, and the usefulness of the EYFS process, when it came to involving parents in home learning activities with their children.

## **Methods of increasing parents' involvement in their child's learning**

All managers, 140 in total, in completing the survey, rated how effective they believed particular activities were in increasing parents' involvement in their children's learning in their setting. The activities themselves were used to classify the settings in terms of low, medium, or high intensity of home learning support. Details of this appear in Part 2: Technical Report.

Special meetings with parents during the starting/settling period, followed by encouraging staff to talk specifically to parents about what they can do to help their child learn at home, and consultations with individual parents to discuss their child's progress, were rated as the most effective activities in increasing parents' involvement in their child's learning. This indicates that from the managers' perspective, the effectiveness of activities in increasing parents' involvement in their children's learning is skewed towards activities that involve communicating with parents individually and directly rather than in a group or through providing written materials and resources. This contrasts with the parents' perspective seen in Table 6.5.5 'What parents would like staff in settings to do', where more parents said that they wanted more information (52 parents) than wanted more communication and feedback (43 parents).

## **Provider views on the most successful parental engagement methods**

When staff were asked "Which parental engagement methods do you feel are the most successful?", the most frequently cited responses involved inviting parents into settings. This

was divided into methods of interaction and methods of engendering interaction. The following are examples of what providers thought were successful parental engagement methods:

- **Face-to-face and one-to-one interaction:**  
*“Being nice and listening so they feel confident to approach us and can ask me any questions. So they do not feel I will judge them. This works with more hard-to-reach groups.”*  
*“Talking to them about what their child has done in the setting – providing feedback so that they will be encouraged to do it at home.”*
- **Having an open-door policy:**  
*“Talking to parents on a daily basis and letting them know that the door is always open. We need to appreciate their concerns and opinions.”*  
*“The open-door policy so that they feel comfortable about coming to me with concerns.”*
- **Drop-off and pick-up times:**  
*“Drop-off and pick-up times are a good opportunity to talk to parents. We distribute letters but also use these opportunities to talk to parents on a one-to-one basis.”*  
*“Verbal information at the end of the day.”*
- **Stay and Play sessions:**  
*“Stay and Play has been very successful especially opening up sessions in the holidays. We got lots of dads involved in Stay and Play.”*  
*“Stay and Play has been very useful. So parents spend time in the setting with the children and see what activities we do.”*
- **Workshops, meetings and events for parents:**  
*“Talking one to one is better at workshops. Also running courses means you get to talk to individual parents and they come back easier.”*  
*“For most disadvantaged families informal workshops work well. Making sure that we commit time to discuss with them after they have finished courses. Then progressing on to things like videoing. Building on positive parenting rather than ‘You have to learn how’.”*
- **Providing learning/information:**  
*“Book club as it is 10 minutes at the end of the session before pick-up. This works for mums and dads.”*  
*“Monthly newsletters, information board and plasma screen TV in parents’ entrance. Also webpage that includes activities and events that are taking place.”*
- **Home visits:**  
*“Home visits give parents the opportunity to discuss personal issues about their child. Once the relationship has been developed the parent would hopefully feel comfortable talking to us.”*
- **EYFS:**  
*“The star sheets we send home which can be completed by the parent with activities they’ve done at home. I will discuss with the parent and then include in the learning journal.”*  
*“Portfolios – but building up the relationship with parents is the most important thing.”*

### **Provider views on the barriers to engaging parents in improving home learning**

When providers (setting staff) were asked: “What do you think are the barriers to engaging parents in improving home learning?”, the biggest barrier appeared to be parents’ lack of time, followed by communication difficulties for parents who do not speak English. Other barriers concerned issues for parents such as their own experiences of school or poor relationships with teachers/staff; their lack of confidence or lack of understanding about learning; lack of resources and parents’ resistance to engaging in home learning. Examples of the main barriers cited by providers and referred to earlier in Section 1 on findings from the study were:

- **Lack of time:**  
*“Work commitments stop parents from coming in and visiting their children. The nursery closes at six so parents do not have much time with their children.”*
- **English as an additional language:**  
*“There is no one in the nursery that can translate.”*
- **Parents’ experience of school or of a poor relationship with teachers/staff:**  
*“Practitioners sometimes can be patronising and not valuing what parents do – they use terms that parents do not understand.”*  
*“Mistrust – for example, travellers.”*
- **Parents’ lack of confidence or understanding about learning:**  
*“Parents may have a learning difficulty themselves.”*  
*“Parents sometimes lack confidence to do things with their children and don’t know what to do.”*
- **Lack of resources:**  
*“Lack of facilities, housing, money, jobs – being a single parent with several children.”*  
*“Home circumstances – if there is a parent who is struggling, the last thing they want to do is work from school – you have to be a counsellor and social worker to understand parental involvement.”*
- **Parents’ reluctance:**  
*“Parents may already think they are doing the right thing so find it hard to accept advice.”*  
*“Parents on mobile phones who don’t communicate with staff.”*

Providers have commented on parents’ lack of time being the main barrier to engaging parents in improving home learning, and this is supported in Section 6.5 ‘Parent views of early years settings: changes after six months’, where parents have identified the main things that stop them doing more with their child as: time; tiredness; and work, family and domestic commitments.

### **Examples and cases where staff had an impact on home learning through parental engagement**

Although providers cited several examples of barriers to engaging parents in improving home learning, 81 per cent of providers cited ways in which they, or their setting, had a positive impact on home learning through parental engagement. Table 6.6.2 shows the main categories into which the examples fell (a few providers gave more than one example).

**Table 6.6.2 Examples where staff had a positive impact on home learning through parental engagement**

Examples of positive impact on home learning	Number of providers
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Providing resources/activities for parents to do at home	20
Staff interaction with parents	17
Modelling learning activities to parents or giving parents the opportunity to experience learning	16
Behaviour management support	6
Other	2

The following examples illustrate the kind of things that staff or settings have done to impact on home learning:

- Interaction with the parent:**  
*“Last year we had a little boy not keen on doing any activities. We called dad in and suggested things he could do and the dad started taking him out once a week and that’s had a big impact on him being able to read and write.”*  
*“Yesterday one of the dads came to see me and said how proud he was of his son and his level of reading. And I said it was because of his input into his child’s education and he was very pleased about that.”*
- Providing resources/activities for the parent:**  
*“We had a meeting with a parent to help their child’s writing skills – we provided one-to-one advice and resources.”*  
*“We support parents to help their child with reading. We send a pack with action and sounds that parents can implement to improve phonics.”*  
*“We are currently working with a parent whose child is going to school in September and she is worried that the child can’t form letters. We suggested play, mark making, etc and ideas to build the confidence and coordination of the child.”*
- Modelling learning activities to parents or giving parents the opportunity to experience learning:**  
*“We had a parent who found it difficult to play with her child. We got her in to watch the staff playing with children. We got her to play with everyday things, encouraging the parent’s confidence.”*  
*“We had a boy aged three who didn’t communicate at nursery. He had a sibling who was brought to Stay and Play. We encouraged mum to come into the nursery and help and then built up a relationship. We showed her more age-appropriate things to do with him.”*
- Behaviour management:**  
*“There was one child who had behaviour problems so we worked with the parents. We asked the child to make prints of his hands and feet with paint on paper and called this art work ‘kind hands and kind feet’. We and the parents supported positive behaviour.”*

### **Promoting home learning support to a range of parents**

Providers were asked if their setting had been doing anything to promote home learning support that is targeted at, accessible to, and engages some particular groups of parents: lone parents; working parents; parents for whom English is an additional or second language; and those parents who need affordable home learning activities.

The following are examples of what some settings have been doing to support these target groups:

- Lone parents:**

*“A group called ‘Flying Solo’ for lone parents with an outreach support worker who identifies needs and signposts on.”*

*“A parent outreach worker does home visits and works very hard to engage lone parents.”*

*“We support parents by guiding them to Home-Start.”*

- **Working parents:**

*“We have breakfast clubs at 7.30 a.m. as something that they can attend on their way to work.”*

*“We have a communication book for their needs and we circulate a newsletter to keep them informed.”*

*“We have started Saturday sessions for working parents starting with Stay and Play and then going on to themed ones that are based on EYFS.”*

*“Working parents can phone the nursery – preferably at a pre-arranged time – and the nursery teacher will always find time to talk to them.”*

- **Parents for whom English is an additional or second language:**

*“Additional support to help them improve their language skills and we provide resources.”*

*“All signage, books, resources and notes are in mother tongue. We have a large multicultural staff.”*

*“If we have a letter to give out I go through it face to face to make sure they understand the letter.”*

*“We keep books in different languages.”*

*“We have a talking pen to communicate with parents and have books with different languages.”*

- **Parents who need affordable home learning activities:**

*“Books in the library are free for loans. If they lose or damage anything we replace them.”*

*“Activities we suggest involve using everyday objects such as encouraging them to make play dough rather than buy it. All the family days are free to attend.”*

*“Always make sure if we want them to do activities at home we send crayons and paper so they don’t have to spend any money.”*

*“We encourage learning in routine activities such as matching socks.”*

*“We spoke to parents about making a music line with household utensils rather than buying expensive equipment.”*

*“Homework sheets include activities that will not cost parents any money, such as looking at patterns and shapes of buildings, looking at insects, sorting out sweets into different colours and giving song sheets.”*

### **What ‘early home learning environment’ means to childcare providers**

Sixty-one of the 69 providers of childcare responded when asked “What does the term ‘early home learning environment’ mean to you?” Responses fell broadly into the categories shown in Table 6.6.3 below.

**Table 6.6.3 What ‘early home learning environment’ means to childcare providers**

<b>Providers’ definition of EHLE</b>	<b>Percent of providers</b>
The environment where children and parents interact and children learn	36%
Partnership between parents and childcare/involving parents and giving them resources and information	28%
Parents talking to baby and doing activities from birth	13%
Acknowledging parents as ‘first educators’	11%
Encouraging parents to play/interact with their child	7%
Reading within the home	3% (2 providers)
Encouraging parent to have fun with child – only doing activities if child wants it	2% (1 provider)
Total	100%

The responses from childcare providers indicate that for a third of them EHL was about partnership with parents and providing them with information. However, there was limited understanding of EHL and no single definition of early home learning environment, although all perceive it as an interaction between parent and child that facilitates the child’s learning. Only two providers were specific about the type of learning activities contained within the EHLE Index, i.e. reading, whereas for most providers learning took place within a range of activities which sometimes included reading and counting but also included play.

#### **Parent’s views of EHL**

Examples from individual case studies show how parents divide their own and the setting’s responsibilities for early home learning.

*“Whatever we do I try to inject learning into it, whether it’s making muffins or going to the museum or going to the park or even try to watch television.”* (case study parent)

#### **Case study**

Lucy is white-British and lives with her partner and three children in a flat they own in a suburb of a large city. Lucy thought that parents should be involved with early learning beyond reading and alphabet learning. She therefore encouraged colouring and construction activities but would rather leave the formal learning to pre-school and school.

#### **Case study**

Michael lives on his own in a house that he owns with his two daughters who also live with their mother for half of the week. At home there was plenty of evidence of home learning such as toys and craft-making equipment. Since starting nursery Mara wants to do more and although Michael is all for early home learning he does not actively encourage it but rather facilitates it. He provides his children with items such as string, Sellotape, paper and pens and encourages them in their activities rather than choosing or directing their activities for them.

## **6.7 How early years staff communicate with parents about early home learning and implications for training and leadership**

This section examines the data collected from observing staff interacting with parents at pick-up and drop-off times to see if there is a connection between the amount of parent-directed behaviour (see below) shown by staff and the intensity of home learning work with parents reported by the setting.

The research also involved observations of frontline staff during day-long visits to 39 providers where Campaign for Learning researchers collected a range of data:

- observations of staff interacting with parents at drop-off and pick-up times using the Parent Child Care Interaction Scale (PCCIS);
- observations of the physical surroundings and facilities as specified by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS – Harms *et al.*, 1998);
- interviews with providers to gain practice information as specified by ECERS;
- interviews with managers to gain updated knowledge and details of the home learning support work being carried out by staff;
- field notes by the researchers to give their impressions of the provision and any contextual information they thought was important.

The full details can be found in Part 2: Technical Report. The research also examined providers' views of parents' willingness to engage in home learning in their setting.

### **Staff interaction with parents at pick-up and drop-off times**

In order to explore whether settings which reported greater intensity of EHL work with parents were also those which communicated more with parents at drop-off and pick-up times, data was analysed from the 39 settings where an observation visit took place.<sup>24</sup>

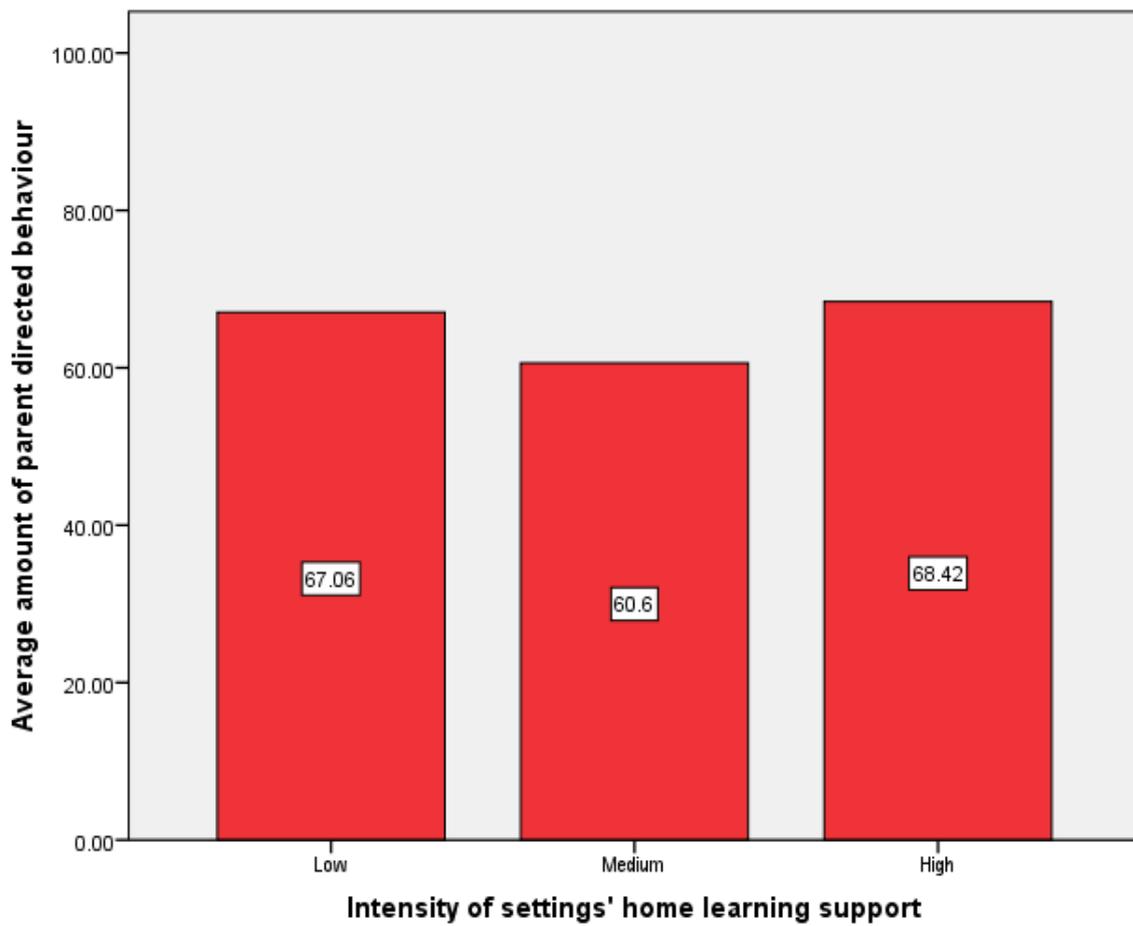
The graphs show the average amount of parent-directed behaviour, as opposed to child-directed behaviour. This was coded by observers using the PCCIS, by each type of setting, low, medium and high intensity of home learning support. Parent-directed behaviour included behaviour such as smiling at the parent, greeting the parent by name, asking the parent for information about the child, offering support or information to the parent concerning the child, setting or activities in the setting and making 'small talk' with the parent about things unrelated to the child or setting such as the weather. Further details of the PCCIS and the methods used are available in the methodology section, A2 Observations report, Part 2: Technical Report A.

Both the figures for observations of drop-offs and pick-ups indicate that settings with high intensity home learning support (that is, that did more individualised one-to-one work such as home visits as well as other types of support) performed the greatest proportion of parent-orientated behaviour. In terms of the follow-up data with parents and the observational data collected from pick-up and drop-offs at settings there is a possibility of reactivity, that is, that providers and parents start to behave in a certain way because they are being observed for or questioned about a certain behaviour. In the settings where observational visits were conducted, researchers asked frontline staff who were being observed if their interaction with parents that day was 'typical'. They were also asked if anything had influenced this interaction or if it was different from normal at the times when observations were made. None reported that the observation itself had changed their behaviour. There is good reason why observed staff should wish to present a 'good impression' of their interactions with parents which might not reflect normal practice, but the literature on observation suggests that this is difficult to maintain over a period of time or across repeated observations.

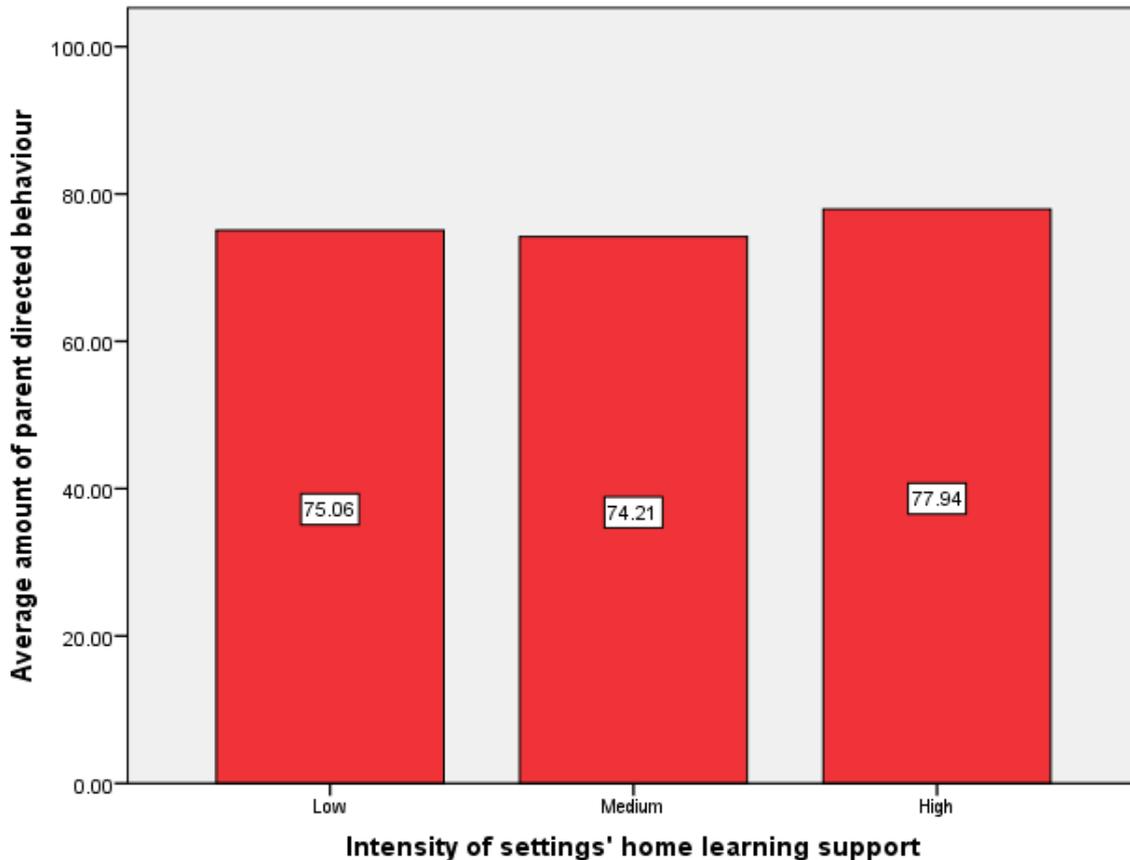
### **Figure 6.7.1: Average amount of parent-directed behaviour (as a percentage of all the provider behaviour observed) at drop-off by intensity of settings' home learning support**

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<sup>24</sup> This is the first time, to our knowledge, that an observations study focused on engaging parents in early home learning has been carried out in England and Wales. A similar study was carried out in Canada recently and the authors allowed their adaptation of the PCCIS scale to be further adapted for this study.



**Figure 6.7.2: Average amount (as a percentage of all the provider behaviour observed) of parent-directed behaviour at pick-up by intensity of settings' home learning support**



### Staff views on parents' willingness to engage in home learning in their setting

Parents' willingness to engage in home learning may be linked to how informed and confident staff felt about engaging parents in home learning. Tables 6.7.3 and 6.7.4 (below) indicate that less than half of staff felt very qualified or informed, or very confident.

**Table 6.7.3 How qualified or informed staff feel to convince parents of their role in early home learning**

Very qualified or informed	35%
Quite qualified or informed	40%
Moderately qualified or informed	19%
Somewhat qualified or informed	3%
Not at all qualified or informed	3%
Total	100%

**Table 6.7.4 How confident staff felt in engaging parents in early home learning**

Very confident	41%
Quite confident	38%
Moderately confident	18%
Somewhat confident	2%
Not at all confident	2%
Total	101% (due to rounding up)

**Table 6.7.5 Parents' willingness to engage in early home learning**

Degree of willingness	Percentage of staff
Very willing	26%
Somewhat willing	66%
Indifferent	7%
Very unwilling	2%
Total	101% (due to rounding up)

**Support, training and guidance for childcare providers***Working with parents*

The research also explored training and guidance given to providers to help them work with parents. It found that most providers had received some kind of support, training or guidance for working with parents. There were 68 individual providers with valid responses. Of these, 78 per cent (53 individuals) indicated they had received support, training and guidance in working with parents. However, the extent of support, training and guidance varied.

**Table 6.7.6 Support, training and guidance received by interviewed childcare providers (staff) for working with parents**

Type of support, training and guidance received by childcare provider	Number of providers
Training focused on working with parents	22
Informal training within the setting	7
NVQ training	5
PEAL (Parents, Early Years and Learning) training	5
EYPS (Early Years Professional Status) training/degree course	3
EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) training	3
Training with a disability focus	3
Other	3
No details given	2

*Early home learning information and support needs of providers*

There were 68 individual providers (staff) who gave valid responses: of these 32 per cent indicated they felt their HLE learning and support needs were not being met. The providers who did not feel their HLE needs were being met indicated that the kind of home learning information and support they felt in need of covered areas such as:

*"I've never been on any course to help with my management role of supporting parents."*

*"I'd like support from the rest of the team and management to work with parents that work full time."*

*"If it was a curriculum-led subject I'd know who I could go to, but for this issue I've not had the information. It probably is out there but hasn't been drawn to my attention."*

## 6.8 Early years staff views of how the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) helps to support early home learning

### Childcare providers' views from interviews

When staff were asked "Do you feel the EYFS helps to create a partnership between parents and providers?", 92.6 per cent responded "Yes" and 7.4 per cent responded "No".

Only those childcare staff and managers who found the EYFS helpful were asked to give an explanation and the following are examples of why the EYFS was found helpful:

- **It makes working with parents a requirement:**  
*"Practitioners no longer pay lip service but have to engage with parents".  
 "It emphasises the importance of working with parents. It makes it clear by putting it in writing."*
- **It aids communication:**  
*"At the foundation stage when parents drop them off there is an opportunity to talk to teachers and staff straight away. Before the EYFS parents had to book appointments with staff. Thus communication between staff and parents has improved."*
- **It emphasises the importance of home learning:**  
*"The message is going out to parents that home learning and partnership working is important. It enables practitioners to share learning with parents."*
- **It brings parents into the settings:**  
*"It encourages parents to come in more and be part of children's learning. It has connected home and nursery together. It encourages parents to take part in what children do and has also got parents asking questions."*
- **It can inspire parents:**  
*"We want parents to be inspired by what they see in pre-school and carry on with this at home."*
- **It provides targets for achievement:**  
*"When we do parent consultations we will go through early years targets and show parents what stage their child has achieved and what they need to improve."*
- **It provides resources:**  
*"There are certain things that can be sent home and information provided. It encouraged us to keep parents informed about what we are doing in the nursery."*

### Managers' views from the survey

The following are the responses to the manager survey question that asked "How, if at all, has the EYFS affected relationships between staff and parents at your setting?"

**Table 6.8.1 Managers' views on EYFS and staff/parent relationships**

The EYFS is very helpful	42.9% of managers
The EYFS is somewhat helpful	21.4% of managers
The EYFS is neither helpful nor unhelpful	22.1% of managers
The EYFS is somewhat unhelpful	2.1% of managers
No response given	11.4% of managers

Examples of how managers found the EYFS 'very helpful' include:

- **It heightened awareness:**  
*"It helped staff to see the importance of a good relationship between staff and parents. It heightened staff awareness."*
- **It gives staff confidence:**  
*"It has given us confidence to talk about early learning of under-threes."  
"The EYFS supports staff to gain an in depth knowledge of children's learning, allowing us to share information relevant to the children with parents and carers."*
- **It aids discussion:**  
*"Parents become aware of how to be involved and support their child's learning."  
"Discussions with parents about their child's learning and development in the Learning Journey books have been fantastic."*
- **It provides a focus for shared achievement:**  
*"We introduced it as a workshop with parents and every parents' evening focuses on how the child is achieving within the home and setting partnership."  
"It has brought everyone together to focus on the child."*
- **It helps parents:**  
*"Parents want to learn and know and understand what their children are learning."  
"There is more structure, making it easier to explain to parents. Visual aids help engage parents."*
- **It promotes the key person relationship:**  
*"It puts relationships as one of the four commitments and uses the key person approach."  
"It builds up confidence and trust with one special person."*

Examples of how managers found the EYFS 'somewhat helpful' include:

- **It strengthens existing relationships:**  
*"We always had a close relationship with parents but it helped to make it stronger."*
- **It encourages practice review:**  
*"We are reviewing practice more. We are sharing more with parents about experiential learning and how we learn through play."*
- **It requires parental involvement:**  
*"It requires parents to communicate with the nursery about things the child does at home. Parents are more willing to tell us things when they see it is helping the child and things that happen at nursery."*
- **It has strengthened the key worker relationship:**  
*"The key worker role is now more clear."*
- **It provides practitioners with more knowledge:**  
*"It gives staff a bit more knowledge about helping parents."  
"It gives more knowledge about communicating with parents."  
"Some staff still need to come to terms with the EYFS. It makes them feel involved with parents whereas, before, they might have felt less confident."*

- **Implementing the EYFS is not always useful:**  
*“It leads to an advanced level of observation and assessment, some of which is useful, some of which is a waste of time.”*

Examples of how managers found the EYFS ‘neither helpful nor unhelpful’ include:

- **It is similar to other programmes:**  
*“It is not substantially different from the foundation stage and other documents.”*
- **It is a continuation of previous practice:**  
*“We are in an area where it is difficult to engage parents so the setting is already doing those things with many parents. So the EYFS hasn’t changed what we do.”*
- **Not all parents want to be involved:**  
*“Our parents are all working parents and rely on the nursery providing good care. They don’t want any more involvement than necessary.”*
- **It is not specific enough:**  
*“It is too woolly. There are not enough specifics so we use our own records. It is fundamentally flawed.”*

One manager explained that the EYFS had been “somewhat unhelpful” because the relationship between staff and parents was already established and the EYFS was seen as “*somewhat intrusive due to the heavy structure*”.

### **Views of managers in observed settings**

Interviews with managers during the observations in settings did not include questions about the EYFS. However, some managers voluntarily referred to the EYFS, indicating that implementing the EYFS has an influential role in getting some parents involved in their child’s learning. For some settings, the EYFS process provides a formal structure that enables staff to gain access to parents.

In some of the observed settings, managers spoke of the EYFS forming a central part of written information about home learning given to parents. For most settings this was in addition to other written information on home learning that the setting provided but, for a few settings, giving out information about the EYFS was the main means of disseminating written information about home learning to parents.

## **6.9 The role of key workers in supporting early home learning**

The research also looked at parents’ perception and experience of key workers.

Figure 6.9.1 (below) shows the average responses from parents when asked to rate their key worker’s qualities.

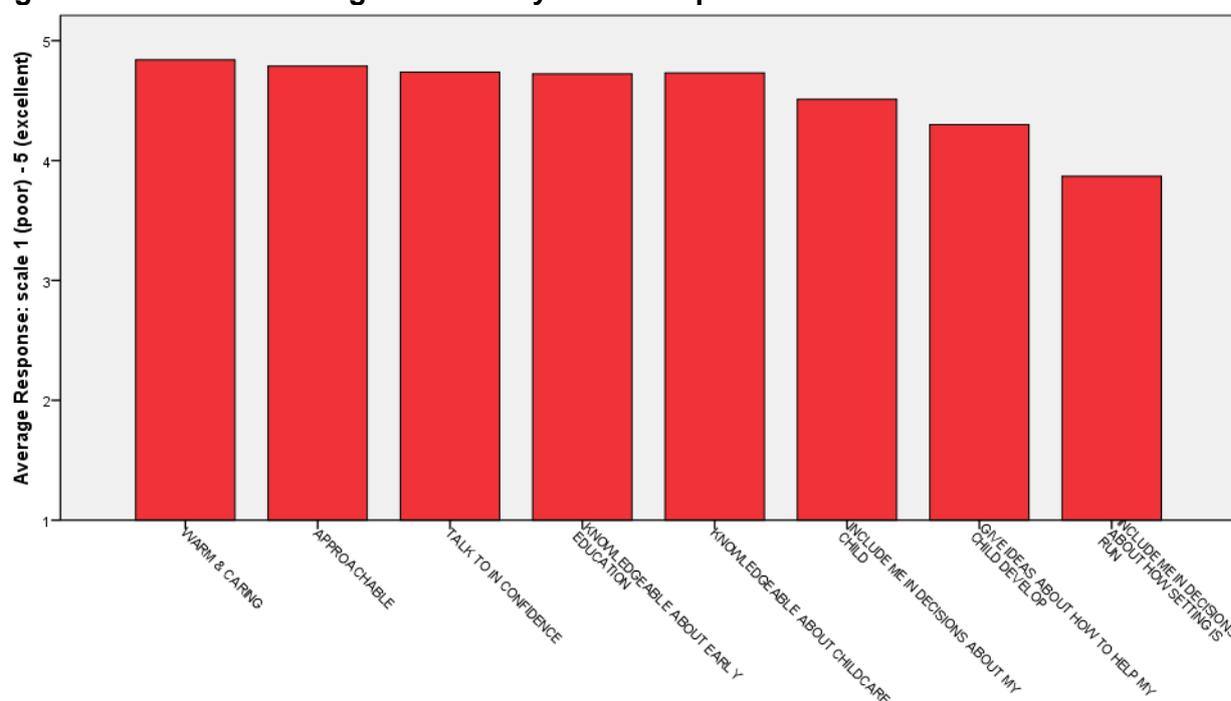
Parents often rated their child’s key worker as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’, however ‘whether the key worker would give ideas on what the parent could do to help her/his child develop’ did not rate as highly as most of the qualities. This may be because parents do not have the same degree of expectations of that quality in a key worker as they do of the other qualities. This corresponds with their views on childcare staffing in general.

Almost all of the follow-up parents thought it was important to have a key worker, with only eight per cent indicating that they did not feel it was important.

The main reasons given for why parents thought it is important were:

- The main emphasis is on the relationship for the child. The key worker is someone who is familiar for the child to trust and will therefore give the child more confidence. Also, having a key worker meant the child had more individual attention.
- The key worker knows more about the child’s development and “*where they are at*”. They can highlight concerns and give parents feedback.
- It is easier for the parent to know who to talk to about problems/difficulties: “*someone with key information*”.
- Key workers give ideas to try at home and tell parents what they can do.

**Figure 6.9.1 Parental ratings of their key worker's qualities**



The questions asked of parents at follow-up, and of providers and managers, did not focus on home learning but more generally on the role of key workers and their relationships with parents, as this seemed to form the basis for engaging parents in home learning. The data indicated that the key worker role is considered important by parents, providers and managers.

Few childcare settings did not have a key worker system in place, although some parents did not think that they had a key worker. As one provider pointed out, above, parents need to be made aware that their child has a key worker.

Almost all of the parents questioned at follow-up thought it was important to have a key worker because their child would benefit from the relationship and also because they, as parents, would benefit from feedback, information and ideas. On average, the parents who said that they had a key worker rated them as ‘good’ or ‘excellent’. Of significance, though, is

the finding that, on average, parents did not rate their key worker quite as highly on the quality of giving parents ideas to help their child develop as they did on most of the qualities.

Most childcare staff thought that being a key worker helped them to build a better relationship with parents by promoting contact with families, rather than just the child. Most managers, too, were positive about the key worker role and had special expectations of key workers' relationships with parents. These expectations ranged from facilitating communication and information sharing about the child's needs and learning to forming a close relationship with families so that both staff and parents felt supported and confident when discussing the child's development.

## 7. Conclusion

The analysis indicates there was no **increase** in EHLE activity in the first six months after a child starting in a funded childcare place that covered the whole sample of parents. The changes that were apparent were limited to specific groups of parents and were not related to the intensity of EHL support provided by the settings.

The differences between groups of parents' EHLE Index scores at baseline, differences relating to number of children in the household and parents' or carers' qualifications were not apparent by follow-up six months later.

The most important difference to emerge at follow-up, which was not apparent at baseline, was the **decrease** in EHLE Index scores associated with household work status: specifically in families **without** at least one parent or carer employed full time. This effect was pronounced – it indicated not just a deficit in EHLE activity compared to families with at least one member in full-time employment at follow-up, but a reduction in EHLE activity over time – the time from the point at which the child was attending a pre-school setting. The comparative reduction in parental early home learning activity is likely to increase any educational disadvantage the children from such backgrounds may already face.

The reduction may stem from a sense that 'learning activities' can be divided between the parent/carer and setting once their child attends; the reduction may also be a response to parents' perceptions of their child's greater independence and ability to undertake learning activities on their own as a result of attending a pre-school setting. It may, however, be the case that home learning activities as measured by the EHLE Index have, to some extent, been displaced by alternative activities, characterised as 'learning activities' by parents, but not measured in the EHLE Index.

As well as the EHLE Index measure, the researchers also asked parents for their own reports of whether they felt they had increased, decreased or stayed the same in the amount of home learning activities they had carried out with their child since they started in a funded childcare place. Close to half of parents (44%) reported an increase in the amount of activities they had done with their children at home since the baseline interview. The main reasons that parents gave for increasing activities were: as a result of attending the setting, that their child wanted more from the parent, that parents had more time or family circumstances had changed and that the weather<sup>25</sup> and/or holidays had increased opportunities.

Those parents who had decreased the amount of activities they carried out with their child at home (14%) generally put this down to either having less time or their child needing less from them as parents or, for a few, the weather.

Some parents, once their child has been in the childcare setting, feel that their child needs their input more while some feel their child needs less input.

Just over a third of parents (37%) had increased how often they had carried out activities with their child at home since the first baseline interview. Reasons for changing the frequency of home learning activities were, in many cases, similar or identical to those given for changing the amount of activities undertaken. Most of the responses for increased

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<sup>25</sup> Parents were interviewed in May-July 2010 and in October-November 2010, depending on whether their child had started in a funded childcare place in January 2010 or April 2010.

frequency of activities focused on the child being older and wanting to do more learning activities at home.

When asked what they would like from staff, parents wanted more information about what children should be doing at their age and what activities parents can do at home. This finding suggests that although parents do not appear to prioritise advice on home learning as an expectation of staff, they do want it. Some parents also expressed a desire for more communication from the staff and more feedback on how their child is progressing.

Parents' views of the staff qualities at baseline indicated their expectations involved care of their child, rather than prioritising advice on home learning. This finding supports the evidence from the Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents (DfE, 2009), which found that the quality of childcare for their children was a high priority. The reasons given by the highest proportion of parents for choosing their formal childcare setting were:

- the childcare staff's reputation (62%)
- ensuring the quality of the care given (55%).

Parents' views of staff qualities at follow-up indicated that, after six months, parents judge those qualities identified as important to be better realised than those judged of lower importance. These findings suggest that the expectations of engagement in home learning that parents had from the provision were not as high as their expectations of the care of their child. This difference may be reflected in their rating of the home learning engagement that they received.

Parental assessment of staff interaction with them about their child indicated that most parents agreed that staff explained how they are working with their child. However, some parents did not appear to be receiving frequent communication and feedback from staff.

Findings from the observations showed ways that settings involve parents in home learning through written information: by involving parents in their child's learning and by sharing information about their child's learning. Two key themes emerged from this part of the research study: the significance of the relationship between the setting and parents, and the usefulness of the EYFS process, when it comes to involving parents in home learning activities with their children.

The survey of managers indicated that the effectiveness of activities in increasing parents' involvement in their children's learning is skewed towards activities that involve communicating with parents individually rather than through providing written materials and resources.

Providers indicated that the most frequently cited successful parental engagement methods involve inviting parents into settings. Parental engagement is achieved both by interaction with parents and by engendering interaction by means of: an open-door policy; making use of drop-off and pick-up times; Stay and Play sessions; and running workshops.

Providers identified several barriers to engaging parents in improving home learning. The biggest barrier appeared to be parents' lack of time, followed by communication difficulties for parents who do not speak English. Other perceived barriers included parents' own experiences of school or poor relationships with teachers/staff; parents' lack of confidence or lack of understanding about learning; lack of resources; and parents' resistance to engaging in home learning.

However, providers also gave examples and cases where staff had an impact on home learning through parental engagement. These broadly came into the categories of interaction

with parents; providing resources/activities for parents; and modelling learning activities to parents or giving parents the opportunity to experience learning.

Some settings target home learning support to particular groups of parents such as: lone parents; working parents; parents for whom English is an additional or second language; and parents who need affordable home learning activities. The research findings indicate that settings do most in the way of promoting affordable home learning activities.

Although many centres find parents generally responsive when staff talk to them about home learning, there are also mixed responses from parents, with some being enthusiastic and others reluctant to engage.

Lack of parental response or lack of willingness to engage in home learning activities might reflect that some staff need to feel more qualified, informed and confident when engaging parents in home learning. Although there is a significant amount of support, training and guidance given to childcare providers for working with parents, there are still unmet needs in this area and in the area of providing support and information about home learning. The Early Home Learning Matters website could be promoted and utilised more by staff and parents.

Most childcare staff felt the EYFS helps to create a partnership between parents and staff. They found it helpful that there is a legal requirement to work with parents and that implementing the EYFS aids communication between staff and parents. Of interest to this study's focus on home learning, staff also felt that it emphasises the importance of home learning and brings parents into the settings where they may be inspired to carry on learning activities at home. The sharing with parents of targets for achievement and EYFS resources was also thought helpful.

Most managers thought that the EYFS was either 'very helpful' or 'somewhat helpful'. The EYFS was thought to be 'very helpful' because it heightened awareness, gave staff confidence and aided discussion. It also provided a focus for shared achievement while helping parents and promoting the key worker relationship.

The EYFS was thought to be 'somewhat helpful' by managers because it strengthened existing relationships, including the key worker relationship. It requires parental involvement and provides practitioners with more knowledge to enable them to communicate and help parents. It was also seen to encourage practice review, but not by all settings.

The main reasons for some managers finding the EYFS 'neither helpful nor unhelpful' were that it is similar to other programmes or is a continuation of previous practice. The point was also made that not all parents want to be involved more than necessary.

Although interview questions to managers in the observed settings did not address the EYFS, some managers voluntarily referred to an influential role that the EYFS has in getting some parents involved in their child's learning. This role included providing a formal structure that enables staff to gain access to parents, providing written information that could be passed to parents and the two-way sharing of the child's learning between staff and parents. The data indicates that the key worker role is considered important by parents, providers and managers.

Few childcare settings did not have a key worker system in place although some parents did not think that they had a key worker and there may be a need to ensure that all parents are made aware of the presence, identity and role of their child's key worker and reminded at regular intervals.

Almost all of the parents interviewed at follow-up thought it was important to have a key worker because their child would benefit from the relationship and also because they, as parents, would benefit from feedback, information and ideas. On average, the parents who said that they had a key worker rated them as 'good' or 'excellent'. Of significance, though, is the finding that, on average, parents did not rate their key worker quite as highly on the quality of giving parents ideas to help their child develop as they did on most of the qualities.

Most childcare providers thought that being a key worker helped them to build a better relationship with parents by promoting contact with families, rather than just the child. Most managers, too, were positive about the key worker role and had special expectations of key workers' relationships with parents. These expectations ranged from facilitating communication and information-sharing about the child's needs and learning to forming a close relationship with families so that both staff and parents feel supported and confident when discussing a child's development.

Further research into the relationship between practitioners, parents and levels of early home learning could continue to explore the potential for improving practice in early years settings, for example by:

- establishing 'norms' for early home learning, given that we know from this study that parents are doing more general early home learning activities;
- following up with longitudinal research that followed the children in this study through their schooling up to age 16;
- feasibility piloting for use of the EHLE index, extended to include a wider range of activities, or other measures to monitor EHL in early years settings;
- regular audit of staff training needs for work with parents and a survey of staff attitudes and confidence in this area.

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