

Provider influence on the early home learning environment (EHLE)

Technical Report

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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Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.

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List of abbreviations

BME	Black and minority ethnic
CfL	Campaign for Learning
ECERS	Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale
EHL	early home learning
EHLE	early home learning environment
EHLEI	Early Home Learning Environment Index
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project
EYFS	Early Years Foundation Stage
EYHLEI	Early Years Home Learning Environment Index
FPI	Family and Parenting Institute
HLE	home learning environment
NESS	National Evaluation of Sure Start
PCCIS	Parent Child Care Interaction Scale

A1 Technical note

This section gives further technical detail on the key methodological and analytical issues which arose in the quantitative aspect of this research.

The sample

The study was based on a sample of parents drawn from 12 local authorities. The sample comprised 339 parents at baseline and 223 at follow-up (although only 213 had a valid EHLEI score), an attrition rate of 34 per cent.

The local authorities were drawn from different parts of England, and were selected by the then DCSF. Local authorities were selected on the basis of having positive parental engagement strategies as well as an even geographical spread.

This research was not a randomised controlled trial of the impact of the work providers did with parents. The research team believed it would not have been ethical or feasible to change what nurseries and other providers already did to encourage early home learning. Instead, the research considered the *amount* and *intensity* of the early home learning support that was being carried out: the extent to which work was one to one with parents, and which key attributes and behaviours at staff and setting level were associated with greater change during the first four to six months in a funded childcare place.

Measurement

The study classified settings into three categories: high, medium and low intensity of support.

Settings classified as 'high intensity' were those reporting the use of more tailored and personalised one-to-one methods of supporting EHL, such as individual coaching and home visits, with or without other less-intensive approaches. The settings which were classified as 'medium intensity' used group-based approaches such as covering early home learning in Stay and Play sessions, with or without other less-intensive approaches. Settings classified as 'low intensity' used only relatively hands-off approaches such as providing website information or leaflets on early home learning. In classifying settings by the amount and intensity of what they did to support early home learning, researchers were dependent on the accuracy and completeness of information provided by managers and staff.

Controlling for influences on early home learning environments

Unfortunately, it was not possible to fully control for all possible variables that might have an influence on the early home learning environment. There were a large number of variables, both those which related to parents and families and those related to settings. Researchers did collect data on variables known or likely to be associated with EHL, such as parents/ carers qualifications.

Timing issues when capturing changes to the early home learning environment

One challenge faced by the research was the well-known problem that changes to early home learning environments may occur over a different period to one chosen by a study. It is possible that changes may occur over a longer period or occur immediately after entering a funded childcare place but fail to be sustained and observable by four to six months.

The research team used the four- to six-month period to see whether settings could make precisely those sustained changes which are associated with better long-term outcomes for children.

Observational and parental data and reactivity

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. This was a possibility and some parents in both the case studies and those interviewed for the main part of the study mentioned that they had “done more” as a result of being in the study. We used a comparison group for the study to test for reactivity. This group was made up of a group of parents who were only interviewed about early home learning activities at follow-up to test for this effect.

Further measures were built into the research to anticipate possible reactivity in other aspects of the study. In the settings where researchers conducted observational visits, frontline staff that were being observed were asked if their interaction with parents that day was ‘typical’. Researchers also asked if anything had influenced it or was different from normal at the times 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 but the literature on observation suggests that this is difficult to maintain over a period of time or across repeated observations.

Analysis

Researchers examined whether attending a pre-school setting impacts on the amount of home learning activity a parent/carer takes part in with their child.

They did this by analysing the relevance, or importance, of background characteristics of the individual, household and setting in terms of whether they promote any potential change – whether an increase or decrease – in parental/carer home learning activity.

The factors examined include parents/carers’ highest qualification, household income and the degree of intensity with which the early years settings’ staff engage in home learning support with parents/carers. The following section begins by detailing the sample in terms of:

- background characteristics, including those of the parents/carers at both baseline and follow-up;
- the settings, using data from the managers’ questionnaire, including details of settings’ intensity of home learning support;
- early years providers, from a series of detailed interviews conducted in a sample of early years provision.

Following this, the results of the baseline home learning environment measure were examined, initially in terms of the means by key background variables, then in terms of multi-level models analysis. This statistical method took into account the simultaneous impact of individuals’ and household background characteristics and the settings on the levels of early home learning activity. This was then repeated for the follow-up HLE measure. Finally, a value-add analysis of the follow-up home learning environment measure was made, taking into account HLE baseline measure in addition to the set of background characteristics already featured – this was undertaken to see if anything other than baseline scores can account for any change in follow-up HLE scores.

A1.0 Sample composition: parents and carers, settings

A1.1 Parents/carers in sample

This report was based on data from 339 parents and carers of children (aged two to five years old) who were taking up funded places for the first time at pre-schools or with

childminders in either January or April 2010. January and April represent two of the three possible months of the year when funded childcare places can normally be taken up, depending on the birth date of the child concerned, the third being September.

Parents and carers in the study were drawn from 12 participating local authorities throughout England. These local authorities and the proportion of respondents drawn from each of them are shown in Table A1.1.1, along with the percentages starting in funded places in January and April. The age and gender of the respondents are shown in Table A1.1.2.

Table A1.1.1: Respondents by local authority¹

Local Authority	Respondents: Total		Respondents: January Start		Respondents: April Start	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Bristol	6	2%	0	-	6	2%
Durham	38	11%	33	10%	5	2%
Hertfordshire	57	17%	51	15%	6	2%
Islington	10	3%	9	3%	1	-
Kingston-upon-Thames	22	7%	20	6%	2	1%
Manchester	47	14%	44	13%	3	1%
North Tyneside	3	1%	0	-	3	1%
Nottinghamshire	25	7%	25	7%	0	-
Sandwell	25	7%	25	7%	0	-
Sheffield	55	16%	49	15%	6	2%
Solihull	16	5%	9	3%	7	2%
Southwark	35	10%	35	10%	0	-

Table A1.1.1 indicates that 89 per cent of respondents were recruited in the January wave, reflecting the greater proportion of parents starting their children in this month compared with April.

¹ Due to rounding the total may exceed 100%.

Table A1.1.2 shows the age and gender distribution amongst parents and carers in the study.

Table A1.1.2: Respondents' age and gender

Age Band	Gender			
	Male		Female	
	n	%	n	%
18-24	1	0.3%	34	10%
25-34	6	2%	143	42%
35-44	4	1%	135	40%
45-54	3	1%	7	2%
55-64	1	0.3%	1	0.3%
Missing age	0	-	4	1.2%
Total	15	4%	324	96%

As Table A1.1.2 indicates the overwhelming proportion of respondents were female and age between 25 and 44. Ninety-three per cent of the sample indicated they were the child's mother. Table A1.1.3 shows the current health status of the respondent and where applicable their partners'.

Table A1.1.3: Respondents' and partners' reported current health

Reported Current Health Status	Respondent n (%)	Partner n (%)
Poor	8 (2.5)	3 (1.6)
Fair	17 (5)	8 (3.1)
Good – excellent	310 (92.5)	242 (95)

The majority of parents and carers in the study rated their and, where applicable, their partners' health as good or excellent.

Respondents were also asked if any of a list of potentially stressful or significant life events had happened to them in the last year. This included items such as: separation/divorce; bereavement; gaining a new partner; having an additional person join their household; the birth of child; a house move; serious illness; unemployment; starting work; starting education; any other significant event as specified by them. One hundred and ninety-three (53%) parents or carers reported that at least one of these events had occurred in the last year, and 145 (43%) reported that none of them had occurred.

Family composition

Approximately 26 per cent of the sample (89 individuals) were lone parents, with one per cent (3) being male and the remainder female. These figures are close to those found in the population for Great Britain in 2007, where it was estimated 23 per cent of parents with dependent children are lone parents: almost 90 per cent being mothers and the remainder fathers (ONS, 2009).

In the case of couple families where the mother was the respondent (234 individuals), only 2 per cent (4) indicated their partner was not the father of the child: the remaining 98 per cent of respondents all indicated their current partner was the child's father.

Household resources: family composition and work status

Fifty per cent of the parents and carers in the sample (160 individuals) were not employed at all, that is neither full nor part time; a further 36 per cent (116) were employed part time; and

15 per cent (51) were employed full time. Comparisons with the population are difficult in this case because the sample is characterised by a specific demographic – all households have at least one dependent child aged four or below, and nationally comparable figures are not available.

Eighteen per cent of those employed full time were lone parents, the rest from two parent families; a further 18 per cent of those employed part time (individual) were lone parents, the remaining 82 per cent from two parent families; of those not working, 34 per cent were lone parents, and the remaining 65 per cent from two parent families.

Lone parent families and employment

Of the lone parents in the sample, approximately 11 per cent (nine individuals) were employed full time, 25 per cent (21) were employed part time and 65 per cent (55) were not working. There was a statistically significant difference in the likelihood of lone parents being employed (full or part time) or not employed, with lone parents being more likely not to be employed: $\chi^2 (d.f. 1) = 7.35, p < 0.01$.

Two-parent families and employment

In the case of the respondents from couple families, 17 per cent (42 individuals) were employed full time, 40 per cent (95) were employed part time, and 43 per cent of (105) were not working. Respondents from two parent families were no more likely to be in employment (full or part time) than to be not employed.

In the case of respondent's partners (i.e. excluding all lone parent respondents), 76 per cent (200 individuals) were employed full time, 10 per cent (26) were employed part time and 14 per cent of (37) were not working.

Taking both partners into consideration, 13 per cent (32 individuals) of respondents belonged to a household where both partners were employed full time; and, including the aforementioned 13 per cent, 78 per cent (196) of respondents belonged to a household where at least one partner was employed full time; 9 per cent (22) belonged to a household where at least one individual was employed part time, but neither full time; and 10 per cent (25) of respondents belonged to a household where neither partner were employed.

Family composition and finance

Only 223 respondents reported their income: the average annual household income of these parents and carers was £43,057 p.a. (s.d: £50683); the median was £30,000 (interquartile range: £17,900 – £50,000). The mean here was somewhat higher than the average UK annual income for families with dependent children, estimated at £32,779 in 2007 (BBC, 2007).

Consistent with greater earning potential, two-parent families in the sample enjoyed a significantly greater annual income: an average of £49,499, which was higher than the lone parents, who had an average of £18,932: $t (d.f.: 221) = -3.78, p < 0.001$.

Residential status

Sixty per cent of the sample (197 individuals) were home owners; of those renting, 19 per cent (63) rented from the council, 13 per cent (45) privately and 9 (31) per cent from housing associations.

Qualifications and cognitive difficulty

Table A1.1.4 indicates the highest educational qualification the respondent had obtained.

Table A1.1.4: Respondent's highest qualification

Highest qualification	n	% of total
None	19	6%
GCSE: O level	69	21%
Vocational	79	23%
A level	52	15%
Degree	73	22%
Higher degree	42	12%

Parents were asked if they had any difficulty conducting practical tasks involving numeracy and/or literacy. Responses indicated only nine respondents having difficulties with each of these.

Ethnicity and English as an Additional Language (EAL)

Information gathered on parents' and carers' ethnicity conformed to the standard classification adopted by the Office for National Statistics (Gardener and Connolly, 2005). Table A1.1.5 shows the ethnicity of the respondents in the sample. There was an under-representation of White British/Irish parents and carers accounting for 75 per cent of the total sample, while the mid-2007 estimate for the percentage of this group in the English population is 85 per cent (ONS, 2007). There was a corresponding over-representation of minority ethnic parents and carers in the sample. This is particularly true of the Black British Caribbean and Black African groups, which accounted for five per cent of the present sample but comprised only 1.7 and 1.4 respectively of the English population mid-2007 (ONS, 2007).

Table A1.1.5: Ethnicity of respondents

Ethnicity	N	% of sample	% of English population (ONS, 2007)
White - British/Irish	253	75%	85%
Black - African	15	4%	1.4%
Black British - Caribbean	16	5%	1.7%
Indian	4	1.2%	2.6%
Pakistani: Bangladeshi	8	2.4%	2.5
Mixed	13	4%	1.7%
Any other respondent cited ethnicity	30	9%	6%

The language the respondents identified as their first language was overwhelmingly English: 84 per cent of the sample indicated they only spoke English. Only two per cent (six individuals) indicated they used only other languages with their child; a further 15 per cent (43) indicated they used English and another language with their child.

The 'Any other' ethnicity category was selected by 30 respondents and included identifications of ethnicity that either: were too vague to re-allocate, such as 'American'; did not fit into a the pre-defined categories, such as Thai or Filipino; or was missing.

A1.2 Children in sample

The age and gender of the children in the study (hereafter children, unless otherwise indicated) are presented in the Table A1.2.1 below.

Table A1.2.1: Age and gender of children

Children's Age	Children's' gender	
	Male	Female
2	23	22
3	131	107
4 +	28	19

The ethnicity of the children in the study is presented in the Table A1.2.2 below.

Table A1.2.2: Ethnicity of children

Ethnicity	N	% of sample	% of English population
White – British/Irish	234	69%	85%
Black – African	8	2.4%	1.4%
Black British – Caribbean	19	3.5%	1.7%
Indian	3	1 %	2.6%
Pakistani: Bangladeshi	7	2%	1.8
Mixed	13	4%	1.7%
Other	52	17%	6%

Parents and carers were asked about the birthweight of their child. Thirteen (4%) parents or carers reported a birthweight for their child that was below normal birthweight (below 2,500 grams) (Scott and Carran, 1989). Additionally, there were 83 children (25%) reported as having a health problem in their first year. Only nine children were reported as being disabled and 17 as having 'special educational needs'. The current health of the children, as rated by their parent or carer, is reported in Table A1.2.3 below.

Table A1.2.3: Current health of children

Reported Current Health Status	Child in Study: n (%)
Poor	4 (1.2)
Fair	8 (2.4)
Good – excellent	323 (96)

Table A1.2.4 indicates the number and percentages of children in the study said to have had or currently be suffering from sleeping, eating or behavioural problems

Table A1.2.4: Children's disorders

Type of problem	Ever suffered n (%)	Currently suffering: n (%)
Sleeping problems	38 (11)	22 (7)
Eating problems	39 (11)	33 (10)
Behavioural problems	20 (6)	20 (6)

Types of childcare setting previously attended: 175 (54%) of the sample indicated their children had attended a previous childcare setting, that is, a different setting before the one

at which they would be taking a funded place. The frequencies for each type of previous childcare setting attended are indicated in the table below.

Table A1.2.5: Types of setting children have previously attended

Previous type of child care setting	Children in study: n (%)
Childminder	40 (11)
Workplace nursery	8 (2.4)
Private nursery	35 (10)
Local authority	16 (5)
Nursery school	10 (3)
Nursery in primary or infant school	7 (2)
Special day school	2 (1)
Playgroup	41 (12)
Combined children and family centres	12 (4)
Other	14 (4)

The current use of pre-school setting reported at 'baseline', that is, before taking up the funded place at a childcare setting, indicated that 29 (9%) children attended more than one setting, seven (2%) more than two, and 21(6%) none. The remainder had attended just one.

A1.3 Settings in sample

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. Managers of all settings attended by children in the sample were requested to complete a questionnaire asking about their understanding of and approach to early home learning support: parent-orientated activities, and various background information such as the settings' size, attitudes to the Early Years Foundation Stage and key workers, staff numbers and qualifications. Table A1.3.1 indicates the frequencies with which children in the sample attended each type of setting.

Table A1.3.1: Types of setting and prevalence of attendance

Type of setting	Number of children attending at baseline (%)	Average number of available children's places (s.d.)	Number of children attending at follow-up (%)
Childminder	2 (0.5)	7 (-)	1 (0.4)
Workplace nursery	1 (0.3)	81 (-)	-
Private independent nursery	87 (26)	79 (36.00)	55 (25)
Local authority nursery	52 (15)	93 (97.64)	34 (15)
Nursery school	55 (16)	114 (102.74)	30 (14)
Nursery or reception class in primary/infant school	58 (17)	111 (71.65)	41(18)
Playgroup	31 (9)	61 (22.58)	23 (10)
Combined children and family centre	53 (16)	111 (112.94)	49 (18)

Data from the managers' questionnaire indicated that the average size of the settings in terms of children attending was 101 (s.d. 105). The numbers of staff (paid/unpaid: full-time/part-time) are presented in Table A1.3.2 below.

Table A1.3.2: Average number of staff by type and setting

Type of setting	Average staff size (s.d.)	Average full-time paid (s.d.)	Average part-time paid (s.d.)	Average full-time non-paid (s.d.)	Average part-time non-paid (s.d.)
Childminder	1.5 (0.70)	0.50 (0.71)	0.50 (0.71)	0 (-)	0.50 (0.70)
Workplace nursery	18 (-)	11 (-)	7 (-)	0 (-)	0 (-)
Private independent nursery	17.55 (10.15)	10.02 (7.42)	6.45 (4.69)	0 (-)	1.10 (2.89)
Local authority nursery	18.81 (14.41)	12.71 (7.05)	6.82 (8.17)	0.12 (0.49)	0.88 (2.50)
Nursery school	15.44 (13.91)	9.00 (8.12)	9.00 (6.47)	0.10 (0.30)	0.73 (2.41)
Nursery or reception class in primary/infant school	12.54 (7.37)	9.86 (10.50)	5.21 (6.61)	0 (-)	0.40 (-)
Playgroup	23 (13.35)	3.62 (6.21)	8.38 (4.50)	0.08 (0.28)	0.46 (1.12)
Combined children and family centre	17.46 (12.17)	9.98 (8.76)	6.56 (5.84)	0.20 (0.56)	0.88 (2.27)

The qualifications of staff were also recorded, and the average proportion of staff in terms of qualification by setting appear in Table A1.3.3.

Table A1.3.3: Average proportion of staff with qualifications by setting

Type of setting	Teaching degree	Any other degree	NVQ 3	NVQ 2	EYPS
Childminder	-	100	75	75	-
Workplace nursery	-	-	100	-	-
Private independent nursery	3	12	57	22	3
Local authority nursery	14	8	60	19	
Nursery school	14	10	44	9	10
Nursery or reception class in primary/infant school	31	8	43	7	3
Playgroup	7	29	50	21	6
Combined Children's and Family Centre	5	12	51	8	4

To assess any impact of more intensive and frequent work with parents aimed at supporting early home learning in settings, managers of settings in the study were asked in detail about the work they did in this area and then classified as high-, medium- or low-intensity settings.

Classification of settings' home learning support intensity

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. The settings classified as 'medium intensity' used group-based approaches such as 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. Most settings reported a high level of intensity in their early home learning work with parents, and therefore most children in the study at both baseline and follow-up were attending a setting classified as high intensity. The prevalence rates are indicated in the following table, Table A1.3.4.

Table A1.3.4: Number of children in the study attending settings classified as having high-, medium- and low-intensity approaches to early home learning work

Level of home learning intervention	Baseline n (%)	Follow-up n (%)
Insufficient data provided by manager to classify	23 (7)	25 (11)
Low	20 (6)	13 (6)
Medium	51 (15)	41 (18)
High	245 (72)	153 (66)

The missing data, from a total of 23 settings at baseline, is accounted for by the following: three settings refused to co-operate; two had closed down; two could not be contacted; one returned only a partially completed questionnaire; and the remainder failed to participate in the survey, although they did not give any outright refusal. An additional two new settings, settings which parents had moved their children to between baseline and follow-up, failed to participate. A total of 30 parents had moved their children between baseline and follow-up. There were 69 providers in total from 40 different settings across 12 local authorities; the frequencies appear in Table A1.3.5.

Table A1.3.5: Providers frequency across local authorities

Local authority	Settings n	Providers n
Bristol	2	4
Durham	4	6
Hertfordshire	6	13
Islington	1	2
Kingston-upon-Thames	4	7
Manchester	5	7
North Tyneside	2	4
Nottinghamshire	1	1
Sandwell	2	2
Sheffield	5	10
Solihull	2	2
Southwark	6	11

The overwhelming majority of providers were female: only two individuals of the 60 individuals who specified their gender were male, and the age range ran from 16 to 62 years old, with a median of 44 years old.

The median duration the providers had spent working at their current setting was six years; 14 individuals (20%) had spent less than two years at their current setting; 12 (18%) had spent two to five years; 22 (37%) had spent five to ten years; and the remaining 25 per cent over ten years.

The median time spent working in childcare services was 11 years; only two individuals (3%) had less than two years' experience working in childcare services; seven (11%) had between two and five years; 17 (28%) had between five and ten years; the remaining 35 individuals (57%) over ten years.

Four individuals (7%) had no or only GCSE qualifications; only one individual (2%) had A levels; 23 (41%) had either a first degree or vocational qualifications respectively; the remaining five individuals (9%) had a higher degree.

The EHLE index

The research study used both qualitative and quantitative measures of the early home learning environment. The key quantitative measure used was the Early Home Learning Environment Index.

The Early Home Learning Environment Index (EHLEI) measure is an aggregate score of the *frequency* with which seven cognitively orientated activities involving the child are engaged in at 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.

The HLE measure has a range of 0 to 49 where higher scores indicate more frequent home learning activity. The precise way in which the questions were phrased, how the scores for the seven activities are measured and how they are combined appears in section A4.

The HLE measure was recorded twice for the majority of parents, the initial measure just prior to taking up a funded place at a childcare setting, and again after a period of four to six months: the follow-up.

The mean, standard deviations and numbers for the baseline HLE scores by differing socio-demographic groups in the sample are presented in section A4 of this report.

Bivariate analysis of each of these groups indicated few differences in the baseline HLE score between socio-demographic groups, although differences were identified in the cases of cognitive difficulties and ethnicity.

A2 Observations report July 2010

The Provider Impact on the Home Learning Environment Project aims 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 project has collected the following data to construct a detailed picture of the practices and approaches associated with changes in parent Home Learning Environment (HLE) activities:

- structured telephone interviews with providers and parents;
- an email questionnaire for childcare setting managers;
- longitudinal case studies of parents of children attending childcare settings;
- observations of staff in childcare settings.

This report covers data from the last of these – observations of staff in childcare settings. We have not been able to find evidence of any other UK study systematically recording staff–parent communication at drop-offs and pick-ups in early years settings and this study therefore provides unique information on this important opportunity that settings have to support the early home learning environment of all children in their care. However, the data comes from a relatively small sample of settings due to both financial constraints on this part of the study and settings not wishing to participate in this part of the study. Therefore, the data presented here provide us with an additional perspective on provider behaviours but are best viewed within the findings of the study as a whole rather than a standalone piece of work.

The observations took place in 39 settings, concentrated in those where there were achieved, or consented to, interviews with both providers (frontline staff who had day-to-day contact with parents of two-, three- and four-year-olds) and parents to allow analyses of the observation data to link to parent and provider data. The types of settings that took part, and their local authorities, can be found in Appendix 3 of this section. Two members of staff were observed in each setting. The staff observed were those that had previously completed a telephone interview for the study and therefore were a self-selecting group of those who had come forward to participate in this earlier part of the study. However, the staff concerned had to be in daily contact with parents, in particular greeting them at drop-offs and pick-ups and therefore they represented the ‘face of the settings’ to parents whose children attended there.

It is also acknowledged, that observers were only able to record what was observed during the data collection period and so the absence of a particular behaviour does not imply that a setting ‘does not do this’ only that it was not observed during the period of data collection.

Design of the data collection

Observations involved day-long visits to settings where Campaign for Learning researchers collected a range of data:

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

Methodology

Ten researchers from the Campaign for Learning were trained in the use of the data collection 'tools' such as the observation coding sheet and ECERS scale. During the training they worked as a group and in pairs on videotapes of parent–staff communication and through role plays to check for consistency in their use of the codes in the observation sheet (or 'calibrate') and ensure that they all understood how different types of behaviour should be coded. They all undertook at least one pilot visit to a setting, in pairs, to further check how consistently they coded behaviours. It was expected that, as in all observational research, there would be some variation between researchers but this was minimised as much as possible by close feedback from, and contact with, the researchers conducting the observations and the member of FPI staff managing this part of the study.

Observations of frontline members of staff

The Parent Child Care Involvement Scale (PCCIS), devised and used by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (Fletcher and Perlman, 1992) to observe parent–staff communication at drop-off point in pre-school classroom settings, has been developed for the drop-off observations and adapted for the pick-up observations. Each of two staff members were observed for two five-minute periods at drop-off and again at pick-up. Observers used coding sheets to focus on instances of communication between staff members and parents at drop-off in areas such as:

- smiling at the parent and engaging in small talk;
- providing and soliciting child-related information;
- providing setting programme information;
- soliciting personal parent information.

Codes were also used to record parent communication to staff and the response to parents where parents had initiated conversation.

In addition to the codes taken from the PCCIS, observers also looked for examples of effective helping, based on Egan's (2007) model of the 'skilled helper'. These codes focus on looking for examples of active listening, reflecting and checking understanding as well as recording the body language, perceived general tone or 'warmth' of communication related to things such as eye contact, laughing, tone of voice shown by the staff. Codes also recorded whether support is asked for and/or offered and who initiates and ends interactions between parents and staff. Pick-up observations recorded similar behaviours but also looked for evidence that information about the child's activities and learning during the day was communicated to parents.

Coding of parent-staff interaction at drop-offs and pick-ups

Key findings for the three case study settings are provided in this report and include the percentage of all recorded behaviours that were 'parent directed'; average number of parent-directed behaviours per parents and key behaviours observed. Explanations for each of these findings are as follows:

- **Percentage of all recorded staff behaviours that were 'parent directed'** records how much of the behaviour that was observed in the settings – undertaken in up to 5 minutes of 20-second 'snapshots' as is standard in observational research in education – was directed at parents as opposed to 'child directed' or 'directed at staff by parents'. For example, if four child-directed behaviours were recorded during a 20-second observation snapshot at a setting (e.g. two smiles at child, one greeting of a child with name, one asking a question of a child) and six parent-directed behaviours were recorded (e.g. three greetings to parents without name, asking two parents how the child is, one telling a parent what the setting is going to be doing with children

that day), then a total of 10 behaviours would be recorded and of these 60%, or 6/10, would be parent directed.

- **Average number of parent-directed behaviours per parent.** Settings varied in the number of parents who were observed at drop-offs and pick-ups so the average number of parent-directed behaviours per parent was also calculated. Then the average overall snapshots was taken. In the example above, if four parents were observed dropping off their child to the observed member of staff during the snapshot concerned then the average amount of parent-directed behaviour would be 6/4 or 1.5. If this were the case for all four snapshots then the average would be 1.5.
- **Key behaviours observed.** At each of the three case study settings we have also given information on key differences in behaviours observed there, for example, if a setting had a much higher level of greeting parents by name observed than in the other case study settings.

Observations of the physical surroundings and interviews with observed staff and managers based on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)

In between the drop-off and pick-up observation periods observers collected data about the physical surroundings of the settings and facilities. The *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale. Revised Edition* (ECERS – Harms *et al.*, 1998) forms the basis of the assessment of the setting. These are well-used and defined measures within the field of early education and involve observation of surroundings and questioning of staff, including the setting manager. The section in the ECERS manual on 'Parents and Staff' was adapted so that observed staff were asked about the provisions for the personal and professional needs of staff, and managers were asked about provisions for parents, in relation to supporting early home learning work with parents (Harms *et al.*, 1998, pp.67-69). The questions used can be seen in Appendix 1 of this section.

Field notes

Researchers undertaking the observations were given forms to record their field notes about the setting. They asked:

- whether early home learning (EHL) materials were displayed;
- whether EHL resources were available in the setting;
- for a summary of their experience of the setting;
- whether there was anything unique about the setting that made it successful in working with parents;
- whether there was anything unique about the setting that made it successful in encouraging home learning;
- for an overall assessment of the provider interaction with parents grading very well, well, not very well and poor;
- whether any staff member was observed talking to parents about things they could do at home to help their children learn.

Findings

Thirty-nine settings and 78 staff members participated in the observations. Analysis of data has produced the following:

- ratings for the settings using the ECERS parent provision responses from managers and data from observer field notes;
- three case studies giving an example of a high-, medium- and low-rated setting to illustrate different levels of support and scope for parental involvement provided by settings for home learning;
- some initial findings from interviews with managers of the observed settings focusing on: written information about home learning given to parents; how parents are

involved in their child's learning; how information is shared with parents about their child's learning; and what managers thought was the key thing that their setting did to encourage parents' involvement in home learning;

- some initial findings from the coding sheets of staff interaction with parents.

Ratings for the settings

Settings were rated using a 5-point assessment following the ECERS ratings but with a focus on home learning. The ECERS scoring uses seven points (Harms *et al.*, 1998 p.67) but for simplification we used five points:

1. inadequate
2. minimal
3. ok/fair
4. good
5. very good

It was decided not to use the full seven points as the range of behaviours observed for this study was not as extensive or as complex as those for which the ECERS scale was devised. It was not felt that data would be limited by the reduction in points as ratings determined by observation are, by their nature, subjective.²

During analysis, seven topics were rated from the data collected. Six topics were taken from the manager's interview and one from the staff member (provider) interview. Managers' topics were about:

- written information about HL given to parents;
- how parents were involved in child's learning;
- how settings share information about child's learning with parents;
- whether parents visit the setting before their child is enrolled;
- how parents take part in evaluating the setting;
- how parents take part in making decisions about the setting.

Providers were asked about their relationship with parents.

(A fuller explanation of the scoring and the topics selected is given in Appendix 2 of this section.) In addition, two sets of data were used from the observer field notes. These were the summary of the observer's experience of the setting and the observer's assessment of provider interaction with parents. Final scores were arrived at by taking an average of the seven ECERS ratings and an average of the two field note ratings to produce a final average score.

The settings were rated as 'high', 'medium' and 'low', although it should be noted that none of the settings scored below ok/fair.

High settings scored 4.5 and above 8 settings

Medium settings scored between 4.00 and 4.4 21 settings

Low settings scored under 4 10 settings

The highest score was 4.7 (5 settings)

The lowest score was 3.4 (1 setting)

A breakdown of the scores by local authority and type of setting is given in Appendix 3 of this section.

² As the scale was unfamiliar to the researchers and the ECERS 7-point scale only has four reference points (semantic anchors), a 5-point scale was devised as it offered the option of identifying the value for each point on the scale, while retaining a mid-point. This is in line with findings that the optimal length of rating scales to maximise reliability and validity are 5- or 7-point scales (Coleman *et al.*, 1997).

Case studies

The following three case studies show an example of a high, medium and low setting illustrating the different levels of support and scope for parental involvement provided by settings for home learning. The numbers of parents observed varies between settings and between drop-off and pick-ups due to variation in numbers of children in the settings and also the numbers of children being dropped off and picked up at the specific times of the observations. Some settings have more extended drop-off and pick-up times than others and our observations only concentrated on a specific time-span

Setting A: score of 4.7

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 are 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 (EHL) information is displayed on notice boards and on a display rack in the reception area. The nursery operates from 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 of their child and having access to particular days and taster courses that focus on parents improving their knowledge and understanding. Parents are 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 the children's learning is shared formally when the nursery closes for one day a year to guarantee that parents have a 45-minute slot with their child's teacher.

Parents are involved in the decision-making process and evaluation of the nursery 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 for a few days to talk with parents about what they want and to get their views on the overall direction of the setting.

The observer felt that what was distinctive about this setting was 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.

The observations of staff interactions with parents in this setting revealed the following behaviours:

At drop-off, staff interaction with **28 parents** was observed. Key behaviours include:

- many of the observed parents were greeted by name;
- staff were observed initiating interaction with parents;
- staff were observed soliciting information about the child (e.g. mood, tiredness, health);
- staff were observed soliciting personal information about the parent (e.g. back at work?);
- examples were observed of staff demonstrating active listening;
- high levels of positive body language were observed from staff;
- good levels of tone and warmth were observed from staff.

At pick-up, staff interaction with **21 parents** was observed. Key behaviours include:

- many of the observed parents were greeted by name;
- staff were observed initiating conversation with parents;
- staff were observed providing information about the child (e.g. she likes books);
- staff were observed providing programme information (e.g. we've got the sand out);
- staff were observed soliciting personal information about the parent (e.g. back to work?);
- high levels of positive body language were observed from staff;
- high levels of tone and warmth were observed from staff.

* In the follow-up telephone interview for another part of this research study, four parents who use this setting gave the following feedback about what the setting staff have said or done to help their children learn and develop at home:

- The staff gave her a lead.
- The staff helped by giving the parents ideas of things to do at home.
- The staff gave advice on discipline, such as setting boundaries, and this was found to be very useful.
- The staff helped the parent to incorporate learning into everyday activities such as learning about letters.

NB Three of the case study parents attended this setting.

Setting B: score of 4.0

This setting is a community pre-school attached to an infant school in a city in the north of England. As it shares playground space with other settings, the pre-school has to be well organised within limited space and has to regulate pick-up and drop-off times.

EHL information is displayed on a special notice board which contains an exploration of the themes covered in the pre-school curriculum along with materials and initiatives from other relevant organisations. There are no specific or explicit EHL resources available but there is a newsletter that highlights the children's interests and explores the themes so that parents can choose to do them with their children if they wish to.

Parents are given informal training in observation skills to help them celebrate their child's learning and then document and report back to the setting activities their child has done at home. Parents are also encouraged to attend the setting for a day to enable them to see the

type of learning activities taking place within the setting so that they can do similar activities at home. Information about their child's learning is shared with parents through the child's development file which parents can see and then provide feedback or input at any time. Parents can be involved in their child's learning as parent volunteers, by being on the parent committee or by sharing interests and talents with the children in the pre-school setting. Parents are involved in the decision-making and evaluation of the pre-school through both informal consultation during session times and more formally with evaluation forms and via the parent committee where final decisions are made.

The pre-school manager thought that the one key thing that the setting does to encourage parents' involvement in home learning is the sharing of information with regards to the child's progress and interests.

The observer at the pre-school felt that the setting was distinctive in its approach to EHL because it empowered parents "by giving them so many angles to engage and participate in the shaping of their children's future" and by parents experiencing staff input "in an organic manner without cumbersome, extensive forms or procedures".

The observations of staff interactions with parents in this setting revealed the following behaviours:

At drop-off, staff interaction with **18 parents** was observed. Key behaviours include:

- almost all of the observed parents were greeted by staff;
- staff were observed providing programme information to parents (e.g. today we've got sand out);
- staff were observed soliciting pragmatic information (e.g. did he bring a hat?);
- staff engaged in small talk with parents (e.g. weather);
- examples were observed of staff demonstrating active listening;
- high levels of positive body language were observed from staff;
- high levels of tone and warmth were observed from staff.

At pick-up, staff interaction with **four parents** was observed. Key behaviours include:

- all of the observed parents were greeted by staff;
- staff smiled at all of the parents;
- staff initiated interaction with all of the parents;
- parents received an active response from staff;
- high levels of positive body language were observed from staff;
- high levels of tone and warmth were observed from staff.

**** In the follow-up telephone interview for another part of this research study, a parent who uses this setting gave feedback about what the setting staff have said or done to help her child learn and develop at home:

"The staff gave practical suggestions of how to help G.... at home and also seeing G.... play at nursery helped me teach her at home."

NB One of the case study parents attended this setting.

Setting C: score of 3.4

This setting is a nursery within a primary school in a metropolitan area. The observer described the nursery as having a "nice building" and that it appeared to have lots of facilities. It has a high number of challenging children, some with Special Educational Needs (SEN) statements, and a number going to specialist centres at various points during the

nursery day. The nursery is open and welcoming to parents with an open reception where parents have a large seating area.

There is no EHL information on display and the only available learning resources are reading books, which parents are able to take home. The manager stated that written information is given to parents but it is about the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and about the school and not really about EHL. However, staff members mentioned a parent group that makes and shares resources for home learning. This group was initially created by a council initiative and the parents asked to continue the group when the funding ran out. Informal ideas are given to parents when they go into the nursery, if they ask for them, such as games to play on the way to nursery to help with numbers.

Parents can get involved in their child's learning by volunteering to support the work in the nursery. There are also informal coffee mornings which are held each term where parents can discuss their child with staff. Information about their child's learning is also shared with parents on a day-to-day basis. There are also 'packed books' that go between school and home for staff and parents to write comments. There are also summaries of the child's learning and development sent to parents each term and parents are encouraged to add what they are doing at home and how they see their child developing.

There are open days when parents are invited into the nursery to see their child in the nursery setting. There is also a home visit before the child starts at the nursery to discuss the child and the practicalities of the nursery.

Parents are not involved in the decision-making for the nursery. Evaluation is undertaken through occasional questionnaires in the school. It is not specifically focused on the nursery.

The nursery manager thought that the one key thing that the setting does to encourage parents' involvement in home learning is the half-termly sharing of topic webs in all six areas of the EYFS with parents so that they can support their child's learning at home. They also send regular notes home about what they are doing in the nursery.

The observer felt that there was nothing particularly distinctive about the setting in its approach to EHL or to working with parents, although it came across as very friendly to parents. There was little in place in terms of parental involvement or home learning. During the observation the manager commented that this is something that the nursery is working on and the observation process and questions made her realise how little they did. She added that they are thinking about what they should do but as they want to get it right, it is a slow process.

The observations of staff interactions with parents in this setting revealed the following behaviours:

At drop-off, staff interaction with **34 parents** was observed. Key behaviours include:

- almost all of the observed parents were greeted by staff;
- staff were observed soliciting information about the child (e.g. mood, tiredness, health);
- parents received an active response from staff;
- positive body language from staff was observed;
- tone and warmth from staff were observed.

At pick-up, staff interaction with **46 parents** was observed. Key behaviours include:

- almost half of the observed parents were greeted by staff;
- staff initiated interaction with some of the parents;

- staff smiled at many of the parents;
- staff provided information about the child to some of the parents (e.g. she likes books);
- staff gave materials (e.g. toys, hand-outs on home learning).

Findings from interviews with managers of the observed settings

This section presents some findings from the initial analysis of interviews with managers of the observed settings:

Written information about home learning given to parents

Several of the settings used a range of ways of giving parents written information about home learning. These were:

- weekly handouts/newsletters (12 settings)
- the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) process (10 settings)
- lending books and/or resources (nine settings)
- developing specific home learning information for parents (six settings)
- making home visits or using outreach workers before child enters setting (five settings)
- using more formal learning programmes (three settings)
- via a website (two settings)
- through courses and workshops (two settings)
- through a parent information cafe (one setting).

Some of these methods are detailed below:

Weekly handouts/newsletters

The most popular method was through weekly handouts and/or newsletters which gave suggestions for home activities to enable parents to model activities that were taking place in the settings. A manager in an infant school that scored 'medium' on the ECERS ratings explained that the setting did not provide written information in the specific terms of home learning but it sent out newsletters that highlight activities and themes explored at the setting. Parents could then decide for themselves whether or not to do these at home with their children.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) as a means of giving parents written information about home learning

For most of these settings, this was in addition to other forms of information but, for a few, this was the main means of disseminating written information to parents.

Generic use of EYFS	6 settings
Learning journals/Learning journeys	2 settings
Specific use of the six areas of learning	1 setting
Use of EYFS rather than any other home learning	1 setting

Lending books and/or resources

These range from lending library books, CDs and toys, to activity cards, early learning bags and story sacks. (The data collated did not give details of these resources.)

Only one of the 'low' settings, a children's centre, compared to four of the 'high' settings, gave out books and home learning bags for home use.

Developing specific home learning information for parents

Examples include:

- information for parents to help their child learn how to write;
- booklets and brochures to meet special needs;
- a book club to support parents working with sounds and letters;
- a booklet identifying milestones in development and the kinds of play that are important;
- tailored home learning support depending on the parents' level of literacy;
- "*friendly, easy to follow instructions to create easy resources*" for explorative play at home with household objects;
- home interest books encouraging parents to engage in their child's learning activities.

Formal learning programmes

Three settings used more formal learning programmes with parents such as 'Every Child a Talker', 'Parents as Partners', 'Family Learning' and 'Magic Moments'.

Only three settings did not give any written information about home learning to parents. These were a private playgroup and two private pre-school settings. Two other settings relied solely on home visits before the child entered the setting to give parents information. Interestingly, one of these two settings, a pre-school attached to a primary school, scored 'high' on the ECERS-based scoring for settings' relationship with parents because it provided a lot in the way of parental involvement with learning.

How parents are involved in their child's learning

Managers in all of the settings gave examples of how they involved parents in their child's learning. These were:

- inviting parents into the setting (28 settings)
- through courses and/or workshops (10 settings)
- providing materials to take home (nine settings)
- having organised trips out (eight settings)
- through the EYFS use of learning journeys and parental observations (seven settings)
- giving out written information (three settings)
- making home visits (two settings)
- through the use of parent committees (two settings).

Some of these methods are detailed below:

Inviting parents into the setting

By far the most cited way of involving parents was to invite them into the settings. This was seen as a way for parents to see play as learning and was expressed by the manager of a state nursery school who felt that this gave parents "*a further angle on early learning and play*". A manager of a private nursery explained that parents are asked to "*volunteer their time in tasks that staff know they would feel capable, happy and confident in doing*".

Having parents as volunteers/helpers	14 settings
Having guest mornings/skill sharing	11 settings
Having open sessions/open-door policy	9 settings
Stay and Play sessions	7 settings
Coffee mornings/afternoons	2 settings

Courses and/or workshops

Some settings run a range of taster courses or workshops that focus on getting parents involved in their child's learning. Specific sessions that were mentioned include: Play Power; Play and Learn sessions; Twilight workshops in the evening; adult and family learning classes; and special event days to talk about areas of learning such as reading.

Providing materials to take home

In some cases the materials provided for home use were aligned to the EYFS such as learning diaries, journals or educational plans. But some settings gave children resources that requested feedback from parents. An example of this is from a pre-school and nursery attached to a primary school, which sends out home news sheets via email which parents fill in. This lets the setting know what successes parents and children have had at home or if there is any news. The setting has found using email in this way has been very successful as all of the parents bar one use email.

Having organised trips out

Several settings made use of parental involvement in organised trips as a way of conveying to parents aspects of learning for their child. The manager of a setting within a primary school pointed out: *"We organise trips and ask parents to come with their children. We have found this is a good way to talk to parents – it is a very relaxing atmosphere."* Another manager, this time of a private nursery, explained that parents are invited on an 'Out and About' project with staff and children. The day is documented with photos in a similar manner to the children's learning journeys, including comments. Parents are then encouraged to document and share their own outings within a folder that goes back to the setting and is shared with staff.

EYFS practice as a means of involving parents in their child's learning

For some settings, the EYFS played a key role in getting parents involved in their child's learning through the EYFS practice of using learning journeys, journals and parental observations of their child. However, in all of the settings where this was mentioned, inviting parents into the setting also played a significant role.

How information about a child's learning is shared with parents

Again, all of the managers gave examples of how information was shared with parents. The main methods were:

- informally on an ad hoc or day-to-day basis (23 settings)
- formally via organised meetings or written feedback (22 settings)
- through the EYFS practice of using journals and parental observations (22 settings)
- through books, diaries and emails between the setting and home (six settings)
- through home visits (three settings).

Some of these methods are detailed below.

Informal information sharing

Most of the settings share information informally with the parents:

Verbally and on an ad hoc basis	11 settings
At pick-up and drop-off	7 settings
On a daily basis	6 settings

Formal information sharing

Many of the settings shared information on both an informal and a formal basis. However, eight settings only gave examples of formal information sharing.

Termly meeting	7 settings
Half-termly meeting	3 settings
Parents' evening	5 settings
Progress meetings	3 settings
Annual open week/day	3 settings
Termly summaries for parents to add to	1 setting

EYFS practice as a means of sharing information with parents

The EYFS practice of sharing journals and involving parents in observations of their child's learning plays a significant role in the way that settings share information with parents. Several settings only gave the EYFS process as the means of sharing this information. The manager of a private nursery with a 'high' ECERS rating responded that "*all information is shared with summaries and home observations enabling information transfer to and from parents about children's learning. For example, parents take photos of visits to a zoo or other activity.*"

What managers thought was the key thing that their setting did to encourage parents' involvement in home learning

Although asked for 'the key thing' that their setting did, some managers offered more than one approach. The main offerings were:

- the setting's focus on its relationship with parents (15 settings)
- providing materials and resources (nine settings)
- holding events with parents (five settings)
- the use of EYFS practice to involve parents (five settings).

Some of these methods are detailed below.

The relationship with parents

This aspect of the approach of settings was strongly voiced by many managers and responses illustrate the importance that many settings place on the staff/parent relationship. The following quotes are just a few of the many examples of ways that managers and settings value this relationship:

"Personalised child-centred support delivered within an ethos of love for learning. The energising and active force to make this happen is providing the activities that strengthen the interdependent relationship between parents, teachers and children so that home, adult and

family learning can work for the benefit of all concerned." (maintained nursery within a children's centre)

"We build parents' confidence as they see that their voice is valued and heard. We are breaking down the barriers that once existed as we are a private nursery of 'We pay for you to look after our children' ."(private nursery)

"Every parent is treated as an individual and therefore a support package is tailored around their needs and levels of experience and confidence." (nursery class attached to a primary school)

"Working with individual parents to improve their literacy. This has a knock-on effect on parents' self-confidence which enables them to help their children with home learning." (private nursery)

"Relationships and partnerships with parents is needed before anything else and then give advice. And personal touches such as a different colour register for a dyslexic Dad." (state nursery that is part of an infant school)

Events with parents

Holding events for parents is also given as a key way to encourage parents' involvement in their child's learning. This may be through workshops, coffee mornings, Stay and Play sessions or trips out. The manager of a 'high' scoring private nursery felt that the setting's 'Out and About' projects "*build bonds of understanding and trust*" and "*serve as a springboard to home learning and other learning activities*" through building confidence. The manager thought that the 'Out and About' projects engaged the hardest-to-reach parents.

EYFS

It has been shown in the previous sections that settings make use of the EYFS to involve parents in their child's learning. The manager of a 'high' scoring pre-school and nursery attached to a primary school made this comment about the EYFS: "*This has had a very significant and very positive impact on the parents' involvement with their child's learning.*"

Conclusions and recommendations

From the analysis of data from the observations, it seems clear that there are two key themes that have emerged: 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.

It can be seen from the data collected from managers about how parents are involved in their child's setting that inviting parents into the setting is the most cited way of involving parents. This is backed-up by the amount of informal sharing of a child's learning that goes on in settings and the number of managers who cited the settings' relationship with parents as their key approach to encouraging parents' involvement in home learning. In the case studies, aspects of the relationship between parents and staff in both the 'high' scoring and the 'medium' scoring settings impressed the researcher/observer as distinctive compared to other observed settings.

- It is recommended that staff in settings are 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 shift of focus in acknowledgement of the importance of parents in children's early learning.

The data also indicates that EYFS practice has an influential role in getting some parents involved in their child's learning. For some settings, the EYFS practice provides a formal structure that enables staff to gain access 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.

- It is recommended that should the EYFS be withdrawn, settings will need another 'bridge' to parents where parents are not so readily involved in their child's learning.

Appendix 1 to the observations report: Questions for managers and observed staff members

Questions for managers

- Is any written information about early home learning given to parents? What is included in this information? Can we have (or be sent) a copy of this information?
- Are there ways that parents can be involved in their child's learning at your setting? Please give some examples.
- Do you and the parents ever share information about the child's learning and development? How is this done?
- Are parents able to visit the setting before the child is enrolled? How is this handled?
- Do parents take part in evaluating the work of the setting? How is this done? About how often?
- Do parents take part in making decisions about the work of the setting? How is this handled?
- Is there any space that can be used for individual parent/staff meetings or for parent group meetings? Please describe.
- If you completed the email questionnaire, is there anything that the setting has planned or carried out subsequently concerning home learning?
- Can you identify one key thing that you think your setting does to encourage parents' involvement in home learning?

Questions for observed staff members

- Do you have a chance to share information about the children and/or parents with the other staff that work with your group? When and how often does this happen? What kinds of things do you talk about?
- Do you have any planning time with other staff members for early home learning work? About how often?
- How does the staff team decide what each of you will do to support early home learning work with parents?
- Does the programme ever organise early home learning or other types of events for parents that you and other staff participate in together? Could you give me some examples?
- What is your relationship with the parents usually like?
- How interested, in general, do you think parents at your setting are in early home learning activities? Very interested? Interested? Not interested? Not interested at all?
- Can you identify one key thing that you think your setting does to encourage parents' involvement in home learning?

Appendix 2 to the observations report: Scores for settings using ECERS and observer field notes

ECERS-based scoring

A 5-point assessment following the ECERS ratings (which uses seven points) with a focus on home learning (HL) was used:

- 1 inadequate
- 2 minimal
- 3 ok/fair
- 4 good
- 5 very good

Example: Question from the manager's interview: 'Written information about HL given to parents':

- 1 No HL information/encouragement given.
- 2 HL information displayed but not given.
- 3 EYFS information given but no explicit emphasis on HL.
- 4 Parents are given HL information/resources but not explicitly encouraged.
- 5 Parents are actively encouraged to link activities at home.

Managers' interview (six topics):

- Written information about HL given to parents
- How parents were involved in child's learning
- How settings share information about child's learning with parents
- Whether parents visit the setting before their child is enrolled
- How parents take part in evaluating the setting
- How parents take part in making decisions about the setting.

Provider interview (one topic):

- Providers were asked about their 'Relationship with parents'

Observer field notes

Only two sets of data from the observer field notes were used:

Q3: Summary of the observer's experience of the setting

Q6: Observer's assessment of provider interaction with parents.

Q3 was rated on a 1-5 rating as with the manager's questions.

Q6 was rated only on a 4-5 rating as all the providers were assessed as either 'well' (four) or 'very well' (five). None of the providers were rated less than 'well' by the observers.

Final scores:

Final scores were arrived at by taking an average of the seven ECERS ratings and an average of the two field note ratings to produce a final average score.

The settings were rated as high, medium and low, although none of the settings were below ok/fair:

High = 4.5 and above	8 settings
Medium = Between 4.0 and 4.4	20 settings
Low = Under 4	10 settings

The highest score was 4.7 (5 settings)

The lowest score was 3.4

Appendix 3 to the observations report: Observations settings by local authorities, type of setting and ECERS parent provision score

Local authority	Type of setting	ECERS score
Bristol	Private pre-school	3.8
Bristol	Nursery within children's centre	4.3
Durham	Private nursery	4.7
Durham	Maintained nursery	4.2
Durham	Private nursery	4.2
Durham	Maintained nursery	4.1
Hertfordshire	Pre-school/nursery attached to primary school	4.5
Hertfordshire	Nursery within children's centre	4.1
Hertfordshire	Nursery within children's centre	4.1
Hertfordshire	Nursery attached to primary school	4.2
Hertfordshire	Private playgroup	4.0
Hertfordshire	Maintained nursery	4.0
Hertfordshire	Nursery within children's centre	4.2
Hertfordshire	Pre-school within children's centre	4.1
Hertfordshire	Nursery within children's centre	3.8
Islington	Primary school	4.0
Kingston	Private nursery	4.5
Kingston	Private nursery	3.9
Manchester	Private nursery	4.7
Manchester	Primary school	4.1
Manchester	Primary school	4.3
Manchester	Nursery within children's centre	3.7
Manchester	Nursery within children's centre	3.9
Newcastle	Private nursery	4.1
Newcastle	Church primary school	4.3
Rotherham	Nursery attached to primary school	4.5
Sandwell	Nursery within children's centre	3.9
Sheffield	Children's centre attached to primary school	4.7
Sheffield	Nursery within children's centre	4.7
Sheffield	Private nursery	4.1
Sheffield	Nursery attached to infant school	4.0
Sheffield	Primary school	4.1
Sheffield	Private nursery	4.3
Sheffield	Primary school	3.8
Solihull	Nursery in infant school	3.8
Southwark	Nursery attached to children's centre	4.7
Southwark	Maintained nursery school	4.3

Southwark	Nursery attached to primary school	3.8
Southwark	Nursery attached to primary school	3.4

A3 Case studies report July 2010

Introduction

The Provider Influence on the Home Learning Environment study collected a range of data to investigate the behaviours and qualities of childcare providers associated with changes in the early home learning environment.

The data were collected from:

- structured telephone interviews with providers and parents;
- an email questionnaire for childcare setting managers;
- observations of staff in childcare settings.

The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) carried out this project in partnership with the Campaign for Learning (CfL).

To complement the mainly quantitative methods of data collection, a group of parents of children in participating childcare settings were recruited to provide longitudinal 'case studies' to provide in-depth qualitative data on the processes and factors which could influence any observed change in home learning activities. The case studies will also be available for providers to download from the FPI website and read to help understand more about how children learn and play at home, and what they could do to help parents encourage and support their children's activities.³

Fifteen parents with a two-, three- or four-year-old child just starting in a funded childcare place and who had already been interviewed over the telephone were selected to participate in the case study element of the research. The sample of 15 included at least one parent per participating authority and has been stratified by ethnicity, gender, age and educational qualifications in order to achieve a range of parents representing key groups.

Methodology

Interviews

This was a longitudinal study that was based on up to five repeat interviews per parent over a period of six months. Using a semi-structured interview format, parents were asked about the play and learning activities they do at home with their children, such as painting or drawing or reading, and the role of their childcare setting in promoting and supporting these activities. The parents were given a digital camera to record their home play and learning activities. The photos they took were shared with the researcher and used as a way to 'anchor' the interviews.

Design

The case study element of the research project included data from up to five interviews with the same parent over a period of six months. Firstly, there was the initial baseline telephone questionnaire interview data which was taken from the main part of the study. Secondly, a researcher conducted a home visit with the selected parents to explain the project in more detail. The parents were given a camera and a teddy bear and were shown how to use the camera and store photos. Three telephone interviews followed, during which the photos were described and discussed. The teddy bear was given to help provide a focus for children in taking their photos.

³ The case studies report will be submitted to the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes for validation in spring 2011.

Time line of the five interviews

December 2009	Telephone baseline questionnaire interviews (part of wider study)
Early March 2010	Home visit
Late March 2010	First case study telephone interview
April 2010	Second case study telephone interview
May 2010	Third case study interview and the follow-up questionnaire telephone interviews

Procedure

After the home visit, the next contact was the first case study telephone interview, which took place 7-10 days later. Here, the same interviewer and the parent talked about the photos taken and the learning activities and about first impressions of the childcare setting. This first interview also served as a way of supporting parents with any technical difficulties they may have had with the cameras and gave an opportunity to ask and answer any other questions.

The second telephone interview, which was usually a month later, was aimed at deepening the understanding of activities and attitudes and talking about new photos taken. All three telephone interviews covered:

- the activities shown in the photos and those done during the previous month;
- why the activities were chosen;
- how the child responded to the activities;
- how the parent viewed the activities and their benefits;
- what role outside influences played, including the childcare provider;
- how likely parent and child are to repeat these activities and what influenced the amount and variety of activities they do together.

The last telephone interview took place a month later and it incorporated the follow-up questionnaire for the main part of the research study. This telephone interview focused on the child's activities and development, and how parents had experienced their interaction with staff in the childcare setting. Parents were also asked about their partner's contribution to early home learning, as well as their aspirations for their child's educational future.

Material: The use of the camera

Parents uploaded the photos on to the internet via Flickr and shared them with the researchers only. The photos are anonymous and the domain is password protected. All of the researchers involved followed strict codes of conduct for data protection and all of them had enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks and carried identity cards.

At completion of the study, any copies of photos held on secure websites were deleted and any memory cards returned to the parent. None of the photos were published in any study, report or website except with the specific permission of the parent involved. Otherwise the photos were a way to help the research team learn more about what parents do with their children and to make taking part in the study fully engaging.

The cameras were digital children's cameras which are simple to operate and robust. This model enables users to take both still photos and short video clips. However, it was found that the video clips took up too much memory and so most parents took photos only. The aim was to encourage both the child and parent to participate in this part of the study by making photos of their activities at home and in the community.

During the initial home visit, parents talked through with the researcher what types of activities might be interesting to record. Parents were left with written details, including information to read to their children about what to do if they want to participate. Participants were asked to take up to 15 photos each month showing any play or learning activities that

they have done together. Some examples given were: reading, painting, drawing, counting, playing with letters, playing outside and visiting a toddler group together.

In a few cases where parents have no internet access or were not confident in using it, memory cards were sent back and forth with no cost to the parent. In one case with a non-English speaker, home visits replaced telephone interviews and interviews were translated.

The sample

The FPI researchers aimed to get a sample from every participating local authority to include:

- young parents;
- fathers;
- parents with no educational qualifications;
- parents from a British Black minority ethnic (BME) background.

We over-recruited for the case studies as we anticipated some drop-outs. Initially, 15 parents agreed to take part in this study and had a home-visit in which they received the camera and the teddy bear as well as more details about the study.

The first column in Table 1 shows the number of eligible parents i.e. those whose childcare settings took part in the observations. It was decided to have an even spread of characteristics in the sample. The second column shows the number of parents who initially agreed in each category. The third column shows the characteristics of the 12 parents that have completed study.

Table 1: Sample criteria and number of parents

Sample criteria	No. of eligible parents	No. parents who agreed to take part	No. parents who completed
Fathers	3	2	2
BME mothers	15	3	3
40+ mothers	17	3	3
Young mothers	4	2	1*
Mothers with degree	22	3	3
Mothers with no qualifications	3	2	0
Total	64	15	12**

* The young mother dropped out after the first telephone interview.

** Two mothers with no educational qualifications as well as one young mother have dropped out of the survey after the first home visits. In two cases mothers told us that their children were unwell and that was why they did not want to continue to be part of the study. This small sample is not a statistically representative sample and it is worth noting that the three BME mothers are educated to graduate level.

The setting observation score refers to a separate part of the research project that focused on the observation of the parent/staff interaction in settings. The settings are scored according to the average taking of their seven ECERS ratings and an average of the two field note ratings. The settings were rated according to three categories: high (4.5 and above), medium (between 4.0 and 4.4) and low (under 4). Of 38 settings, eight settings were scored high, 20 as medium and 10 as low. Five settings scored highest with 4.7 and the lowest score was 3.4 (see section A2 Observations report).

Table 2: Details of settings in sample

Local authority	Type	Setting observation score	Number of parents	Deprivation index ⁴	Rank of average score ⁵
Islington	Children's centre	cancelled	1	38.96	8
Islington	Nursery class as part of the primary school	4.0 (medium)	1	38.96	8
Kingston upon Thames	Nursery class as part of the primary school	3.9 (low)	2	13.10	245
Sandwell	Nursery class as part of children's centre and primary school	Has not been included as an observed setting	2	37.03	14
Southwark	Nursery class as part of children's centre and primary school	4.7 (high)	3	33.33	26
Sheffield	Pre-school attached to children's centre and infant's school	4.0 (medium)	1	27.84	63
Sheffield	Pre-school attached to children's centre and infant's school	4.7 (high)	1	27.84	63
Manchester	Private daycare nursery based in a children's centre	4.7 (high)	1	44.50	4
Total:	8 (6 observed)		12		

⁴ This figure shows the average score (range between 5.75 and 46.97) of the index of multiple deprivation at district level. It has been compiled using the English Indices of Deprivation 2009 that are the Government's official measure of multiple deprivation at small area level, providing a relative ranking of areas across England according to their level of deprivation and it includes a combination of 37 different indicators (e.g. income, health, education, crime) (Communities and Local Government, 2009).

⁵ The rank of average score ranges from 1 to 354. For presentation, a rank of 1 indicates that the district is the most deprived according to the measure and 354 is the least deprived.

About the photos taken

As part of the case study research we have analysed the photos taken by the 12 parents who completed the study. The list of activities being photographed is wide ranging but the three most photographed activities were:

- playing outside e.g. park, playground, outing, garden;
- reading or looking at picture books;
- drawing and painting.

Learning activities are not restricted to indoor activities as 107 of the photos were taken outside and 173 were taken inside. In other words, more than a third (38%) of photos were taken of activities that took place outdoors.

The 12 parents uploaded 280 photos in total, or approximately 23 photos per parent. However, there was a wide variation in the number of photos uploaded per parent. While one parent uploaded only 10 photos, another parent uploaded 78 photos. Not only did parents take photos of their child doing certain activities alone, but photos were also taken of the child with members of their family (siblings, non-participating parent).

Table 1: List of activities photographed inside and outside

Inside	Outside
playing with toys	gardening
dressing up	playing at the park
eating	riding his/her bike/scooter
cooking/baking	day trip (to town/ farm/museum)
painting/drawing/labouring in	doing exercise (roly poly, paddling pool, climbing)
playing with numbers	playing with toys (e.g. blowing bubbles)
dressing themselves	having a picnic
reading	tending pets
learning the alphabet	
helping with the housework	
role play (playing schools/with dolls)	
playing educational computer games	
taking photos with the camera	
playing with board games/puzzles/cards	
practising writing	
playing with play dough	
arts and crafts (making cards, stickers)	

Individual case studies

The following pages give a more holistic view of each parent and the home learning environment (HLE) by describing each family and condensing the results of the interviews. They also indicate the Early Years Home Learning Environment Index (EYHLEI) score for each parent at the first interview to give a quantitative indication of how the range and frequency of the home learning activities they reported at the start of the study compared to other parents. The EYHLEI is based on the frequency of seven activities associated with improved cognitive development:

- visits to the library

- reading
- letters
- ABC
- numbers
- nursery rhymes
- drawing.

Scores can range from 0 to 49, where the higher scores indicate higher frequency and a greater range of activities undertaken. Scores were designated as high, medium and low for the purpose of this part of the study. We have a fairly even distribution, with four having a low HLE score, four a medium HLE score, three a high score and one missing case.⁶ All names and places have been changed for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity.

Case study 1: personal index scores high: 42; setting index score 4.7: high; district level deprivation rank 26 of 354)⁷

Sari is a 43-year-old Black African living with her North African husband and four daughters in a rented housing association house in an area of social deprivation. She has a degree and does voluntary work one day a week. Her husband is a professional who works full time. English is Sari's first language but there are several languages spoken within the home (English, French and local languages).

Sari's youngest daughter, Angelina, who is three and a half, started at nursery in January. This was her first experience of childcare. She did not send her other daughters to nursery until they were older as she felt they were not confident enough to go to nursery aged three.

Angelina's mother had been anxious about whether Angelina would settle; she hadn't felt confident about sending her older children to nursery at this age as they were less independent than Angelina. However, Angelina loves the nursery and is always keen to go. Sari found she had to fit into the nursery routine, drop-off and pick-up times and find out what was required of her but she felt all had gone well.

Open-door policy

Sari has found the childcare staff tell her what the children are doing. She had gone into the nursery for the settling-in period and this helped her see how well her daughter was coping.

"It's been nice because they sort of give you their time to say, 'Oh, she's doing really well today.' Maybe she did an activity and they'll point out that, you know, she coped really well."

Sari also values being able to go right into the nursery at drop-off and pick-up time so that she can see what Angelina is doing and she can ask the staff questions. Sari feels strongly that learning begins from babyhood and she knows that she has had an important role in building Angelina's confidence by teaching her daughter skills such as dressing and feeding herself.

Regular meetings between key worker and parent

⁶ The missing case is due to a 'don't know' response to one or more of the questions concerning the frequency of HLE activities.

⁷ This setting has been scored 'high' as part of the observation study as it caters for a large population of immigrant and illiterate parents and helps parents understand what their children are doing – according to the observer field notes. The district level deprivation rank refers to the rank of average score as detailed in Table 2.

Sari has a very positive relationship with the nursery. At the first parents' meeting a member of staff had told her:

"We can see that she's getting a lot of things from home.' And it kind of surprised me at first because... for me, it's not that I'm thinking I'm doing anything extra... That's part and parcel of home life."

Sari also felt she had learned from this meeting. The staff explained to her what early mark making, early language and early reading were. This was useful as she thought that lay people didn't have access to that kind of knowledge.

She mentioned that the nursery gives parents a 'write-up' of how well their children are doing and their likes. Sari thought it would be good if the nursery could develop this further by encouraging parents and giving them ideas about early home learning activities.

Inclusion of fathers into EHL learning

Although Angelina's father works full time he is involved with the children as much as he can be. She was happy with her husband's support and was keen to give examples of what he does with the children. He plays with the children once a day and looks after them about once a week. He does quite a few outdoor activities with them such as taking them out on their scooters. He also takes part in indoor play, such as football-related card games. Sari is pleased that her husband can share an interest in football with his daughters.

Angelina's father, when he didn't have to work one Saturday, had attended a weekly Dad's group which is connected to the nursery. He took Angelina with him and the session included how fathers can interact with their children and their play. When discussing the photos that had been taken, Sari mentioned that she should have included one of Angelina doing something with her father. She described her daughter cooking with her father on Sundays:

"Because he works... he likes to do eggs on Sunday and you know she's always in there, has a shot to break the eggs and watch it be mixed up."

Doing more EHL activities since starting nursery

Generally, she did not feel that the nursery had influenced the kind of activities that she does with Angelina but she has copied the nursery's practice of giving children a range of activities to choose from to encourage independence and freedom. Being part of the study had made her more aware of the things she is doing with her daughter and of how she is developing.

"I would like her to do as much as she could and I would like a time when if I look back and think, 'yes, I did give her a lot, lots of opportunities', that's what is in my mind at the moment."

Case study 2: Carena (HLE index score high: 40; setting score is missing as setting has not been included in observation; district level deprivation rank 14 of 354)

Carena did not complete all four interviews but dropped out after the first interview because of issues with her parental family.

Carena is white, 21, and lives with her unemployed partner and her two sons (the oldest, Daniel, aged three years and the youngest 8 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.

Carena seems very enthusiastic about her son's development and learning and is very pleased with the nursery. Daniel goes there five days a week for half a day and does not want to leave at the end of the day. His behaviour had also improved recently, which might be due to the nursery's influence or the fact that he got used to his new baby brother. Carena is slightly concerned that other children are reading at a faster rate than her son.

How the nursery encourages early home learning: information sessions

The nursery organises many 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 teach him to add use and like snooker or hop scotch. As well, we've made him some cards to use like snap with letters as well."

Carena thinks that playing with Daniel through activities such as telling make believe stories encourages social development. There is one photo of her son drying dishes. She interprets this as promoting his independence and transforming the chore into something with an educational content, for example by counting how many spoons he puts back in the drawer.

"The teacher in the school has recommended that."

The interaction between nursery and Carena is positive and she adopts a pedagogical term when she refers to 'fine motor skills'. On one of the submitted photos Daniel is seen doing up his pyjamas buttons:

"That's something he's only just learnt how to do. The school encouraged ... help him start doing more fine motor skills, stuff like that, and I try and encourage the fine motor skills now, so he's just learnt how to do it, so we're very proud."

She supports early home learning and believes that her input means that her son can do well at school. She also likes working together with the nursery and finds the drop-in sessions and the conversations with the staff at the nursery most useful:

"To be honest, I would be lost without them. Because I've learnt everything at school, even though I'm only like 21 and it is completely different to the way Daniel is learning everything now."

Doing more since starting nursery

Carena says that the number of activities she and Daniel do together has increased since he started nursery:

"Sometimes before he went to nursery, it was like, what do I do with him? And then you tend to get into the habit of leaving him to do what he wants. Since he went to the nursery like, I understand how really important it is that you do them things with them and it is like, you know what to do with them."

The family activity pack

Carena tends to refer to a booklet of different children's activities that she received from the Sure Start children's centre. The title of the booklet is *Family Activity Pack*. It was produced by the Sure Start children's centre, her local council and her local primary care trust. The booklet has sections for physical development, emotional development, creative development and others.⁸

⁸ The booklet is handed out by practitioners when providing services and engaging families in early learning. The *Family Activity Pack* is meant for new arrivals to the settings and is designed by early years practitioners. It is designed to be left with carers and parents, promoting opportunities for learning arising within simple daily routines such as sorting out washing or walking to school.

Inclusion of fathers into early home learning

Carena tends to be the one who does the early home learning activities and it is her partner who reads with Daniel. Her partner teaches the physical activities. Her partner is extremely close to their son but Carena would like him to help more with Daniel and the house.

Case Study 3: Nina (HLE index score 14: low, setting index score high: 4.7; district level deprivation rank 3 of 354)

Nina is aged 33, is Black African and lives with her Black African husband and three young sons. They own their house in a large city. The sons are aged three and a half (Danny), four and a half and seven. English is not Nina's first language but it is the language that she uses with her children. She has a first degree but has not had paid employment since she had children. However, she keeps busy by undertaking adult education courses and doing voluntary work. She hopes to return to paid employment when Danny starts full-time school. Her husband is employed full time in a managerial role, but often works shifts.

When Nina had her initial telephone interview for this project, she stated that Danny was about to start his nursery placement and that in the past he had only attended a college crèche and a playgroup. This was to be his first 'school' setting.

By the time of the first home visit to prepare the family for the case study, Danny had recently started at the nursery. At this time, Nina was struggling to balance her voluntary work and study time with getting her sons to three different schools. This was made more difficult as Danny attends five half-day sessions at the nursery.

The importance of older siblings

Danny was enjoying going to 'school' like his older brothers and, in the nursery, had discovered that he liked playing with water. He enjoyed carrying on with water play when he got home.

Inclusion of fathers in EHL

When Danny started at the nursery in January, his mother undertook the vast majority of the childcare of her sons. Her husband looked after them only once or twice a week, playing with them less than once a week. Nina did feel, though, that she could always rely on her husband to care for the children and that she was happy with the amount of support that he provided.

Doing more EHL since starting nursery: reading

Nina had found a one-to-one conversation with the nursery teacher helpful as she had been encouraged to do reading with her sons. She had also been involved in activities at the nursery:

"And I do attend all the nursery's activities. Like, on Friday it was Book Day. We dressed as different characters. I was there. I read the story with him for, like, ten minutes when I left him."

Nina had also started reading with Danny at home. She was trying to read with him every night, something she had been advised to do by the nursery, although this was sometimes difficult because of the competing demands of his brothers. Danny, therefore, often brought a book home from the nursery and Nina left him to read to himself. She was impressed by Danny sitting with his book while making up a story himself as he couldn't read the words.

By the second telephone interview arranged to discuss the photos, Nina had done more reading with Danny – making it a daily activity with books he brought home from the nursery and giving more of her attention.

“He just got it from school. He brings a book home. Yes, so we read the story in there and he just tells me like he did the other time. He normally tells me what is in the book or at times he makes up his own story by looking at it.”

Doing more EHL since starting nursery

When questioned about activities that she did with Danny, Nina stated that she felt very confident about doing things with him and that nothing got in the way of that. At the time of the initial interview Nina was doing learning activities with Danny, such as reading, playing with numbers and letters, only occasionally or less than once a week. Danny did painting and drawing with his older brothers one or two days a week. Nina saw her role, her husband’s role and the childcare provider’s role as equally important when it came to doing things with Danny.

Nina had a lot of information about things she could do with her children which came from the courses she had attended, the voluntary work she does which involves family learning and from the nursery. Occasionally it seemed as if she was not sure which ideas came from which source. However, she was clear that she and her husband were doing more with Danny since he started nursery and that she found the nursery staff very helpful concerning Danny’s “development and progress”.

Nina had also started to do more learning activities with Danny:

“For example, helping me when I am hanging out the clothes outside. I tell him to give me a peg and from that we learn colours and lots of things using all the different simple things that you don’t even, like the shapes and the colours and the numbers. So, as I said, I just sit down and ask him to tell me which finger is the longest in his hand and from that we just do different things, really.”

Copying nursery activities at home

When Nina had her second interview to discuss the photos that she had taken of Danny’s learning activities at home, she expressed delight on finding him making himself a watch from Sellotape. This was something that he had done a couple of weeks before at the nursery and he had now tried to do it himself at home on his own:

“So, I mean, for him just to come up with this is amazing to me. That he still remembers what he does and, you know, he is trying to also explore and, you know, be creative.”

Nursery as a catalyst for home learning activities

Only when Danny started nursery did Nina recognise that she should do learning activities with him: *“Now he needs to know things, so that is why we do it.”*

Nina had been on many parenting courses because she is thinking of entering a childcare profession and she wanted to learn more about child development:

“The reason being on the parent course I want to learn more about what my children are doing, why they are doing what they are doing and what can I do to help them you understand, instead of me shouting at them, smacking them and raising my voice, what are other ways that I can teach them and how I can help them to learn to develop, socially, emotionally and physically actually.”

She wanted to know what she could do to help her children learn and “develop socially, emotionally and physically”. However, it would appear that Nina did not see that she had a role to play in Danny’s learning until he started nursery. Seeing what Danny has achieved in the nursery and the skills he has brought home has opened Nina’s eyes to what Danny is capable of in terms of learning and creativity.

Regular meetings with staff

Nina stated in the subsequent interviews that she had found the one-to-one meetings in the nursery, such as the first parents' evening in March, particularly helpful. The staff had talked about what Danny has been doing and what he loves to do. She thought the meetings encourage parents and let them know where their child needs to improve. She agreed that she had increased her activities with Danny because the nursery gave her ideas and she tries to do them at home.

CASE STUDY 4: HLE index score 19: low (Setting score: missing as dropped out of the observation part of the study; district level deprivation rank 8 of 354)

Angela is a migrant from Central America, grew up in the United States and went to university there. She now lives with her partner; both are professionals and live with their only child – a three-year-old son called Martin – in a terraced house that they own in a large city. Angela's partner is in southern Europe for four days every two weeks when he visits his older children from his first marriage. Angela only speaks Spanish with her son but has been in the UK for many years. She is very keen to impart her cultural heritage.

Martin is considered clinically obese although Angela feeds him what she considers to be the healthiest meals and she has worked with specialists such as nutritionists and clinical psychologists, the health visitor, key workers and the head of the centre on his approaches to relationships with food. She considers herself proactive in searching for information and asking people for help.

Parents' interests and ambition guide EHL

Angela is very pro-education:

"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."

On the other hand she also thinks that

"...people feel it is an admission of failure as parents if they are not educating their child around the clock."

Angela believes parental involvement has nothing to do with social class and ethnicity:

"I think there's a lot of taking parents off the hook in the UK actually (...) I think the bottom line is you don't have to be educated to want your kids, you know to imbue your kids with this intellectual curiosity, even if you can't talk to them about the books that they have read at school. I think a nurturing environment goes very, very far in giving kids the confidence. (...) I think the big issue, the problem I have, is that people feel entitled to having things done for them as parents that they can actually do with zero money."

Martin is really happy in the children's centre where he has had a funded childcare place since January 2010. He goes there three full days per week. Martin is not so keen on structured activities – such as classes. He likes three-dimensional play, such as playing with animals and a rail set. He has lots of energy and tends to wake early in the morning, which makes his mother feel tired.

Peer pressure and gendered play at the nursery

However, Angela is concerned that his play has become more gendered. Angela thinks that “He was being taunted and pressured into thinking that that it is a silly thing to do playing with girls. Now he thinks “all girls are icky’.”

At the centre, one boy with a particularly strong character makes fun of Martin if he plays with the girls:

“Three weeks ago, he was dressing up as a princess every day and then about two weeks ago, he started going BANG! BANG! BANG!”

She raised this with the children’s centre and she was very happy with the response. The staff got a consultant in to talk with the children about ‘Super Hero Play’:

“Where the boys are asked to write, although they don’t know how to write about their feelings about super heroes. And it is a way of channelling their interest – without saying NO it is wrong to like superheroes. But rather it’s channelling it and then having them express their feelings about it, through that way.”

Angela realises that Martin has to reconcile home and nursery: it has become clear to her that some of his classmates are watching television that’s not age appropriate or spending time with older siblings and this is impacting on Martin.

“We had another sort of issue where he used a really, really inappropriate phrase and absolutely no way that he’s heard it here at home.”

How the nursery encourages EHL: reading

At the time of the third interview she had become slightly concerned that her son will fall behind in letter recognition as Angela reads their books only in Spanish. They read two books as part of his bedtime routine, unless he’s lost privileges. While Angela reads to her son she translates into Spanish, although the text is in English. By the third interview she had been following her friend’s advice for letter recognition and she started writing his name everywhere and labelling things around the house too. When she discussed the predicament with the children’s centre they’ve also started labelling items in different languages.

Open-door policy

Angela worries jokingly that she might be categorised as a ‘vexatious’ parent. The children’s centre has an open-door policy and Angela thinks very highly of the staff at the centre. They are proactive as well as responsive, warm and communicative.

“They have an enormous amount of training, they are incredibly senior and experienced but not at all stuck in their ways of thinking, (...) there is pretty much no turnover in that place, even the volunteers stay there for years working for free and the staff create an environment in which the kids are happy and if anything is wrong then I as a parent feel that I can work in a very collaborative way with them, and I love that, and I don’t know that they will remain that way.”

Key worker

Every member of staff in the centre has different qualities and personality traits and she appreciates that over any one single quality or approach as this would simplify these people and how the needs of their charges change. Her son’s key worker, for example, has made her aware that her son is ‘excellent at puzzles’. So she bought more puzzles for him. Angela thinks that realising the full potential of the Early Years Curriculum depends on staff members.

“Whether it fails or succeeds for a child is based on how committed that person, the key worker is, how passionate that person is.”

Inclusion of fathers into EHL

One of the photos taken indicated that she and her partner play differently with their son. As Martin and his father are building a foam castle it appears that dad wants Martin to finish the puzzle and advises him where the pieces go, whereas Angela would try to give him hints so that he could come to his own conclusions.

Case study 5: HLE index score 33: medium (setting score high: 4.7; district level deprivation rank 26 of 354)

Susanne is a White-British single parent with two mixed-race children aged two and three and a half. She lives in a flat that she owns in a large city. Susanne works four days a week as a PA in a large organisation. Susanne's two-year-old daughter attends a childminder and Simon attends a nursery in the mornings and a childminder in the afternoons.

Parent's interests and ambitions guide EHL

Susanne has always engaged in a lot of activities with the children and only lack of time prevents her doing more. The children's father has recently resumed having access to them and that is through a contact centre.

Susanne wants to do formal learning activities with her children and reverse her childhood experiences:

"I left school so I was left with no direction, I wasn't taught life skills, really how to socialise."

She recognises the importance of her children learning skills from an early age and ensured that her childminder had a good Ofsted rating when she chose her. The next quote refers to the children being prepared to sit still and attentive when they start 'proper' school. Their social skills are really important to her:

"What they learn now is going to be the foundation for what they do even at five and settle down."

During the telephone interviews Susanne was very clear about the pleasure she gets from being with her children and in doing things with them. She sets aside time early every evening to sit with them and read or watch TV programmes together.

She was eager to learn all she could about how she could help fulfil her aspirations for her children. She wants her son to be happy and polite but also *"to be out looking and ambitious and curious to go and find out about the world around him"* while still staying close to her.

Susanne also saw the value in outdoor play and play with other children. She enjoys visiting friends with their own children, and plans to have her garden cleared to enable them to do gardening together.

Being a single parent with a demanding job Susanne found stressful at times, and she sometimes struggled to combine what she wanted to do with the children with the demands of domestic routine.

The impact of the camera

Susanne was enthusiastic about being part of the research study and she talked about using the camera to record their activities as a "bonding thing" bringing the family together to do things and then having a record "to re-enjoy it". She used the camera as means of showing the children how to share, as acquiring social skills is as important to her as acquiring

learning skills. She also valued Simon's experience of using the camera at the childminder's in terms of allowing him to gain some independence, control and responsibility.

One of Susanne's favourite photos was of the children's painted hands. This had been taken in a childminder's group where the children do a lot of messy play and arts and crafts. The childminder found a poem to go with the photo and for Susanne. This exemplifies the importance of helping her children's development and learning:

"It is all about the fact that they have got small hands and what they are doing now and how fun they are and how precious these early years are... and how we can guide them and teach them in their early years."

Closed-door policy

Susanne likes the nursery that Simon attends but she feels that the staff don't have time to talk when she picks the children up. She mentions in two interviews, though, that she has to be punctual collecting Simon at lunchtimes because the staff have to feed the children and then have their own lunch. She feels she needs to make an appointment if she wants to discuss anything with the staff. On occasions when she has made an appointment she found the staff helpful and reassuring about her son.

Nursery encouraging home learning activities: reading

At a parents' evening at Simon's nursery she had asked for ideas of things to do with him and she had been told that parents should take home the 'weekly book' to use to read with their children, but that all other parts of the early years' programme are done within the nursery.

Information sessions

Work commitments meant that she could not attend classes that the nursery put on for parents and she was disappointed by the nursery's lack of flexibility for working parents. The classes or drop-ins are in the daytime and none of them are on Fridays – the one day she doesn't work.

Case study 6: (HLE index score: low (15-22);⁹ setting score 3.9: low; district level deprivation rank 245 of 354)

Lucy is aged 39, is white-British, and lives with her partner and three children in a flat they own in a suburb of a large city. The children are her son Chris, aged three and a half, and two daughters aged 6 and 11. Lucy has a degree and works part time in an office. She was employed before Chris was born and returned to work when he was two. Her partner, who is self-employed in an industry that requires regular evening and weekend working, works irregular hours and sometimes works abroad.

Chris has attended his current pre-school setting since was nearly three and currently attends for 10 hours a week. He has also attended a childminder in the past. Lucy is Chris' main carer.

Inclusion of fathers into EHL

Her partner only plays with him once or twice a week and she feels that she can only count on her partner to look after Chris sometimes. Overall, Lucy is not very happy with the amount of support that she gets from her partner and she would like him to do a bit more.

⁹ As one of the seven HLE variables was missing data, this HLE score was calculated with a lowest possible to the highest possible score of this missing variable.

Lucy did not feel that her partner's involvement in activities with the children had increased at all over the six months interviewing period: *"He has different priorities."*

Lucy is fairly confident about engaging in learning activities with Chris but lack of time prevents her from doing more. She saw her role and the childcare provider's role as being of equal importance in terms of engaging in learning activities with Chris, but she considered it less important for her partner to do them.

Parents' interests and ambitions for child guide EHL

Lucy had not yet talked to the staff at the childcare setting about things that she could do with Chris. She felt that, as Chris was not her first child, she feels confident enough to let him gravitate spontaneously towards things he likes to do. She values his independent play but also expressed some concern that this may be, in part at least, because *"there is always something else to do"*.

The impact of the research

At the first case study telephone interview Lucy spoke of being aware that she could do more with Chris. Taking part in the research project lead her to reflect on this:

"It did make me realise that, because I talk to him a lot and you sort of naturally in your day do help him with colours and numbers – because I didn't think I did much of that. But talking to somebody made me realise that I do that. So, I think that has increased my awareness of what I need to do."

She commented that the research project had made her aware of the need to spend more time with Chris.

Doing more early home learning activities since starting nursery: reading

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.

By the time of the second telephone interview, though, Lucy had increased the frequency of learning activities with Chris, especially reading and she also tried to join in more often with his play.

Formal and informal learning

Lucy appeared to make a distinction between formal learning and play, but did not seem to identify there being any educational content in the informal learning experiences she engaged in with Chris. She frequently mentioned activities such as planting seeds in the garden, outdoor play in the garden and the park, and visits to London and rural/coastal parts of the country. She also planned to take the children to the Natural History Museum so that Chris could see the dinosaurs.

Copying nursery activities at home

Chris wants to do the things that he has learned at pre-school at home, e.g. making sandwiches and using the computer. Lucy had helped at the pre-school and had picked up some ideas of simple things she could do at home.

Lucy had also decided to offer her time at the pre-school one morning:

"It is good for me to see what they get up to and it's nice for me to see Chris. And also it might give me some sort of ideas as well. I am not very good at asking questions, I don't think. I kind of like to see and pick up ideas for myself."

Case Study 7: Michael (HLE index score 30: medium; setting score 4.7: high; district level deprivation rank 63 of 354)

Michael lives on this own in a house that he owns with his two daughters (3 and 7) who also live with their mother for half of the week. The mother, a teacher, works part time and Michael, who has no formal educational qualifications, owns a shop and café, with regular opening hours, in a public institution in a small city. At home there was plenty of evidence of home learning, such as toys and craft-making equipment. His younger daughter, Mara, has just started on a funded childcare place in a children centre for three days a week in January 2010.

Parents' interests and ambitions

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:

"I just let them get on with 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 the activities for them. Michael feels that the nursery has made Mara slightly more independent and able to initiate her own activities, such as finding pens and a colouring book. Mara's older sister also initiates their activities.

He hopes Mara will be in education for as long as possible, but he worries for her long-term future: as living standards drop it will become harder for her to own a house. He is also worried that Mara will generate many thousand pounds worth of debts by going to university.

Older siblings play a significant role in EHL

Mara now plays with her older sister more, who tells Mara what to do to some extent. In one photo, she is occupying the baby role while playing 'mother and baby' with her sister. Michael thinks that the siblings playing together makes it much easier for Mara to learn and to, in his words, "have a go at different things", partly because, as a parent, he is not anxious and believes that children should take physical exercise.

"Yes I think the younger one comes on faster I think than the older one. I think it is because they are exposed to more things, such as that first picture where she has got the hammer, you know, without having the other child there who was doing it in the first place, you would never go and give your three-year-old a hammer would you?"

The older sibling also seems to determine what kind of early home learning activities both children engage in and also pressurises Mara to get it right and to concentrate:

"The little one (Mara) now is always colouring in pictures, she has found a knack for getting a picture and colouring it in and trying to make it as neat as possible without smudging because the older one will tease her about it if it's smudged."

Formal/informal learning and outdoor play

Outdoor play and independence is a common theme that goes through the photos and the interviews. Michael quite often just lets them get on with it themselves with him watching them and every now and again holding their hand.

In one photo, the sisters are climbing up a tree in a park. Michael finds that playgrounds are not challenging enough.

"I encourage them to climb up things and get rid of little bits of fear of being able to do things independently."

He believes in learning through play and giving them as much freedom as he can without exposing them to greater danger. Michael also thinks that it is much harder if you have just one child, as in the absence of a sibling greater involvement is required of the parent.

Michael feels the presence of his children somewhat restricts his activities:

"I want to ride my bike but you can't when you have a three-year-old."

However, Mara has recently reached one of Michael's milestones as they went up a large hill together.

"She managed to get there and back. It took her four hours and it was independent, I didn't carry her or anything, it was a little bit cruel but [laughs] (...) She was alright, we played, it was me that was more tired than them (...) There was moaning on the way back 'I want piggy' you know, but we persevered and she made it all the way back."

Inclusion of fathers in EHL

He doesn't spend much time on reading:

"I don't spend too much time doing it because there is usually so much going off."

He finds that their mother and he complement one another, with her being more academic and him being somewhat more practical. Michael's former partner (the children's mother) is a teacher, and will spend time doing the more formal learning activities at home.

He is confident that the staff would talk to him if he or they had a concern. He speaks of the nursery-parent contact as gendered:

"Mothers become very fussy very soon on, if they think there is the slightest problem they might react to it when there isn't really an underlying problem. (...) I would want to be convinced myself that there was a problem because I think quite often there probably isn't a problem it is only on that day they were feeling out of it or you know, some situation made it happen, so not to react too fast to things. I think men probably don't react too fast to things."

Early home learning and everyday activities

However, Michael does incorporate counting in everyday activities.

"Even if you are doing fish fingers can't you, you can say there you are, one, two, three, four fish fingers you know."

Mara doesn't seem to bother at all with the camera and her older sister has taken possession of it, to some extent at least. Mara doesn't really understand its role and she would rather have some pens and her colouring book.

Lack of EHL encouragement from the nursery

To date, Michael hasn't had any conversation with the childcare staff about activities at home, nor has he been to any events, meetings, open days, trips or drop-in sessions. He has not tried anything different at home in terms of home learning or teaching that could be connected with or attributed to the nursery.

Michael likes the nursery though and he is happy that the nursery has an outdoor area and a craft area to which Mara has access. Mara is happy in the nursery and Michael does not have any particular concerns.

"I am quite happy that that is all there and available to her, and I know she will be doing it."

Michael would, however, like to feel that the staff are both warm and caring towards Mara, rather than just being there for the wage.

Closed-door policy

Although Michael does most of the pick-ups and drop-offs at the nursery, his communication with the nursery is limited. He has not seen any need to talk with them yet and at pick-up time the nursery does not appear to have an 'open-door policy'. He does, however, feel he could talk to them if he wanted to but they usually seem busy:

"They don't want you in there. I think it is probably because everyone is picking up at the same time and so they don't let you into the nursery, they sort of hold you out and say 'We will fetch her out'."

Case study 8: (HLE index: 14 – low; setting score 4.7: high; district level deprivation rank 4 of 354)

Shevana is a 31-year-old Pakistani mother who lives in a small city with her Pakistani husband and their daughter, aged 7, and their son, Masood, aged 3. 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. At the beginning of the study, her husband was seeking employment and they were living off their savings, but he started a job during the course of the study. Initially, the family income was supplied by child benefit, disability allowance and incapacity benefit for Shevana.

Masood started his first childcare placement in January, having previously been to a playgroup where his mother stayed with him. Shevana reported that Masood was really enjoying the nursery:

"He has changed so much since he's started. He is a lot more settled. He is loving it. He even wakes up on the weekend wanting to go to the nursery."

Parents' interests and ambitions for child

Shevana had always believed in the importance of early home learning and began singing and reading with her children from when they were young babies. She feels that the work she has done with them at home has made them confident children. She spoke of wanting Masood "to grow up having experienced everything" and she does as much with him as she can at home in the hope that he's ready for learning at school.

Doing more since starting nursery

Her low HLE index may be explained by the fact that she only did learning activities with Masood one to two days a week at the baseline and the follow-up interview stages of the study. However, the reading increased at the follow-up stage. Interestingly, her case study interviews suggest that she does more with him than one to two days a week.

Nursery encouraging home learning

Masood particularly enjoys doing art activities and playing outside. As the weather had not been good at the start of the study, art activities dominated at home. Shevana had found ideas of art activities mostly from children's TV programmes and the internet rather than from the nursery but she had attended a 'taster session' for an arts and craft course within the nursery building and she found this helpful.

The nursery involved Shevana early on in observing and recording activities that Masood did at home as part of the Early Years Foundation Stage. 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.”

As Masood likes play dough at the nursery, Shevana bought some, although the nursery had given her a recipe to make some. Shevana enjoyed *“seeing him developing and learning basic things like his colours and his shapes through playing with the play dough”*.

Copying nursery activities at home

The nursery also gives parents a monthly newsletter which explains the activities planned for the coming month so that parents can link activities at home with what is happening at the nursery. Shevana feels that it is important for childcare settings to keep parents informed about what activities are taking place in the nursery so that parents can do similar things at home if they want to.

Shevana has formed a good relationship with her son’s key worker, who is usually there when she drops him off and tells her what he’s done when she picks him up.

Inclusion of fathers in EHL

At the beginning of the study, Shevana felt she could only sometimes count on her husband to look after Masood but at the end of the study this had changed to ‘usually’. However, throughout the study Shevana was happy with the amount of support that her husband gave with looking after Masood.

Shevana tended to do most of the learning activities with Masood whilst her husband did most of the physical activities. She thought that it was equally important for her husband to do learning activities with Masood as it was for her and the childcare setting. Once he started employment her husband had less time to spend with the children during the week but he did more childcare at weekends and regularly takes the family out.

The impact of the study on early home learning

Shevana found that taking part in the research had made her think of new ideas and activities that she could do with Masood:

“Being part of the case study and going to the nursery, I have picked up ideas that I would like to do at home.”

Initially, her husband could not see the point in the project and the photo taking but now enjoyed having the photos to look back on to provide memories of things that they have done with Masood. Shevana also thought that her husband had increased the amount of activities that he does with Masood, such as videoing activities and reading with him.

Case Study 9: Marlon (HLE score 29 – medium; setting score is missing as setting has not been included in observation; district level deprivation rank 14 of 354)

Marlon owns a house with his wife in a metropolitan borough. Both are Black-Caribbean and live with their three children, one girl and two boys. The youngest is David, who started nursery at two years eight months. David started by going three days a week for about seven hours in total. At the time of the last interview, David attends nursery every weekday for half a day.

Marlon is a university student and his wife is the sole earner in the house. She works as a nurse and does shift work. He is the main carer and mainly involved in home learning. At the outset, he would have even liked his wife to do a bit less looking after David but he was happy with the amount of support at the end of the interviewing period.

Parents as the main driver of early home learning

Marlon thinks that the parent is the main initiator of home learning. This family has only one earner and Marlon's identity is that of a university student but also an educator.

"If the parents don't have enough time because the parents aren't managing their time properly then you leave a situation where the child is going to be left behind."

Marlon believes in early home learning and is very keen on receiving advice about how to improve things for his son's learning and development. Ultimately though, he believes that the parents and their aspirations for their children are the driving force behind their child's learning ability.

"I think that the amount of activities that we do or the drive to see the child succeed comes from within, from us, the parents wanting to get the child involved in different activities from one to the next."

Doing more since starting nursery

Marlon has increased his learning activities over the interviewing period as spring itself has created a lot of outdoors activities, such as gardening and physical activities such as football and the bike riding. On a seaside holiday he is able to teach David orienteering, distinguishing different types of fish and learning about high and low tide.

How the staff encourage home learning

Staff at the nursery have suggested to use the outdoor environment in order to increase learning, any opportunity that you get, one of them distinctly is counting.

"If we go to the supermarket then we try to count how many items might be on a table or something small, not a very large amount."

Parent's attitude to early home learning – formal/informal

David enjoyed doing puzzles and building things with Lego. For example, he made a plane out of Lego during one interview. One of the case study photos shows how Marlon teaches David letters and the sound of letters, using fridge magnets and a chart with the alphabet and corresponding animal pictures.

Another photo shows David using the Hoover. Marlon thinks that this is a very good exercise as it teaches him "a core value of family life, to clean up after himself".

Every experience is seen as a learning opportunity, for example, counting plant pots when gardening or talking about shells at the seaside holiday. Nonetheless, he perceives his teaching as rather informal despite the fact that he teaches quite formal activities, like trying to get him accustomed to the letters and numbers and speaking properly and improving his handwriting skills by encouraging more colouring and trying to get to hold a pencil properly.

Inclusion of fathers in EHL

His wife approaches home learning in a more formal manner than Marlon.

“She would do her normal role which would be doing lessons, in a very formal matter, she would go in a very formal manner, I take a more indirect approach to it. And mix the approaches really.”

Older siblings play a significant role in EHL

It is not only David’s father but his older brother who encourages home learning activities.

“My older son who is five years old, he’s an inspiration to the younger one because he knows the model of the vehicles, he knows, he can say the model and brand name of vehicles that’s on the road so he is able to distinguish what is a Ford Focus and what is a Renault and what is, you know. So what happens to the younger one is learning from that, that idea of distinguishing and take it upon themselves what is a particular type. Also with numbers, you know if one could remember what number plate passed, you know and again increasing awareness of numbers with David.”

How the nursery could encourage EHL: Parent Assessment proposal

Beyond parents, Marlon believes that individual or one-to-one support and observations in the home are much more effective than generic support, as those are more likely to get to the ‘root of a problem’. Rather than focusing on the setting Marlon thinks it more effective to look at the parent and child and the learning environment as a whole.

Marlon even wants his relationship with David and David’s development to be assessed by an independent committee that would give him feedback or approval and how he can improve upon them:

“It (assessments) would point people in better directions rather than giving them books and tell them you know go ahead and read it. I think it would be nice to do some sort of formal assessment to be done of the parent and child and when they do the assessment they can come back with more logical and more proper information of ways that you should go from there.”

Information sessions

Marlon also values the information-sharing sessions or the generic support that is offered at his son’s nursery once a week and he attends about half of them:

“The individual support yes it is right from not only in terms of that information but letting it be too restrained in terms. Yes there is this share environment where I go sometimes to the school and on a Thursday maybe twice a month, or every Thursday. It will be good to have another source like yours assessing, suggesting, making recommendations, do you understand, of how to improve learning outcomes.”

Key worker

Marlon does not know whether David has a key worker but there are formal one to ones between a member of staff and a parent about four times a year. Between interviews, Marlon attends a ‘share session’ that David’s nursery arranges on a weekly basis at 9 o’clock. The aim of this session is to bring parents into a learning environment so that they can help the child. Last time:

“They had approximately five or six parents and we all went through making the play dough and decorating and one of the other meetings basically was a fundraising exercise with the school that we need to participate in.”

Parents’ interests and ambitions

Marlon has ambitions for his son and would like for him to stay in education past the age of 18. He believes that education is not just there to improve employment opportunities but also that it makes life more interesting. Marlon is also keen that David can develop at his own pace:

"I would definitely like him to be as much as he can be, as whatever he wants to be, I would like, I will support him in whatever, you know he wishes."

Case study 10: Laura (HLE index low: 21; setting score 4.0: medium; district level deprivation rank 63 of 354)

Laura is aged 37, is White-British, and lives in an urban conurbation with her husband, her son aged 7, and her two daughters, aged 5 and 3, in their own house. Laura has a degree and is a qualified professional although she has been a full-time mother since before her younger daughter, Grace, was born. Her husband is a professional in a supervisory capacity.

Readiness of the child matters

Grace started her first childcare placement in January. At that time, both parents were reading frequently with Grace but other formal learning activities such as playing with letters or teaching numbers occurred less frequently. Laura felt that Grace was too young to engage in some learning activities, such as learning the alphabet:

"If she wants to learn, then I will help her. But I wouldn't push her to learn at this stage."

However, the family did baking together and they played with jigsaws and games with Grace. Laura uses games to help Grace:

"to take turns and be patient and learn to not always be the winner".

Laura feels that it is important that her children are happy and confident and that they do the best for themselves without feeling under pressure. Laura has always liked to link play with learning for Grace. She described how Grace likes to play with her dolls and that Laura joins in the play:

"I kind of guide her a bit more when I am playing with her, you know, spending time playing with her rather than her playing with the dolls herself."

Also, as all three children have Coeliac disease Laura uses cooking sessions, such as making their special pizzas and biscuits, to teach the children what they can and can't eat.

Inclusion of fathers in EHL

Grace's father rarely looks after her but he plays with her every day and Laura feels she can always count on her husband to take care of Grace. She is happy with the amount of support he gives.

How the nursery encourages EHL: copying activities at home

Grace's key worker is usually in the pre-school when Laura picks her up and she often spends a couple of minutes telling Laura what Grace has been doing. Laura had helped out at a couple of pre-school sessions and she saw that the staff encouraged the children with looking at letters and writing so she and her husband started doing that at home with Grace:

"Just because I've seen they do things kind of with her at a higher level than I've done previously. And that has kind of encouraged me to do (that) with her at home."

How the nursery encourages EHL: reading

“Just before she goes to bed at night – it is something that they started doing which they call the book club. They have a story in Emma’s room, a story in Grace’s room. Then Emma will read a story and Dad will read a story to them both... it is just a way to make the reading a little bit more exciting.”

At a recent helping session, Laura had spoken to Grace’s key worker:

“I looked through Grace’s file. I saw the things she did at pre-school and the key worker suggested various things that I could do with her at home if I wanted to.”

Laura later described using alphabet letters in the bath so that Grace can recognise her name and then go on to recognise other letters. The pre-school had given Laura ideas for helping Grace to write her name because ‘G’ is a difficult letter to copy:

“I didn’t know probably until we started doing this that they would give you suggestions for things to do at home. But once you start having the conversation about what they’re doing at pre-school, what they’re doing at home, they do come up with some really good ideas and also I didn’t necessarily know what the next stage is.”

Doing more since starting nursery

As the case study proceeded, Laura began to introduce activities such as games involving the alphabet, colouring in and gradually working on Grace’s writing. Also, Laura saw Grace using scissors at pre-school and now let her use them at home whereas before she had thought Grace was too young and would cut herself.

Case Study 11: Diane (HLE score medium: 31; setting score low: 3.9; district level deprivation rank 245 of 354)

Diane lives with her husband in a house they own in an affluent suburb of a large city. Lily is their only child, age 3, and their house was stocked with many toys for Lily. Both parents work full time but during the interview period Diane was off work for a couple of months while recovering from an operation. When she is in work she feels she misses out on the contact with the nursery.

“I do miss out a lot because I tend not to drop her, my childminder drops her, so there’s a lot I miss out on, that’s work and job and things like that, but she isn’t missing out on anything so that’s a good thing.”

Doing more HLE activities since going to nursery

Lily attends the nursery 2.5 hours a day and loves going. Diane comments on how Lily has improved and grown as a result of attending nursery and going to the childminder. She has become more confident and more able to share and enjoys playing with the other children. Diane comments that her daughter is very active and “always on the go” and that she needs constant stimulation which she finds quite exhausting.

Diane also thinks that the amount of activities has increased because of the warmer and drier weather. Now Lily can be more active while playing in the garden and she looks after the plants too. She mentions that Lily can count with little bit of help to 60.

“She will sit and play by herself and read her books, but she likes for you to be involved in everything, and you have to watch what she is doing, you never know what they are doing when they go quiet.”

The impact of being part of the study – increased pressure

Being part of this study has made Diane more aware about early home learning but she also perceives an increase of the pressure on her.

“Well sometimes I think I don’t do enough with her, I don’t sit down enough with her doing learning things and playing, you know when you are working full time it just makes you realise what you are not doing.”

Diane, because she is in full time employment, feels the time she can devote to learning activities with Lily is constrained. But she does feel she receives genuine support from both the childminder and the nursery.

“I am just pleased at the moment she is backed up very strongly with a fantastic nursery and a fantastic childminder, so where I am failing they are picking that little bit, I know it’s very important that your parents, but at least she is getting, where I am missing out she is picked up by other people, so I have a fantastic support setting behind me, it is fantastic.”

Reading at home

Diane reads to Lily every day and, as Lily knows some books verbatim, Lily also ‘reads’ to Diane; with other books, Lily makes up stories. So, she is reading “even though she is not reading”.

“I read to her every night before she goes to bed, and then she reads back. I mean she can’t, but she makes it up as she goes along, so she always has a story at bedtime but quite often she’ll go and get her books and we sit and read them.”

Inside/outside activities

Lily loves drawing and painting at home as well as playing with her dolls and her pushchair.

The spring/ summer weather enables her to do more outdoor activities

“Everything changes with the weather doesn’t it? You do more outside.”

With the arrival of spring and fewer rainy days, Lily increasingly wants to play in the garden. Along with riding her scooter, she likes gardening and has a climbing frame with a slide. She has also just been given a trampoline.

Father’s involvement

Diane gets Lily up in the morning and puts her to bed in the evenings, but Lily’s father looks after Lily most afternoons. He is more interested in getting her engaged in physical activities:

“He plays with her and he likes her to be out in the garden, he always says ‘I don’t want her to get fat’ you know, and he has got her outside a lot of the time, so taking her for walks and things.”

Nursery encouraging home learning

Diane thinks the most important thing that a childcare setting can do to support parents in helping their own children learn is communication.

Diane is very satisfied with the nursery and with the communication between herself and the staff. There is a newsletter that describes the activities that take place in the nursery, which can also be pursued in the home. The nursery also has a board up with the learning themes that are featured throughout the week.

“If it is a certain theme I try to deal with those themes at that time. We had one about building and construction so I was digging around showing all diggers in the streets and things like that, big buildings, so yes.”

While the newsletter gives Diane an idea about activities, her childminder is also good in making suggestions about outings and early home learning activities.

The nursery also has a little 'two-way book', a learning journal that helps Diane interact with the nursery. The staff give it to Diane weekly and sometimes monthly.

"They do have a little book that you get every now and then, it's a two way thing, you write what Lily has been doing and they write what she has been doing and it kind of goes backwards and forwards. Both the nursery staff and the parent write what has happened at home and at nursery."

Diane feels that this is very good as it includes her as a working parent:

"You get a feel of what is going on in the nursery even if you are not there, so that's very good."

Diane volunteers for the nursery on occasion and has helped with different fundraising activities such as book and cake sales.

Key worker

Laura has got a key worker who is the first point of call, or the person who knows most about Lily. She has recently had a meeting with her key worker and felt encouraged:

"She said she is doing very well, she is interacting with the other children, we have recently changed childminder as I was rather concerned about that, she was saying how pleased everyone is at the nursery, that she was really coming on in leaps and bounds and interacting really well, so all in all everything is going really well."

Ambitions for child

Diane hopes that her daughter will go to university. She supports early home learning as she thinks *"it gives them a good start for when they go to school"*. She wants her daughter to be happy and she thinks that being on the same educational level as her peers will help.

"Otherwise she may be ridiculed, she may be, she would be at a different level, she wouldn't be able to communicate maybe as well as other children and that would make her unhappy."

Case Study 12: Olga (HLE score high: 39; setting score medium: 4.0; district level deprivation rank 8 of 354)

Olga is a white single Spanish mother. She lives in a tidy flat that she rents from a housing association in London with her four-year-old mixed race (Spain/African) son, Carlos. Olga has A-levels or the equivalent and was in employment before Carlos was born. No longer employed she now receives jobseeker's allowance and housing benefit; she mentioned a financially difficult period between the birth of her son and the arrival of benefit payments. By the time the last interview took place her son had begun attending nursery school full time and she had enrolled in a 'work course' to assist her in returning to paid employment.

Being part of the study

Olga was very happy to participate in the interview as she wanted to do everything she could to help improve Carlos' learning environment and thought that she would benefit as a parent. During one of the early telephone interviews she talked about how she had stayed up until

the early hours in the morning to clean the house because she wanted it to be perfect for her child.

She has a small support network from attending church and through having a Spanish-speaking friend but she feels isolated along with her son. She speaks only a few words of English. She was happy that the interviews were conducted in Spanish and she would love to find more drop-in groups where her native language is spoken.

Early home learning activities

Olga would like Carlos to attend a university eventually. Currently, there is nobody else to look after Carlos and Olga reads with him and talks about letters and numbers every day. Carlos seems to want to play with his mother most of the time:

“all the time, from when we get up.”

For Olga, being a ‘good mother’ means having a close relationship and good communication with her son. In her opinion, this sets her apart from British mothers who she thinks are more emotionally detached from their children:

“For instance, he tells me things and explains things to me, what he does at school too. And I explain to him about my day, and, like, we talk, we tell each other things, we... we communicate well; yes, so it’s good, kids aren’t... like that... because they don’t want to, because they don’t like mummy, he’s not, he’s not one of those.”

However, by the last interview, Olga had been to see a child psychologist with Carlos because of his behaviour problems:

“Sometimes he takes me for a child and he goes on top of me because he is so intelligent.”

She thinks she lacks parenting experience too:

“I am inexperienced, and so by being inexperienced it is harder, isn’t it?”

Carlos had also begun to object to being spoken to in Spanish by his mother.

“He laughs at me when I am at school and I say good bye to him at school and he laughs at me, and his friends laugh too, because I am speaking in Spanish, he likes English.”

The psychologist suggested that both of them should make efforts to be more sociable and spend time among friends.

Reading

At the commencement of the case study Olga was reading to Carlos in Spanish; at its conclusion by the last interview Carlos wanted Olga to read to him in English. However, she doesn’t know songs in English. Olga is not confident about teaching her son letters in English, as her son speaks better English than her.

Nursery encouraging home learning

Olga is very happy with the nursery because her son is socially integrated there, has many friends and engages in a variety of activities. Frequenting the nursery has also resulted in Carlos initiating games he is learning and teaching her nursery rhymes.

Inside/outside play

Olga finds she undertakes more activities since Carlos started nursery. These activities are quite seasonal and with spring arriving they’re also more likely to go out. However, at times she is afraid to go out as she speaks little English.

“The home is better than the street, I think. You avoid, I don’t know, a few more problems. Because at home he understands me, I understand him and in the street, maybe you have a good day. But there is always someone who has to ruin it for you (she laughs). I am sorry. No, it is good to be at home and doing things.”

Key worker

Olga’s key worker acts as a gateway to the nursery as she tends to read out and explain letters, text messages and forms. She read out a form that informed Olga about a request for volunteers for a gardening day, for example. Without this input of the key worker she would have not known about it. *“She gets me to go, because she told me herself; otherwise, I wouldn’t know what was going on.”*

However, she has not had a formal meeting about Carlos’ progress, or otherwise, and the integration with the nursery seems to break down if the key worker is absent, away, on leave or ill.

“The nursery has a kind of small suitcase, right? And every Friday, they put the book they want you to read for them for the week in there. But they haven’t given me the little case for two weeks. They have it there but they’re not giving it to me. Two weeks without the book either...”

Engagement with fathers

Although Carlos’ father is not involved in their lives she sees the father’s role as being very important.

“The father in a family is very important, for me it is very... mm... I do believe in that, the mum, the mum does everything. Yes? And sometimes, the kids know that the mum, ah, she will always say yes, when I push her and push her and push her, she is going to say yes right? But the dad is like the trousers of the home: child, here, here and here do you understand? Then I think it is very important that there is a dad in a home, and I am ‘trying’ to be like the dad, strict...”

Findings: Early years settings and early home learning

The study has found that the interaction, communication and relationships between the parent and the setting varies according to the parent’s individual personality traits, the awareness and attendance of information sessions and whether the child has a key worker or whether the setting has an open-door policy.

Most parents in the case study send their child to a nursery that is attached to a primary school and all but two parents report that their child has a key worker, a designated member of staff who relates closer to the child and interacts more with the parent.

Where parents talk about regular written information handed out by the setting, they talk about it in a very positive way as it keeps the parents involved in the curriculum and enables them to talk about the current topics and activities with their children and the staff.

Increase in early home learning activities since starting nursery

Since their child started nursery, most parents report that they have increased the quality and the number of early home learning activities.

It is not always apparent whether the activities are due to the child’s development or inspired or suggested by the nursery directly or from other sources such as friends and the media.

But going to nursery can be seen as a catalyst for doing home learning activities. Some children are inclined and keen to copy the activities they have done during the day in the nursery and the parents seem more open to early home learning too.

This young mother says that the number of activities has increased since her son started nursery as she realises its importance:

“Sometimes before he went to nursery, it was like, what do I do with him? And then you get tend to get into the habit of leaving him to do what he wants. Since he went to the nursery like, I understand how really important it is that you do them things with them and it is like, you know what to do with them.”

Communication is key

One mother describes the good ideas that the nursery staff give to parents to help their children learn letters. She uses alphabet letters in the bath so that her daughter can recognise her name and then go on to recognise other letters. The pre-school had given Laura ideas for helping Grace to write her name because ‘G’ is a difficult letter to copy:

“I didn’t know probably until we started doing this that they would give you suggestions for things to do at home. But once you start having the conversation about what they’re doing at pre-school, what they’re doing at home, they do come up with some really good ideas and also I didn’t necessarily know what the next stage is.”

Communication is key in getting parents involved. In the case of this mother, communication not only increased her understanding of the value of play and gave her ideas for learning at home but it also taught her about ‘the next stage’ in her child’s development.

However, communication can also act as a barrier to parental involvement if it is pitched incorrectly, such as the over-use of jargon or communication that doesn’t establish a personal connection with the parents or under-emphasises the benefits to children of the Foundation Stage curriculum (Spafford, 2008).

EHL is a loose term

This includes the recognition that ‘early home learning’ includes formal/informal, outside/inside, parent/child led and guided/unguided learning activities. The six months contact with the parents and the photos show that as spring arrived, learning activities that were described were increasingly outdoor and involved physical activities, such as cycling, gardening and climbing.

Every family is different

This study has shown that approaches to home learning vary within and between households.

Parents have different attitudes to early home learning and some parents have a high home learning environment (HLE) score and others a low one. This score refers to formal learning only but parents prioritise different activities for various reasons. Family circumstances also vary and every family has to navigate different circumstances and pressures, constraints and resources such as time, tiredness, other family members and paid work.

Within the diversity of the families these common themes have emerged from the case studies that are being discussed in turn:

- parents’ interests and ambitions for their child guide EHL;
- approaches to EHL vary within and between households;

- older siblings play a significant role in EHL;
- child development ;

Parents' interests and ambitions for their child guide EHL

Previous research such as the EPPE demonstrated that what parents do is more important than who they are (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). However, parents are different and have different circumstances to navigate. There are barriers at the parent level such as poor experience of school or professionals, which may lead to negative attitudes on the part of parents and practitioners. Parents may also fear being judged as a failing parent or place a low value on education.

There are different motivations to be involved in EHL. One working mother in this study wants her daughter to learn so that she is 'ready for school' and for her to have a 'competitive edge' so she will not left behind in class and will enjoy learning as opposed to having to 'catch up'.

"I think because she needs to be in a position with her counterparts of a reasonable, same level, otherwise she may be ridiculed, she may be, she would be at a different level, she wouldn't be able to communicate maybe as well as other children and that would make her unhappy." (mother, 40+, medium HLE)

As the study started in winter and ended in spring, it could show that learning activities vary according to seasons. With the arrival of spring, outdoor activities become more attractive. One father prioritises outdoor play and independence over reading and finds it very important that his daughter is able to go on long walks, learns how to climb a tree and ride a bike.

Approaches to EHL vary within and between households (formal/informal, inside/outside, guided/unguided)

Approaches to early home learning vary within and between households and so do parental ambitions. One mother prioritised the child learning two languages fluently. One father knows that his partner does the formal learning activities such as reading. He feels he complements this by focusing on outdoor play and independence.

Older siblings play a significant role in EHL

Older children are influential in informal and formal early home learning activities and this has not been picked up in research yet.

"I think it is much harder if you have got just one child, your first one, you do have to get more involved because otherwise the child wouldn't ever see it being done or anything, (...) but when you have got an older child and a second one, they are doing all that for you."

This study does not suggest that older siblings should be included in early home learning but the setting can perhaps raise awareness of the influence of older siblings as well as recognition of their 'work'.

Child development

Every child is different and at a different point in their development and parents' perception of their children's development vary too. Especially at the outset of the study when children

just started at nursery, some parents were doing many learning activities while others were doing few.

For example, Grace started her first childcare placement in January. At that time, both parents were reading frequently with Grace but other formal learning activities such as playing with letters or teaching numbers occurred less frequently. The mother felt that Grace was too young to engage in some learning activities, such as learning the alphabet:

“If she wants to learn, then I will help her. But I wouldn’t push her to learn at this stage.”

The mother felt that it is important that her children are happy and confident and that they do the best for themselves without feeling under pressure.

The effect of the longitudinal study on the parents: The case study as an intervention

This longitudinal case study could be considered an ‘intervention’. Parents became increasingly interested in EHL, self-aware, reflective about ways to help their child and proactive and spent more time interacting with child.

Taking part in the research project led one mother to reflect on the effect of taking part in the study:

“It did make me realise that, because I talk to him a lot and you sort of naturally in your day do help him with colours and numbers – because I didn’t think I did much of that. But talking to somebody made me realise that I do that. So, I think that has increased my awareness of what I need to do.”

A father finds:

“Induces me now to get on and do more. So what I am saying is that any activity that induces people or encourages people to improve results generally helps people doing so, in addition to what I would normally do I would do a bit more, not necessarily for you but just the recognition that more has to be done.”

A mother finds:

“Well sometimes I think I don’t do enough with her, I don’t sit down enough with her doing learning things and playing, you know when you are working full time it just makes you realise what you are not doing.”

The influence of the digital camera

There were a variety of responses to the use of the camera.

“She hasn’t bothered, she hasn’t shown any signs of wanting the camera, it’s probably because she doesn’t really understand what it’s doing so much, she would rather have some pens and her colouring book.”

“Oh she loves the camera. It is a battle to get it away from her actually. She likes the little games, (...) and she does like to take pictures and she likes to look at them when she is taking them, she can see them on the screen and she thinks that’s great. I just think it is an overall fun thing, I don’t know if she has really learned from it, but fun learning is good.”

“When I take photos of him, he actually stops unfortunately what he is doing. And then grabs the camera from me and either takes a picture of me, or takes a pictures

of the objects. (...) he's watched us take pictures of him for so long, and he has finally had something that he can use as well."

The influence of the teddy

Again, there were a variety of responses to the teddy.

"The teddy that we brought is being ignored by Martin. The mother thinks that this is because there is no emotional attachment connected with the soft toy as it hasn't been given to him by someone who means something to him."

"She likes the teddy, in fact she had it yesterday I noticed. She doesn't have it every day or anything like that, they have got so many toys of that nature that they tend to swap about a bit."

"She plays with it sometimes, but she has got so many dolls and so many teddies that sometimes she will pick it up and there are other teddies, she just loves anything that's new really."

A4 Data tables

Data included in data tables

Table 1 presents details of the parents/ carers' sample at baseline. It indicates the numbers of parents/carers by group, such as age group, in terms of the groups used in the later analysis; it also presents the average (mean) Early Home Learning Environment Index score for each group at baseline, along with the standard deviation – a measure of the variance associated with these scores.

Table 1: Group frequencies and baseline EHLEI means (s.d.)

Groups	Frequency	Mean EHLEI	sd
Respondent English Additional Language: No	287	30.56	8.33
Respondent English Additional Language: Yes	26	32.62	9.82
Receipt of non-universal benefits: No	92	30.62	8.85
Receipt of non-universal benefits: Yes	221	30.76	8.32
Child's birthweight: Missing	292	30.73	8.42
Respondent's relation to child: Mother	10	28.54	8.81
Child's birthweight: Below normal	10	28.54	8.81
Respondent's relation to child: Other	10	28.54	8.81
Child's birthweight: Normal	249	30.84	8.15
Respondent's age: 18-34	140	30.59	8.45
Setting HLE rating: Missing	140	30.59	8.45
Respondent's age: 35 or over	140	30.59	8.45
Setting HLE rating: Low	234	30.73	7.98
Respondent's ethnicity: White British/Irish	234	30.73	7.98
Setting HLE rating: Medium	48	30.99	7.83
Respondent's ethnicity: Other	48	30.99	7.83
Setting HLE rating: High	227	31.35	8.38
Respondent's qualifications: missing	227	31.35	8.38
Respondent's qualifications: None/ GCSE	75	29.37	8.75
Respondent's qualifications: Vocational	76	30.09	8.08
Respondent's qualifications: A' level	49	30.61	8.63
Respondent's qualifications: Degree	109	31.94	8.43
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	279	30.92	8.21
Respondent's cognitive difficulties : Yes	18	28.28	10.79
Family structure – single	77	30.58	8.65
Family structure – couple	223	30.73	8.48
Household work status: Full time	192	31.06	8.51
Household work status: Part time/not working	108	30.04	8.51
Household annual income: missing	104	29.61	8.59
Household annual income: low	72	31.03	8.30
Household annual income: medium	71	31.76	8.89
Household annual income: high	66	31.03	7.95
Number of previous settings child attended: 0	20	29.90	6.65
Number of previous settings child attended : 1	260	30.96	8.43
Number of previous settings child attended : 2	33	29.33	9.68
Child's gender: Male	172	29.87	8.27
Child's gender: Female	141	31.77	8.61
Child's age: 2 years old	42	29.69	8.54
Child's age: 3 years old	220	31	8.70
Child's age: 4 years old	45	30.49	7.45
Children in household: 1	106	32.63	8.18
Children in household: 2	139	30.12	8.77
Children in household: 3 or more	68	28.97	7.81

The principal analysis used in this report was multi-level models. Multi-level models give the opportunity to examine the variation in parents'/carers' home learning activity, as measured by the EHLE Index, in terms of both the differences between parents/carers – in terms of the background characteristics featured in Table 1(e.g. age, educational attainment), and also differences between the settings their children attended.

Table 2 indicates the properties associated with the initial multi-level analysis of parents/carers' baseline EHLE index scores.

Table 2: Baseline EHLEI as outcome: Multi-level model properties

Model properties	Null model	Complete model	Percentage change
Log-likelihood ratio	-1113.80	-1047.70	
Setting level variance	7.13	6.46	9
Individual level			
Variance	66.35	65.73	1
Total variance	73.48	72.19	2
Inter Class Correlation	0.10	0.09	8

Table 2 shows both the properties for the null model and the complete model. The null model features only the outcome, the baseline HLE score, and the second level predictor, the settings chosen by the parents for their children. Settings level two; individuals' characteristics level one: n = 313; Groups = 127

The complete model features these items and, at the first level, the set of background measures identified in Table 6.1.1 in the main report. The results of the complete model are also compared with those of the null model so the collective contribution of the various background measures can be assessed. The same approach was used with Tables 5 and 7. The settings explained very little of the variance: this can be estimated from the Inter Class Correlation (ICC). The ICC can range from 0 to 1: were it to reach 1 this would indicate that there was no difference at the individual level and that people's background characteristics explained nothing and so everybody could be considered to be the same. However, the results indicated the ICC was 0.09.

Table 3 shows the results of the multi-level models in terms of background characteristics. The model works by comparing the outcome (EHLEI scores) between groups of parents/carers. It compares the average EHLEI in each group of parents (e.g. all those with a degree) with a designated 'comparison' group. In the case of groups relating to respondent's qualifications, all groups are compared to those with no or low educational qualifications. The model determines if any of the comparisons are statistically significant, that is, does any group have a greater score than another when all the background characteristics are taken into account. This is derived from the groups' associated coefficient and variation. In the case of respondent's qualifications, there is a significant difference between the comparison group and one predictor group – those with highest qualifications: those parents with highest qualifications also have greater EHLEI scores than the comparison group – parents/carers' with no/ low qualifications. This, however, only indicates there is a statistically significant difference. The coefficient is also used to calculate the effect size, the size, or magnitude, of the difference between two groups, which may be positive or negative, depending on whether one group's scores are greater or less than another. Whether the effect size is negative or positive depends on whether the predictor group scores are higher or lower than the comparison group. If the predictor group scores are higher than those in the comparison group the effect size shown will be positive, if they are lower it will be negative. In the case of respondent's qualifications, this indicates the difference is relatively large at 0.39.

Table 3: Multi-level model properties; Individuals' characteristics Level One: n = 313; Groups = 127

Predictors	Comparison Group	Coef	Std Error	Effect Size*
Respondent's age: Missing	Respondent's age: 18-34	-0.50	4.54	-0.06
Respondent's age: 35 or over	Respondent's age: 25-34	-0.04	1.12	-0.01
Respondent English Additional Language: Yes	Respondent English Additional Language: No	2.06	2.14	0.25
Receipt of non-universal benefits: Yes	Receipt of non-universal benefits: No	1.27	1.25	0.16
Respondent's relation to child: Missing	Respondent's relation to child: Mother	11.83	8.65	1.46
Respondent's relation to child: Other	Respondent's relation to child: Mother	-0.57	2.09	-0.07
Respondent's ethnicity: Other	Respondent's ethnicity: White British	-1.54	1.43	-0.19
Respondent's qualifications: Missing	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	7.26	4.45	0.89
Respondent's qualifications: Vocational	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	0.80	1.44	0.10
Respondent's qualifications: A' level	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	0.86	1.65	0.11
Respondent's qualifications: Degree	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	3.15	1.46	0.39*
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: Missing	Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	0.65	2.38	0.08
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: Yes	Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	-1.20	2.21	-0.15
Child's age: Missing	Child's age: 3 years old	-3.86	3.78	-0.48
Child's age: 2 years old	Child's age: 3 years old	-0.63	1.50	-0.08
Child's age: 4 years old	Child's age: 3 years old	0.21	1.48	0.03
Child's birthweight: Missing	Child's birthweight: Normal	2.35	2.76	0.29
Child's birthweight: Low	Child's birthweight: Normal	2.43	2.50	0.30
Children in household: 1	Children in household: 2	2.73	1.16	0.34*
Children in household: 3 or more	Children in household: 2	-1.59	1.32	-0.20
Child's gender: Female	Child's gender: Male	1.85	1.01	0.23
Household income: Missing	Household income: Low	-1.51	1.40	-0.19
Household income: Medium	Household income: Low	0.24	1.63	0.03
Family structure: Missing	Family structure: Couple	-0.99	1.75	-0.12
Family structure: Single	Family structure: Couple	1.39	2.50	0.17
Household work status: Part time	Household work status: Full time	0.34	1.66	0.04
Previous settings attended: 0	Previous settings attended: 1	-0.43	1.57	-0.05
Previous settings attended: 2	Previous settings attended: 1	-1.65	2.04	-0.20

Setting HLE intensity: Missing	Setting HLE intensity: High	-1.32	1.61	-0.16
Setting HLE intensity: Low	Setting HLE intensity: High	-0.92	2.11	-0.11
Setting HLE intensity: Medium	Setting HLE intensity: High	-3.60	2.32	-0.44
cons		-2.39	1.63	

* Indicates significant difference between experimental and comparison group at 0.05.¹⁰

¹⁰ The figure of 0.05 indicates that the difference between two groups is unlikely to have happened by chance, that is, there is only a one in twenty chance of this result having been produced at random and not as a result of a true difference between the groups themselves.

Table 4 presents details of the parents/carers sample at follow-up. It indicates the numbers of parents/carers by group, such as age group, in terms of the groups used in the later analysis; it also presents the average (mean) Early Home Learning Environment Index score for each group at follow-up, along with the standard deviation – a measure of the variance associated with these scores.

Table 4: Group frequencies and follow-up EHLEI means (s.d.)

Groups	Frequency	Mean EHLEI score	s.d.
Respondent English Additional Language: No	197	30.24	7.89
Respondent English Additional Language: Yes	16	32.94	9.17
Receipt of non-universal benefits: No	67	31.46	8.14
Receipt of non-universal benefits: Yes	146	29.97	7.92
Respondent's relation to child: Mother	203	30.18	7.99
Respondent's relation to child: Other	9	34.78	5.97
Respondent's age: 18-34	109	30.60	8.28
Respondent's age: 35 or over	102	30.39	7.77
Respondent's ethnicity: White British/Irish	159	30.47	7.83
Respondent's ethnicity: Other	54	30.35	8.56
Respondent's qualifications: missing	3	27.67	9.45
Respondent's qualifications: None/ GCSE	50	30.74	8.67
Respondent's qualifications: Vocational	52	30.44	7.59
Respondent's qualifications: A' level	29	30.86	8.43
Respondent's qualifications: Degree	79	30.20	7.80
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	198	30.58	8.04
Respondent's cognitive difficulties : Yes	8	30.75	8.70
Family structure – single	44	26.98	8.74
Family structure – couple	161	31.25	7.60
Household work status: Full time	135	31.82	7.58
Household work status: Part time/not working	70	27.46	8.15
Household annual income: missing	60	29.72	7.82
Household annual income: low	51	29.98	9.15
Household annual income: medium	53	31.62	7.68
Household annual income: high	49	30.53	7.35
Number of previous settings child attended: 0	14	30.14	8.13
Number of previous settings child attended : 1	175	30.62	8.14
Number of previous settings child attended : 2	24	29.29	7.07
Child's gender: Male	127	29.48	7.46
Child's gender: Female	86	31.86	8.59
Child's age: 2 years old	25	30.60	8.67
Child's age: 3 years old	155	30.95	8.19
Child's age: 4 years old	31	28.45	5.90
Children in household : 1	63	31.86	8.78
Children in household: 2	101	30.44	8.02
Children in household: 3 or more	49	28.63	6.59
Child's birthweight: Missing	41	32.46	7.61
Child's birthweight: Below normal	11	30.09	8.61

Child's birthweight: Normal	161	29.95	8.03
Setting HLE rating: Missing	15	33.33	9.00
Setting HLE rating: Low	12	30.33	8.52
Setting HLE rating: Medium	37	29.11	6.45
Setting HLE rating: High	149	30.49	8.20

The principal analysis used in this report was multi-level models. Multi-level models give the opportunity to examine the variation in parents'/carers' home learning activity, as measured by the EHLE Index, in terms of both the differences between parents/carers – in terms of the background characteristics featured in Table 1 (e.g. age, educational attainment), and also differences between the settings their children attended.

Table 5 indicates the properties associated with the initial multi-level analysis of parents'/carers' follow-up EHLE index scores.

Table 5: Follow-up EHLEI as outcome: Multi-level model properties

Model properties	Null model	Complete model	Percentage change
Log-likelihood ratio ¹¹	-746.07	-667.55	
Setting level variance	7.25	7.50	3
Individual Level			
Variance	58.66	52.30	10
Total variance	65.91	59.81	9
Inter Class Correlation	0.11	0.13	8

Table 5 also shows both the properties for the null model and the complete model. Settings level two; Individuals' characteristics level one: n = 213; Groups = 101.

This analysis found that settings explained very little of the variance. The results indicated the ICC was 0.13.

¹¹ The log-likelihood ratio compares how well a set of variables (e.g. parent age, income and education) 'fit' or account for differences in an outcome variable (e.g. EHLEI score). You can use the log-likelihood ratio to compare two models (sets of variables) and see which one is the best at predicting or explaining differences in the outcome you are interested in. Generally, the smaller the log-likelihood ratio the better the fit of the model to the data.

Table 6 shows the results of the multi-level models in terms of background characteristics. The model works as indicated in the account for Table 3.

Table 6: Multi-level model properties; Individuals' characteristics Level One: n = 213; Groups = 101

Predictors	Comparison Group	Coef	Std Error	Effect Size*
Respondent's age: Missing	Respondent's age: 18-34	-3.71	6.01	-0.51
Respondent's age: 35 or over	Respondent's age: 25-34	-1.38	1.22	-0.19
Respondent English Additional Language: Yes	Respondent English Additional Language: No	1.73	2.51	0.24
Receipt of non-universal benefits: Yes	Receipt of non-universal benefits: No	-1.13	1.35	-0.16
Respondent's relation to child: Missing	Respondent's relation to child: Mother	14.85	7.98	2.05
Respondent's relation to child: Other	Respondent's relation to child: Mother	5.89	2.85	0.81*
Respondent's ethnicity: Other	Respondent's ethnicity: White British	-0.09	1.66	-0.01
Respondent's qualifications: Missing	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-5.28	4.85	-0.73
Respondent's qualifications: Vocational	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-1.64	1.60	-0.23
Respondent's qualifications: A-level	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-0.54	1.87	-0.07
Respondent's qualifications: Degree	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-1.68	1.61	-0.23
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: Missing	Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	-2.65	3.36	-0.37
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: Yes	Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	0.60	2.93	0.08
Child's age: Missing	Child's age: 3 years old	-10.5	5.94	-1.44
Child's age: 2 years old	Child's age: 3 years old	-0.96	1.74	-0.13
Child's age: 4 years old	Child's age: 3 years old	-2.01	1.62	-0.28
Child's birthweight: Missing	Child's birthweight: Normal	1.15	2.81	0.16
Child's birthweight: Low	Child's birthweight: Normal	0.02	2.48	0.00
Children in household: 1	Children in household: 2	2.18	1.34	0.30
Children in household: 3 or more	Children in household: 2	-1.63	1.44	-0.23
Child's gender: Female	Child's gender: Male	1.79	1.19	0.25
Household income: Missing	Household income: Low	-1.67	1.58	-0.23
Household income: Medium	Household income: Low	-2.65	1.90	-0.37
Household income: High	Household income: Low	-2.10	1.98	-0.29
Family structure: Missing	Family structure: Couple	-0.40	2.97	-0.05
Family structure: Single	Family structure: Couple	-2.27	1.93	-0.31
Household work status: Part time	Household work status: Full time	-4.57	1.85	-0.63*
Previous settings attended: 0	Previous settings attended: 1	0.73	2.28	0.10
Previous settings attended: 2	Previous settings attended: 1	-1.85	1.78	-0.26
Setting HLE intensity: Missing	Setting HLE intensity: High	3.91	2.29	0.54
Setting HLE intensity: Low	Setting HLE intensity: High	0.61	2.55	0.08
Setting HLE intensity: Medium	Setting HLE intensity: High	-0.40	1.78	-0.06
cons		33.81	4.50	

* Indicates significant difference between experimental and comparison group at 0.05.

Table 7 indicates the properties associated with the initial multi-level analysis of parents'/carers' follow-up EHLE index scores, when taking into account their earlier baseline EHLE scores, and so indicates if any groups of parents/carers have changed their degree of EHLE activity, taking into account their level of EHLE at baseline, i.e. the level at which they started.

Table 7: Follow-up EHLEI as outcome, including baseline EHLEI as a predictor: Multi-level model properties

Model properties	Null model	Complete model	Percentage change
Log-likelihood ratio	-746.07	-585.44	
Setting level variance	7.25	6.34	13
Individual level			
Variance	58.66	40.53	30
Total variance	65.91	46.87	29
Inter Class Correlation	0.11	0.14	22

In Table 7 the settings are level two; individuals' characteristics are level one: n = 198; groups = 98. Table 7 shows both the properties for the null model and the complete model. The settings explained very little of the variance. The results indicated the ICC was 0.14.

Table 8 shows the results of the multi-level models in terms of background characteristics. The model works as indicated in the account for Table 3.

Table 8: Multi-level model properties; Individuals' characteristics Level One: n = 198; Groups = 98

Predictors	Comparison Group	Coef	Std Error	Effect Size*
EHLEI baseline		0.51	0.06	1.33***
Respondent's age: Missing	Respondent's age: 18-34	-4.86	4.98	-0.76
Respondent's age: 35 or over	Respondent's age: 25-34	-1.53	1.06	-0.24
Respondent English Additional Language: Yes	Respondent English Additional Language: No	1.08	2.14	0.17
Receipt of non-universal benefits: Yes	Receipt of non-universal benefits: No	-2.23	1.17	-0.35
Respondent's relation to child: Missing	Respondent's relation to child: Mother	8.13	6.63	1.28
Respondent's relation to child: Other	Respondent's relation to child: Mother	3.95	2.39	0.62
Respondent's ethnicity: Other	Respondent's ethnicity: White British	-0.26	1.39	-0.04
Respondent's qualifications: Missing	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-9.34	4.07	-1.47
Respondent's qualifications: Vocational	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-1.78	1.40	-0.28
Respondent's qualifications: A' level	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-0.09	1.66	-0.01
Respondent's qualifications: Degree	Respondent's qualifications: None/GCSE	-2.32	1.42	-0.36
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: Missing	Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	-2.67	2.75	-0.42
Respondent's cognitive difficulties: Yes	Respondent's cognitive difficulties: No	1.45	2.84	0.23
Child's age: Missing	Child's age: 3 years old	-6.68	4.96	-1.05
Child's age: 2 years old	Child's age: 3 years old	-0.31	1.45	-0.05
Child's age: 4 years old	Child's age: 3 years old	-2.90	1.34	-0.46*
Child's birthweight: Missing	Child's birthweight: Normal	0.56	2.36	0.09
Child's birthweight: Low	Child's birthweight: Normal	-0.77	2.11	-0.12
Children in household: 1	Children in household :2	0.93	1.18	0.15
Children in household: 3 or more	Children in household: 2	0.21	1.27	0.03
Child's gender: Female	Child's gender: Male	1.05	1.03	0.17
Household income: Missing	Household income: Low	-0.03	1.38	0.00
Household income: Medium	Household income: Low	-1.98	1.63	-0.31
Household income: High	Household income: Low	-2.20	1.72	-0.35
Family structure: Missing	Family structure: Couple	-0.51	2.64	-0.08
Family structure: Single	Family structure: Couple	-1.64	1.67	-0.26
Household work status: Part time	Household work status: Full time	-3.40	1.59	-0.53*
Previous settings attended: 0	Previous settings attended: 1	0.61	1.92	0.10
Previous settings attended: 2	Previous settings attended: 1	-0.19	1.59	-0.03
Setting HLE intensity: Missing	Setting HLE intensity: High	2.22	1.97	0.35
Setting HLE intensity: Low	Setting HLE intensity: High	0.38	2.28	0.06
Setting HLE intensity: Medium	Setting HLE intensity: High	-0.43	1.35	-0.07
cons		19.92	4.12	

* Indicates significant difference between experimental and comparison group at 0.05.

*** Indicates significant difference between experimental and comparison group at 0.001.

Table 9 Home Learning Environment (HLE) measure

The Home Learning Environment (HLE) scale used in this study was as used in the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) and in the Millennium Cohort Study. The overall HLE score is the sum of the 0-7 scores for each of the seven highlighted activities. 'Reading at home' and 'Visits to the library' are subject to conversion to a scale ranging 0-7.

Question	Response	Score
Does anyone at home ever read to index child?	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does someone at home read to index child?	1 - Occasionally or less than once a week 2 - Once a week 3 - Several times a week 4 - Once a day 5 - More than once a day	1 2 4 6 7
Does anyone at home ever take index child to the library?	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does someone at home take index child to the library?	1 - On special occasions 2 - Once a month 3 - Once a fortnight 4 - Or, once a week	3 5 6 7
Does anyone at home ever teach index child a sport, dance or physical activities?	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does someone at home teach index child a sport, dance or physical activities?	1 - Occasionally or less than once a week 2 - 1 or 2 days a week 3 - 3 times a week 4 - 4 times a week 5 - 5 times a week 6 - 6 times a week 7 - 7 times a week/constantly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Does index child ever play with letters at home?	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does index child play with letters at home?	1 - Occasionally or less than once a week 2 - 1 or 2 days a week 3 - 3 times a week 4 - 4 times a week 5 - 5 times a week 6 - 6 times a week 7 - 7 times a week/constantly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Does anyone at home ever help index child to learn the ABC or the alphabet?	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does someone at home help index child to learn the ABC or alphabet?	1 - Occasionally or less than once a week 2 - 1 or 2 days a week 3 - 3 times a week 4 - 4 times a week 5 - 5 times a week 6 - 6 times a week 7 - 7 times a week/constantly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Does anyone at home ever teach index child numbers or counting?	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does someone at home try to teach index child numbers or counting?	1 - Occasionally or less than once a week 2 - 1 or 2 days a week 3 - 3 times a week 4 - 4 times a week 5 - 5 times a week 6 - 6 times a week 7 - 7 times a week/constantly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Does anyone at home ever teach index child any songs, poems or nursery	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does someone teach index child songs, poems or nursery rhymes?	1 - Occasionally or less than once a week 2 - 1 or 2 days a week 3 - 3 times a week 4 - 4 times a week 5 - 5 times a week 6 - 6 times a week 7 - 7 times a week/constantly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Does index child ever paint or draw at home?	1 - Yes 2 - No	0
How often does index child paint or draw at home?	1 - Occasionally or less than once a week 2 - 1 or 2 days a week 3 - 3 times a week 4 - 4 times a week 5 - 5 times a week 6 - 6 times a week 7 - 7 times a week/constantly	1 2 3 4 5 6 7

A5 Questionnaire design

The research was divided into five surveys, identified below, along with an indication of the areas they covered.

Parental survey (baseline and follow-up surveys)

- Demographics – baseline
- EHLE Index at baseline and follow-up
- Attitudes to, and experience of parenting/childcare at baseline and follow-up

Parental case studies

- Contextualise home learning
- Identification of parent–child home learning activities
- Recording parental attitudes to home learning

Managers' survey

- Involvement in early years' initiatives
- Support for home learning
- Early Years' Foundation Stage and key worker experience/evaluation

Providers' survey

- Attitudes/experience of home learning
- Attitudes/experience of engaging parents
- Provision of specialised support for home learning

Settings' observation

- Observations of staff interaction with parents
- Rating of settings using Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS)
- Support for home learning

The questionnaires were developed by the research team at the Family and Parenting Institute and the Campaign for Learning in consultation with representatives from the Department for Education. The full questionnaires are available on request.

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