

# Family learning

An evaluation of the benefits of family learning for participants, their families and the wider community

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This small scale survey report evaluates aspects of family learning and its benefits for adult participants and their children, their families and the wider community.

Between September 2008 and March 2009, inspectors visited 23 local authority adult and community learning services that were receiving Learning and Skills Council funding for wider family learning, family literacy, language and numeracy, and family learning impact funding. The survey explores a range of delivery models, gives examples of good practice and makes recommendations for improvement.

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## Executive summary

Between September 2008 and March 2009, three of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an additional inspector visited a sample of 23 local authority adult and community learning providers of family learning. They observed 36 family learning classes on the premises of schools, at Sure Start children's centres and in a library. Providers were selected based on previous good inspection grades in family learning or other identified examples of good practice.

All the providers visited used a wide range of indicators to target families from particular groups and communities effectively and to support planning and set resource levels for provision in priority areas. Partners and other agencies actively supported the targeting and recruitment of learners. In the providers visited, most of the family learning observed took place in primary schools, with much work carried out through clusters of schools that provide extended services.<sup>1</sup> A smaller, but still substantial, amount was delivered through Sure Start Children's Centres. Although 15 of the providers worked with secondary schools, inspectors found little provision beyond Key Stage 2. Most of the parents and carers involved were women over the age of 25, and 20 of the providers gave specialised provision for very specific groups. Providers were seeking to improve the low level of recruitment of fathers and male carers through the timing and location of classes and the selection of topics to support learning.

The range of primary learning and social needs of the targeted families showed a high degree of similarity. A considerable number of the families attending the sessions observed lived on low incomes, were unemployed, had low educational achievement, low levels of motivation and little social confidence. Providers' data indicated that more than half of the adults in family learning, observed in the survey, had few or no qualifications, and were new to learning.

Across the provision sampled, effectively designed learning programmes consistently met the needs of participating children and adults. Most of the family learning provision observed was intergenerational, with a clear and appropriately defined proportion that was adult focused, particularly in family literacy, language and numeracy courses.<sup>2</sup> In the intergenerational classes seen, modelling by staff helped parents to observe and practise effective techniques for working with children. The

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<sup>1</sup> The extended services core offer includes a varied range of activities, including study support activities in a safe place, for primary and secondary schools: childcare 8am to 6pm, 48 weeks a year in primary schools; parenting and family support; swift and easy access to specialist services such as speech and language therapy; and community use of facilities including adult and family learning and information and communication technology. Over 70% of schools now provide access to extended services, and the Government target is to include all schools by 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Intergenerational learning is learning that involves adults and children in joint learning activities. Adult participants may be parents, grandparents who are primary carers, or other adults who care for children, such as foster carers.

providers made good efforts to ensure that the learning needs of both adults and children were met through joint planning with school staff, and by setting clearly articulated outcomes linked to the adult core curriculum, personal targets or the national curriculum.

Good partnerships, team teaching and consultation with parents were central to effective delivery. The contributions of parent support advisers, family and health workers, mentors and school class teachers to family learning sessions were invaluable. Parent support advisers were helpful in building supportive links with parents as their children started school, and in providing individual support to help them participate in family learning sessions. All of the providers sampled deployed a wide range of support strategies to make provision accessible to targeted groups. However, approximately three quarters of them were concerned that funding did not always recognise the high costs of work with vulnerable groups.

Family learning programmes had a considerable impact on the achievements of both children and adults. In almost all of the providers surveyed, adults were developing good or very good skills, behaviours and parenting attitudes or were achieving success in gaining qualifications. In 16 of the providers, most adults progressed to longer courses where Skills for Life was more central to the programme. The proportion that progressed varied between providers, with fewer adults progressing when personal development targets, rather than Skills for Life qualifications, were identified as their immediate learning need. Those learners who did progress achieved high pass rates in Skills for Life qualifications. Wider benefits and progression outcomes for adults included increased involvement in school life, gaining employment, and an increased social network. The children's class teachers reported that since attending family learning, the children had settled better in class, improved relationships with their peers and teachers, and improved their communication, interpersonal skills and self-confidence.

Almost all of the providers visited had difficulty in systematically monitoring and accurately recording wider progression outcomes, and in just over half of the providers, the systems to monitor on-course progress for adults or children or both were not effective. Where providers had begun to monitor each child's progress there were early, but clear, indications of improved progress and attainment following family learning intervention. Access to impartial guidance workers was available at all the providers sampled, but just under half had systematic approaches to giving information, advice and guidance.

All the providers sampled had well-established partnerships with the public and with voluntary and community sectors that provided an effective model to promote community cohesion. High-profile events, actively supported by the most senior council representatives and local celebrities, provided a clear message to adults and children about their worth.

Although the providers visited had clear strategic links between their family learning provision and key council policies and strategic plans, these links were at different

stages of implementation in different authorities. They were less well established where responsibilities for the delivery of family learning and for the client group of parents and children resided in different council directorates. Councils were placing a greater emphasis on 'joining up' services and family learning managers were members of key strategic groups.

## Key findings

- The family learning providers visited benefited from very effective partnerships to support all aspects of provision. Good links with schools and specific statutory and voluntary sector agencies were well established in referral, engagement and recruitment processes, programme delivery and the development of strategy.
- The needs of priority groups were generally met effectively through well-targeted provision. Specifically designed programmes met the particular needs of groups such as Travellers, foster carers, grandparents who were primary carers, the parents of disabled children and very young parents. The providers were generally unsuccessful in recruiting many fathers and male carers.
- Most of the provision observed was for the parents and carers of children from early years, Foundation and key stages 1 and 2. Very little provision was available beyond primary education.
- Approximately three quarters of the providers visited were concerned that funding did not always recognise the high costs of work with vulnerable groups, and they supplemented Learning and Skills Council funding from other sources.
- All the parents interviewed during the survey were very positive about how their confidence, communication and interpersonal skills had improved considerably since attending family learning. Parenting skills improved along with wider learning. Parents commented on how they were better able to manage their children's behaviour, communicate with them and support their learning at home effectively.
- Most children surveyed made good progress in their learning and attainment. Teachers commented favourably about their improved concentration, attainment and behaviour in classrooms.
- The adults observed developed good literacy and numeracy skills. Those who took external qualifications were highly successful and many progressed through the national test levels in literacy and numeracy at levels 1 and 2. Successful adults progressed to further learning or vocational qualifications, most commonly in childcare and support work in schools. Many became more active in their child's school or in their local community.
- Systematic monitoring arrangements for progress and progression of adults and children were underdeveloped and limited data were available. It was difficult to compare success in external qualifications, as providers used different measures.

## Recommendations

The survey identified many aspects of good practice in family learning-funded provision. To improve the quality of provision further, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and the Learning and Skills Council should:

- produce standard definitions to support national comparisons about achievement of external qualifications, especially in Skills for Life
- ensure that the allocation of funds recognises the actual costs of engagement activities and continuous support that are essential to the success of family learning, such as the cost of childcare, outreach work to new learners, family support, relief teacher costs, and the need for some group sizes to be relatively small.

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) should:

- promote the benefits of family learning to headteachers as a core school activity, and maximise the resources available in children's centres.

All providers should:

- promote family learning provision beyond Key Stage 2 to support key transition stages in children's learning and development
- further develop effective strategies and provision to target, recruit and retain more men within family learning
- further develop effective systems to monitor progress and outcomes for parents, carers and children.

## Background information

Family learning provision, offering opportunities for intergenerational learning, or learning that helps parents and carers to more successfully engage with and support their children, is well established in many parts of the country. All 152 local authorities deliver family learning, usually planned to engage with and prioritise learning within the most disadvantaged communities. There are two key strands of family learning programmes.

- Family literacy, language and numeracy are Skills for Life programmes, aimed at, and designed for, parents to improve their literacy, numeracy and language skills, and thereby help them to support their children's ability to learn.
- Wider family learning programmes are those specifically designed to enable adults and children to learn together, or those programmes that enable parents/carers to learn how to support their children's learning. They are often flexible and innovative to engage parents and children in learning. There can be links in wider family learning programmes to community

capacity building, regeneration and renewal activities and other links to local plans.

The Learning and Skills Council's provider guidance has in recent years placed more emphasis on longer programmes and less on short programmes. The 2009–10 guidance places a greater emphasis on national tests and achievement for learners in family literacy, language and numeracy courses. In wider family learning, recruitment from priority groups has a strengthened focus on the recruitment of learners from the most deprived communities (especially those without level 2 qualifications), fathers and male carers. The guidance stresses the importance of intergenerational learning opportunities in all family learning.<sup>3</sup>

Introduced in 2008–09 for a period of three years, family learning impact funding provides additional funding from the DCSF. Its focus is on the recruitment of new learners, and its six strands of development and delivery are intended to expand existing provision to meet specified aims. These include involving more at risk families and fathers, extending the range of provision, and placing a greater emphasis on qualifications and progression and improved data collection.<sup>4</sup>

The Learning and Skills Council funds wider family learning to a total of £12 million every year and family literacy, numeracy and language to £25 million every year. Family learning impact funding from the DCSF comprises £10 million in each year of the three-year programme. Learning and Skills Council data indicate that family literacy, numeracy and language programmes enrol some 62,000 adults every year and 35,000 children, of whom about 2,000 children are secondary school age.<sup>5</sup> Wider family learning programmes enrol 68,000 adults and 32,000 children. Fourteen per cent of learners in family literacy, numeracy and language are on Skills for Life programmes that contribute to government targets.<sup>6</sup>

## **Targeting those families most in need of support through family learning programmes**

1. All 23 of the local authority adult learning providers visited actively targeted their provision to meet identified need and ensured the recruitment of the neediest families, using a wide range of indicators. This included data from school league tables, underachieving children identified by their school, the uptake of free school meals, council priority areas, unemployment rates, the proportion of adults with qualification levels below level 2, local knowledge and close working links with schools and coordinators for schools that provided

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<sup>3</sup> Learning and Skills Council Family Programmes 2009/10, February 2009, pp 3–5.

<sup>4</sup> Learning and Skills Council Family Programmes 2008/09, June 2008, p22, paragraph 58.

<sup>5</sup> Learning and Skills Council national office data, September 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Learning and Skills Council strategic analysis national office data. Skills for Life analysis, May 2009.

extended services. Profile data for communities helped establish resource levels and the allocation of higher levels of resources to the most deprived areas.

2. The involvement of partners and other agencies in targeting families was central to the referral and recruitment process. In particular, effective links with school leadership supported the recruitment of specific parents and families, following much sensitive work at individual level to support and encourage them into initial learning. Headteachers often had a good understanding of which parents had low levels of qualifications and literacy and numeracy skills, gained from their background knowledge of each family and the school's assessments of children. All of the providers had good partnership arrangements. They had established good links with agencies such as Sure Start children's centres, primary care trusts, Traveller support teams, school improvement teams and local health and social service providers. These links ensured that families who were vulnerable, at risk or needing very specific support were identified and referred.

Case studies: examples of specifically targeted provision making use of partnerships

Effective links with healthcare professionals supported referrals to family learning at one provider. In one class visited, a speech and language therapist referred the mother of a young child with impaired speech and language development to a family learning class with her child. She had learnt how to effectively adapt and apply specific communication strategies that encouraged her child to talk, and that she could continue to use at home.

At another provider, targeting the parents of children who were deaf or hearing impaired supported them to learn sign language and helped them to improve their communication with their children.

Good links with the international new arrivals team in a city-based provider helped to target newly arriving families who were speakers of English as an additional language and direct them to well-established family language provision. This helped newly arrived families with language development needs to receive language support at an early stage following their arrival and reduced their potential isolation.

3. The schools observed providing family learning classes used a range of strategies to target particular families. In schools that provided extended services, family learning was provided within the extended services offer. Parent school advisers were used well to establish supportive relationships with parents and liaise with family learning and school teaching staff. Many parent school advisers had attended family learning with their own children and were excellent advocates for the programmes. In all of the schools visited, headteachers and class teachers were key points for referral, and 15 of the

adult and community learning providers worked extensively through extended school coordinators. Children occasionally supported links with their parents, for example, by writing invitations to their parents to attend family learning courses on a particular theme, such as becoming a teenager.

4. The schools observed differed in the way they used family learning. Examples included targeting of pre-nursery and Year 1 families to provide early intervention and improve baseline assessments, followed by continued intervention and support in a child's early school experience. In another example, family learning in years 5 and 6 supported children as they approached the end of their primary school learning and helped them in the transition to secondary education. One school targeted those families where children were on the threshold of underachievement, rather than those with specific learning needs.
5. Although the providers had well-developed strategies for targeting and recruiting families through children's attendance at school, three also recruited families from the wider population, where other learning or social needs had been identified. Examples of this included circumstances where parents found difficulty in communicating with or relating to their children or where there were mental health issues in the family. Twenty providers had facilities for specific groups, such as Travellers, foster carers, teenage parents, the parents of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and grandparents who were primary carers. Four of these providers offered targeted provision in locations near army and navy bases and in prisons, using projects such as 'Story Book Dads' that helped develop parents' reading skills and provided a personalised link between children and absent fathers.
6. Across all the providers, most parents and carers involved were women, and the low level of recruitment of fathers and male carers was a common finding. Collectively, the providers visited recruited nearly 26,500 adult learners to family learning in 2007/08. Typically, the proportion of men recruited in the providers visited was low, at around 15% to 17%, but in three it was very low at 8% or less. A further eight providers identified the recruitment of more fathers and male carers as a development target. Providers' strategies to improve these rates included providing classes after school and at weekends, when fathers who worked weekdays could attend. Fathers and children sessions, using topics such as football, science and technology and outdoor education themes proved successful in engaging men. One provider had well-established and successful links with its local football club and used their resources well to develop literacy and numeracy skills through football. Another provider expressed the view that the predominantly female environment of family learning was a barrier to recruiting men and was about to appoint its first male family learning tutor.

### Case study: work to engage fathers and male carers in family learning

One provider had experienced success in recruiting fathers and other significant male family members through its programme 'Rowdy Robots'. Each event typically involved over 50 fathers, grandfathers, uncles and older brothers, with children, in a technology project that was delivered in the early evening at primary schools. Each family group collectively produced a simple 'robot racer' using easy to follow guidance. Generally, the men enjoyed working with the children on the technical aspects. The children enjoyed the creative part of designing and making the robot's body and testing the finished article through robot races along the corridor. School and family learning staff were on hand to provide additional guidance and support so that every family group successfully completed their robot. One father commented, 'I thought I'd come to a robot-building session, but it's not building robots, it's building families'. School staff were particularly positive about the benefits children gained from the event, where it became the topic of assembly and class-based discussions and activity.

The workshops were part of a wider strategy linked to a staged programme of courses that used imaginative play and technology as the theme. The programme of courses, building up to 20 hours learning in total, was part of a project called 'Men who Dare', intended to get men involved in childcare. The provider had exceeded its recruitment target of 400 men into family learning in 2007/08 using this approach. Over the year, 647 men and 760 children participated. Other aspects of the strategy included facilitator training on developing 'Men-friendly Organisations'. This targeted early years practitioners to help them develop childcare settings so that the children's fathers felt welcome to attend. An 'Interactive Dads' project was aimed at getting fathers to complete a number of activities with their children and maintain a diary about their experiences.

7. All the family learning provision visited engaged parents or carers of children from the Early Years Foundation Stage and key stages 1 and 2. Although 15 providers offered family learning up to age 16, in practice, very little provision beyond Key Stage 2 existed. Providers' explanations for this varied and included insufficient resources to deliver more provision, less well-developed links with secondary schools, and perceptions that children were less positive about involvement in family learning at that age. In addition, there has been no growth in the family learning budget since 2004/05, and no plans for growth in 2009/10 or 2010/11.<sup>7</sup> They felt that any development in secondary school provision would be at the expense of primary provision. Where examples of secondary school family learning were found they were usually linked to

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<sup>7</sup> Learning and Skills Council national office information resource.

supporting key transitions, for example as children progressed to secondary school, into their teenage years or prepared for GCSE examinations. Other provision at Key Stage 3 supported the parents of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

#### Case studies: examples of family learning in secondary education

At one provider visited, family learning provision in secondary schools contributed to improvement of low attainment in maths. The provider supported family learning provision in 10 secondary schools during Year 7. Explicit links to the council's annual performance assessment strategic priority, which related to pupil achievement and school effectiveness, encouraged secondary schools to participate where children and parents were both underachieving. One school ran standard family learning programmes during the day and then ran an evening provision to help all parents understand maths and to encourage and help their children. A high proportion of the parents who attended these sessions had previously attended family literacy, language and numeracy when their children were in primary school. These parents would not normally have participated. At one of the participating schools, 14 out of 18 pupils on courses were assessed as making significant improvement in maths following the family learning sessions. Their National Curriculum level had increased by one or two sub-levels higher than had been estimated. Twelve had significantly increased their concentration and application. Ten of the 16 families had significantly increased their joint activities in the home. Outcomes for parents were equally positive: 15 of the 16 parents increased their confidence in maths, felt more confident about supporting their children's numeracy and increased their confidence in working with the school. Nine of the 16 parents opted to take external accreditation at the end of the course. They all achieved their accreditation at entry level 3. Five had improved from their initial assessment of entry level 2.

In another provider, targeted wider family learning provision for parents and children in a special needs secondary school at Key Stage 3 supported the development of confidence and self-esteem for children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The programme 'Calm, Confident and Creative' provided a range of art and design, relaxation and confidence-building activities. The children worked jointly with the parents on a range of activities. The artwork produced was of a high standard and included mono printing. The group's work was put on public display in the main library. One parent stated: 'This course has made our children feel special: people usually write them off'.

8. Most of the parents and carers involved in the family learning provision seen by inspectors were over the age of 25. Specialised provision for teenage parents and for grandparents who are a child's primary carer formed a small proportion

of the total provision. Other specifically targeted groups included the parents and carers of children with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, foster carers, Travellers, and the parents and carers of young people who were not in education, training or employment.

9. The range of primary learning and social needs of the targeted families showed a high degree of similarity across all the providers visited. Their main areas of need were significant and fundamental to success in learning and life. They included poor literacy, numeracy, communication skills, interpersonal skills and relationships, low self-esteem, confidence and aspiration. Many of those observed lived on low incomes or were unemployed. Parents generally had poor academic achievement and low levels of motivation for learning themselves. They had little social confidence to participate and found difficulty in relating to teachers and other professionals who were perceived as authority figures. Those parents who were themselves the children of very young parents often had underdeveloped parenting skills. Families with language development needs were often socially isolated, and in situations where they had only recently arrived in the country as refugees, some families also had to deal with the trauma of their experiences.
10. All the providers visited systematically monitored the uptake of learning by target groups in a number of ways. Initial assessment scores and other enrolment data provided evidence of prior qualifications and literacy and numeracy starting points of participants below level 2. Postcode analysis indicated whether families lived in priority neighbourhoods. School data show that the targeted schools had a high proportion of children who were underachieving or had free school meals. Specific targets, such as parents under 25, men and new learners were monitored systematically. Data collected from the providers visited indicated that more than half of the family learners surveyed had few or no qualifications, and were new to learning.

## **The characteristics of the most effectively designed learning programmes**

11. The characteristics of the most effectively designed learning programmes were consistent across the provision sampled. Teaching and learning were good or outstanding at all providers. The pattern of delivery usually consisted of workshops in a variety of interest-based activities that were designed to attract reluctant learners. The range of interests was extensive and included gardening and allotments, environmental activities, arts and crafts, cooking and healthy eating, sport and fitness, makeovers and nail care, mehndi, outdoor pursuits, computers and technology. Most provision was enriched by external visits to extend learning, promote a group identity and provide an incentive for regular attendance.
12. All the providers visited had a good, planned approach to learners' development, and offered a sequenced programme that began with taster

courses and workshops, and progressed to short, wider family learning courses and on to family, literacy, language and numeracy provision.

Case study: example of pattern of delivery and progression through family learning provision

For one provider visited, a carefully staged pattern of delivery supported recruitment of new parents and progression for learners. Staff from the service attended many events and festivals or carried out activities with local partners to make initial contact with learners and generate interest in provision. Work in partnership with museums and parks helped the provider offer and extend cultural activities to families. At the initial stage much emphasis was placed on building confidence and establishing trust. The first step into learning usually consisted of a short workshop using a wide variety of interest-based activities. These were designed to be enjoyable and non-threatening to attract and retain reluctant or unconfident learners. Initial progression to short family learning provision was again focused on confidence-building activities such as arts/crafts. These were followed by Skills for Life courses. This pattern of delivery had proved the most effective way of getting new parents into provision.

13. Most of the programmes observed were offered in schools, Sure Start children's centres, libraries, family centres, pupil referral units, teenage parents' projects and youth centres. Other venues were also used for sessions, particularly in city centres, to widen the experience of families in using public facilities. This was particularly notable in two providers where, for the first time, many learners were accessing libraries, art galleries, botanic gardens, bowling alleys and theatres.

Case studies: working with groups with very high level support needs

One provider's joint work with the family support charity Homestart supported vulnerable parents and work with children, using additional funding from Children in Need. All of the parents had children less than 5 years of age, and had difficult relationships and circumstances that resulted in their failure to engage with their children. The parents often lived in poor quality or overcrowded living accommodation that provided an unstimulating environment for children to grow up in. The parents' group met at a Barnardo's centre for a two-hour session for 15 weeks together with up to 12 children. They required very high levels of support from Homestart, including home visits and the allocation of a volunteer to support the family. They did not have the confidence even to go to a children's centre on their own. The family learning tutor's view was that the group would have been lost without Homestart support. Each member of the group had very significant needs and brought many problems to the sessions each week.

The sessions included learning time, for example, language through play; visits from external visitors to talk about joining and using the library, health issues etc; and 'me time' for the participants, such as nail art, which contributed to the accredited 'speaking and listening' level 1 progression award unit they were all working towards. As the parents' self-confidence and self-esteem grew and their understanding of child and language development, and literacy and numeracy skills improved, so did the benefits for the children. Of the group of eight learners, all progressed onto a further family learning course. Four learners then went on to access other learning; three to other family learning in Sure Start children's centres and one, who was a speaker of English as an additional language, to literacy and numeracy and a national vocational qualification at level 2 in childcare to enable her to work in a school.

Another provider had developed a very successful approach in working with families in their own homes on an individual basis. This work could be universal, but had proved successful with particularly vulnerable families. The provider's outreach workers were chosen for their ability to relate to the family, and their situation. They had to be self-confident, skilled and highly supportive of families. Parents benefited from the all-round support, useful advice on wider health issues, direct teaching in parenting skills and how to play effectively with their children to develop language, literacy and numeracy skills. Good individual tuition was matched effectively to the needs of each parent and child in their particular situation and supported by a resource pack that was very well received and used. This individualised work was particularly valued by parents at their most vulnerable time.

14. In 21 of the providers sampled, provision was planned throughout the year, with some offering longer courses in the summer term. Seven providers commented on the challenges of providing longer courses, although their reasons varied. For two providers, the challenge was in the readiness of individuals in their target groups to progress to a long course. For a further three providers, progression to longer courses was low, and two providers had insufficient staffing capacity to meet the increased demands of long courses.

#### Case study: encouraging parents to commit to sustained learning

Recent challenges for some providers have included the growing emphasis on funding for longer courses. Many parents lacked the confidence to enrol for these. Others found it difficult to commit because of uncertainty in their life circumstances. One provider had largely overcome this by modularising its long courses into four-week 'Sticky fingers' blocks, each with a different but linked theme, such as different aspects of art and craft, play, linked blocks about rhyme, story sacks and story base, and gardening. Parents were comfortable to enrol for four weeks at a time, and as they grew in confidence and motivation became keen to progress

to more learning. Many parents had successfully completed sustained amounts of continuous learning for a full year, following this bite-sized approach.

15. Classes observed included family literacy, numeracy and wider family learning. All but two of the providers were in receipt of family learning impact funding but, in almost every case, classes had only very recently started and it was too early to comment on their effectiveness. The few courses of this kind that had completed, for example in financial capability and law and order, were successful.
16. Twenty of the providers visited made intergenerational family learning available, together with a clear and appropriately defined proportion that was adult focused, particularly in family literacy, language and numeracy courses. In the intergenerational classes seen, modelling by staff helped parents observe effective techniques for working with children, such as how to hold children's attention when reading to them, or making learning about numbers an interesting and enjoyable activity. However, in two of the providers, the proportion of intergenerational provision was disappointingly low and in another no provision was intergenerational.

Case study: creative and effective intergenerational session for numeracy

The intergenerational aspect of one family learning numeracy session for Year 1 pupils offered a particularly wide range of activities for children to develop and practise their skills in counting, sequencing and writing numbers. Parents and carers were able to observe a class activity led by the tutor and class teacher before they supported their child in a range of different activities that helped them to develop and reinforce learning about number, and develop their fine motor, communication and interpersonal skills. Singing, sorting games and craft activities helped children to identify and sequence numbers. Decorating biscuits with numbers and making large numbers with playdough helped them in number formation. All the time, children were encouraged to make their own choices, to talk about what they were doing, and express how far they were pleased with what they had made. All the materials used were readily available at home. One parent had attended family learning previously with her oldest child and commented about how she had seen that it had made a big difference in their enjoyment of learning.

17. The providers sampled made good efforts to ensure that the learning needs of both adults and children were met. Lessons built on the identified needs of participants and most planning showed clearly articulated outcomes for both parents and children linked to the adult Skills for Life core curriculum, personal targets or the National Curriculum. In all the providers visited, tutors reviewed learning throughout sessions, at the end of each session and at the end of the course.

18. Many of the family learning courses observed were jointly planned by the children's teacher and adult learning tutor, to ensure that all learners' needs were met. To support this, in one provider, non-teaching time was allocated to allow increased communication between all members of staff to share expertise and disseminate training. The family learning team contributed to school staff meetings to enable school staff to be more empathetic to the needs of adults and understand their barriers to learning. In another provider, much joint staff development was effective in developing the skills of school staff to deliver parent-only programmes themselves as a core part of the school offer.

Case study: meeting adult and children's learning needs

In one provider visited, all learners completed a 'What You Want to Learn' form in their family learning passports, which included space for children to include their targets. Learners were supported in target setting, with the use of target cards provided for all courses. Tutors and teachers used this information when planning their courses to ensure that personal targets were met.

19. In 17 of the providers sampled, provision was through direct delivery by the local authority. They had effectively selected, recruited and developed staff to meet local needs and national priorities. In addition, all providers supplemented delivery well with the use of external experts and support staff. In one provider, where provision was fully contracted out, procurement specifications ensured that the planning and support requirements of the subcontracted providers met the council's stringent quality standards.
20. In 15 of the classes observed, team teaching by family learning staff and class teachers or teaching assistants enabled flexible and responsive teaching. Providers supported this by funding cover arrangements to free school staff to work in the family learning class, generally for family literacy, language and numeracy classes, or where families required high levels of support. A minority of schools found it difficult to release class teachers to participate in family learning. Family learning tutors and school staff complemented each other's skills, sometimes working solely with either children or adults, sometimes jointly as the stage of learning required. Parents were able to observe how their children responded to the different learning activities and level of formality.
21. Schools supported family learning delivery with learning support assistants, family workers or mentors in about half of the providers visited. Adults who had attended family learning themselves sometimes progressed to these roles, and used their own experience to provide effective support. Professionals in a particular field, such as a dietician, dental health specialist, or a drugs and alcohol specialist taught aspects of particular courses very effectively.
22. The main considerations in curriculum design and planning were closely aligned to key priorities for the local authorities sampled, including Every Child Matters

outcomes and parenting strategies. The providers consulted widely with parents and carers, schools and partners through face-to-face conversations, evaluations of learning sessions, inductions and celebration events, to determine local needs. In one provider, the main consideration in design and planning was delivery within a pastoral framework for those learners who, because of circumstance, could be vulnerable and hard to reach, and providing a range of progression routes. Community support networks were a key aspect of support in terms of providing mentoring.

Case studies showing a range of engagement strategies that enabled children and adults to participate in designing and shaping provision

One provider had initiated a learner forum and used course review, telephone surveys and postcard surveys to gain learners' views. The family learning team was also responsible for running the local authority's participation strategy and had high levels of expertise in engaging and consulting with learners.

Family learning staff, at another provider, engaged children and adult participants through informal discussion at pre-course events, such as coffee mornings. In addition, the purchase of a number of electronic response tools provided an immediate response to questions that contributed to future planning, and to evaluation of provision.

A different provider had developed a good strategy to involve parents in the design of the curriculum. In one Sure Start children's centre, in partnership with the workers there, it developed a course in communication skills specifically linked to being a community advocate. These parents were then involved in a partnership event where they discussed the needs of the community. The parents took part in a voting system to design programmes and activities across the patch.

Very good use of learning champions supported the recruitment and involvement of new families at another provider visited.

23. All the providers sampled gave careful consideration to the range of challenges that learners faced and deployed a range of strategies to make provision accessible to targeted groups. All offered crèche facilities and most provided this free to learners. Courses were offered at venues and times to suit learners, including during the school day, twilight sessions, evenings and at weekends. Courses targeting specific groups were run at times and in venues to suit the group. Group sizes reflected the support needs of the learners, and were smaller for those with less confidence. In one provider advice and support from its learner support department were available where necessary. For example, accessible print was provided for partially sighted learners, and signers enabled communication with deaf learners. In another provider, rewards and incentives for attendance, such as the offer of excursions, were effective in ensuring

regular attendance. In some cases, such as for foster carers and parents of children in a pupil referral unit, transport was provided to enable dispersed carers with a common focus to attend. One provider routinely offered a taxi service to transport isolated learners to and from learning venues.

24. Approximately three quarters of the providers visited cited funding as one of their main challenges. They were concerned that funding did not always recognise the high costs of working with people potentially vulnerable by circumstance and marginalised groups in outreach; taster courses; small group sizes; provision of crèche facilities and transport. Learning and Skills Council funding was supplemented by many other sources, including local authority core funding, neighbourhood regeneration funding, national lottery and charity funds and support in kind, for example, for crèches from Sure Start children's centres.

## **The impact, and its measurement, of family learning on participating children and adults**

25. End-of-course evaluations by participants and schools supported the monitoring of uptake of family learning. However, the providers did not always receive prompt responses from schools to requests for evaluation about the effectiveness of family learning courses, and their impact on children.
26. The family learning programmes observed made a considerable contribution to the achievements of children and adults. In all but two of the 23 providers visited, learners were developing good or very good skills, behaviours and parenting attitudes, or were achieving good success in gaining qualifications. Learners particularly gained skills in areas such as how children learn, health-related topics and interpersonal skills. They interacted much better with teachers in schools, showing increased confidence and communication skills. They developed good skills to help their children's learning, became familiar with the teaching strategies the school used, and applied the same methodologies to support their children. In one of the providers, learners developed good skills to play and interact well with their babies and toddlers, benefiting from the one-to-one coaching given to them in their own homes. In topic-based family learning sessions, such as healthy eating, fitness or arts classes, parents learned many skills to apply at home. Another provider had taken a strategic decision to embed health-related topics in its provision specifically to contribute to the authority's targets in combating the poor health record in the city. Parents were learning good skills in healthy nutrition and the sustained effects of exercise. In one provider, however, learners were not developing skills such as punctuality sufficiently.
27. In 21 of the providers, learners greatly improved their literacy, numeracy and language skills. They applied these skills well to developing games and activities that stimulated and enthused their children. At 16 of the providers, learners progressed to longer courses where Skills for Life was more central to the

programme. Learners were actively encouraged to progress to qualifications and providers had high expectations that learners would take up this opportunity. However, the proportion of learners who progressed varied depending on the emphasis placed on the qualifications. Those who progressed achieved high pass rates in Skills for Life qualifications. Inspectors found it difficult to make comparisons between the achievements of different providers, as some used success rates, some used achievement rates and some used pass rates.

28. In other providers, the emphasis was more on the achievement of personal goals. Learners for whom English was an additional language improved their spoken skills considerably, to help their child and to better integrate themselves into the local community. In one inner-city provider, learners developed a good support group with the other learners on family learning programmes. The primary motivation of all parents and carers interviewed in attending family learning was to help their child, rather than learning for themselves or gaining qualifications. However, attendance at the classes was a key factor in their decision to progress further when they were able to do so.
29. In all the providers visited, staff and parents reported that children's skills developed well. Children's behaviours improved and they settled better in class. They were able to relate better to their peers and to teachers. They improved their communication skills, self-confidence, fine motor skills, and participation in group activities, reading, writing and numeracy. Interactions between the child and their parent or carer were much improved.
30. The wider benefits and progression outcomes for adults included increased involvement in school life, gaining employment, increased social networking, achieving qualifications and moving into employment. Parents became more actively involved in school life, with benefits for all. Becoming teaching assistants, school governors, lunchtime supervisors or volunteers on fundraising activities were the most commonly found forms of school-based progression. Many of the parents surveyed progressed to achieving qualifications or attending wider courses, including university courses. In one provider, a partnership with a local university provided specific progression routes for family learning participants to Access to Higher Education courses.

Case studies: examples of parents gaining employment following family learning

Many parents gained employment, often starting from very low levels of confidence, skills or qualification base.

A Pakistani parent obtained paid employment for the first time in her life at her children's school. She gained English for speakers of other languages qualifications, starting at entry level and progressing to level 2,

and provided a positive role model for others when working in the school's office.

A man who originally struggled in the family learning provision due to memory issues associated with a brain injury, successfully retrained and gained qualifications in childcare. He gained employment working as a teaching assistant.

Family learning had made a long-term impact on employment in one disadvantaged area. The family learning team made a significant input into the regeneration work of the area, and for one community that had high levels of need. This work was externally recognised. In 2008 the Family Learning Award was given to the neighbourhood partnership by the National Association for Neighbourhood Management, for a project aimed at breaking the cycle of educational underachievement by adding to the skills of adult family members so they could better help their children. Over a three-year period, 15% of the adults who took part in family learning had found work. This had a positive effect on the employment rate for the area and for household incomes, which had risen by 8%.

#### Case study: significant progress across three generations in one family

At one school visited, three generations of one family were active in family learning and had significantly improved their lives and made a good contribution to their wider community. The grandmother of the family had been a young mother herself, and left school early with no qualifications. Her older children had not been regular school attendees. However, when her youngest children started school, she became involved in family learning and benefited to such an extent that she encouraged her older daughters, now young mothers themselves, to attend as well. They achieved literacy and numeracy qualifications to level 2, and national vocational qualifications in childcare at levels 2 and 3. The family was active in their local school and community and supported the crèche provision for other family learners. One of the family members commented that 'people are comfortable leaving their children with us in the crèche. They know us as their neighbours, and our children go to school and play together'. The youngest children attended school regularly and were making good progress. The school was convinced that the cycle of underachievement for this family had been broken. The family's achievements were recognised in 2008 by a national group learning award.

31. Parents and carers who attended family learning gained a good support network and developed a wider social life. In one inner-city provider they introduced each other to playgroups, had social time together and organised trips out. For foster parents in another provider, the group provided an

invaluable social, supportive network for carers often looking after children with multiple needs. As well as the family learning outcomes, foster parents were able to discuss the very specific issues that affected them and help each other to resolve the issues. In one provider, a law and order course helped parents on an estate in an area of deprivation to take more control and feel more able to challenge antisocial behaviour or involve the police when required.

32. All the providers used individual learning plans, a range of assessment methods and progress charts to monitor and record progress and achievement. They used the Skills for Life core curriculum to cross-reference their materials. Individual learning plans and qualification success were used as measures of progress and achievement. About half of the providers recognised their need for further development to improve the consistency of quality of the individual learning plans, in particular in relation to target setting. In addition to the direct learning aims and outcomes for learners, there were clearly considerable wider benefits and outcomes for parents and carers, illustrated in all providers by many individual case studies or learner interviews.

Case study: progression from family learning to vocational training and into employment

A Somali mother, who came to Britain in 1994, took part in two consecutive intensive family literacy, language and numeracy programmes while her children were at first and middle schools. The intensive programmes focused on improving the skills of parents and helped them to support their children. For many of the learners this involved understanding the British education system and improving their English. This parent was one of the many learners who were inspired to go further with their adult education and went on to attend English for speakers of other languages, and numeracy and literacy Skills for Life programmes, where she gained a level 1 qualification in literacy and a level 2 in numeracy national tests. After that, she took the opportunity of joining a parenting support programme. This course gave her the confidence to reach out and work with the Somali community. She also took part in an Ethnic Minority Achievement Service/Integrated Early Years and Childcare Service-run programme for Somali practitioners and volunteers, where sessions aimed to build learners' confidence in discussion, modelling and analysis of good practice in early years education. The training led to paid employment as a learning assistant in a local primary school. In 2007 she took a support work in schools course and went on to become a parent ambassador at the school. This mother spent much of her time supporting the Somali community in providing translation and advice.

33. Almost all of the providers expressed at least some difficulty in systematically monitoring and accurately recording wider progression outcomes, and were in the process of developing their systems. Just over half identified a key area for

development around the monitoring of progress for learners or children or both, which was confirmed by inspectors. Difficulty in monitoring progress from one internal course to another or to higher level and external courses was the most commonly expressed challenge. None of the 23 providers visited kept accurate statistical data on progression into work or voluntary work. In five providers, the monitoring of individual progress for either parent/carer or child was problematic, most frequently in the quality of setting specific and measurable targets for learners.

34. Sixteen of the providers were monitoring the child's progress in partnership with the schools. In most cases, this was underdeveloped. However, two providers had monitored children's progress over a number of years, and three had begun more recently. This work indicated clearly improved progress and attainment by children following family learning intervention.

Case study: work to measure the impact of family learning on the attainment of children

One provider began exploration of the potential of collecting reliable data about children's achievement following family learning, begun during the Skills for Families initiative (2003/05). A data analysis record was developed following advice from early years staff and the local authority's data adviser. This enabled class teachers to record the start and end assessments of children using either the Foundation Stage profile or curriculum sub-levels depending on the age of the participating child. Data were collected for 2003/04 (pilot), 2004/05, 2005/06 and 2006/07. In the majority of cases, there was clear evidence that immediately after a family learning programme had taken place, those children who had attended had travelled a greater distance in their learning compared to children of similar ability in a control group. Following family learning, children at Key Stage 1 outperformed children at each ability level in the control group. At the Foundation Stage, they outperformed the average and less able children in the control group. Teachers noted that the child's confidence, self-esteem and behaviour, and their relationship with the parent supporting the child, had improved with immediate effect. The data analysed also identified that family learning had reached a greater number of underachieving boys who had, or were later to receive, additional support.

These data had been shared with other family learning providers and some of those visited had begun to implement this model for themselves.

35. All the providers visited had access to qualified, impartial guidance workers through partnership agreements or through internal mechanisms, and very specific guidelines for the frequency and accessibility of guidance. However, just under half had a systematic, effective approach to giving information, advice and guidance. These providers had, or were working towards, MATRIX

accreditation and had experienced tutors who possessed, or were training towards, qualifications in information, advice and guidance. Specific guidance sessions were built into their provision and schemes of work. Most had specific advice days or events to promote progression and well-designed leaflets or progression booklets. Two of the providers gave insufficiently systematic information, advice and guidance. Most advice was given by tutors who were conscientious and knowledgeable about their area, but who did not have the full range of information that an impartial guidance worker could bring to the provision. Both of these services had improvement plans in place.

## **Organisational models used to promote community cohesion**

36. All the providers visited expressed clear links between their family learning provision and key council policies and strategic plans. Key areas for strategic links included the family and parenting strategy, Every Child Matters, local area agreements, corporate and children and young people's plans, extended services plan and early intervention strategy. However, the implementation of these links was at different stages of development in different authorities. Barriers to the level of strategic development and links depended largely on where responsibility for family learning rested within council structures. Where family learning was located in the directorate with responsibility for families and children, links were better, but where delivery of family learning and responsibility for the client group of parents and children were located in different directorates, links were less well established. For example, at one provider, family learning was based in the Information, Culture and Community Learning Directorate and links with the Children and Young People's Directorate were not always effective.
37. Staff responsibility for strategy varied. In some cases, a single, designated senior council officer was identified. For example, the interim head of targeted services in one provider took an active role in the development of family learning and its positioning within the council's extended services. In other providers, staff representing different directorates had a shared responsibility for strategy. Councillors with portfolios holding responsibility took an active interest in family learning by making site visits. Strong emphasis on developments of a 'One City Approach' in one provider helped raise awareness of, and access to, social entitlement to city resources. A growing emphasis on 'joining up' services was observed and managers of family learning were members of key strategic groups. For example, in another provider, family learning managers were on the parenting board and the multi-agency guns, knives and gangs strategy team. The effectiveness of strategies was monitored through standard processes, such as the review of strategic plans and self-assessment.

38. Well-established multi-agency partnerships, observed in all local authorities visited, helped meet the widest range of interests and promote community cohesion. Partnerships embraced the public and voluntary and community sectors and brought together effectively a wide range of people from different communities, cultures, faiths and ages. Joint working by staff from different sectors was common, and supported a shared understanding of their different work contexts and the challenges faced by particular communities. Celebrations of success events for family learning were frequently high profile and actively supported by the most senior council representatives and local celebrities. This provided a clear message to adult participants and children about their worth. They learned that achievement and contributing were highly valued. This raised their self-esteem and aspirations.
39. The providers visited identified a range of key challenges for community cohesion. These typically related to the learning and social needs of family learners: low levels of achievement in working-class White British areas; the large range of different cultures in some schools and communities; the transient populations in some schools and areas where lives are fragile and continuity of contact is difficult. Another important factor was the prejudice and fear between different groups, such as older people and young people, Travellers and other groups seen as new or different. The presence of a 'gun, gang and knife' culture posed specific challenges for two city-based providers working in deprived areas and was a feature of work in another. For providers serving rural areas, social isolation and poor transport were key issues. Unemployment, low pay, low educational achievement and low aspiration underpinned challenges to cohesion in every case.
40. Family learning activities are not specifically designed to promote community cohesion; they are designed to bring families together in learning. However, taking the family as a unit within the wider community, the simple process of families, and parents of children from a particular school or community, becoming involved in shared activities helps form the springboard for improvements in family and community cohesion. For example, the 'Sing Inspiration' Gospel Choir at one provider involved grandparents, parents/carers and grandchildren. Parents playing an effective role in their child's school and the local community or gaining qualifications that supported their employment potential were other key factors that promoted community cohesion.
41. Activities that promoted inclusion of all community groups provided ways of people getting to know each other, sharing common experiences, building relationships, and developing community ownership. Many such activities were essentially very simple. They included an international lunch organised by a family literacy, language and numeracy group, and culturally mixed parents sharing recipes in a 'Being Healthy' course. The creation of a garden supported many areas of the school curriculum, involved parents in its ongoing maintenance and provided an inclusive learning experience for people of all ages and abilities. Access to local facilities such as parks, art galleries, theatres

and museums was an effective tool in promoting community cohesion and learning about life in the UK, introducing learners to new experiences.

Case studies: family learning activities that contributed to community cohesion

City centre providers had particularly good links with, and use of, social capital such as art galleries, libraries and museums that helped to break down barriers of access to the cultural facilities that were freely available and that many people had felt were 'not for them'.

One group of Muslim parents visiting an art gallery were surprised to see the links between biblical-themed paintings and the stories they knew from the Koran. They had not realised their shared roots. A group of Somalian parents was taken to Stratford-upon-Avon to give them new experiences of life in England and visit places that were important in English culture and history.

Another provider used parents' cultural heritage in a story sack project at one children's centre, so that children became aware of their family's own background and culture through the games and stories in the sacks. The same provider had developed 'Supporting our Kids' clubs that were designed for families from a range of communities, including Asian, Bangladeshi, Somalian, Swahili and others from family English as an additional language classes. The clubs provided an effective peer support and development model for the families involved.

One school had developed the practice of holding an informal coffee morning before every new family learning course to welcome all new families joining the school, to help them settle in quickly to the school community.

One council planned to set up provision for fathers and grandfathers from minority ethnic groups, for example, members of the Polish community, to promote a greater sense of community and establish cultural links.

In three of the providers, family learning staff and their partners were involved in historic lantern parades, or carnivals, that involved significant interagency work, including the police and fire services. These activities brought together people from a wide range of different backgrounds, and helped develop good relationships and interaction with the different agencies and groups in the neighbourhood.

## Notes

The survey was conducted by three of Her Majesty's Inspectors and an additional inspector between September 2008 and March 2009. A sample of 23 local authority adult and community learning providers was visited where 36 family learning classes were observed on the premises of schools, Sure Start children's centres and a library. Providers in the sample were selected on the basis of previous good inspection grades in family learning or other identified examples of good practice. Inspectors held meetings with learners, tutors, school headteachers and their staff, managers and other staff from within local authorities. They also scrutinised policies, procedures, self-assessment reports and data, and reviewed examples of learners' and children's work. The small scale survey included both deskwork and fieldwork research, and liaison with the national office of the Learning and Skills Council, local authorities, the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education and Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy Advisory Group meetings held at the National Research and Development Centre for adult literacy and numeracy.

## Further information

*The deployment, training and development of the wider school workforce*, Ofsted, 2008; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070222](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070222).

*An evaluation of National Strategy intervention programmes*, Ofsted, 2009; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070256](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070256).

*Good practice in extended schools*, Ofsted, 2009; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080242](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/080242).

*White boys from low-income backgrounds: good practice in schools*, Ofsted, 2008; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070220](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/070220).

*Extended services in schools and children's centres*, Ofsted, 2006; [www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Extended-services/Extended-services-in-schools-and-children-s-centres/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Extended-services/Extended-services-in-schools-and-children-s-centres/(language)/eng-GB).

## Local authority adult and community learning providers participating in the survey

Birmingham City Council  
Bournemouth Borough Council  
Bracknell Forest Borough Council  
City of York Council  
Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council  
Essex County Council  
Gateshead Metropolitan Borough Council

Isle of Wight Council  
London Borough of Camden  
London Borough of Croydon  
London Borough of Harrow  
London Borough of Wandsworth  
Manchester City Council  
Newcastle on Tyne City Council  
Nottingham City Council  
Portsmouth City Council  
Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council  
Sefton Metropolitan Borough Council  
Stockton on Tees Borough Council  
Sunderland City Council  
Swindon Borough Council  
Wakefield Metropolitan District Council  
West Sussex County Council