

Supporting parents with their children's 'at home' learning and development

Research Report

Laurie Day, Jenny Williams and Jackie Fox

ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd in partnership
with the National Institute for Adult Continuing
Education and JB Associates



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The project local authorities

- Northampton Excellence Cluster
- Tower Hamlets Children's Services
- Sefton FAST
- Sefton Extended Services
- Rochdale Family Learning Service
- Isle of Wight Council
- Nottingham Family Learning Service

The project schools

- Our Lady Queen of Peace School
- Farnborough Road Junior School
- Crosby High School
- Forefield Junior School
- St James Primary School
- Delapre Primary School
- South Street Nursery
- Howard Street Nursery
- Thomas Buxton Infants School
- Bonner Primary School
- Brocklewood Junior School
- Springfield Primary School

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- NIACE: Clare Meade, Penny Lamb, Mandy Thomas, and Ian Yarroll.
- JB Associates: Professor John Bastiani and Diana West.

Glossary of terms

CAL	Community Arts and Literacy
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families
EAL	English as an Additional Language
EPPE	Effective Provision of Pre-School Education
ESOL	English for Speakers of Other languages
ECM	Every Child Matters
FAST	Families and Schools Together
FLIF	Family Learning Impact Funding
ITT	Initial Teacher Training
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
NIACE	National Institute for Adult Continuing Education
OCN	Open College Network
SIS	School Improvement Service
SEAL	Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning

Executive Summary

1. Background

- In January 2008, ECOTEC was commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to undertake research into how parents can be supported with their children's 'at home' learning and development. The research aimed to respond to the Desforges review (2003), which found mixed evidence for the effectiveness of initiatives that are designed to reinforce more spontaneous 'at home good parenting'. The project aimed to establish the effectiveness and outcomes achieved by different types of interventions, with a particular focus on primary schools and 'hard to reach' parents. The research took place between January 2008 and March 2009.
- An action research method was deployed, to establish whether local good practice schemes can be replicated and sustained elsewhere, and to examine the issues that arise from supporting parental engagement in different cultural and socio-demographic settings. The project was organised into work streams, to reflect the 'development' and 'research' tasks that were required. These were as follows:
 - work stream one: scoping and exploratory work - a literature search; a snapshot survey of local authorities, and case study visits to short-list 'promising' schemes.
 - work stream two: scheme design and development - a framework for the schemes to enable their transfer; recruitment of local authorities (n=6) and schools (n=12).
 - work stream three: scheme implementation and support - ongoing advice and support to the schools and local authorities; observations of joint planning and training events (n=29)
 - work stream four: research and evaluation - in-depth face-to-face interviews with parents who participated in the activities (n=75); a small number of paired interviews with children and their parents (n=5); in-depth telephone interviews with project staff (n=21); practitioner focus groups (n=6) with a cross-section of staff from each scheme; and analysis of collated scheme data.
- The six schemes participating in the action research stage were as follows:
 1. Sefton - Families and Schools Together (FAST) educational home visits
 2. Rochdale - Community Arts and Literacy (CAL)
 3. Tower Hamlets - Curriculum Workshops
 4. Northampton - Working with Families scheme
 5. Isle of Wight - Law and Order scheme; Open College Network (OCN)
 6. Nottingham - Family Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)

2. Exchanging good practice - lessons learned from the project

The benefits and drawbacks of a local linking approach

- The local authorities and schools on the project highlighted a number of success factors when transferring local good practice. These included the importance of having shared values, skill-sets and professional frameworks; senior level backing and leadership, and contact between practitioners from the earliest possible stage.
- Working together to exchange a particular scheme or curriculum programme was thought to offer a “deep” level of insight to how common issues around parental engagement are tackled in different local areas. This often gave the project teams new ideas for developing and extending provision within their own local area.
- The project highlighted the degree of variation in how support for parents and families is structured at a local authority level. This proved challenging when attempting to transfer a scheme between settings with a different training or funding regime. However, there were also benefits from seeing how other authorities had gone about joining-up their provision for parenting support, family learning and extended schools.

Engaging schools

- The schools that were recruited for the project were all at a stage where they were able to introduce new parental engagement work; whether following an extended schools audit, change in leadership, or to consolidate existing activities with parents. This was also an important factor in securing Head teacher backing. The schools were at varying stages with delivering work with parents, but none were starting completely ‘from scratch’.
- The schools often had a contrasting demographic profile, which threw-up some differences in terms of adapting a scheme to a different social and cultural context. This often presented a new set of tools for engaging with hard to reach parents.

Multi-agency involvement

- The involvement of community organisations was important to the schemes in different ways. In Sefton, multi-agency referral networks had sustained the FAST home visits model, whereas on the Isle of Wight the Law and Order scheme engaged a variety of youth justice partners to raise awareness of the work of the sector. It proved difficult to replicate these models within the project, as they had often built-up over time. A scaled-down approach was needed, tapping into local networks.

Training and professional development

- The project highlighted the importance of practitioners having a shared understanding of professional roles and expertise for working with children and adults. The transfer of schemes was more challenging where the project crossed-over between different local authority teams, or different parental engagement arrangements in schools. This was addressed to some extent through joint training and work shadowing.

Scheme costs

- The schemes received a small support budget of up to £4,000 over the two-year period, and drew upon in-kind contributions and reciprocity from the teams involved. The small scale of the funding reflected the aims of testing local exchanges of good practice. Expenditure included training visits between staff, new learning materials and resources, and staff replacement costs. The schemes varied in scope from around 6 days time inputs required to plan and run individual sessions with follow-up, upwards to 22 days for establishing outreach visits to families.
- The budget was generally thought to be adequate for a small scale exchange of good practice. The time inputs for training and planning were higher than anticipated due to some differences in the skills and professional background of the staff within the paired local authorities, however, and there were thought to be some risks of reduced quality without adequate core funding. Some elements of the schemes were mainstreamed with support from local authority and school budgets, where they proved effective.

Targeting, recruitment and publicity

- Parents reported varying motivations for taking part in the project, but they most often cited the opportunity to support their child's learning and to spend time together. They were often found to be particularly receptive to attending at key transition points. Some parents attended out of a sense of responsibility to support their child's school.
- The schools faced quite specific challenges for engaging with their local community, depending on their size, location, and demographic profile, and it proved important to design the recruitment strategy around this. However, the involvement of children in recruiting their parents was nearly always an effective method. Some schools found it a successful approach to target a whole year group, linked to a curriculum theme.
- There was mixed success with recruiting 'hard to reach' parents. The school-based schemes engaged quite a high proportion of parents who were already networked to some extent. Some progress was made by using more targeted recruitment and drawing upon the support of bi-lingual staff. The outreach method proved more effective in engaging vulnerable families, including asylum seekers and refugees.

Engaging fathers

- Fathers and male carers were not consistently represented at the school-based events. Working hours and the influence of gendered caring roles and responsibilities for their children's learning were identified as key factors. Fathers were reported by mothers and other female carers to be considerably more engaged in their children's learning at home, however, and often had clearly defined roles that were valued greatly by their children.
- There was some evidence that the use of outreach was successful in engaging fathers indirectly at home, by working with the mother or other carer in the first instance. This was achieved by demonstrating the benefits of play for their children, and establishing a first line of communication with the child's nursery.

3. Delivering the activities - methods of engagement and their effectiveness

Learning environment and context

- Most of the schemes within the project delivered school-based activities to parents. The main advantage for the schools was to build or extend relationships with parents, which was often facilitated by meeting a cross-section of teaching and non-teaching staff. Parents regularly valued the opportunity to show support for their child's learning by attending the school, and to learn with their child outside of routines at home.
- The experiences from the different schemes highlighted that there was no easy way to ensure high levels of participation for school-based activities. The attendance at individual sessions was affected by parents' varying work patterns and other family commitments around evenings and weekends. Participation was helped by providing adequate notice, and costing for crèche facilities and additional learner support.
- The FAST scheme was alone within the project in delivering home-based activities to parents. Parents and staff alike often valued the greater flexibility for engaging with the family to suit their circumstances, and modelling the activities directly within the home learning environment. The approach lacked the same opportunities to engage with school staff, so it was important to offer progression to school-based activities.
- A drawback of the home-based approach was that it required staff to be available outside of their regular working hours. This sometimes presented a challenge; particularly where the visits had to be carried out on top of existing workloads and around childcare responsibilities.

Mode of engagement - group and one-to-one activities

- Most of the schemes on the project offered some kind of group activities with parents and children, or less commonly with parents alone as an adult learning model. The opportunity to share ideas and experiences with other parents about supporting children's learning was thought to be one of the main advantages of this format, which regularly provided a route for hearing about or joining social networks at the school.
- Parents commonly lacked confidence about their own literacy skills or curriculum knowledge, and were anxious about any deficits being exposed in front of the group. It was important for the facilitator to manage such differences in parents' confidence and support needs, whilst also imparting information about how to support their children's learning. This often required staff with an adult learning background.
- Whilst only the home visits offered entirely one-to-one engagement for the individual family, most of the schemes were designed to facilitate some level of one-to-one time for the parent and child within a group setting. The approach was thought to have helped to personalise the activities. One-to-one visits were more resource intensive to manage, however, and needed to avoid a perception of 'singling-out' parents.

The parent and child dynamic

- Parents and children nearly always reported positive experiences of learning together, whenever they were afforded this opportunity. The interviews showed that parents and children were sometimes able to reinforce each others' learning, with the child offering the parent a greater insight to their school life and the teaching methods in use. This 'child's eye view' was notably absent from parent-only sessions at primary stage.
- The engagement of children generally proved more difficult where the scheme offered to parents across the whole school. In these situations, it was necessary for the staff to manage quite significant differences in ages and stages within the same group. A focus on shared curriculum themes was found to offer some common ground.
- Whilst it was rarer for the schools to deliver the whole scheme without any direct involvement from their children, it was sometimes appropriate to deliver activities with the parents only. This included where the main focus was to provide parents with strategies for managing children's learning or behaviour, to facilitate parent-to-parent discussion, or where the main focus was on adult learning outcomes.

4. Making and sustaining the link with 'at home' learning

Strategies for linking with 'at home' learning

- A number of common success factors were identified for establishing a link between learning at home and school. These included taking parents' existing positive interactions as a start point (a 'wealth' model), personalising the activities to the individual child and family, and taking into account the home learning environment

Modelling positive parent-child interactions

- An approach for supporting parents with their children's 'at home' learning was to model positive interactions between parent and child, which could be used at home. This was often best achieved by giving parents ideas or techniques to adapt for themselves, rather than seeking to impose whole learning routines.
- Project workers on the educational home visits scheme were able to demonstrate play routines to parents that would help their children learn, and to identify the types of feedback that the parents can provide to the child. This was achieved through the use of story sacks, which included developmentally appropriate toys and games.
- Parents generally welcomed the additional ideas and guidance. They usually pointed out colours or shapes to their child anyway, but the use of play to communicate these ideas was a new approach. Some parents found the volume of toys and resources intimidating, and thought it set unrealistic expectations for them and their child.
- Project staff on the curriculum workshops scheme supported and encouraged parents to try out different reading techniques, using puppetry to make this interactive. Some parents found the association between 'reading' and the 'arts' useful to generate ideas for reading with their child. The use of peer discussion enabled parents to share experiences.

The use of 'take home' resources

- A further method for making the link with 'at home' learning was to provide resources for parents to take home and use directly with their children. The ethos behind this approach was to encourage the sharing of knowledge between home and school. Examples included parents and children designing games or storybooks together.
- The approach of taking home resources was the most successful where it was made locally relevant. This was achieved by the Law and Order scheme, where families played an educational game about local crime issues to inform discussion at home.

Activating the learning at home

- Parents were often found to have tested-out the project activities with their children at home, but this was usually done in quite subtle ways. It was rarer for parents to attempt to recreate whole workshop activities, although some had done so. This occasionally involved other family members; such as where a board game or similar was involved.
- Parents who took part in the home visits reported being more conscious of getting the most out of opportunities to play and learn with their children. They had regularly incorporated role play ideas into routines such as preparing food, bath times or mealtimes. It was not uncommon for parents to involve other family members as well.
- Parents who took part in the curriculum workshops and creative arts often reported a renewed interest in reading with their child. Some had introduced puppetry and crafts or created their own stories to make reading fun. This was usually built upon a strong foundation of more open-ended creative learning practices within the family.
- Parents had occasionally borrowed or purchased new toys or books for the child, where a child was enthusiastic about a particular activity they had done at the session. This was sometimes supported by visits to their local library.

Factors affecting use of the project activities

- Where parents had not used any of the activities or ideas from the project, this was often due to a lack of available time because of family or work responsibilities, or because they thought it 'too ambitious' to recreate the activities at home. This situation was sometimes avoided by providing more open-ended activities that could be adopted 'any time, any place'.
- Parents' responses were also subject to a range of more personal factors, which included their existing role within their child's education, family and cultural influences, and the use of other learning resources such as internet and television at home.

5. Outcomes achieved

Parents' knowledge and understanding

- Parents who took part in the project routinely identified gaining a better understanding of how their children learn. This was usually achieved by learning alongside their child in a supportive environment at school or home, with project staff in a facilitative role.
- Parents' emotional bond with their child was an important factor in understanding their children's learning, and they usually made strong associations between learning and wellbeing. Parents were in a fairly unique position of being able to relate the child's learning to their wider experiences outside of school and within a family context.
- Parents sometimes reported an improved awareness of the curricula and teaching methods used at their child's school, where the project activities were designed to provide this information. Some parents identified a need for continuing guidance from their school, however, with a more direct link to children's learning in the classroom.

Parents' skills and competence

- Most parents reported gaining new skills and competencies for supporting their child's learning at home. They felt more confident to support their child through fun or creative activities to reinforce the child's learning; often making use of everyday situations.
- Parents commonly found that the project helped them to become more responsive to their child's learning at home, and to maintain their child's concentration for longer periods of time. This was thought to be as a result of better understanding of their child as a learner. The project occasionally strengthened parent-child relationships.
- The support from the project may have helped some parents to overcome deep-rooted anxieties about supporting their child to learn. This outcome was achieved by building the parent's own skills and confidence, often in the context of support from other parents.
- Parents in early years' settings were more likely to report positive outcomes from the project. At this stage, parents often reported greater difficulties in identifying step changes in the child's language or literacy skills. In contrast, parents' awareness of reading stages and available support were generally higher by primary stage; although less so for first time parents.

Children's outcomes

- Parents consistently observed more positive attitudes towards learning in their children, after taking part in the project activities. Key indicators included children initiating learning with the parent more regularly; a greater level of interest and enjoyment of reading or play, and the child's recognition of their own progress.
- Parents who were doing their own learning commonly reported benefits for their children. This included where children were inspired by watching their parent learn, and picked up on their confidence. Some parents also reported feeling better informed to discuss issues that affected their child, as a result of their own learning.

- There was limited evidence for the impact of the project on children's literacy or numeracy skills. The project was mainly qualitative in focus, and was not designed to capture information of this type on a large scale. Moreover, parents often considered there to be many other influences on their child's attainment to take into account.
- Parents sometimes observed progress with their child's learning and development, however, including step changes to their reading, writing and communication skills at home. These step changes were usually thought by parents to have been as a result of parents continuing to use the strategies that were modelled for them by project staff.

Parental engagement outcomes

- Parents were quite evenly divided between those for whom the schemes provided an opportunity for further engagement with their child's school, and those for whom there was no real change to their existing patterns of contact. The latter was more often the case where the parents already had a well established relationship with school staff.
- Some parents reported feeling more confident to raise issues or ask questions of the school, and had established new contacts with staff and other parents. Other parents reported no change because they already had a good relationship with school staff.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

- The report concluded that schools have an important role to play in supporting parents with their children's 'at home' learning, and that a variety of models exist to draw upon. The research also suggests that schools often lack the capacity and expertise to run such activities on a regular basis, and that further investment is required in joint training and workforce development for school and adult learning practitioners.
- The project showed that local schemes can be transferred and adapted without relying on significant external investment, but that it is important to consider the training and professional expertise that underpins any given scheme and to ensure that this is taken into account to avoid compromising the quality and outcomes.

The key recommendations from the report are as follows:

1. To examine how workforce development can be strengthened for practitioners who work with adults and children, through more regular opportunities for joint training within the common core, and to include parental engagement and family learning within ITT and CPD for schools.
2. To review the range and quality of available learning programmes that are available to schools for engaging pupils and parents together, and to provide greater flexibility for schools to offer family learning within the timetable as a core curriculum activity.
3. To examine the role of literacy and language development within outreach provided by Sure Start Children's Centres and nurseries, and consider how effective practice for supporting 'at home' learning can be best supported within early years' settings by adopting a wealth model.
4. To further scope the potential for a home visiting as a method for engaging with fathers and wider family members; to review the range of models that are currently offered by primary schools, and to assess their effectiveness.

5. To conduct further research into the role of ICTs, including internet and television, as media for schools to support intergenerational learning; to review the source and quality of available materials, and to provide support for parents to access and use these resources effectively.
6. To conduct further research into the impact that school-promoted family programmes has on siblings and wider family members; to establish the contribution this type of work is making towards family literacy development and strengthening family relationships.
7. To ensure that the role of parents as partners in their children's education is taken into account within the Ofsted review of pupil wellbeing, and to strengthen and extend the involvement of families and parents within the teaching of social and emotional aspects of learning in schools.
8. To create and maintain a national databank of good practice resources and information for schools to support parents with 'at home' learning, with contributions from local authorities and schools across England; covering early years, primary and secondary education, and to consider making funding available to support innovative exchanges of good practice.

1.0 Introduction

In January 2007, ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd were commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to undertake research into how schools can promote the skills needed by parents to support their children's 'at home' learning and development. The project was undertaken in partnership with the National Institute for Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) and John Bastiani (JB) Associates.

The research took place over two years from January 2007 to March 2009. This final report presents the findings from the project. A report for practitioners is also available as a separate document, providing additional information about the schemes that were included within the project; and a good practice checklist for local authorities and schools.

1.1 Aims and objectives

The overall aim of the project was:

To provide policy makers and practitioners with evidence to assist them in developing school-promoted initiatives to encourage parents to develop and enhance their ability to improve their children's learning and development in their own homes.

The project also set out to address the following key research questions:

1. How can schools promote the skills needed by parents to help at-home learning?
2. Do these initiatives actually have any effect on pupil outcomes? How much do they cost?
3. How useful do parents find these initiatives? Have their skills improved?
4. Does parental involvement in these initiatives spill over to other areas of involvement with schools?
5. How can schools encourage "hard to reach parents" to become involved in these schemes?
6. How can good practice in this area be replicated and transferred?

In addressing these questions, an action research method was required, to establish whether promising initiatives that have been developed at a local scale can be replicated and sustained in other settings, without compromising their quality or outcomes.

The project had a particular focus on primary schools, although the decision was taken at the project scoping stage to widen this focus to include early years' settings.

1.2 Method summary

The project methodology was organised into work streams, to reflect the 'development' and 'research' tasks required to transfer examples of local schemes to a different setting, and to assess their effectiveness and outcomes. The following table provides a summary. Further information about the individual schemes, selection criteria and transfer process are provided at Annex One of the report.

Table 1.1 Method summary

Work stream 1: scoping and exploratory work

To review the type and range of schemes in operation; identify promising practice, and short-list a cross section of schemes to participate in the action research stage.

Methods and tasks:

- a literature search and snapshot e-survey of local authorities, covering a mix of Extended Schools, Parenting Support and Family Learning teams (issued n=60, achieved n=22)
- case study visits to examples 'promising' schemes (n=10), to shortlist for the action research stage; comprising staff interviews, parent focus groups and data collection
- Timescale: January-June 2007

Work stream 2: scheme adaptation

To develop a framework and guidelines for the schemes, enabling their transfer to a different local setting; agree with local authorities and host schools to participate, undertake planning and consultation, and provide support to tailor the schemes to each local context.

Methods and tasks:

- planning support, consultation around schemes of work (NIACE)
- Timescale: July-December 2007

Work stream 3: scheme implementation and support

To work with the participant schools and local authorities at key points, offering support with transferring the schemes, planning advice and peer support workshop

Methods and tasks:

- ongoing support and advice; consultations with scheme staff (NIACE)
- observations of joint planning and training events and scheme delivery (n=29)
- peer support workshop at project mid-stage, to share lessons learned
- Timescale: January-July 2008

Work stream 4: scheme evaluation

To develop a project-wide evaluation framework, provide support to the schemes for monitoring and self-evaluation, and undertake research visits and data collection.

Methods and tasks:

- in-depth face-to-face interviews with parents who participated in the activities, using a semi-structured topic guide and of between 30-45 minutes in duration (n=74)
- a small number of paired interviews with children and their parents (n=5)
- in-depth telephone interviews with project staff (n=21), and practitioner focus groups (n=4) with a cross-section of staff from each scheme
- analysis of collated secondary data from the six schemes, comprising; self evaluation reports, attendance logs, session plans, and parent feedback forms
- Timescale: January-December 2008

Table 1.1 Method summary

Work stream 5: reporting and dissemination

To provide ongoing dissemination for the project via a web-site, newsletters and events; and to meet the reporting requirements for the DCSF

- drafting of progress reports, practitioner report and final research report
- development of a project website; dissemination of three research newsletters and project case studies
- end of project celebration event
- Timescale: to end March 2009

A total of six schemes were short-listed from ten, following the literature search, scoping survey and case study visits. They can be identified as follows:

1. Sefton Families and Schools Together (FAST) - educational home visits
2. Rochdale - Community Arts and Literacy (CAL)
3. Tower Hamlets - curriculum workshops
4. Northampton - Working with Families scheme
5. Isle of Wight - Law and Order scheme; Open College Network (OCN)
6. Nottingham - Family Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning (SEAL)¹

The local authority teams were 'paired-up' to enable the schemes to be transferred. Each local authority identified a number of primary schools or nurseries to take part in the project, and the schemes were then adapted and delivered in a new setting. Again, the more detailed criteria and rationale for this approach are described at Annex One.

1.3 Background to the research

This report is published at a time of considerable policy interest in the role of parents as partners in their children's education, and with growing evidence from research to support the relationship between parental engagement and children's learning and development. The 2007 *Children's Plan* renewed the commitment by Government to support parents and families in bringing up their children, and identified a range of measures to strengthen the offer of support to parents and families from schools, Sure Start Children's Centres and local authorities. The *Children's Plan - One Year On* reinforced this message, with a priority to help more parents get involved in their children's learning. The report stated the intention, amongst other measures; to ensure that all new teachers are trained to work with parents, to issue guidance to schools for working with parents as partners in learning, and to reform current arrangements for Home School Agreements (HSAs).

¹ Gateshead initially joined the project to transfer their Wider Family Learning courses, but had to withdraw

There is also a wealth of research evidence to support the impact of parental engagement in their children's learning, and the relationship between 'home' and 'school' as spheres of influence. Whilst much of this literature falls beyond the remit of the study, it is important to highlight some of the key points that underpin the research, which include that:

- the spontaneous interaction between parents and children at home, or '**at home good parenting**' is directly correlated with children's attainment and development¹.
- the quality of the **home learning environment**, when combined with **effective pre-school education**, has lasting benefits for children's intellectual and social development, outweighing factors such as parental occupation, education and income²
- these benefits can be **sustainable** following the transition to primary school, and even mitigate against the effects of a poor quality experience of primary education³.
- the considerable majority of parents reported feeling **at least 'fairly involved' in their children's school life** based on national survey data, and levels of involvement have improved over time based on a comparison between data for 2001 and 2007⁴
- parental engagement in their **child's individual learning** has much clearer educational benefits than parental involvement in other aspects of school life⁵.
- the **socio-economic status** of the family and **parental education** are key predictors of children's attainment⁶, which cut across other home and school-related factors; and,
- parents from families in areas of high **socio-economic disadvantage** often have high aspirations for their children's learning⁷, which can provide a source of resilience, and can help to mitigate against low socio-economic status to some extent⁸.

The Department has provided a synthesis of the evidence regarding parental involvement in their children's education, which further expands on some of these key issues⁹.

The review of parental involvement in their children's education by Desforges and Abouchar (2003) provides a key reference point for this project. The review found clear evidence for the relationship between spontaneous '**at home good parenting**' and children's attainment and adjustment, even after other factors affecting attainment were taken out. Whilst the impact of parental involvement was found to diminish with the age of the child; the impact at primary stage was consistently greater than that of variations in the quality of schools, and was

¹ Desforges, C., and Abouchar, A. (2003) *The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review*. Nottingham: DfES Publications.

² Sylva, K., et. al. (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report*. London: DfES

³ Sammons, P., et. al. (2007) *Effective Pre-School and Primary Education 3-11 (EPPE 3-11) Project: Influences on Children's Attainment and Progress in Key Stage 2: Cognitive Outcomes in Year 5: Full Report*. London: Institute of Education, University of London.

⁴ DCSF (2008) *The Impact of Parental Involvement in their Children's Education*. Research Report. DCSF RR0924.

⁵ Desforges, C., and Abouchar, A. (2003). Op. cit.

⁶ Seaman, P. et., al. (2006) *Informing Change. Parenting and children's resilience in disadvantaged communities*. York: JRF Publications.

⁷ Seaman, P. et., al. (2006). Op. cit.

⁸ Peters, M., Seeds, K., Goldstein, A. and Coleman, N. (2008) *Parental Involvement in Children's Education*. Research Report. DCSF RR034.

⁹ DCSF (2008). Op. cit.

evident across all social classes and ethnic groups. The core educational benefits of effective parental engagement were identified as follows:

- shaping the child's self-concept as learner; and,
- raising their aspirations; both educational and otherwise

The review was inconclusive about the effectiveness of 'interventions' that have been designed to reinforce this more spontaneous activity between parents and children in their homes, however, which it noted '*... have yet to deliver convincingly the achievement bonus that might be expected*'¹. The review concluded that much more could be done to enhance the attainment of working class pupils, if the characteristics of effective parental involvement were drawn together and implemented systematically at a national level.

Taking these findings as a start point, the research project aimed to test the relationship between the following:

- a. the main different types of project interventions and their logic / design;
- b. the process of 'activating' learning between parent and child at home; and
- c. the resulting outcomes for parents and children.

The methodology was based around the concept of transferring examples of local good practice between different local contexts. The aim was to explore the hypothesis that effective parental engagement is relatively universal and can be adapted by schools anywhere. The project also retained a main focus on primary schools, where the impact of parental engagement is the most clearly demonstrated within the research literature; although one 'early years' model was included. The rationale was to explore the issues encountered for parents of very young children, and to consider how early engagement is best managed and sustained.

1.4 Structure of the report

The remainder of this report is structured as follows:

- **Section two** of the report examines the local exchange model that was used for the project. It examines the key issues encountered when transferring the schemes, and considers the lessons learned for other local authorities and schools.
- **Section three** considers the effectiveness of the project activities. It examines the different types and levels of engagement that were achieved by the schools and local authorities within the project, and how they were experienced by the parents.
- **Section four** examines the strategies that were adopted for the different schemes, to make the link with 'at home' learning. The section first considers how this link was made, before considering how the learning was activated by parents within the home.

¹ Desforges, C., and Abouchar, A. (2003) op. cit., p.3.

- **Section five** reviews the outcomes that were experienced by parents, and observed in their children, The section considers the conditions, success factors and barriers that affected the outcomes that were achieved within the project; and,
- **Section six** draws together the findings from the report to conclude on the lessons learned from the project, and the key messages and recommendations for policymakers and practitioners in supporting parents with their children's 'at home' learning.

2.0 Exchanging local good practice - lessons learned from the project

This section of the report examines the lessons learned from the model that was used for the project, which involved local authorities and schools working together to transfer good practice for supporting parents with their children's 'at home' learning. The section first draws upon the research interviews and focus group data to review the effectiveness of this model in broad terms, by examining the strategic planning, costs, and training inputs that were involved. It then goes on to review the role of multi-agency work within the project, and the effectiveness of the different approaches that were taken for identifying and recruiting parents to take part.

Key findings

The benefits and drawbacks of a local linking approach

- ▶ The local authorities and schools on the project highlighted a number of success factors when transferring local good practice. These included the importance of having shared values, skill-sets and professional frameworks; senior level backing and leadership, and contact between practitioners from the earliest possible stage.
- ▶ Working together to exchange a particular scheme or curriculum programme was thought to offer a “deep” level of insight to how common issues around parental engagement are tackled in different local areas. This often gave the project teams new ideas for developing and extending provision within their own local area.
- ▶ The project highlighted the degree of variation in how support for parents and families is structured at a local authority level. This proved challenging when attempting to transfer a scheme between settings with a different training or funding regime. However, there were also benefits from seeing how other authorities had gone about joining-up their provision for parenting support, family learning and extended schools.

Engaging schools

- ▶ The schools that were recruited for the project were all at a stage where they were able to introduce new parental engagement work; whether following an extended schools audit, change in leadership, or to consolidate existing activities with parents. This was also an important factor in securing Head teacher backing. The schools were at varying stages with delivering work with parents, but none were starting completely ‘from scratch’.
- ▶ The schools often had a contrasting demographic profile, which threw-up some differences in terms of adapting a scheme to a different social and cultural context. This often presented a new set of tools for engaging with hard to reach parents.

Multi-agency involvement

- ▶ The involvement of community organisations was important to the schemes in different ways. In Sefton, multi-agency referral networks had sustained the FAST home visits model, whereas on the Isle of Wight the Law and Order scheme engaged a variety of youth justice partners to raise awareness of the work of the sector. It proved difficult to replicate these models within the project, as they had often built-up over time. A scaled-down approach was needed, tapping into local networks.

Training and professional development

- ▶ The project highlighted the importance of practitioners having a shared understanding of professional roles and expertise for working with children and adults. The transfer of schemes was more challenging where the project crossed-over between different local authority teams, or different parental engagement arrangements in schools. This was addressed to some extent through joint training and work shadowing.

Scheme costs

- ▶ The schemes received a small support budget of up to £4,000 over the two-year period, and drew upon in-kind contributions and reciprocity from the teams involved. The small scale of the funding reflected the aims of testing local exchanges of good practice. Expenditure included training visits between staff, new learning materials and resources, and staff replacement costs. The schemes varied in scope from around 6 days time inputs required to plan and run individual sessions with follow-up, upwards to 22 days for establishing outreach visits to families.
- ▶ The budget was generally thought to be adequate for a small scale exchange of good practice. The time inputs for training and planning were higher than anticipated due to some differences in the skills and professional background of the staff within the paired local authorities, however, and there were thought to be some risks of reduced quality without adequate core funding. Some elements of the schemes were mainstreamed with support from local authority and school budgets, where they proved effective.

Targeting, recruitment and publicity

- ▶ Parents reported varying motivations for taking part in the project, but they most often cited the opportunity to support their child's learning and to spend time together. They were often found to be particularly receptive to attending at key transition points. Some parents attended out of a sense of responsibility to support their child's school.
- ▶ The schools faced quite specific challenges for engaging with their local community, depending on their size, location, and demographic profile, and it proved important to design the recruitment strategy around this. However, the involvement of children in recruiting their parents was nearly always an effective method. Some schools found it a successful approach to target a whole year group, linked to a curriculum theme.
- ▶ There was mixed success with recruiting 'hard to reach' parents. The school-based schemes engaged quite a high proportion of parents who were already networked to some extent. Some progress was made by using more targeted recruitment and drawing upon the support of bi-lingual staff. The outreach method proved more effective in engaging vulnerable families.
- ▶ Fathers and male carers were not consistently represented at the school-based events. Working hours and the influence of gendered caring roles and responsibilities for their children's learning were identified as key factors. Fathers were reported by mothers and other female carers to be considerably more engaged in their children's learning at home, however, and often had clearly defined roles that were valued greatly by their children.
- ▶ There was some evidence that the use of outreach was successful in engaging fathers indirectly at home, by working with the mother or other carer in the first instance. This was achieved by demonstrating the benefits of play for their children, and establishing a first line of communication with the child's nursery.

2.1 Local linking - the main benefits and challenges

The project highlighted a number of common success factors for local authorities and schools coming together to exchange good practice in parental engagement. The main ones were as follows:

Table 2.1 Success factors for transferring local good practice

1. The importance of shared skill-sets and professional development

The project underlined the importance of each set of practitioners having compatible professional skills and expertise, when transferring schemes to a different local context. For example, the pairing of Nottingham with the Isle of Wight proved effective because it brought together two Family Learning Services with a shared ethos, and compatible provision. This formed the basis of a meaningful exchange, despite the obvious challenges in terms of socio-demographic context.

Elsewhere, the differences in the professional backgrounds of staff sometimes made the transfer more problematic. This underlined the need to consider the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) dimension of the schemes as one of the first priorities.

2. Identifying clear strategic priorities and goals

It proved to be important for the local authorities and schools to have shared goals, and to identify in advance the planned contribution towards achieving local targets. For example, there was a clear rationale for Rochdale to adapt the educational home visits from Sefton, because they offered a viable model for engaging with asylum seeker and refugee communities. It proved more difficult to sustain the level of commitment that was required from staff, in situations where these goals were not established from the outset, or where the timescales were not clearly defined.

3. The importance of senior level backing and ownership

The lead contact for each local scheme was the Head of Service or equivalent in most instances. This proved invaluable in gaining clearance for practitioners to work on the project, and provided extra leverage when approaching the schools to take part.

4. Equity in the exchange process

The project relied on schools and local authorities offering time and resources to transfer their expertise. Some of the project staff felt that the process had been too one-sided, however - either as a result of staff turnover, or a perceived lack of reciprocal time committed by the paired authority. In hindsight, it was thought that signing-up to a work plan with key milestones would have helped to ensure that the exchange was equitable.

5. An early opportunity to share information and experience at all levels

Several of the most effective project exchanges involved residential visits to observe the scheme in its original context, review materials, and meet with practitioners and parents. This was thought to have been important to understand the systems and professional ethos that underpin the scheme, and to identify the training needs for staff. Where this was done, it helped to provide a realistic view of what would be feasible with individual groups of parents.

Working together in a focussed way was generally thought to be a useful model for local authorities and schools to gain a "deeper level of understanding" of each others practice, which went beyond more general membership of professional networks. However, it also underlined the differences between local areas and schools in how provision for parents and families is structured. Most of the schemes involved working with both parents and children to make the link with 'at home' learning, and therefore required different inputs from Family Learning, Extended Schools and Children's Services teams. The relationship between these teams was found to differ between local areas.

The differences in provision were the most challenging, where there was no direct link-up between the teams that were paired-up for the project. For example, it was necessary for the pairing of Sefton and Rochdale to be asymmetrical, because the outbound Sefton FAST model needed Children's Services involvement, whereas the inbound Community Arts and Literacy (CAL) model sat better with Extended Schools. This led to a more complex exchange model, which made it more difficult to transfer the schemes in their original format without considerable extra training and development for the staff.

There were also benefits from learning about how other authorities had gone about joining-up their provision internally, through departments working together. New operational contacts were developed between Extended Schools and Children's Services within Sefton as a direct result of the collaboration required for the project. The Isle of Wight team also improved their internal collaboration with Children's Services, as the following case study illustrates.

Case study: Isle of Wight

Joining-up parental engagement at a strategic level

The Isle of Wight Family Learning Service set-out to import the Family SEAL (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning) model that has been developed in Nottingham. The model is delivered in ten-week blocks, and involves a Family Learning tutor working alongside school staff.

The Nottingham team hosted a two-day visit by the Isle of Wight Family Learning Service team. The aim was to take a 'whole systems' approach to observing practice in another local authority. The visit included observations of Family SEAL and ESOL Family Language, and a review of learning materials. The scheme manager commented that:

"It was the first time the whole team have gone on a visit together, including admin staff, tutors and managers. It made a real difference to the learning process. The staff involved were from both adult and children's service directorates and included parenting and family learning team members. This has had huge benefits for understanding and developing operational links".

(Local Authority Manager, Isle of Wight)

The visit illustrated how SEAL has been developed on an integrated basis between schools and wider parenting support and family learning authorities in Nottingham. After the visit, the Family Learning Service approached their Children's Services Directorate to explore how this model might be adapted to the Isle of Wight. This has resulted in their representation on the SEAL steering group. It is hoped that the project has provided a stepping stone for strengthening the level of parental engagement in SEAL on the Island.

The pairing of the local authorities also resulted in some **contrasts in terms of size and socio-demographic profile**. Whilst some of the scheme leaders felt that they would have preferred a wider pool of schemes and authorities to select from, the differences in profile were not thought to pose a particular barrier to joint working. Most of the authorities identified parallels in terms of meeting the needs of diverse communities, raising aspirations, and working with schools at varying stages with parental engagement.

2.2 Engaging schools

The **selection of schools** to take part in the project was guided by a mix of both practical and strategic factors. The first priority was to avoid setting schools up to fail, and the local authorities nearly always identified schools where there was some recent experience of delivering activities with parents. The nurseries in Rochdale had good links with the Family Literacy Workers and were already undertaking pre-transition visits on a small scale, whilst the two Nottingham primaries had been “*warmed-up*” with Family Learning short courses.

Despite these steps to minimise the risks, however, there was a genuine spirit of challenging the schools to take their parental engagement work “*one step further*”. The Sefton Extended Schools team identified four schools with very different needs - three primaries and a special school, but each was selected because the project had the potential to strengthen their Extended Schools core offer. In Northampton, too, the schools saw the project as a timely opportunity to tackle curriculum issues with parents:

“The two schools had to be solutions-focussed, “how to do” attitude schools. Those two schools are a long way in how they engage with their parents, and the parents were ready to move to that level. Parent surveys in Northampton schools showed there was a demand for this... a curriculum focus”

(Local Authority Manager, Northampton)

In addition to providing the right opportunity at the right time for the schools, the active engagement of Head-teachers was found to be a success factor in getting the schools on board. This approach proved particularly successful in Sefton, where the Head-teachers grasped the potential benefits of the CAL activities at an early stage, and several went on to champion the scheme within their school and raise awareness with staff directly.

The differences in the demographic profile of local schools within each pairing provided an opportunity to test the schemes in a different context. This was particularly beneficial for the Sefton FAST (Families and Schools Together) educational home visits, as it provided an opportunity to test the model in a majority Pakistani and Bengali community in Rochdale where there are specific challenges relating to the engagement of wider family members, and where support is provided from bilingual workers.

2.3 Multi-agency involvement

Several of the schemes involved **partner organisations** in a supporting role - either to assist with the identification and referral of parents (Sefton FAST), or to support delivery (Law and Order). In these instances, it was necessary for the hosting authority or school to consider how the equivalent organisations might be identified within their local area. This was achieved with varying degrees of success within the project timeframe.

In Sefton, the referral networks surrounding the FAST model were felt by staff to be an integral part of the service because they ensure that awareness is raised with families by a Health Visitor when child development issues arise. Without this supporting infrastructure,

the Rochdale team experienced greater difficulties in accessing parents who might not be in contact with mainstream services. This required more of a drip-drip approach.

In Nottingham the exchange of the Law and Order course was able to happen in a fairly short time scale by building on existing partnerships and the well established infrastructure and expertise of the Family Learning service to engage new partner organisations as is illustrated by the following case study.

Case study: Nottingham Ensuring multi-agency involvement

The Open College Network (OCN) accredited Law and Order scheme was developed by the Family Learning Service on the Isle of Wight. The scheme engages parents, or parents and children together, to participate in an eight-week course with a focus on citizenship education and awareness of crime and community safety issues. One element of the course is to hold talks and discussion with professionals, to raise awareness and break down barriers.

To achieve multi-agency involvement for the project, the Family Learning Tutor was able to share their own experiences of approaching criminal justice partners on the Isle of Wight, and to signpost the Tutor in Nottingham to local sources of information. With this support, the Nottingham Tutor was able to secure the involvement of the Police and Fire Service, and arranged for parents to visit the local Galleries of Justice. This was thought to have provided a good level of multi-agency involvement for the first year of running the course.

Key success factors for developing this multi-agency approach included:

- undertaking initial research to map the scheme to key local priorities and targets - the local Crime and Disorder Audit provided a first point of reference, and helped to identify who the local criminal justice partners might be
- finding a named individual at operational level to approach as a first point of contact – the Police Officer who supported the course was engaged through a colleague; and,
- signing-up to realistic time commitments over the course of a year

2.4 Training and professional development

The project highlighted the importance of practitioners from different sectors and backgrounds having a shared understanding of their professional roles and expertise for working with children and adults. For example, the transfer of the Law and Order scheme from the Isle of Wight to Nottingham was assisted by the fact that each team was familiar with core principles and practice of Family Learning. The tutor described how it was possible to integrate the scheme as part of a wider suite of Family Learning courses that are offered to local schools. This was thought to have been aided by the primary school background of the Nottingham Family Learning team. This meant that the tutor was able to engage parents and children together and address both sets of learning outcomes.

The transfer of schemes was found to be more challenging where the project crossed-over between different local authority teams, such as adult and children's services. One of the Sefton FAST Coordinators described how most of the team has a background in early years, for example, which is supplemented with twelve months of intensive training. Although the

Rochdale Parent Partnership Service also works with both adults and children, the Rochdale Family Literacy Workers do not have the same background in child development. The difference in skill-sets was addressed to some extent by providing initial orientation in the developmental stages for 0-3 year olds, scaling-down the visits, and focussing on relationship-building with the family.

Key differences in staffing and training were mirrored at individual school level.

The Tower Hamlets Curriculum Coordinator described how the Parental Engagement team draws many of their staff from a teaching background, for example. This was thought to have shaped the curriculum workshops and their responsiveness to local schools. In contrast, the Northampton Family Support Worker role was perceived to have a greater focus on adult learning, with staff not necessarily having a school teaching background. This had very direct impact on the format of the workshops delivered in Northampton. Whilst it was possible to model the format based on a shared understanding of parental engagement, it was necessary to rely on support from Reception Teachers and Curriculum Managers to link the workshops to the curriculum. This placed the Family Support Workers in a slightly different - more pastoral - role in relation to the workshop delivery.

The issue of training and development was thought to pose the greatest risks in relation to any **further cascading of the schemes**. The support provided by Tower Hamlets was sufficient to deliver curriculum workshops in two Northampton schools, for example, but project staff noted that this did not constitute having transferred the "entire model", which also includes the training and infrastructure encompassed within the Tower Hamlets team:

"The concern is that the model retains it's quality as it is snowballed to other local authorities... as it is branded as a Tower Hamlets model, it will have implications for us, and we really need to consider how that's being transferred or who is transferring it and how well they know it"

(Local Authority Manager, Tower Hamlets)

The plans for making the schemes sustainable are considered further in the next section.

2.5 Adapting the scheme content and materials

The local authorities and schools within the project adopted a variety of approaches to **tailor the format and content of the schemes** to suit local needs. A key challenge in this respect was to identify which elements of the scheme to transfer, whilst preserving the quality and outcomes of the original model. This required a process of negotiation between the teams involved, based on an understanding of the context for the individual schools.

The adaptation was sometimes assisted by developing a 'menu' of activities to draw upon, within an overarching framework. This was achieved by reviewing the scheme in its' original context to identify the essential elements that cannot be compromised. For example, the Tower Hamlets team had already developed sets of learning materials that were designed to be accessible by staff with different levels of training and expertise. These materials proved invaluable for the Northampton schools, although the Curriculum Coordinator was keen to emphasise that the workshops were never intended to be delivered entirely *"off the shelf"* and still required a school-by-school approach to delivery.

The staff interviews also showed that it was important for the host local authority and school to have clear objectives about what they needed to get out of the scheme. It was rarely the case that the scheme offered an *entirely* new approach for supporting parental engagement, and there was a priority to ensure that the exchange added value to the work that was already taking place in each school. The Sefton Extended Schools team attended an observation of a Community Arts and Learning event in Rochdale, for example, and found that the emphasis on supporting parents around transition and use of creative arts activities closely mirrored their own work. The visit resulted in the Sefton Extended Schools team taking away quite specific additional ideas, however, which included:

- the combination of poetry and art within a single event;
- the culmination of the session in a professionally finished book of poetry and artwork for the families to take home; and,
- a 'whole school' approach to sharing the experience with other pupils.

This focussed approach was thought to have been a success factor in delivering the sessions within a relatively short timescale, because it enabled the Sefton team to piggy-back the scheme on transition work that had already been earmarked for specific schools. The schemes generally proved the most straightforward to adapt where they identified specific time-bound activities, such as an event (CAL), workshop (curriculum workshops), or course (Law and Order). Greater difficulties were encountered, however, where the aim of the exchange was to re-model aspects of a whole service (FAST home visits) or a school-wide approach towards parental engagement (Working with Families).

2.5.1 Benefits from adapting the schemes

The endorsement of the scheme by another local authority team or school was sometimes thought to have ***helped to validate the original format***. For example, the Rochdale Family Literacy Workers found that the shorter two-week format of the home visits was not quite enough to give them the desired level of contact with local families, for example. This provided the Sefton FAST team with evidence to support the four-week model, at a time when a funding review had placed the team under pressure to scale-back the visits.

The process of sharing good practice through the project was also thought to have encouraged reflexive practice. This sometimes benefited the original model by giving the local authority team new ideas about how to develop the scheme further, or highlighting opportunities to engage new target groups. The scheme manager for the Isle of Wight described how the Law and Order scheme was "rejuvenated" by the experience of working with the Nottingham team, for example. The scheme has since been accredited to Level 2 and tailored to meet the objectives of the Family Learning Impact Funding (FLIF), and there are plans to develop a more targeted version to support work with foster parents.

2.6 The scheme inputs and costs

The research explored the time and resource inputs that were required to plan and deliver the different schemes¹. As it was necessary to provide a £4,000 budget to each local authority to cover staff replacement costs, travel and subsistence and essential materials², the scheme inputs were explored in a wider context of a) the type and level of time commitments needed to deliver the schemes, and b) their financial sustainability. Broadly speaking, the time and resource inputs required to deliver the schemes was found to vary according to a number of key variables. These included the following:

- The scope and complexity of the scheme to be transferred
- The existing skills and experience of the recipient team; and
- The core funding arrangements for the local authorities and schools

The core project budget was utilised in a variety of ways, which included the following:

- **staff replacement costs** - all of the schemes involved some level of staff time to attend initial planning meetings, to organise and deliver training to the opposite number local authority, and to work with the schools or nurseries to plan and deliver the activities with parents. The time inputs varied from around 6 days to plan and run individual sessions (such as workshops or events), to 22 days for establishing outreach visits to families. These inputs can be scaled upwards according to the numbers of schools involved. They are also variable according to other factors; such as whether the scheme is planned as a stand alone or as part of a rolling programme of activities for parents. In Sefton, the start-up time for the CAL scheme was kept to a minimum because the Extended Schools Team planned the scheme as part of a wider programme of events that were scheduled for local schools on a 'transitions' theme.
- **whole team exchange visits** - Nottingham and Isle of Wight teams front-loaded the funding to cover the initial exchange visits, which involved all of their staff, noting that it would not have been possible to fund activities at this scale from their core budgets. The Tower Hamlets, Rochdale and Sefton FAST teams used the funding to offset a mix of staff replacement costs, travel and subsistence and learning materials.
- **creative arts resources and materials** - Sefton Extended Schools took a slightly different approach of allocating a budget of £1,000 'per school' to cover sessional costs for the community artists and poets, books and resources, catering and scenery. This school-level spend was considered important to help make the scheme a "showcase" that would be memorable to the parents and kick-start other activities.

The interviews with project staff showed that the funding was supported by a significant level of 'in kind' time contributions. The process of offering training materials to another local authority was thought to be particularly time consuming. Examples included where the local authorities had built on the relationships developed through the project to support each other

¹ For a more detailed consideration of the costs and inputs required to run the schemes on a larger scale (i.e. in their original context) please refer to the Practitioner's Report that is available alongside this Research Report.

² The provision of development funding was essential to ensure the participation of the local authority and school staff on top of their existing work commitments. The funding clearly introduces design effects to the research, however, which limit the usefulness of any attempts to compare and contrast the levels of expenditure between the different schemes

in preparing for Ofsted inspection, and further sharing of learning materials. A more detailed breakdown of the costs and time inputs required per scheme is presented in *Report No. 2: A guide for practitioners*, which is available as a separate document to complement this research report.

On balance, most of the local authorities and schools considered that the funding of £4,000 combined with 'in kind' contributions was sufficient for a showcase, but warned against seeing this as an alternative to adequately funded core provision in the longer term. Although it would arguably be less expensive to repeat the activities once established, the project benefited from having staff offering reciprocal expertise and materials free of charge. These hidden costs would need to be met, and tapping into core budgets was thought to be the most sustainable way of doing this.

The Sefton Extended Schools team had gone some way towards 'mainstreaming' the CAL model, by allocating an extra 16 days of staff time to support schools within the authority the following year. This support will be delivered on the condition that each school provides match funding of £500 to cover delivery costs. The approach was only made possible by the flexibility within the Extended Schools budget, and the ability to use the project model to take forward a pre-identified strategic priority¹.

The picture was also rather mixed at individual school level. A number of the schools had incorporated elements of the project activities, such as parent workshops or courses, and intended to fund them from mainstream budgets the following year. It was acknowledged that parental engagement still falls short of being the "bread and butter" of school funding, however. One Head-teacher conceded that they would be unlikely to release staff at the same level of resource without the 'spotlight' that was provided by taking part in a national DCSF funded project, and the additional local authority support.

2.7 Targeting, recruitment and publicity

The local authorities and schools approached the targeting and recruitment of parents in various ways, depending on the scale and focus of each scheme. This section first considers parents' motivations for attending the schemes, before examining the practical methods that were used to recruit parents for school-based and home-based activities.

2.7.1 Parents' motivations for attending

The parents who were interviewed reported having different motivations for taking part in the activities. The reasons most commonly given by the parents were as follows:

- **supporting their child's reading** - although the publicity usually avoided direct references to literacy or numeracy, it was common for parents to assign a high priority to anything that would help with their child's reading. This was particularly so for parents of children starting Reception year, when there was a heightened anxiety about children's reading progress, and when it seemed to be a case of "*right message, right time*". Some of the parents described overcoming a lack of confidence about their own reading skills to attend, if they thought it would benefit their child.

¹ Funding was already earmarked on the theme of arts and learning, to support the Liverpool Capital of Culture status, and the project model dovetailed with funding arrangements to support the Parenting Support strand of the Extended Schools Core Offer with schools within the authority

- **an opportunity for quality time with the child** - parents from across the different schemes identified that they would make it a priority to attend events or activities at school that were considered important *by their child*; especially where their the invitation was extended from the child directly. Some parents saw the activities as being a "*special occasion*", and had rearranged work commitments so that they could attend.
- **a sense of responsibility to support the school** - parents from multilingual families were often keen to ensure that they supported the more formal teaching of English language skills at their child's school, and the 'learning' theme of the schemes provided an opportunity to do so. This had a further impact on how the activities were applied at home, as is considered further in the next section; and,
- **getting involved with issues affecting the local area** - the parents from the Law and Order scheme were often motivated by the chance to have a say about crime in their local area, which was a key theme within the scheme publicity. The parents reported having an interest in "*helping improve the estate and teaching the kids about safety*", and "*about where we live... giving to society*".

The opportunity for contact with other parents was also widely valued, although this was rarely a main reason for attending. The focus of the activities meant that parents usually saw the schemes as being about them and their individual child specifically, rather than a more general informational or networking event.

2.7.2 School-based recruitment

Most of the schemes were school-based, and the recruitment was therefore managed by the school, either with or without support from the local authority team.

A key message from the project was that schools often faced quite specific challenges for engaging with their local community, depending on their size, location, and demographic profile, and that it was important to design the recruitment strategy around this. Some of the challenges, and the schools' responses to them, were as follows:

- **engaging working parents** - one primary school in a relatively affluent area had encountered difficulties with recruitment in the past, because there was a high proportion of working parents. The Head-teacher knew from experience that it was important to provide several months' notice, to get parents to attend. A written invitation was therefore sent to the targeted year group, along with staff raising awareness with parents in the playground. This resulted in a good level of attendance.
- **overcoming travel distances** - a special school on the project faced a particular challenge with many of the families living some distance from the school. This meant that there were fewer opportunities to meet with parents and build relationships around pick-up and drop-off points, as many of the children arrived by minibus. The attendance was improved to some extent by providing transport and raising awareness via pupils and parents. The Head teacher identified that this was part of a long-term process.

Despite these specific challenges, a number of recruitment methods were thought to have helped increase levels of attendance. They included the following:

- **recruiting parents with encouragement from their children** – the use of leaflets taken home and / or designed by the pupils proved effective with some parents, who were found to respond well to encouragement from their child; and,
- **mixed method and multi-level recruitment** - most of the schemes ultimately used a variety of methods to reinforce the publicity for the schemes. For example, one school undertook awareness-raising with pupils, through the school newsletter, and through one-to-one telephone contact with parents by the Learning Mentor.

The following case study illustrates how a coordinated approach was successfully used by one school at a 'whole year group' level.

Case study: Northampton

Multi-method recruitment involving parents and pupils

In Northampton, the two primaries followed a tried-and-tested approach that is used in Tower Hamlets when working with a new school to deliver the curriculum workshops. The approach places an emphasis on engaging school staff in the decision-making process from the start, and undertaking activities with the pupils and parents by providing the text to be used at the session in advance. The specific steps were as follows:

- consultation with Curriculum Coordinators, Classroom Teachers and support staff to discuss the purpose of the workshop and establish links with the curriculum
- agreement upon a specific year group to target
- Foundation / Reception teachers introduce the text to the class the week before, and encourage parents to get involved through the 'reading partners' scheme
- publicity reinforced through the local authority team and school, with an emphasis on the opportunity to take a book home at the end of the session
- reminders through assemblies and routine parent contact with school staff

This approach helped to generate a good level of awareness of the scheme amongst parents within the year group, and the workshop places were quickly taken.

A different approach again was taken by two of the schools on the project. In Nottingham, the primaries each offered the Law and Order scheme to existing groups of learners who had participated in other Family Learning courses. This was partly because of the timescales that were involved. Nottingham had joined the project at a late stage, and this provided the most realistic option of engaging parents at short notice.

The method also had the benefit of offering progression to existing groups of learners, which included parents with additional support needs. The group sizes were boosted to some extent through word of mouth, and by the participation of other family members who were not involved with the previous course. The drawback was, of course, that the scheme did not reach a significant number of additional parents within the school.

2.7.3 Engaging hard to reach parents

There was mixed evidence for the success of the schemes in engaging 'hard to reach' parents and carers, when considered across the project.

The use of **outreach recruitment** provided by far the most effective strategy. The two nurseries in Rochdale identified a role for the educational home visits in helping to engage families of the new intake, with a focus on 'hard to reach' parents. This approach was based on the Sefton FAST model, which emphasises early engagement to support transition to nursery. The following case study explains how this was adapted to Rochdale.

Case study: Rochdale

Engaging 'hard to reach' groups to support learning at home

The Rochdale Family Learning service was supported by Sefton FAST to adapt their model of educational home visits. This involves a series of visits to engage parent and child on a one-to-one basis, with the aim of improving their language, literacy and communication skills through play. Two Rochdale Family Literacy Workers, who are part funded by local nurseries to work with families, received the outreach training.

The scheme faced a challenge in engaging asylum seekers and refugees within one area of Rochdale, where many adults have not been through the education system themselves and are often reluctant to engage with the local nurseries.

As a result of the outreach model and project staff having a regular presence within the local community, the team felt that the scheme had raised the profile of the nursery and challenged negative perceptions of the estate. Families recognised the staff while they were out, and would approach them directly to discuss their children's progress having received the home visits, which did not happen previously.

As might be anticipated for the school-based schemes, the recruitment resulted in a high proportion of parents who were already networked to some extent. It was not uncommon for parents attending the sessions to recognise many of the usual participants in these types of events. It was sometimes a slight adjustment in the recruitment approach to include a more targeted focus that made the difference. Some approaches included:

- **support staff giving parents individual encouragement in advance** -for some parents who lacked confidence, the approach of having a familiar member of staff at the school such as Learning Mentor offer them encouragement was found to increase their chances of attending. This was done in a subtle way to avoid any stigma, building on the positive relationships that were already in place; and,
- **providing bi-lingual versions of publicity and materials** - for example, some of the Bangladeshi parents who attended the curriculum workshops in Northampton commented positively on the fact that this effort was made by the school staff.

There was thought to have been some progress in engaging smaller numbers of non-traditional participants within established groups, by using these approaches. For example, one of the school staff who had helped to coordinate the workshops commented that:

“I was able to offer it to everybody [in the year group], but I targeted certain parents who were not really doing much with their kids at home,,, three or four of those parents came, which was brilliant”

(Family Support Worker, Northampton)

The engagement of **fathers and male carers** was less prominent within the school events, which reflects wider patterns of attendance by fathers at primary stage. It was not uncommon for staff to speak of “a few dads” having attended as a relative success. Moreover, much of the language that was used by staff and parents reflected the gendered nature of participation in these kinds of events: “our usual group of mums”.

The interviews suggest that a number of factors affected fathers’ attendance:

- **fathers’ availability during working hours** was often a key issue affecting their engagement in events at the school. This was particularly the case for fathers within the interview sample who reported to work very long hours, and whose participation in their children’s learning centred much more on the home;
- **the subdivision of parenting roles and responsibilities** within the family was also reported to be a factor. Some parents described different parenting styles or attributes within the household that guided who from the family would attend certain events. So, for example, one mother who attended a curriculum workshop described how the emphasis on storytelling and play was off-putting for her husband, who usually attended more academically related meetings for their older children;
- **language barriers** were reported amongst some families where English was not the first language. In Tower Hamlets and Rochdale, for example, it was not uncommon for fathers within the Bangladeshi community to speak very little English. In these situations, parent-child interaction within the home sometimes centred on the child ‘teaching’ the parent English language skills that had been acquired at school; and,
- in a few cases, fathers were thought to have been deterred by the fact that events at their child’s primary school or nursery tended to be **female-dominated**. Based on experience, therefore, the fathers would avoid attending. The predominance of female staff within the early years workforce is a recognised barrier to fathers’ engagement¹.

It is important to set these findings about gender in the context of the project, of course, which was concerned with nurseries and primary schools. Previous research shows that fathers’ engagement rises considerably at secondary stage², and a different pattern of attendance might be anticipated if the project was re-run with older children.

¹ See for example: Page, J., et. al. (2008) A review of how fathers can be better recognised and supported through DCSF policy. DCSF-RB040. Nottingham: DCSF Publications.

² This evidence is fairly dispersed within the literature, but see for example: Goldman, R. (2005) *Fathers’ involvement in their children’s education*. Nottingham: DfES Publications.

The outreach visits again proved rather more effective at engaging fathers and other extended family members; albeit in a fairly *indirect* way¹. This was achieved by engaging with the family 'in situ'. The project staff described how extended family members, including fathers, would often be present during the visit, which might take place at an evening or weekend. It was common for them to observe the activities that the outreach worker was doing with the parent (usually the mother) and child, and to see how positively the child responded. The outcome was sometimes to make first contact with the father and raise awareness of what the nursery could offer.

In Rochdale, the predominance of Bangladeshi families within the scheme also gave this engagement a particular cultural dimension. The project workers described how fathers were often reluctant for the mother to attend the nursery with the child, as the mother's role was defined around particular household responsibilities. As such, the children were commonly dropped-off and collected from nursery by grandparents. As a result of engaging with fathers directly in the home, the project staff reported that some of the fathers were more receptive to their wives attending the nursery, and recognised the value of their child's play.

The project interviews highlighted that fathers' existing engagement in their children's learning within the **household** was often much greater than might be surmised from accounts by school staff. Mothers who were interviewed for the project often described the father having a pivotal role in supporting their child's learning at home, and the child attaching particular importance to this time spent together. The accounts that were provided placed an emphasis on *quality* of time spent with the child, rather than frequency:

"He's the one that's out at work all day so the couple of hours that he does at home with them...he'll come back and the kids will tell him straightaway what they've done today. When [child] does his homework, even though I've checked it through, he'll want his dad to do the same thing as well...He will sit there and read to them and he will do their homework with them, play and everything"

(Mother, Isle of Wight)

These findings perhaps emphasise the importance of distinguishing between fathers' engagement with schools, and fathers' engagement in their children's learning in a wider context. As a purposive sample was not used for the research interviews, further enquiry is necessary to more clearly establish the extent of these differences.

¹ Previous research has also recommended outreach as a possible method for raising fathers' participation. See again: Page, J., et. al. (2008) op. cit.

3.0 Delivering the activities - methods of engagement and their effectiveness

This chapter of the report considers the key characteristics of the schemes within the project, and their advantages and drawbacks for engaging parents and children. The chapter begins by identifying some of the main areas of variation between the schemes in terms of how and where the activities were delivered, including the learning environment and context, mode of engagement and the roles of parents and children. It then goes on to summarise the lessons learned from the project under each of these headings, drawing upon the staff and parent interviews from across the project.

Key findings

Learning environment and context

- ▶ Most of the schemes within the project delivered school-based activities to parents. The main advantage for the schools was to build or extend relationships with parents, which was often facilitated by meeting a cross-section of teaching and non-teaching staff. Parents regularly valued the opportunity to show support for their child's learning by attending the school, and to learn with their child outside of routines at home.
- ▶ The experiences from the different schemes highlighted that there was no easy way to ensure high levels of participation for school-based activities. The attendance at individual sessions was affected by parents' varying work patterns and other family commitments around evenings and weekends. Participation was helped by providing adequate notice, and costing for crèche facilities and additional learner support.
- ▶ The FAST scheme was alone within the project in delivering home-based activities to parents. Parents and staff alike often valued the greater flexibility for engaging with the family to suit their circumstances, and modelling the activities directly within the home learning environment. The approach lacked the same opportunities to engage with school staff, so it was important to offer progression to school-based activities.
- ▶ A drawback of the home-based approach was that it required staff to be available outside of their regular working hours. This sometimes presented a challenge; particularly where the visits had to be carried out on top of existing workloads and around childcare responsibilities.

Mode of engagement - group and one-to-one activities

- ▶ Most of the schemes on the project offered some kind of group activities with parents and children, or less commonly with parents alone as an adult learning model. The opportunity to share ideas and experiences with other parents about supporting children's learning was thought to be one of the main advantages of this format, which regularly provided a route for hearing about or joining social networks at the school.
- ▶ Parents commonly lacked confidence about their own literacy skills or curriculum knowledge, and were anxious about any deficits being exposed in front of the group. It was important for the facilitator to manage such differences in parents' confidence and support needs, whilst also imparting information about how to support their children's learning. This often required staff with an adult learning background.

- ▶ Whilst only the home visits offered entirely one-to-one engagement for the individual family, most of the schemes were designed to facilitate some level of one-to-one time for the parent and child within a group setting. The approach was thought to have helped to personalise the activities. One-to-one visits were more resource intensive to manage, however, and needed to avoid a perception of ‘singling-out’ parents.

The parent and child dynamic

- ▶ Parents and children nearly always reported positive experiences of learning together, whenever they were afforded this opportunity. The interviews showed that parents and children were sometimes able to reinforce each others’ learning, with the child offering the parent a greater insight to their school life and the teaching methods in use. This ‘child’s eye view’ was notably absent from parent-only sessions at primary stage.
- ▶ The engagement of children generally proved more difficult where the scheme offered to parents across the whole school. In these situations, it was necessary for the staff to manage quite significant differences in ages and stages within the same group. A focus on shared curriculum themes was found to offer some common ground.
- ▶ Whilst it was rarer for the schools to deliver the whole scheme without any direct involvement from their children, it was sometimes appropriate to deliver activities with the parents only. This included where the main focus was to provide parents with strategies for managing children’s learning or behaviour, to facilitate parent-to-parent discussion, or where the main focus was on adult learning outcomes.

3.1 Different types and levels of engagement

The different schemes within the project can be examined in terms of their core characteristics. The following table provides a framework for approaching this task.

Types and levels of engagement	
Learning environment and context	- ranging from - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>school-based engagement</i>, with parents transferring and applying the knowledge in an 'at home' setting; - to - • <i>home-based engagement</i>, with staff working alongside parents to reinforce the learning outcomes directly within the home environment.
Mode of engagement	ranging from - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>group activities</i>, with parents completing common activities and discussion; often following a family learning model - to - • <i>one-to-one engagement</i>, with staff working alongside individual families to offer more intensive support
The parent and child dynamic	- ranging from - <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>engaging the parent and child together</i>, to provide shared learning strategies; - to - • <i>engaging with the parents’ own learning</i> in the first instance, followed by subsequent discussion with the child in the home.

The remainder of this section examines these different characteristics in further detail,

3.2 Learning environment and context

The project included schemes that engaged parents in activities at their child's school, and one that was home-based. In addition, one of the schemes offered visits to local services as part of an eight-week course to raise awareness of youth justice issues. This section examines the advantages and drawbacks of these different formats.

3.2.1 School-based engagement

Most of the schemes delivered **school-based** activities to parents in the first instance, with ideas and strategies provided for supporting their children's learning at home.

For the schools, a main advantage of school-based activities was to physically "get parents in" and to build or extend relationships. This was especially important if parents had not entered a classroom for many years, or held negative associations. For example, the parents attending one of the events commented on how the children responded well to being allowed into the staff room, where the Head teacher had served parents with drinks. This was thought to have helped them engage with school staff on a more even footing.

For the parents, attending the activities at the school provided an opportunity to show support for their child's learning, and to find out what they had been doing at school. Parents often found that learning alongside their child at school helped them to step outside of their usual routines in the home. This set the parent and child relationship in a different context, and therefore provided an insight to how each other learns:

"It was just nice to spend time together outside the home environment, where it was a lot more relaxed, here we can just do anything we want to".

(Father, Sefton)

The project raised a number of issues about accessibility and support for parents and children that reflect parental engagement work in schools more widely. The following table provides a summary.

School-based delivery - an overview of support arrangements

Timing of the activities

- running sessions first thing after dropping-off the children at school proved popular with parents. This avoided the immediate after school period, when it was common for families to have different commitments, including sports clubs or religious activities.
- comments from staff and parents suggested the on-going course sessions worked well in the autumn term. There was thought to be a risk posed of losing parents' interest and motivation if workshops were delivered too close to the summer holidays.
- there was no easy solution for achieving high levels of participation. Weekend events were sometimes more successful in encouraging working parents to attend, but sometimes experienced a poor attendance. The level of notice given to parents and how the event was publicised sometimes proved more important than the timing.

School-based delivery - an overview of support arrangements

Crèche and childcare arrangements

- the parent interviews highlighted the importance of providing childcare or crèche facilities for school-based activities. For some parents, childcare was a determining factor for their attendance.
- the specific childcare arrangements at the sessions varied. Where a crèche was available, parents spoke positively of the provision, especially where this was in the school grounds and the parents could drop-in to see their children if they wanted to.

Additional support

- projects where the school served a local community with a high proportion of parents with English as an Additional Language (EAL) provided interpretation and translation services for the participants. This was generally provided informally by bilingual school staff involved in the project or by bilingual teaching assistants helping out in the sessions.
- school staff were commonly surprised at the extent to which parents' levels of basic skills varied. There was a strong message about ensuring that extra support was available for adult learners, in addition to making time available from Classroom Assistants and Learning Mentors to support the children.

The Law and Order scheme offered visits to the local galleries of justice as part of the course format. The parents who attended generally thought this was an effective way to provide more direct experience and observation linked to some of the course themes. This also helped to keep the children's interest and encouraged discussion.

3.2.2 Home-based engagement

The project included one example of a **home-based** scheme - the educational home visits scheme, which was developed from the Sefton FAST model. Parents and staff alike highlighted the following main benefits of the format:

- providing greater flexibility to arrange a visit at a suitable time for the family;
- enabling a more intensive one-to-one session with parent and child that avoids the distraction of a larger group setting;
- being able to model the activities directly within the home learning environment, with which the parent and child are familiar; and,
- engaging 'harder to reach' families who would not otherwise attend their children's centre or nursery, due to confidence, health, mobility, or cultural reasons.

A drawback of home-based provision was that it lacked the same opportunities for parents to engage with their peers and school staff. Because of this, the visits were structured to provide the opportunity for progression to Early Start family learning groups at the local nurseries. This enabled the nurseries to engage with the parents and establish a relationship to support a smoother transition for the child.

3.3 Mode of engagement

The schemes included a mix of group activities and one-to-one delivery with individual families, although there were also examples of activities that included elements of both. This section examines some of the relative advantages and drawbacks of each approach.

3.3.1 Group-based engagement

Most of the schemes within the project offered some kind of **group activities** with parents and children; including a mix of one-off workshops, workshops leading to a celebration event, and one example of a longer (eight week) course. The group sessions were usually based on a family learning model, but one scheme offered parent-only sessions.

The parents who were interviewed routinely identified contact with other parents as the main advantage of a group format. Clear benefits were identified from the opportunity to meet with parents to share knowledge and experiences of learning at home. Some parents also identified that this provided a route into social networks of parents within the school:

"I was a bit apprehensive at first because I don't really talk to many of the mums at the school. But I felt great once I was in there and I feel really good now because it's given me an opportunity to talk to some of the mums that I haven't spoken to before "
(Mother, Northampton)

The parent interviews suggested that it was important for practitioners to put parents at ease and avoid **exposing any difficulties with basic skills** if a group setting was used. Parents commonly spoke of feeling vulnerable attending a group session, and it was only the knowledge that it would benefit their child that encouraged them to do so. If not handled effectively, therefore, it is evident that the sessions might further marginalise more vulnerable parents. In the event, this scenario was generally handled effectively by the staff within the project:

"To begin with I think it [the workshop] was a bit tenuous, because we were vulnerable, but as the day went on we loosened-up a bit, and by the afternoon it was great. It was relaxed".
(Mother, Northampton)

The group format also posed both advantages and drawbacks when discussing more sensitive issues, such as on the Law and Order course. Staff who delivered the course in its original context on the Isle of Wight highlighted that **confidentiality** had been a problem when the course was first established. This was because the subject matter, including drugs and alcohol and legal / illegal pupil behaviour, resulted in some parents disclosing information about illegal activities in front of Police or Community Support Officers.

The use of clear ground rules was found to address this issue, with parents made aware of the fact that Police would need to act on certain types of information. After these adjustments were made, the parents who took part in the Nottingham schools generally reported that the small group format was ideal for maintaining confidentiality, because rapport was built-up over the eight week period and the parents spoke of *"being able to speak freely"* in a *"trusting"* environment. This enabled frank discussions about often difficult issues.

3.3.2 One-to-one engagement

Only the home visits offered activities to parents and children on an entirely **one-to-one** basis. The two formats were not mutually exclusive however, with the home visits offering progression to family learning groups at the local school or nursery, and most of the group activities including one-to-one time for parent and child.

The main benefits of the one-to-one approach were to offer more personalised support to the individual family, at a greater level of intensity. The main drawbacks identified by the project staff were:

- the greater costs and resource requirements - the approach engaged fewer parents at a higher cost, and proved time consuming for the project staff to plan and deliver; and,
- the risk of stigma - project staff were conscious of the need to avoid 'singling out' parents for a visit. This issue was addressed by offering the visits to parents at a variety of levels of need, but including some more specific targeting.

3.4 The parent and child dynamic

The majority of the schemes engaged both parent and child together, although some activities had more of an adult learning focus. The following considers the main advantages and drawbacks of each approach, drawing on the parent interviews.

3.4.1 Activities with parents and children together

A strong message from the interviews was that the parents and children nearly always enjoyed the experience of learning together, and that the schemes provided a **supportive context for this type of interaction**. Parents often found that learning alongside their child at school helped them to step outside of their usual routines in the home, and allowed them to focus their attention on the individual child. This set the parent and child relationship in a different context, and provided an insight to how each other learns:

"He [the child] really enjoyed me coming in to it and then wanted me to come to more of the sessions where he would be involved with learning with me".

(Mother, Sefton)

"He had more of my attention there, whereas at home, if I'm not doing the dishes, or I'm not trying to do the tea... he was excited because he had my total attention".

(Mother, Northampton)

A number of the workshops were divided into two parts, to enable parent-to-parent discussion and learning, followed by parents and children learning together. This format was widely thought to have provided a good balance between providing space to focus on adult learning outcomes, and quality interaction with the child. Parents observed that:

"The children were excited and parents were as well... I think it's a good way of learning",

(Mother, Nottingham)

“It meant I was doing it with him rather than just me learning and then practising it at home, because we’re doing it together, so he was able to come out of his class and then sit with other parents who were doing it with their children as well so it’s like a group of parents with their children, everybody was doing it with their own child’.

(Mother, Sefton)

Where the activities were at their most effective, the interviews showed that parents and children were sometimes able to **reinforce each other’s learning**. Having children present was sometimes thought to have altered the group dynamic, and benefited from introducing a “child’s eye perspective”. For example, one parent described how she had brought her seven-year-old to the visit to the galleries of justice. The questions posed by her child had resulted in a wider discussion amongst the group about the role of a Judge, which was thought to have been informative. It was felt that the visit would have been very different without pupils there to challenge the adults’ assumptions.

There was also some evidence of this type of reinforcement of learning between adult and child on a one-to-one basis. For example, the children sometimes observed that having their parent with them helped them to recall more of the session, because it stood out as being “a different type of lesson”, and that “*having the [thought of] mum in your head makes you remember*”. Conversely, a number of the parents felt that working alongside their child helped them to gain more of an understanding of what they were learning at school: “*I mean, with the phonics I was helping her and she was helping me together*”.

There was a more varied response from parents where the sessions involved **pupils from different year groups**. Whilst often having a positive effect on the attendance and group dynamic, some parents were disappointed by the level and curriculum focus of the session if they perceived this to be of a level that was pitched towards younger pupils. This was raised as an issue by several parents who participated in the curriculum workshops, for example. The staff at the session were thought to have addressed this to some extent by focussing on common problem areas and challenges across the school curriculum.

3.4.2 Activities with parents only

Whilst the project demonstrated a number of clear benefits from children and adults learning together, this was not always found to be appropriate. The main situations in which parents were engaged separately included the following:

- **where the main priority of the session was adult learning** - one of the schools that took part in the Law and Order scheme in Nottingham opted to run the whole scheme without the children present, because the parents wanted to cover the topics at a higher level. The parents were able to follow a similar course structure and take home resources to discuss with their children, but there was no actual joint delivery;
- **to provide strategies for managing the child’s learning** - several of the schemes included time for working with the parents on reading techniques, where it was preferable to cover the material without the children being present; and,
- **to facilitate parent-to-parent discussion** - similarly to the above, time was sometimes provided for parents to engage in discussion or networking.

The lack of the child’s perspective was an inevitable drawback of delivering activities with parents only. Parents sometimes considered in hindsight that more child involvement would have improved the scheme, even if only at specific points during the scheme.

3.5 Practitioners' skills and experience

The activities were usually delivered by family learning or parental engagement staff, but sometimes with inputs from teaching and support staff from the schools. The parent interviews provide an insight to the skills and qualities of practitioners that they found the most useful. The key messages were as follows:

- parents often responded well to a mix of facilitation and information-giving;
- an informal style was usually preferred, with a focus on creative methods;
- parents took confidence from the practitioner being able to relate to both adults and children within the group, if each were present; and,
- they usually valued ongoing feedback and reassurance

Parents spoke highly of the individuals involved in many of the sessions identifying the personal qualities most valued in the project staff - "*welcoming*", "*made you feel at ease*", "*not make you feel daft*", "*she had time to talk to everyone*", and "*making me feel special*". Further attributes considered important were "*they come at your level*", "*encouraging not patronising*", "*outgoing and bubbly*", and "*involving other family members as well*".

The positive interaction between the parents and the staff involved often helped parents to feel more confident. One parent who received an educational home visit noted that the worker was never intrusive or condescending, which she felt could have been easy in her role. Instead she felt the worker was very encouraging and praised her children which she really appreciated.

"I remember feeling utterly fantastic when she [Family Literacy Worker] had gone and really pleased with my children and thinking how they were doing wonderful things, when in fact actually they were doing quite sort of ordinary things, but I felt really good about it, and I felt good about playing with them."

(Mother, Northampton)

Within the school structure, the active involvement of the Head-teacher often helped to ensure buy-in from school staff; particularly for weekend events, and provided parents with reassurance that the event was being taken seriously by the school.

The input of **external staff** was generally appreciated by parents and children. They were often considered knowledgeable in a context wider than the school, which was conveyed in terms of bringing knowledge about the local community and the parents enjoyed meeting professionals with whom they would not usually come into contact. This was particularly the case on the Law and Order course, where parents' interest was secured by involving guest speakers, such as a local Police Officer.

The children often also responded well to different teaching styles to those they would normally experience in the classroom. For example, one parent observed how the children's behaviour was more positive for the family learning tutor than for teachers at the school, because it was a different style of delivery with which the pupils were unfamiliar. The artists and poets in Sefton also captured the children's interest and attention through the use of costume and performance:

“They capture the young ones’ attention because they were so boisterous and so loud and so jumpy about, and they really involved them. Because we had to get up and do a dance, which the kids thought was great. The mums have got to get off their seats”.
(Grandparent, Northampton)

A drawback of mainly external-led sessions was that it became unclear how the school staff were being empowered. For example, one of the Law and Order sessions involved a Teaching Assistant in a support role for the pupils, but their role did not extend to delivering any of the course. Although the scheme received positive feedback from parents, there was no evidence that teaching or curriculum staff had engaged with the scheme or that they were able to adapt any of the ideas for other lessons.

4.0 Making and sustaining the link with 'at home' learning

The individual schemes adopted varying approaches to link the activities delivered with parents by school or local authority staff, with the subsequent appropriation of these ideas in a home learning environment. This section of the report draws upon the interview evidence with staff and parents to first consider *how* the link between school and home was made by practitioners, and the intended effects. It then goes on to examine the ways in which the learning was actually applied by parents in the home, and the range of influences that affected how and when this was done.

Key findings

Strategies for linking with 'at home' learning

- ▶ A number of common success factors were identified for establishing a link between learning at home and school. These included taking parents' existing positive interactions as a start point (a 'wealth' model), personalising the activities to the individual child and family, and taking into account the home learning environment

Modelling positive parent-child interactions

- ▶ An approach for supporting parents with their children's 'at home' learning was to model positive interactions between parent and child, which could be used at home. This was often best achieved by giving parents ideas or techniques to adapt for themselves, rather than seeking to impose whole learning routines.
- ▶ Project staff on the educational home visits scheme were able to demonstrate play routines to parents that would help their children learn, and to identify the types of feedback that the parents can provide to the child. This was achieved through the use of story sacks, which included developmentally appropriate toys and games.
- ▶ Parents generally welcomed the additional ideas and guidance. They usually pointed out colours or shapes to their child anyway, but the use of play to communicate these ideas was a new approach. Some parents found the volume of toys and resources intimidating, and thought it set unrealistic expectations for them and their child.
- ▶ Project staff on the curriculum workshops scheme supported and encouraged parents to try out different reading techniques, using puppetry to make this interactive. Some parents found the association between 'reading' and the 'arts' useful to generate ideas for reading with their child. The use of peer discussion enabled parents to share experiences.

The use of 'take home' resources

- ▶ A further method for making the link with 'at home' learning was to provide resources for parents to take home and use directly with their children. The ethos behind this approach was to encourage the sharing of knowledge between home and school. Examples included parents and children designing games or storybooks together.
- ▶ The approach of taking home resources was the most successful where it was made locally relevant. This was achieved by the Law and Order scheme, where families played an educational game about local crime issues to inform discussion at home.

Activating the learning at home

- ▶ Parents were often found to have tested-out the project activities with their children at home, but this was usually done in quite subtle ways. It was rarer for parents to attempt to recreate whole workshop activities, although some had done so. This occasionally involved other family members; such as where a board game or similar was involved.
- ▶ Parents who took part in the home visits reported being more conscious of getting the most out of opportunities to play and learn with the children. They had regularly incorporated role play ideas into routines such as preparing food, bath times or mealtimes. It was not uncommon for parents to involve other family members as well.
- ▶ Parents who took part in the curriculum workshops and creative arts often reported a renewed interest in reading with their child. Some had introduced puppetry and crafts or created their own stories to make reading fun. This was usually built upon a strong foundation of more open-ended creative learning practices within the family.
- ▶ Parents had occasionally borrowed or purchased new toys or books for the child, where a child was enthusiastic about a particular activity they had done at the session. This was sometimes supported by visits to their local library.

Factors affecting use of the project activities

- ▶ Where parents had not used any of the activities or ideas from the project, this was often due to a lack of available time because of family or work responsibilities, or because they thought it 'too ambitious' to recreate the activities at home. This situation was sometimes avoided by providing more open-ended activities that could be adopted 'any time, any place'.
- ▶ Parents' responses were also subject to a range of more personal factors, which included their existing role within their child's education, family and cultural influences, and the use of other learning resources such as internet and television at home.

4.1 Strategies for linking with 'at home' learning

The interviews with staff and parents highlighted a number of common success factors for establishing a link with learning at home. These included the following:

- practitioners taking parents' existing positive interaction with their child as a start point, and showing parents how this benefits their child's learning (a 'wealth' model);
- personalising the activities, by drawing upon the child's interests and reference points, based on an understanding of what they enjoy doing at home;
- providing realistic strategies that take into account the huge variation between home learning environments, and parents' available free time;
- giving parents options and ideas, rather than imposing a formal routine; and,
- an emphasis on creative activities and play.

The following considers each of the main strategies that were identified in turn.

4.1.1 Modelling positive parent-child interaction

A principal method of making a link with 'at home' learning was by modelling positive interaction between parent and child in a way that could be continued by the parent in the home. This was approached in a variety of ways, including:

- practitioners working with the parent and child together on a one-to-one basis to develop tailored activities to suit their family circumstances; and
- practitioners facilitating groups of parents to discuss or act-out 'everyday' scenarios that might be encountered in the home, and how they would deal with them.

The use of modelling was a key feature of the FAST educational home visits. In its original context, the visits are based on **learning through play**. This method uses play as a vehicle for developing the child's communication, language and literacy skills by working with the parent and child together on a one-to-one basis to reinforce the child's learning and provide continuous feedback to the parent. The version of the scheme that was transferred to Rochdale adopted a similar 'modelled' approach by the practitioner with parent and child together. However, the emphasis was adjusted to focus more on the benefits of family members engaging in play, and less on identifying early language or writing development.

The interviews showed that the parents generally welcomed the additional ideas and guidance that were provided by modelling play activities. In many cases, they already pointed out colours or shapes to their child as part of everyday learning, but the use of more *structured* play to communicate these ideas was often new to them.

Two particular elements of the sessions stood out, for the parents who were interviewed, which are summarised in the following box.

Educational home visits: success factors for learning through play

The first key element of the model was the use of story sacks, which were brought to the home visit to underpin the **structured approach towards play**. The sacks included examples of developmentally appropriate toys, books and games, and costumes for dressing-up. This allowed the practitioner to show *how* the child can use the toys in different ways to improve their learning, and the types of feedback that the parent can usefully provide to the child to support this. In turn, parents commonly saw the existing toys or books within the household in a new light:

"Before, I just used to give the toy to him [the child]... and that was it".
(Mother, Rochdale)

"There is something different every time, the child likes that. And the bag [story sack] there is something different every five minutes".
(Mother, Rochdale)

The second element was the **local knowledge of the practitioners** who conducted the visits, both of whom were bilingual staff, and understood the community. The parents, many of whom were Bangladeshi, appreciated the fact that the practitioners understood the cultural roles of family members within the household, and adapted the play scenarios to take this into account. This was an advantage in households where there were few existing toys or resources to draw

Educational home visits: success factors for learning through play

upon, and the parent and child were uncertain about how to play together. In one such example, the practitioner modelled the session on a tea party, which engaged the child who had seen her mother using these items within the home.

The modelling approach adopted by the home visits was less successful, where parents were intimidated by the wealth of resources that were brought into the home: *"I had never seen so many toys before... I was unfamiliar with using them"*. It was important to ground the activities in 'the everyday' to maintain the parents' interest and keep the activities relevant to their situation.

The modelling of positive interactions was approached in a slightly different way for the curriculum workshops in Northampton. In this case, the aim was to provide **strategies for shared reading** between parent and child, with a focus on a specific text. The workshop session was divided into two parts, with the first session delivered to parents without the children. Here, the parents worked together to make puppets to represent characters from the book, and were supported by the facilitator to test out different ways of reading the text "in character". This resulted in wider parent-to-parent discussions about the benefits and drawbacks of different styles of reading to their children. The parents were then joined by their children for the second session, where they participated in creative activities and role-plays based on themes from the book.

As with the educational home visits, the interviews showed that parents and children instantly engaged with creative activities that mirrored their own interests at home. For example, one parent who was initially apprehensive about the workshop described how she was put at ease by the focus on storytelling, making puppets, and dressing-up because it provided a familiar point of reference:

The parent interviews showed that two aspects of the session were particularly effective in making the link with 'at home' learning, which are described in the following box.

Curriculum workshops: success factors for promoting shared reading

The first key element of the session that proved effective in making a link was to establish a stronger **association between "reading" and "arts and crafts"**. Parents commonly reported doing each activity in its own right with their child at home, but rarely made a direct link between the two. It was typical for parents to perceive reading a structured learning activity, and creative activities as being more open-ended. The use of creative activities to explore themes from a book therefore encouraged self-reflection:

"We'll make a card or something, but to have themed activities like that, that we don't normally do. Usually the reading and the activities are quite separate".

(Mother, Northampton)

The second element was to develop ideas of characterisation and reading styles, through informal **peer discussion amongst parents**, and supported with role play. A number of the parents commented positively on how they were encouraged to reflect on their early memories of reading; to get into the mindset of a child and how they experience reading at home. The use of the puppets was thought to help break down any shyness about speaking in front of the group, and kept the session light-hearted:

Curriculum workshops: success factors for promoting shared reading

"We read the book together and talked about books, talked about our favourite books, how we'd make it fun for children by changing voices and things like that. Then we all had a go in the group changing voices and saying something each"

(Mother, Northampton)

"It was just normal chatting, and what sort of books did you read... I've done voices [with children] before the workshop, but there were some things... I could have done it that way and it would have been better"

(Mother, Northampton)

The use of active and creative learning was found to have been particularly appropriate when catering for **different levels of literacy** - amongst both adults and children. Two of the parents who attended the workshop had a dyslexic child and several others required additional support for their own basic skills. The session avoided 'exposing' any weaknesses in children's reading abilities, and provided sufficient one-to-one time within the group setting for families to approach the activities in their own style. The success of this approach does appear to have varied between the individual schools, however, and there was a common message about the need for high levels of staffing to fully support parents or children with additional needs.

As with the educational home visits; the interviews showed that the link to 'at home' learning was often less effective, where the modelling of activities was thought to be unrealistic to achieve outside of the session. For example, comments included that:

'We did kind of story props and lolly sticks and kind of like clip art pictures on lolly sticks to...recall a story. But they weren't able to lend us the story so it just seemed a bit...it wasn't very useful'.

(Mother, Northampton)

"All the materials... it was quite extravagant"

(Father, Northampton)

As these comments show, some parents felt that it would have been beneficial to keep a copy of the text, or to receive further guidance on how to continue the activities beyond the end of the workshop. Others did not think this was necessary, and thought that the session was intended more to illustrate different ways of looking at the process of reading.

4.1.2 The use of 'take home' resources

A further method for making the link with 'at home' learning was to provide resources for parents to take home and use directly with their children. A wide range of materials were provided from different courses, including activity packs, games, puzzles, word games, and worksheets.

The interviews highlighted that **parents' involvement in designing or adapting the materials** was often a key factor in making them relevant to use with their children at home. Two main reasons were identified for this:

- parents' involvement in producing something to take home helped to give them and their child a sense of ownership or achievement; and,

- the act of personalising the games or activities sometimes helped to bring parents' associations of 'home' and 'school' more closely together, by drawing upon reference points from each context within a single activity¹.

The following considers how the different schemes approached these issues.

Two of the schemes included **board games for parents and children to play together**.

The Law and Order scheme in Nottingham included a board game that was based on a map of the area surrounding the school. The parents and children played the game together, and took it in turns to visit landmarks relating to crime and justice, including the police station, courts, and Youth Offending Team. At each turn, the parents were given information about the particular setting, and presented with different scenarios to discuss with their child. This was followed-up with a series of talks and visits by representatives from some of these settings, and an opportunity to take the game away to play at home.

The parents who were interviewed highlighted several key success factors that were thought to have helped make the link with 'at home' learning, as described below.

Law and Order scheme: success factors for encouraging family discussion

The first key element of the board game that helped to engage parents and children was the inclusion of **locally relevant content and information**. Because the game was based on a map of the local area, it encouraged members of the group to discuss issues that were common to their school and community. The format was thought to have been effective in supporting children to express their views, because it avoided over-reliance on more traditional pen-and-paper exercises and helped to "bring to life" the discussion.

The 'take home' format of the board game sometimes provided a tangible way to **communicate the workshop messages to other family members**. One parent described how "we all got involved", for example, after the child's siblings had been curious about the game and wanted to play. This led to a continuing discussion about course topics within the home. Another parent commented on how they were already trying to put across messages to their children about road safety and graffiti, and the game helped to support these messages by taking a different approach.

A similar approach was taken in Northampton, where parents and children came together at the end of the curriculum workshop to design a board game, based on the text they had been working on throughout the day. The game adopted a 'snakes and ladders' format and included symbols relating to the text. This provided one of a number of resources that the parents and children took away with them:

"It was very...interesting, they give out little games and things so people can take it home and actually carry it on with their children at home...they give us the activities and show how the children learn".

(Mother, Northampton)

¹ This broadly supports the concept of 'funds of knowledge' in homes and communities, developed by Hughes (2007), whereby objects or artefacts that are associated with family life provide a tangible way to bring the local community and its history into schools, and vice-versa.

A drawback of providing resources for parents to take home in this format was that there was no guarantee as to their subsequent use. Parents were mixed in their feedback as to whether or not their children took an interest. In some cases, the games were reported to have had regular use, whereas other families had shown no interest. This was largely dependent on the individual family; their interests and routines.

The use of take home resources was approached in different ways by the other schemes. The parents who received the educational home visits often described how the practitioner would **leave behind a toy for the child to play with**, in-between the visits. Having taken part in various role plays at the home visit, the children were usually keen to play with the toy after the worker had left. This further encouraged the parent to test-out the strategies that were modelled for them at the visit. Holding a series of visits enabled the worker to return and answer any questions that arose as a result of the child and parent learning together when the practitioner was not present.

4.1.3 Indirect linkages - mementos and records of achievement

A final, and more indirect, link between home and school was sometimes made by producing **a visual record of the scheme**. This usually involved some kind of display of photographs or artwork at the school, and conversely, mementos from the schemes put on display in the home. Whilst relatively straightforward to achieve, this two-way exchange of materials was valued highly by many of the staff and parents who took part¹. It was sometimes thought to have helped to “keep open” the lines of communication that were established during the project.

One example of this was the **Early Record of Achievement**, which was given to the parents at the end of the educational home visits. The project staff explained that because the scheme uses an “open record” to document practitioner feedback throughout the visits, the document captures all of the step changes that the parent and child have made, and the positive actions they are able to take forward from that. The approach was generally well received by the parents who took part in the project, and helped to further embed the memory of the activities within the home:

“It’s about having something to show them [the child] when they are older”
(Mother, Sefton)

“You’ll remember it, when you have another child and they reach that age... it triggers the memory”
(Mother, Sefton)

In Sefton, the schools each held a **celebration day**, to celebrate what the children and their parents had achieved as part of the Community Arts and Learning (CAL) scheme. The day provided an opportunity to disseminate the work that the parents and children had done together to other children and parents and to encourage their participation in future events. The schools used different approaches. One made it a unique event, whereas other schools piggy-backed on the existing ‘praise’ assemblies.

¹ The concept of a two-way exchange of knowledge between home and school is documented in previous research. See for example: Teaching and Learning Research Briefing March 2007 - Number 22- ‘Enhancing primary literacy and mathematics through home-school knowledge exchange’. Downloadable from www.tlrp.org/pub/research.html

Each celebration day involved the presentation of the framed poems and art work, or individual certificates and photographs, often followed by social time for parents. Feedback from parents showed that they appreciated receiving the lasting memento of the activity, and often took pride in what they and their child had achieved.

“He was proud because there were some photos taken while the session was taking place and he was very proud to be in the photo of me and him doing the work together, and it was displayed and he really was very proud that I went there and he’s got the picture with me doing the work together”.

(Mother, Sefton)

The schools prominently displayed the photographs, and the ‘pictorial’ minutes that were produced at each session. This proved to be effective for raising awareness amongst the school staff, and setting a precedent for this type of work with parents.

4.2 Activating 'at home' learning - parents' perspectives

The interviews provide an opportunity to examine how or whether parents tested-out the activities with their children at home, and the extent to which this interaction followed the approaches that were modelled for them. This is a key issue for the research, as it concerns the link between project intervention and more “spontaneous” at home parenting.

The interviews suggest that a number of common factors affected how or whether parents applied the learning or ideas from the project with their children at home. These included the following:

- **the intensity of the initial support** - one-to-one engagement with parents and children together invariably proved to be an effective way of introducing new practices that were sustainable at home without ongoing encouragement from project staff;
- **the emphasis on action learning, rather than providing information** - there was some evidence that the ‘doing’ part of the schemes played an important role in bringing about actual changes to practices in the home; and,
- **parents’ existing predispositions towards their child’s learning** - the project highlighted a wide variety of roles and beliefs, each of which exerted an influence on how the activities were received. These roles are considered further in this section.

The following examines in further detail how and when the learning was applied.

4.2.1 Activating ‘at home’ learning - factors affecting the different schemes

The different formats, staffing and approaches of the different schemes resulted in some observable differences in how the parents tested them out at home.

The majority of parents who received **educational home visits** in Rochdale said that they had incorporated some of the ideas from the sessions into their home routines. These changes were usually found to be quite subtle and involved being more conscious of getting the most out of opportunities to play and learn with the children. It was not uncommon for parents to involve other family members as well, where they took an interest. Examples included where parents incorporated role play ideas into routines such as preparing food, bath times or mealtimes:

“Having structured play is good, instead of just leaving them [the child] and doing the washing up... it encourages you to sit down and make the time”.

(Mother, Rochdale)

Parents had occasionally purchased new toys or books for the child, where a child was very enthusiastic about a particular role-play they had done at the home visit, although no-one had attempted to recreate the visit format. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that each visit lasted more than an hour and drew upon a wealth of resources provided by the project staff. One parent was worried that her daughter would not enjoy the games as much without the home visitor and story sack, but found that this was not a problem.

There was also a good level of take-up and adaptation of the ideas that were presented to parents at the school-based **community arts and learning** and **curriculum workshops** schemes. As with the educational home visits; any adjustments to existing routines with their children were usually quite subtle. It was common for parents to report a renewed interest in creative activities or reading with their child and to introduce new ideas, but this was usually built upon a strong foundation of more open-ended creative learning practices within the family. A few parents particularly liked the idea of reinforcing the child’s learning by discussing the story with their child afterwards, and built this into their reading practices:

“You’ve got so much out of just one book, whereas before I thought you could just read a book and that’s it, now we’ll have conversation about the book once we’ve finished...it’s made me realise how much he [the child] does think about it, and how much he remembers’.

(Mother, Sefton)

‘We are making more of an effort to see how much he’s understood out of a book and which parts he enjoyed. Whereas before we would have probably just read the book and given him a kiss and said goodnight, now we do have a talk about it’.

(Mother, Sefton)

The response to the original session was often guided by the child’s level of interest, rather than a sense by the parent that they should be promoting learning in a particular way. For example, one parent attending the curriculum workshops had purchased new books after the session, because their child was enthusiastic about the idea of continuing to read together. In a handful of examples, the parents had made more significant adjustments to how they learn with their child, and took a more structured approach to continue with the activities that were modelled during the initial session:

‘I’ve taken what they’ve given me and then come up with a few ideas of my own... I make up my own flash cards, I try to...judge on what she’s doing, what I think she needs to do or what I think she needs a bit of extra help on and then we’ll do that together’.

(Mother, Sefton)

The parents who attended the **Law and Order** course reported a slightly different link between the activities and their children’s ‘at home’ learning. As the emphasis was on raising awareness of youth justice issues, the main action taken was to discuss these issues informally with family members in the home after each session. A few parents also made drawings based on the topics that were raised each week, or wrote-down the situations that were discussed and asked their children what they would have done. The eight-week course format was found to be effective in this respect, as it sometimes helped to sustain dialogue within the home by providing new topics and ideas each week.

Despite these benefits, some of the parents felt that the subject matter was more relevant for their older children, and were reluctant to discuss them with their younger child. Having both child and adult present during the course sometimes helped this situation, because the parents saw that their children of primary school age had a greater awareness of crime and community safety issues than they had anticipated

Whilst almost all of the parents reflected that the visits had been useful to some extent, **a few had not taken any further action** to use the ideas with their child at home. The main factors were reported as follows:

- **family and work responsibilities** - working patterns and caring roles within the family meant that some parents felt they did not have the time or opportunity to participate in similar activities with their children on a more regular basis,
- **pressures of schoolwork** - other parents were concerned about the expectations that their child's school already places on their free time, including homework or preparation for SATs. These formal assessments of their child's progress were considered a priority, and did not leave time for other school-oriented activities; and,
- **activities seeming "too ambitious"** - this was a drawback of more structured activities such as reading exercises, which did not always translate well from a school to a home context, and quickly lost the interest of some parents or children.

4.2.2 Other factors affecting learning at home

A number of additional factors were identified, which were found to have an influence on how or whether the activities were used at home after the initial session. These factors related more to the established beliefs and practices that underpinned support for the child's learning at an individual family level, and can be identified as follows:

- **parents' existing beliefs and values** - parents described their role in relation to their child's education in very different ways. Some parents described themselves demarcating learning time in the home and actively 'teaching' their child, whereas others were averse to more systems and placed an emphasis on their child's creativity. These fundamental values were found to influence parents' responses to the project, and determined whether they sought to test-out the activities directly at home. Such varied roles for parents as educators are well documented in previous research¹.
- **family structures and routines** - the project included a variety of family structures and parenting roles, including some examples of very large extended families. The role of extended family members, including grandparents, in supporting children's learning at home was particularly pronounced in some multi-ethnic and multi-lingual communities. Parents sometimes identified that this had been an important factor in how the project activities were appropriated in the home, because there was a much greater involvement of a variety of family members in supporting the learning;
- **religious and cultural learning** - some of the parents who took part in the project reported a central role for structured religious education within their child's learning and development, with regular activities at the mosque or church, or enrolment at Saturday schools. This often affected how and when parents and children had the opportunity to learn together, and framed the parents' educational goals for their children; and,

¹ See for example: Atkin, J. & Bastiani, J. 'Are they teaching'? an alternative perspective on parents as educators'. In Cable, C. & Eyres, I. (Eds.) (2005) Primary teaching assistant –curriculum in context. London. David Fulton Publishers

- **TV and Internet as educational resources** – the parents within the interview sample described multi-media resources both in terms of a barrier to children’s learning (such as long hours spent playing computer games) and an opportunity for learning together at home. Some parents reported having taken ideas or themes from the project and used them to visit related web-sites or download learning materials with their child.

In summary, there is clearly no ‘one size fits all’ model for determining how project intervention is incorporated into existing family practices. The interviews underlined the highly individualised nature of families’ circumstances, which meant that the learning from the session was used in very different ways. Moreover, the interviews showed that parents’ initial enthusiasm about the activities at school did not always translate into practical changes in supporting their child at home, even where they had the intention to do so. The support offered from the project was often competing with pressures from the child’s school, parental work responsibilities, and other demands on family time. Nevertheless, parents were commonly able to draw upon their experiences from the project to reflect on their child’s learning and their existing routines to support them.

The next section goes on to consider the outcomes that were reported by the parents who took part in the project, and how they were achieved.

5.0 Impact and outcomes

This section of the report draws upon the qualitative interviews with parents and practitioners, to consider the types of outcomes that were achieved through the project, and the main factors that influenced them. The section first considers the parental outcomes that were reported by parents and carers themselves and observed by project staff, before going on to consider observed changes in children's learning and development in an 'at home' setting. Consideration is then given to the main benefits for the participating schools and nurseries, and the extent to which the project had a knock-on effect for other aspects of parental engagement.

Key findings

Parents' knowledge and understanding

- ▶ Parents who took part in the project routinely identified gaining a better understanding of how their children learn. This was usually achieved by learning alongside their child in a supportive environment at school or home, with project staff in a facilitative role.
- ▶ Parents' emotional bond with their child was an important factor in understanding their children's learning, and they usually made strong associations between learning and wellbeing. Parents were in a fairly unique position of being able to relate the child's learning to their wider experiences outside of school and within a family context.
- ▶ Parents sometimes reported an improved awareness of the curricula and teaching methods used at their child's school, where the project activities were designed to provide this information. Some parents identified a need for continuing guidance from their school, however, with a more direct link to children's learning in the classroom.

Parents' skills and competence

- ▶ Most parents reported gaining new skills and competencies for supporting their child's learning at home. They felt more confident to support their child through fun or creative activities to reinforce the child's learning; often making use of everyday situations.
- ▶ Parents commonly found that the project helped them to become more responsive to their child's learning at home, and to maintain their child's concentration for longer periods of time. This was thought to be as a result of better understanding of their child as a learner. The project occasionally strengthened parent-child relationships.
- ▶ The support from the project helped some parents to overcome deep-rooted anxieties about supporting their child to learn. This outcome was achieved by building the parent's own skills and confidence, often in the context of support from other parents.
- ▶ Parents in early years' settings were more likely to report positive outcomes from the project. At this stage, parents often reported greater difficulties in identifying step changes in the child's language or literacy skills. In contrast, parents' awareness of reading stages and available support were generally higher by primary stage; although less so for first time parents who generally reported lower levels of awareness..

Children's outcomes

- ▶ Parents consistently observed more positive attitudes towards learning in their children, after taking part in the project activities. Key indicators included children initiating learning with the parent more regularly; a greater level of interest and enjoyment of reading or play, and the child's recognition of their own progress.
- ▶ Parents who were doing their own learning commonly reported benefits for their children. This included where children were inspired by watching their parent learn, and picked up on their confidence. Some parents also reported feeling better informed to discuss issues that affected their child, as a result of their own learning.
- ▶ There was limited evidence for the impact of the project on children's literacy or numeracy skills. The project was mainly qualitative in focus, and was not designed to capture information of this type on a large scale. Moreover, parents often considered there to be many other influences on their child's attainment to take into account.
- ▶ Parents sometimes observed progress with their child's learning and development, however, including step changes to their reading, writing and communication skills at home. These step changes were usually thought by parents to have been as a result of parents continuing to use the strategies that were modelled for them by project staff.

Parental engagement outcomes

- ▶ Parents were quite evenly divided between those for whom the schemes provided an opportunity for further engagement with their child's school, and those for whom there was no real change to their existing patterns of contact. The latter was more often the case where the parents already had a well established relationship with school staff.
- ▶ Some parents reported feeling more confident to raise issues or ask questions of the school, and had established new contacts with staff and other parents. Other parents reported no change because they already had a good relationship with school staff.

5.1 Outcomes measurement

As a development project, the approach towards measuring outcomes was influenced by the timescales for adapting and transferring parental engagement between different local settings, and the scale of the delivery. This typically involved small groups of parents or one-to-one support, conducted in two or more 'host' schools for each scheme. A primarily qualitative interviewing approach was selected, therefore, with a focus on capturing parents' own perspectives of how the activities were appropriated within an 'at home' setting, and the outcomes that resulted for themselves and their child¹. These perspectives were cross-checked against the staff interviews, to contextualise the parents' accounts and relate them to the scheme design. Where the scheme involved adult learning (a family learning model, for example), these outcomes were also considered within the analysis.

¹ An interval of two to four months was typical between delivery of the initial activities, and the follow-up interview by the project researchers to provide a satisfactory balance of action and recall.

The analysis of the interview data highlighted a number of principal types of outcomes that were evident across the project, although with some key variations between the individual schemes depending on their aims, staffing, resources and format. For the purpose of an initial summary, the core project outcomes can be identified as follows:

Parental outcomes

- knowledge and understanding of how their child learns
- curriculum awareness
- improved skills and competence for supporting their children's learning

Child outcomes

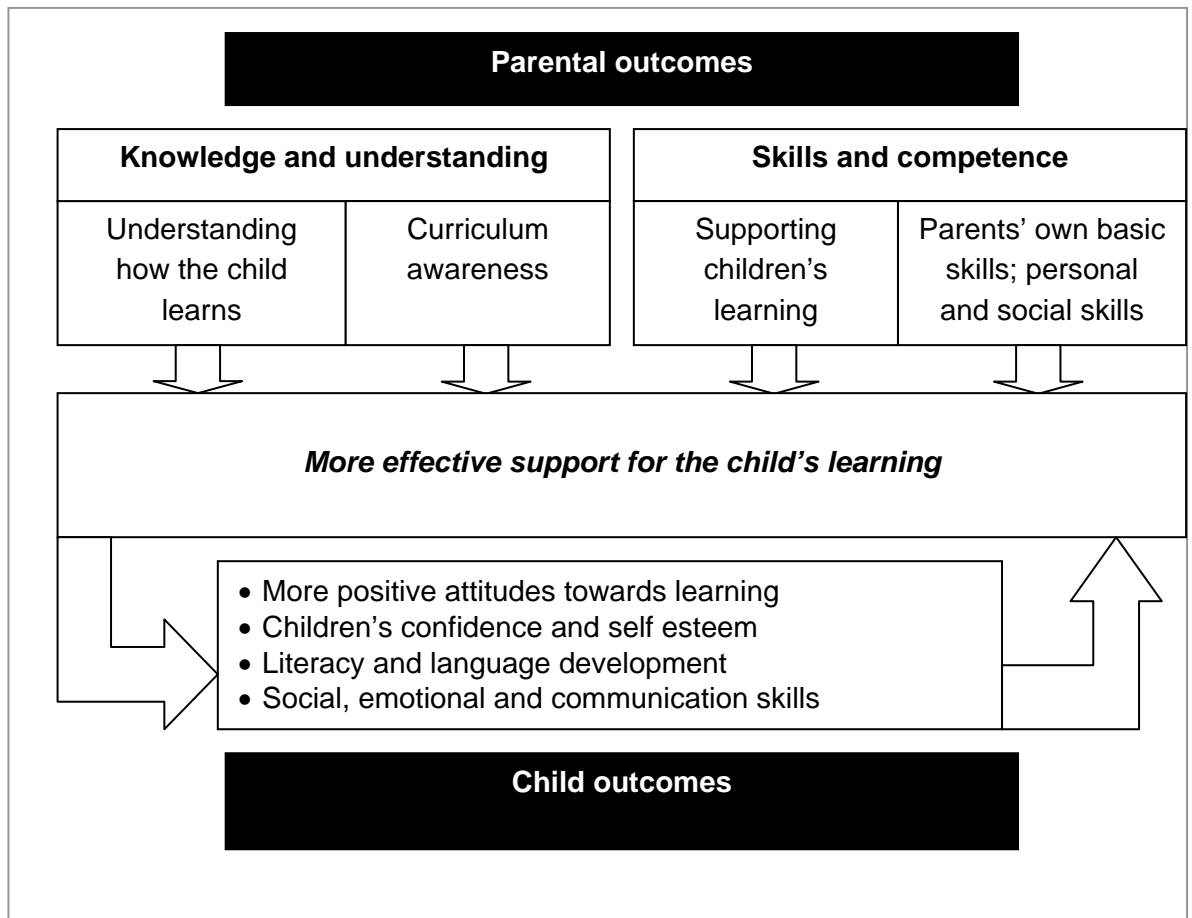
- more positive attitudes towards learning
- confidence and self esteem
- literacy and language development
- social and emotional skills

Crosscutting

- strengthened parent-child relationships

Whilst these outcomes are examined in their own right within this chapter, the research also underlined the importance of the ***inter-relationship between parental and child outcomes***. Parents and children learning together in the context of a supportive relationship were at the heart of the project; whether this took place at school or in the home, and against a diverse backdrop of other factors affecting the child's learning. The schemes were often most successful where this inter-relationship between the parent and child was fully grasped, with project staff in a facilitative role to help activate the learning process. Figure 5.1 provides an illustration.

Table 5.1 The relationship between parental and child outcomes



As the diagram shows, improvements to the skills and confidence of parents and children can be viewed as mutually reinforcing, with more aware and effective support from parents benefiting from children becoming more confident and receptive to learning.

The following sections consider each of the main types of reported outcomes in turn, and explore the factors that influenced how they were achieved.

As the diagram shows, improvements to the skills and confidence of parents and children can be viewed as mutually reinforcing, with more aware and effective support from parents benefiting from children becoming more confident and receptive to learning.

The following sections consider each of the main types of reported outcomes in turn, and explore the factors that influenced how they were achieved.

5.2 Parents' knowledge and understanding

A first main set of outcomes can be identified in relation to parents' knowledge and understanding of their child as a learner, and of the curriculum and teaching methods that children experience at school. These distinct outcomes are each considered in turn.

5.2.1 Understanding how children learn

Parents routinely identified gaining an ***improved understanding of how their child learns***, as a result of the project activities. This was the case for nearly all of the schemes, although there were some key variations in how this outcome was achieved.

The opportunity to spend focussed time learning alongside the child in a supportive environment was the main factor in achieving this outcome. Parents often described how their usual opportunities to support their child's learning at home were restricted by other household routines, and the competing attentions of their other children. The project allowed parents to step outside of this context, to focus on the individual parent-child relationship. This extra time, coupled with support from skilled practitioners, often highlighted aspects of their child's learning of which they were previously unaware:

"He's six, and I still see him as a little boy. But if you actually just sit and let him talk... he comes out with some quite interesting and clever things".

(Mother, Sefton)

"That was a shock as well, because I looked at him, and I went... 'I didn't know you knew so much about cars'? And he said 'Mum I play computer games and its all different types of cars on it'... I hadn't thought about that".

(Mother, Nottingham)

The ***emotional bond between parent and child*** was an important factor in helping parents to understand how their children learn; where the parents and children engaged together. Parents often reported being particularly well placed to identify the triggers for their child's learning, because of the closeness of their relationship, and their knowledge of the child's personality. This also meant that any learning gains could be related to wider family situation and activities undertaken at home, which teachers would be unable to do within a formal classroom setting. The parent-child relationship therefore set aside learning together as something qualitatively quite different from the child's learning at school:

"He looks forward to it... me bringing things for him to do at home, so it's different from school... he's doing these extra activities with me"

(Mother, Northampton)

At best, parents occasionally reported that the activities had ***strengthened their relationship with their child***. This was as a result of working alongside their child to observe and interact with their learning, which provided a deeper level of insight. For example, one parent noted that the activities *"...brought us closer together"*. This deeper level of engagement¹ was by no means the norm, however, and parents more routinely identified the combination of understanding how their child learns, alongside the social benefits of spending enjoyable time together.

¹ For discussion on parent-child relationships see: Mezirow, J. 'Perspective Transformation' in (1988) Woodhead, M.&McGrath, A. (Eds.) *Family, School and Society: Exploring Educational Issues* Vol.1. London. Hodder Arnold H&S

A number of factors were found to be specific to the individual schemes:

- The educational home visits were consistently effective in raising parents' awareness of their child's literacy, numeracy and communication skills development. Parents commonly described feeling unsure of how to spot signs of their child's progress, before taking part in the project. As a result of the modelling of ideas and approaches for playing with their child by project staff, however, some of the parents identified feeling more aware of phonics, number recognition, and developmental stages to expect for their child.
- The outcomes were reported slightly differently by parents who took part in the Law and Order scheme, with parents more likely to identify having gained an insight to specific aspects of their child's development. These insights largely reflected the focus of the course on youth justice awareness, and included an improved understanding of their child's views and feelings about crime; and, an insight to their child's social values and decision-making skills. This was achieved through the discussion of such topics between parents and children during the activities at school, and often through subsequent discussions as a family.

A number of crosscutting factors were also found to exert an influence on parents' levels of awareness and understanding. These were identified as follows:

As might be expected, the outcomes for parents' levels of knowledge and understanding also varied somewhat according to the ***intensity and duration of the activities***. The evidence was the greatest for those activities that engaged parents and children together and allowed for a personalised approach. In contrast to this, the few examples of parent-only approaches within the project generally lacked the same level of opportunity for shared learning. The *observation of the child learning by the parent* was perhaps a missing element in this scenario. This so often proved to be an important factor in helping parents to understand their child better, through an 'action learning' approach.

There was some evidence that the ***use of creative activities*** provided an important demonstrator of children's learning. This was particularly the case for parents who were relatively unfamiliar with this method of learning, prior to the project. These parents sometimes reported having seen a side of their child's personality of which they had been unaware. For example, one parent commented that "*I never knew how imaginative he [the child] could be*". For parents who identified *already* doing creative activities with their children, this often provided a familiar reference point to how their child learns at home. It therefore enabled them to relate the outcomes from the scheme, to the types of learning that they would usually do together.

5.2.2 Curriculum awareness

Parents attending the activities sometimes reported an ***improved awareness of the school curriculum and teaching methods***. This was mainly the case for those schemes that were directly underpinned by curricular frameworks; whether early years or primary. These outcomes were usually reinforced by bringing parents into contact with school staff, and undertaking the activities within the school learning environment.

Parents most often reported feeling better informed of teaching at their child's school, where they attended the curriculum workshops. The parents commonly spoke of feeling out of touch with modern teaching methods before they took part in the project, because they only had their own memories of schooling to draw upon. This resulted in anxiety about contradicting the techniques that were used by their child's teachers; especially so when supporting their child with homework or more structured activities that were initiated by their child's school, although less so for wider home literacy practices.

As a result of attending the workshops, some of the parents felt that their knowledge of teaching at school had been brought up-to-date. This was achieved through a combination of hearing about the Foundation stage directly from school staff, and participating in activities to experience how children learn through reading. Despite the workshops being in a different style to 'formal' teaching at school, as they adopted a family learning approach, the first hand experience of the school environment alongside their child was thought to have been insightful:

"It's made me realise what they are going through, and what he [son] is doing at school"

(Mother, Northampton)

"It's refreshed my mind on how it's done these days"

(Father, Tower Hamlets)

A further parent described how the workshops had given her more confidence about selecting books for her child to read at home. This was because the information from the staff and studying the text had given her a better concept of age appropriateness.

On balance, however, there were some ***differences between parents' initial expectations of learning about the curriculum, and their actual experiences of the project.*** Some parents were relieved that the activities avoided duplicating the variety of other information sources about school life, which were said to include after school clubs, tutor time, library learning and discussion with other parents. A few parents favoured a more formal 'instructional' approach, however, and wanted more sustained guidance and reassurance that they were supporting their child's learning *"in the right way"*.

This underlines the distinction between parents' requirement for factual information about the life and work of the school, and more spontaneous (and often informal) learning together at home. For the parents, these two distinct areas of support were related to each other in different ways, depending on parents' beliefs and expectations about the role of the school within their child's learning and development.

5.3 Parents' skills and competences

A further set of outcomes were identified in relation to the skills and competences that were acquired by parents through the project to support their child's learning at home. This section first considers the skills relating directly to the child's learning. It then goes on to examine the adult learning outcomes from the project, and their more indirect influence.

5.3.1 'Teaching' skills

Parents routinely identified some level of improvement to their **skills and competence for supporting their child to learn in the home**, as a result of the project activities. This outcome related more directly to the role of 'parents as educators'¹.

The project activities helped to up-skill parents in supporting their children's learning in different ways, depending on parents' existing levels of competence. The following box summarises some of the main ways in which this outcome was achieved.

'Parents as educators' - reinforcing parent's skills and competence

1. Developing and extending effective practice

Most of the parents who took part in the project reported gaining some new skills and techniques for supporting their child to learn. Parents usually reported taking away new ideas from the project to strengthen their existing home learning practices. They occasionally described having changed their whole approach to engaging with their child.

Parents usually described having set aside time to play or read with their child before the project, but did not always think about how the activities were structured to help the child to learn. The support of the project staff helped parents to recognise how their interaction was benefiting their child's learning, and to consider different techniques to reinforce this:

"I've learnt how to teach them...how I can teach them at home, that's opened my eyes and given me ideas. Before I wouldn't think to actually ask them to come through the kitchen and help me with a little bit of cooking or food preparation. Small things, putting five potatoes in the pan and things like that..."

(Mother, Rochdale)

As a result of taking part in the project, the parents often reported being more aware of the skills at their disposal and knowing when to put them into effect. Examples included:

- parents drawing upon 'everyday' situations to reinforce their younger children's learning, with reference to colours, numbers, or shapes;
- parents facilitating the child to make decisions about how they learn;
- parents using toys more effectively with younger children, to support language, communication and literacy development; and,
- parents using imaginary or creative play to encourage their children's reading.

¹ Atkin, J. & Bastiani, J. (2005) op. cit.

'Parents as educators' - reinforcing parent's skills and competence

Parents who were already very confident about supporting their child at home were the least likely to report learning new skills. Typical comments included that: *"It just fitted nicely with what we do anyway"*, or *"it confirmed that we are on the right track"*.

2. Tuning-in to the child as a learner

Parents also commonly reported having developed more effective strategies to maintain their child's interest and manage their concentration skills when learning at home.

The insight gained to the social and emotional aspects of their child's learning was a key success factor. Parents often described how, before the project, it proved difficult to know how or when to initiate learning activities with their child, to gain their attention. As a result of finding out more about their child's interests and fears about their education, parents described feeling better attuned to the child as a learner. The benefits included:

- parents being able to participate in a wider range of activities with their child at home, because of better understanding of the child's learning interests;
- parents being *"more patient"* when learning with their child, *"getting upset less often"*; and knowing how to avoid potential flashpoints; and,
- parents feeling more able to talk with their child about their thoughts and feelings when learning together, where this was previously thought to be difficult.

3. Overcoming a lack of confidence for supporting the child's learning

A minority of parents identified that, before taking part in the project, they found it stressful to learn with their child, and sometimes took action to avoid doing so. Parents in this situation commonly reported the following barriers to engagement:

- concerns about their own basic skills;
- low self esteem; and,
- a lack of confidence in their abilities to support their child's learning.

For example, parents' comments included that: *"I was scared of getting it wrong"*, or *"I didn't want [to] look stupid in front of her [the child]"*. Some parents were also concerned that they might confuse their child or somehow have a negative effect on their learning, by contradicting the teaching that took place at their child's school.

After taking part in the project, parents in this situation often reported feeling more competent and confident in supporting their child's learning. This was achieved through a combination of modelling effective strategies to engage with the child, and positive reinforcement of the parents' own knowledge and abilities. The parents were more likely to report enjoying the interaction with their child as a result, which in turn led them to initiate learning or play at home on a more regular basis. This contributed to a sense of empowerment and achievement for the parent: *"it's given me peace of mind"*.

Overall, parents less routinely identified strong or direct outcomes for up-skilling or learning *new techniques* to support their child, than they did for *understanding* their children's learning. This appears to have been mainly because any insights to the child's learning were highly specific to the time spent together during the project, whereas the skills and techniques for supporting this learning came from a variety of sources.

In particular, the 'skills' outcomes from the project were found to be lower in the following situations, where parents had already been able to draw upon ***other types of support***:

- where parents had older children who had been through the education system, and were more familiar with the schooling system and teaching methods;
- where there was pro-active involvement from extended family members in the child's learning outside school, and parents could tap-into this support;
- where parents had participated in previous family learning courses or extended schools provision, and / or made regular use of the school library with their child; and,
- where parents had a background in childcare or teaching occupations, and therefore already felt confident about teaching methods.

There were also some noticeable differences within the interview sample, between parents of children at different ***ages and stages***. Whilst there was only one example of an early years' scheme within the project, and these findings should therefore be treated with some caution, the main variations were as follows:

- overall, parents in the early years' settings reported stronger outcomes in relation to learning new skills and techniques for supporting their children. This was mainly because fewer sources of information and support were thought to be available to parents for supporting their child's early language and literacy development, and any such gains were harder to identify by the parent. The role of project staff in helping parents to identify these step changes was therefore valued highly.
- in contrast, parents were often found to be drawing upon a variety of information sources about their child's reading by primary stage, including support from their child's school, libraries and the media. The project activities were therefore less likely to be experienced as a major up-skilling event, but more in terms of gathering new ideas and strategies to take away and try for themselves.

The outcomes were slightly different again for the Law and Order scheme, with regard to parents' skills and competence. As a result of a mix of discussion and tutor-led activities within the course, some of the parents reported the following outcomes:

- being able to ***talk more openly with their child*** about difficult issues relating to crime, safety and the Law; and,
- on a smaller scale and with less evidence of actual testing-out between parents and children: an ***improved awareness of techniques for dealing with their child's behaviour***.

These outcomes were less apparent where the parents thought the course material was geared towards older children (of secondary school age). The parent was less likely to have engaged in discussion with their child at home in these situations, although some of the outcomes arose from the parent discussing the course content with older siblings of the child who was attending the course. These outcomes were somewhat unexpected for the parents concerned.

5.3.2 Progression to employment or training

Parents less commonly reported taking steps to further their own *learning or employment* as a result of the project, although some were already enrolled for adult learning courses or other Further and Higher Education provision at the time when the activities took place. Parents often perceived a connection between their own education and that of their children, however, and some thought that current learning activities were having a positive impact on their child. This issue is discussed further in the next section.

The main reasons why the activities had not apparently led parents to further their own learning for most of the schemes were as follows:

- timescales - for most of the schemes a follow-up interval of around three months is perhaps unrealistic to expect to give a full picture in this respect; and,
- scheme aims and structure - three of the schemes were primarily focussed on parents in a supportive or facilitative role to their child's learning, and were not generally perceived as adult learning opportunities by the parents. Moreover, none of these schemes offered a structured record or accreditation for the adult's learning.

The Law and Order scheme was the main exception to the above. Out of two fairly small groups of parents, there examples of the following actions:

- parents who started training to become a Parent Support Adviser (PSA) or Learning Mentor at their child's school;
- parents who made enquiries about a Community Care NVQ; and,
- parents who applied to re-train for a post at the local Youth Offending Team (YOT).

The interviews showed that the emphasis on adult learning was a key factor in encouraging parents to take these actions. Although parents had often engaged with the course to focus on issues affecting their child, there was an evident demand to complete the OCN course accreditation and explore the opportunities arising from this. Moreover, the role of the course in raising parents' awareness about different crime and youth justice settings had inspired several of the parents to re-train in a sector that they perceived to be undertaking important work with children and young people.

In summary, therefore, the direct engagement of parents to support their own learning was most effective within the project where it followed a more structured family learning model that offered accreditation for the adult learner. These outcomes were by no means assured by delivering other types of school-based activities with parents and children.

5.4 Children's outcomes

The outcomes identified for children on the project largely fell into two main areas, which included benefits for children's attitudes towards learning, and more specific learning outcomes. This section considers the evidence for each in turn.

The overall message was that children were routinely thought to have benefited from the project, but it often proved difficult to attribute these outcomes directly. At best, parents identified that the project represented a step change in their child's learning and development. In many cases, however, the children's experiences of the project had enriched the diverse learning that they were already doing at home with their parents.

5.4.1 Attitudes towards learning

One of the main outcomes observed for children was their more **positive attitudes towards learning**, as a result of taking part in the project. This outcome was reported across the schemes and related to a variety of learning activities undertaken together by parents and children at home. Some of the indicators that this change had occurred included the following:

- children initiating learning activities with the parent in the home, where this was rarely the case prior to the project;
- children showing a greater level of interest in creative activities or shared reading, drawing upon ideas from the schemes; and,
- children responding positively to feedback from the parent, such as where praise was given for progress with reading or play.

Parents reported mixed success with engaging their children in learning activities at home before the project, and sometimes lacked practical ideas for gaining their child's interest. Having taken part in the project, parents identified gaining new ideas for making their child's learning more fun and interactive. This included the use of role-plays, puppetry and crafts to support children's reading. Where these approaches were tested-out at home, parents commonly observed that their children enjoyed the activities more and wanted to do them on a regular basis.

Children who took part in the community arts and literacy scheme often reported **a keener interest in reading**, having taken part in the workshop. This was thought to have been achieved by presenting 'poetry' in a very different context to more traditional learning at school. The memory of the artists and poets, and the artwork that was produced by parent and child together sometimes captured children's imaginations where they previously had no interest. For example, one parent described how her daughter had been keen to visit the local library after taking part in the session, to take out "*fun poetry books*". The parent and child had also made their own storybooks together:

"Someone did buy her a set of poetry books once, which I know are on a shelf and never opened. Whereas now, she will actually go and say: 'ooh look at this poem'. So it's widened here horizons"

(Mother, Sefton)

Parents commonly found that the children's realisation that they were actually learning whilst taking part in 'fun' activities was another key factor in sustaining their interest. Parents sometimes felt better placed to give their child positive reinforcement about what they had learned, as a result of the modelled strategies that were provided by the project staff. Children generally responded well to this reinforcement, which helped to validate their own progress:

"Before he wasn't sure he could do it, so he wasn't that interested, whereas now he realises he's learning each time, he's enjoying it a lot more... I think he's fond you can make it a fun way of learning"

(Mother, Rochdale)

The interviews also highlighted the positive influence that the **parent's own learning** often had on their child's outlook – whether this learning took place within or externally to the project. This influence was found to have been achieved in several ways, which included:

- **setting an example** - the fact that parents had taken the step to learn was often valued highly by the child, and contributed towards their enthusiasm: *"she's seen me doing something with my life"*, and *"they love it that mum's learning, and so they remember it"*. For example, one parent had observed her child getting on with her homework, after watching her mother doing her own learning at home.
- **confidence gains** - parents who had reported feeling more confident about their own learning sometimes observed a direct knock-on effect for their children: *"they have got more confidence, because I have got more confidence."*; and,
- **discussion and debate** - parents sometimes described how they were able to raise their child's enthusiasm for learning at home, by prompting discussion around topics that interested them. The information provided by the schemes was a key success factor, because it enabled parents to feel better informed about these topics

The use of discussion was particularly effective on the Law and Order course. As a result of learning more about topics that captured children's interest, including legal ages and local crime issues, parents were sometimes able to encourage their children to talk about these activities at home in the evenings. One parent described how their children had logged-on to the Internet with them, to look for more information. Another parent described how, as a result of the discussions, *"The whole family has grown in confidence"*.

5.4.2 Literacy and language development

Given the timescales for the research and the qualitative project design, the researchers did not set out to quantify any gains in children's literacy, language and communication skills. The evidence for these kinds of outcomes therefore relied on the observations of parents and school staff, within a relatively short interval (three months) after delivery.

Parents usually considered it **too early to know** whether the project had actually improved their child's literacy and numeracy skills, even where the schemes raised their awareness of *how* these types of outcomes are achieved. Indeed, a few of the parents commented on the difficulty of making an assessment of impact; because their own understanding of their child's learning had changed as a result of the project. For the group-based schemes in particular, the level of support received during the project was sometimes described as being

a “*drop in the ocean*” compared with the ongoing reinforcement of children’s literacy and language skills from their school, and other out-of-school influences¹.

Nonetheless, parents sometimes attributed these types of outcomes to the project in the following situations:

- where the initial activities had provided a *directly modelled approach to identify signs of the child’s early writing, speech and communication development*; and,
- where the child’s *additional support needs were effectively addressed by the project in a way that could be continued and monitored by the parent*.

The parents who received the early educational home visits were the most likely to report identifying progress in their child². For some parents, the approach of more regularly introducing learning through play was thought to have improved their ***child’s recognition of colours, shapes and numbers***. In a further example, the child’s coordination skills were observed to have improved. This was achieved by project staff identifying more developmentally appropriate toys, which the parent had used with their child afterwards, and the parents’ own sense of having a better idea of what to look for in her child’s development:

“Yes the game helps [her to] coordinate... they got holes in it, and stuff on the string. And she didn’t know that before, so yes, she learnt that”.

(Mother, Rochdale)

A few of the parents who attended the curriculum workshops also reported observing ***progress with their child’s reading skills at home***; particularly where the child had picked-up on the concept of ‘reading in character’ at the original session. The indicators that the child’s abilities had improved included longer periods of concentration during the reading session, and step changes to their reading comprehension. This was thought to have been achieved through the modelling of the activities at home, including the techniques for providing affirmation of the child’s learning gains, and the focus on enjoyment. Having repeated this type of activity at home on a regular basis, some parents had observed a step change in their child’s confidence and abilities for reading, as follows:

“[She’s] more confident in reading now, because she wants to try it herself, which she didn’t used to do before... She’ll say ‘stop, mum, can I just read what the word says?’”

(Mother, Northampton)

“Reading is a big thing for her... definitely since she’s done that [the activities] and we have done it together... Her teachers have turned around to me and said her reading and her writing has come on leaps and bounds”

(Mother, Northampton)

On the community arts and literacy scheme, a further parent described how her dyslexic son had made noticeable progress with his writing since attending the session. This was attributed to the fact that he had responded very positively to the use of drawing and word

¹ Including for example: Family ESOL provision, language teaching at after school clubs and / or Saturday schools, the use of internet and TV as educational resources, siblings and extended family. Refer to the previous chapter for a further consideration of the role of these factors in “activating” learning at home.

² There is direct and robust evidence for the equivalent outcomes in Sefton where the FAST model originated, and where the service has been evaluated over a longer period with a greater number of parents using a Randomised Control Trial.

association. The child was thought to have improved his word formation since the parent had continued this approach with the home.

As is apparent, however, these types of outcomes related to a scattering of cases and it would warrant a larger scale quantitative study to measure them comprehensively.

5.4.3 Social, emotional and communication skills

As discussed in the previous section, the parent-child relationship proved an important one for parent and child finding out more about how the other learns. In some cases, this was also thought to have had benefits for the child's social and emotional development.

Parents from most of the schemes commented on how their close interaction during the project, and the regular use of characters and role play had improved their understanding of skill such as **empathy and emotional expression**. This was observed by parents in the home, when reading with their child and participating in creative activities that were inspired by the creative arts and learning or curriculum workshops schemes. The skills were sometimes thought to have benefited the parent-child relationship. For example, several parents reported that their child was communicating better with them more effectively since taking part in the activities. This included examples where the parent and child had taken steps to overcome previous tensions within their relationship:

“She’s a bit more tolerant of mum since the workshop, whereas previously she was quite resistant... this has made it easier to learn together... we empathise more”.

(Mother, Nottingham)

“She [daughter] talks to me more, now”

(Mother, Northampton)

Parents who attended the early educational home visits were particularly attune to their child's development, because the scheme targeted families of children who were about to start at nursery. The parents were sometimes quite anxious about how their child would cope with this transition. Parents in this situation were generally reassured of their child's **readiness for nursery** by the project staff. This was achieved by demonstrating to the parent how their child was able to cope when learning with another adult from outside the family, and gained in confidence over the course of the two visits.

One parent took much reassurance from the home visitor that her child was *“emotionally ready”* to start nursery. Another commented on how her child had insisted on being taken to nursery by her sisters. After the visit, she felt comfortable with being accompanied by the Family Support Worker and was said to have gained confidence in interacting with the staff and children there.

5.5 Parental engagement with the child's school

A final consideration for the research was to examine the extent to which the schemes had any knock-on effects for other aspects of parental engagement within the schools and nurseries. This outcome was explored from the perspectives of parents and staff.

The interviews showed that parents were quite evenly divided between those for whom the schemes provided an opportunity for further engagement with their child's school, and those for whom there was no real change to their existing patterns of contact.

Where parents identified changes to their **engagement with their child's school of nursery**, the main outcomes were as follows:

- parents who received educational home visits commonly reported feeling more relaxed and comfortable with the idea of attending courses at their child's nursery. This was as a result of watching their children respond well to the session, and the role of staff in explaining to them *"what the nursery can offer, and what this will be like"*;
- parents who attended activities at their child's school sometimes reported feeling more confident to ask questions about their child's schooling and curriculum matters. This was achieved as a result of finding out more about how their children learn;
- parents occasionally spoke of having maintained social contacts that were made with other parents at the initial session, and were more likely to engage with both staff and parents that they met when picking-up or dropping-off their child. This was described by one parent as *"a gradually widening social circle"*;
- a few of the parents who received educational home visits reported feeling more confident that the nursery was making an effort to reach out to the local community. Whereas previously the nursery was perceived as being slightly remote, the home visiting approach sent out the message that *"they are giving us more attention now"*;
- a few of the parents who attended school-based activities commented that they would be more likely to actually go into the school and speak with staff if their child had any problems. This was as a result of meeting with staff at the session and making contact.

For those parents where there was no reported change, the main factors were as follows:

- they already reported having a good relationship with school staff, and did not consider that the session had significantly extended this;
- some parents described their engagement in terms of being *"serial learners"* – this included where parents had regular opportunities to attend short course adult learning provision at their child's school and had done so many times before;
- there was a limited opportunity to engage directly with staff from the school at the session - this was the case for the Law and Order course, for example, which was delivered by a family learning tutor but did not directly involve the children's teachers;
- in the case of some of the parents who received educational home visits, their child eventually secured a place at a different nursery. This meant that there had been little ongoing contact with the staff whom they met through the project.

These factors highlight the problematic nature of engaging 'hard to reach' parents. In some cases it is clear that the schools had a regular group of parents who were already engaged and would attend most activities on offer. Although the outcomes were often positive, this raised the issue of challenging more established patterns of engagement that are repeated over time. This issue is perhaps common to schools in general, rather than being a specific feature of the project design.

6.0 Conclusions and recommendations

This report has examined the findings from an action research project that was funded by the DCSF between January 2007 and March 2009 to examine how schools can support parents with their children's learning in the home. Section two of the report reviewed the experiences of six local authorities and ten schools in working together to transfer established schemes to a new local setting. The delivery of these schemes was examined in section three, with attention to the different types and levels of engagement and their effectiveness, whilst section four considered how the link with 'at home' learning was made and sustained. The resulting outcomes of this process were explored in section four, from the perspectives of the staff and parents who took part.

This final section of the report draws together the findings from the project to conclude upon its effectiveness, and to consider the implications for policy and practice. The section A set of recommendations from the project are then presented.

6.1 The role of schools in promoting 'at home' learning

The project set out to examine how schools can promote the skills needed by parents to help 'at home' learning. The scoping stage and the subsequent exchanges of good practice underlined the variety of roles that schools are able to play, and importantly, that **school-promoted** initiatives do not always have to be **school-led**. The ten schools joined the project with very different levels of experience, priorities and resources for parental engagement, and this was reflected in the support that was required for setting-up the schemes. It often proved invaluable - or even essential - to draw upon the expertise that lies within schools' extended services, local authority teams and the wider community.

6.1.1 Children and adults as learners

A key message from all of the schemes was that 'at home' learning involves both **children and adults as learners**. Where the schemes ran smoothly, this was almost always because the planning and delivery was undertaken by professionals with a shared understanding of adult and child learning outcomes and the recognition of the skills of professionals working with adults and children as an equal partnership. A success factor for effective provision was to achieve this mix of expertise at an individual school level:

- the exchange between Northampton and Tower Hamlets showed that the curriculum workshops were equally adaptable to schools where parental engagement expertise is in-sourced or out-sourced, but that a close partnership with teachers and curriculum managers was essential in either scenario.
- in contrast, the exchange between Sefton FAST and Rochdale, whilst ultimately successful, exposed the potential risks of transferring a scheme to a different setting where the expertise of child outcomes or adult outcomes is not fully established.

This strong **workforce development dimension** was recurrent throughout the project, and highlighted wider issues regarding how school-based professionals; from Head-teachers, to teachers, support and administrative staff are supported to acquire the necessary skills for working with parents. There was a consensus amongst project staff on the need for opportunities for joint training involving schools, family learning and parenting professionals, to ensure that a common understanding of adult and child outcomes is embedded at an

operational level. Some felt that universal work in schools had lagged behind more targeted work with families in this respect..

6.1.2 Schools' capacity for effective engagement

The project highlighted a number of issues regarding ***schools' capacity to offer support to parents*** with 'at home' learning. Although all of the schools had staff with designated responsibilities for parental engagement, there was often a reliance on individuals offering non-core time to help establish the schemes. This partly reflected that:

- the schools often had a full timetable of extended activities, and were reluctant to displace existing provision; and,
- there was a high level of need for teachers and curriculum managers to support the project, given the focus on pupil's *learning* outcomes.

Many of the project staff felt that putting family learning into the core curriculum within schools was the only way to address this issue. It was thought this would give practitioners working with adults and children adequate time to jointly plan provision, and therefore to achieve better quality and outcomes.

Although the main focus of the project was on primary schools, the theme of 'transitions' emerged as an important one from the research, and there was a strong message about the importance of ***the earliest possible engagement*** with parents to build learning partnerships:

- the Sefton FAST early home visits demonstrated considerable success with raising parents' awareness of early literacy and language formation through play, and showed that support for 'at home' learning is possible in a pre-nursery setting¹.
- similarly, the delivery of curriculum workshops at Foundation stage was shown to provide schools with a head-start for engaging parents during Reception year. While the Law and Order family learning programme and the arts and poetry workshops (Community Arts and Literacy) were successful in engaging parents and children at different stages and could be adapted to meet needs of families at points of transition.

These findings reinforce the importance of home-school development from the early years.

6.2 Ensuring positive outcomes for parents and pupils

The research aimed to examine how the project influenced parents' existing support for their children's learning in the home. The interviews reinforced that parental views of roles and responsibilities towards their children's learning were ***highly individualised***. Whilst engagement with the child's school was a recurring priority, this was just one of a number of ways in which parents supported their child's learning that also included, to a varying extent at an individual family level:

¹ This evidence is also supported by the research literature. See for example: Siraj-Blatchford, I. et. al. (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*. London. DfES Publications. Based on case studies conducted in Foundation Stage (FS) settings, the study cited the practitioners' curriculum knowledge, shared educational aims with parents, and formative reinforcement of learning as key factors affecting children's outcomes.

- established home literacy practices;
- informal and creative learning together;
- support from extended family members;
- cultural or educational visits, including to libraries and museums;
- structured religious and cultural education within the home or community, and
- the use of television and internet as educational resources.

For parents of younger children in particular, the descriptions of home-based learning centred on imaginative play, which often held **indirect associations with 'teaching' at school**. Although parents were usually receptive to being able to identify signs of their child's development and progress, it was not always appropriate to approach this in a formal way that might serve to displace more spontaneous positive interaction.

6.2.1 Parental outcomes

The project showed that activities were often the most successful where they engaged parents in a way that **validated their prior knowledge and skills** for supporting the child in the home. This usually involved a two-way exchange to relate curriculum information to the home learning environment. This link was made in three principal ways through the schemes that were involved with the project:

- through the 'modelling' of positive parent-child interactions, such as the use of role play to help recognise early language and literacy development, or by fusing creative activities and literacy to support parents' strategies for reading;
- through the participation of parents and children in designing 'take-home' resources; such as parents and children being supported to design games or storybooks that brought together ideas or references from home and school; and,
- more indirectly, by providing mementos or records of achievement; as a reminder of the scheme, and to keep open the lines of communication that were established.

Where the activities were **consistent with parents' philosophies and approach**, they had often continued to set aside time for play or reading with the child, and sometimes extended this further. Parents had often continued or adapted successful activities, and sometimes purchased books or resources to reinforce this, alongside other activities to promote their children's learning through encouragement and informal activities.

Equally, however, it was clear that the initial enthusiasm generated by the project was not guaranteed to result in practical changes within the home, even where parents intended to do so. The activities were often competing with commitments from the child's school, parental work responsibilities and other demands on family time. The activities were often the most successful where they offered ideas or general principles for supporting children's learning, rather than relying on parents to recreate whole activities from scratch.

The project highlighted a distinctive role for activities that **engage the parent and child together**. Where parents and children participated jointly in family learning activities, the parents commonly reported having an improved understanding of *how* their child learns, and the wider social and emotional context for their child's schooling. In some instances, this was reported to have strengthened parent-child relationships. The activities also regularly promoted the engagement of wider family members; especially where cultural or gender barriers were broken down directly through the use of outreach to engage with parents and support them learning with their children directly in their own homes.

6.2.2 Children's outcomes

The interval between delivering the project activities and follow-up was not sufficient to attempt any quantification of children's educational outcomes at a school level. The project highlighted a number of areas where children's learning outcomes were observed directly by staff or parents, however, as follows:

- parents commonly observed improvements to their child's communication, language and literacy skills, where they had continued to practice activities that were first modelled at the family learning session;
- parents often observed wider benefits in terms of their child's interest towards reading and creative activities at home generally; and,
- parents who had taken steps to improve their own skills regularly observed improvements in their child's attitudes towards learning, as a result of more regular discussion in the home and the influence this had on the child's aspirations.

It was more problematic to attribute outcomes to the project, where the parents or children had also participated in other learning activities over the same period. The findings largely support previous family learning evaluations, however, which particularly emphasise the role of **intergenerational learning** in improving adult and child outcomes together¹.

6.3 Transferring and replicating good practice

The project aimed to test the transferability of schemes that have been developed at a local level to support parents with their children's learning. The conclusions must take into account the particular model that was developed to manage this transfer, therefore, and its likely impact on the outcomes that were achieved.

6.3.1 Effectiveness of the project model

As a 'showcase', supported by the project team and with the profile afforded by DCSF sponsorship, the project certainly demonstrated tangible benefits from **local authorities and schools working together to exchange good practice**. The conditions created by the project made it possible to bring together whole teams of managers, practitioners and school staff from different local areas to share resources and observe activities being delivered. This was widely thought to have been the most useful aspect of the project for practitioners, which resulted in the following outcomes taken across the project:

¹ See for example: Gregory, Long and Volk (2004) *Many Pathways to Literacy: Young children learning with siblings, grandparents, peers and communities*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

- new professional relationships and networks developed
- improved collaboration between schools and family learning practitioners; and,
- improved knowledge and awareness of working with diverse communities

The actual transfer of ***the individual schemes experienced mixed success***. Four of the six schemes were established in a different setting through close negotiation between the local authorities and schools, and delivery took place within the project timescale. For two of the schemes in particular, there were some valuable lessons learned from adapting the activities to meet the needs of parents with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and addressing cultural and gender barriers to parental engagement. The other two schemes proved more problematic to transfer within the timescale, due to differences in how provision is planned and funded between local authorities (Family SEAL) and differences in school-level roles and infrastructure for parental engagement (Working with Families).

An important lesson learned was that it ***rarely proved feasible to transfer the original scheme in its entirety***. The Law and Order course was shortened and delivered with reduced levels of multi-agency involvement, whilst the FAST home visits were shortened from four to two visits and with a narrower age group. These adjustments were carefully negotiated by project staff to preserve the original framework, but concerns were expressed about any wider rollout of each scheme once it was removed from the umbrella of professional expertise provided by the core team. Only in Nottingham was it thought feasible to transfer the entire model, because the exchange took place between two Family Learning Services with equivalent funding and objectives.

6.3.2 The transferability of local good practice

The message for policy and practice is therefore to sound a note of caution. The project demonstrated that there is much to be gained from local authorities and schools working together to undertake small-scale exchanges of good practice, but that this is not a substitution for ***adequately funded core learning provision***. Whilst highly effective examples of local schemes were found to exist, their scaling up is perhaps best managed by developing a central and coordinated bank of resources that is accessible to all local authorities and schools, and with clear guidance on the underpinning skills, knowledge and competences that are required to deliver them. As with other strands of the project, this returns to the priority for central investment in workforce development to support all practitioners whose role includes a focus on working with both children and adults.

6.4 Recommendations

The authors recommend a number of actions, in taking forward the findings from the research. These are as follows:

- 1 To examine how workforce development can be strengthened for practitioners who work with adults and children, through more regular opportunities for joint training within the common core, and to include parental engagement and family learning within ITT and CPD for schools.
- 2 To review the range and quality of available learning programmes that are available to schools for engaging pupils and parents together, and to provide greater flexibility for schools to offer family learning within the timetable as a core curriculum activity.

- 3 To examine the role of literacy and language development within outreach provided by Sure Start Children's Centres and nurseries, and consider how effective practice for supporting 'at home' learning can be best supported within early years' settings.
- 4 To further scope the potential for a home visiting as a method for engaging with fathers and wider family members; to review the range of models that are currently offered by primary schools, and to assess their effectiveness.
- 5 To conduct further research into the role of ICTs, including internet and television, as media for schools to support intergenerational learning; to review the source and quality of available materials, and to provide support for parents to access and use these resources effectively.
- 6 To conduct further research into the impact that school-promoted family programmes has on siblings and wider family members; to establish the contribution this type of work is making towards family literacy development and strengthening family relationships.
- 7 To ensure that the role of parents as partners in their children's education is taken into account within the Ofsted review of pupil wellbeing, and to strengthen and extend the involvement of families and parents within the teaching of social and emotional aspects of learning in schools.
- 8 To create and maintain a national databank of good practice resources and information for schools to support parents with 'at home' learning, with contributions from local authorities and schools across England; covering early years, primary and secondary education, and to consider making funding available to support innovative exchanges of good practice.

Annex One: Method statement

A1.1 Scoping and exploratory work

The study commenced with a call for evidence regarding local schemes that involve schools in supporting parents with their children's learning development. A number of strategies were adopted for this task, which comprised of:

- **A short scoping review**, drawing upon academic, Government and independent sources of literature to identify the type and range of models that exist and to consider the available evidence for their effectiveness. The documents were checked for research question applicability and catalogued as a resource to inform the short-listing of schemes for the project.
- **A snapshot survey of local authorities**, to establish the type and range of schemes in existence; the nature of the role for schools / LA and wider community partners; the outcomes achieved from such schemes; and the available sources of evidence. A contact list of 60 LAs was compiled from an internet search of LA websites and with attention to geographical coverage. The survey was distributed to more than one key contact wherever possible, to ensure a mix of respondents from a) Parenting Support, b) Extended Schools and c) Family Learning. One set of reminders was issued per LA. The achieved sample comprised of 22 LAs. The data was entered to a spreadsheet to facilitate a comparison.
- **Awareness raising of the scheme** via the DCSF newsletter; the Family Learning Local Advisory Group (FLLAG) network; National Home School Development Group (NHSDG) network, and a dedicated web-site for the project:

The partners reviewed the evidence from the schemes to shortlist the examples of 'promising' schemes and to schedule case study visits to examine them in further detail. Ten schemes were short-listed. Each visit comprised of a set of face-to-face semi-structured interviews with key LA personnel and school representatives, and paired interviews or focus groups with parents where this was possible to arrange. Additional scheme documentation was collected.

Criteria for selecting the schemes

The short-listing required attention to the best mix of different types of schemes that were identified through the scoping work, whilst taking into account practical issues that might affect their replication. This included costs, local authority and schools' capacity, and feasibility within the timescale. The specific criteria were as follows:

- A cross-section of the main broad types proposed for the research. These types were presented and justified in the response to the initial research brief, and refined at scoping stage. This resulted in the identification of five main categories:
 - 1) home-school liaison roles;
 - 2) family learning schemes;
 - 3) home-made, school-based activities;
 - 4) parent-led support groups; and
 - 5) multi-agency community schemes

- A cross-section of types of outcomes, from explicitly 'attainment-focussed', to 'wider development', and cross-mapped to the five Every Child Matters outcomes;
- A range of work with parents at different educational stages, from early years, to primary and approaching transition to secondary; and,
- A range of universal and more targeted work, across different levels of need on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) scale.

A total of six schemes were short-listed on this basis, following the literature search, scoping survey and case study visits. They can be identified as follows:

1. Sefton FAST - educational home visits
2. Rochdale - Community Arts and Literacy (CAL)
3. Tower Hamlets - curriculum workshops
4. Northampton - Working with Families scheme
5. Isle of Wight - Law and Order OCN
6. Nottingham - Family SEAL¹

A main point of contact was established at local authority level for each scheme. This reflected the prolific role for local authorities in working with schools to support parents, and ensured that this level of strategic planning was reflected within the project.

Table A1.1 overleaf provides additional information about each of the schemes.

¹ Gateshead initially joined the project to transfer their Wider Family Learning courses, but had to withdraw

Table A1.1 Schemes short-listed for the action research stage

Local authority	Name of scheme	Brief description	Partners	Current funding	Reasons for selection
1. Sefton	<i>Families and Schools Together (FAST)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational home visits, with a focus on children aged 0-4 and their families to raise standards in communication, language and literacy through play. • Four-week structure, 1 ¼ hours per week culminating in an early Record of Achievement. • Progression to 'Start Right' family learning groups, based at schools or Sure Start Children's Centres. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by the Family Learning Service, in partnership with parents, schools and Sure Start Children's Centres. • Referrals from the Health Visiting service. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children's Services (core) • Sure Start • Mixed / other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early intervention model, with success in engaging parents (including 'hard to reach') to build relationships prior to child starting school • Clear and replicable structure / format
2. Rochdale	<i>Community Arts and Literacy (CAL)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community-based programme, fusing media, the arts and family learning to support parents to engage with their children's learning, develop basic skills and to build social cohesion. • Flexible structure; can be delivered through group work or individually, and run alongside schools' curricula. • Includes targeted work for adults with mental health, but less direct work with children for this. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by the Partnership Education Service, as part of Wider Family Learning provision • Partnership with voluntary sector, libraries, health centres and schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Deal for Communities • Project funding from MIND for the mental health strand 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example of an effective community-based multi agency model, suitable for enhancing schools' extended services • Includes a focus on transition to secondary school, to support parents at key points.
3. Tower Hamlets	<i>Curriculum-focussed workshops</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training for school staff to deliver curriculum-focussed workshops for groups of parents in schools. Capacity-building approach for sustainability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Managed by the local authority Parental Involvement Team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School funding (core) • NRF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Example of a curriculum-oriented model that has a very direct link to attainment and standards

Local authority	Name of scheme	Brief description	Partners	Current funding	Reasons for selection
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be delivered as a stand alone, or as part of a wider parental involvement programme. In Tower Hamlets, this includes links / progression to Family Learning days out for participants. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Home-school liaison workers recruit parents to the scheme • Teachers and support staff are trained to deliver the workshops. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good potential to combine with a variety of other approaches.
4. Northants	<i>Excellence Cluster 'Working with Families' strand</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multi-agency home-school partnership model, aims to raise aspirations and achievement within cluster schools. • Training for Family Support Workers to build capacity for parental involvement in schools alongside Learning Mentors; brokering access to local provision (such as FL; healthy eating activities) • Also includes a practical handbook for parents, and parent-led conferences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellence Cluster Team, in partnership with local schools, parents, and voluntary and community sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellence Cluster • Sure Start 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on a grassroots 'enabling' approach to raise schools' capacity to work with parents to support their children's learning • Very replicable in other cluster settings, and drawing on locally available provision
5. Isle of Wight	<i>Law and Order (law and citizenship scheme)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement citizenship programme, written by a FL tutor in conjunction with local parents. • Delivers effective citizenship education to children, whilst raising parents' awareness of youth justice settings. • Ten week course, with classroom and community elements. Resulting in portfolio and National Open College Network (OCN) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Learning Service and Parenting and Family Support • Partnership with courts, probation services, YOTs, prisons, and local schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LSC Family Learning Programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses the wider citizenship and behavioural dimensions of children's learning • Might be combined with other parental involvement activities at school level

Local authority	Name of scheme	Brief description	Partners	Current funding	Reasons for selection
		accreditation.			
6. Nottingham	<i>Family SEAL</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A school-based parent education programme, which was developed and piloted by the Nottingham City Family Learning Service • Scheme aims to build upon and strengthen the level of parental engagement within mainstream SEAL provision for pupils. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family Learning Service and Children's Services Directorate • Local schools; SIS, Family Learning; Life Education Centre. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LSC Family Learning Programmes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses children's social and emotional skills through school-based support • Will broaden the range of ECM outcomes covered

The following matrix provides a cross-check for the schemes, against the selection criteria that were described previously in this section.

Table A1.2 Scheme characteristics

SELECTED SCHEMES	CRITERIA														
	A. Typologies					B. ECM outcomes					C. Age group			D. Focus	
	Home-school liaison	Family learning	Home-made, school-based	Parent-led support groups	Multi-agency community	Be healthy	Stay safe	Enjoy and achieve	Positive contribution	Economic wellbeing	Early years	Primary	Secondary	Universal	Targeted
1. FAST programme	x	x				x		x			x			x	x
2. Community arts					x			x	x				x		x
3. Curriculum workshops			x					x	x				x	x	x
4. Working with Families				x		x		x		x			x		x
5. Law and Order					x		x	x					x	x	x
6. Family SEAL		x				x		x					x		x

A1.2 Scheme adaptation

The project aimed to test the transferability of the schemes. The model selected to achieve this was to 'pair-up' the local authorities and schools to enable them to exchange good practice in a focussed way. The approach offered practical benefits, in making it easier to support local authorities and schools within a finite budget and timescales. This mitigated the risk of schools being 'set up to fail', through a lack of time or resources.

The final decision about the pairings was made on a thematic basis, by further grouping the schemes into three broad types on the basis of their approach towards parental engagement¹.

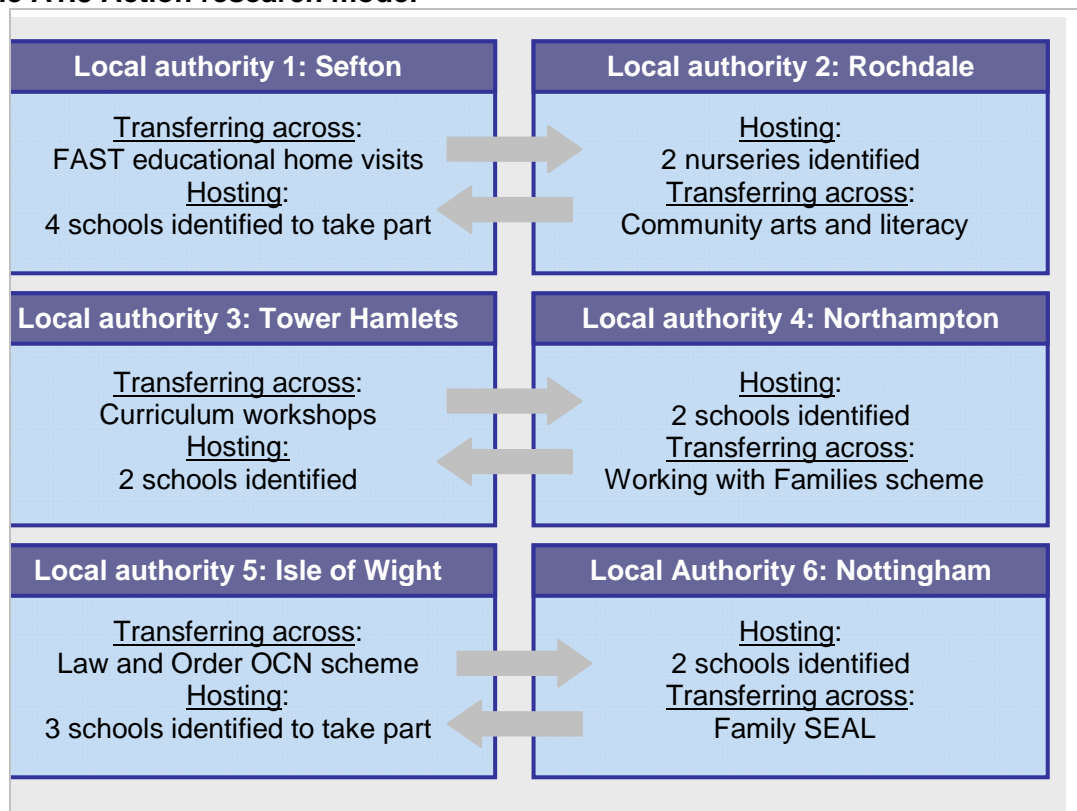
Although this meant that the authorities within each pair were sometimes of varying sizes and types, the project was essentially concerned with activities delivered at *school* level. Each pairing therefore provided a sufficient range and breadth of schools to draw upon to achieve effective targeting. The local authorities used their discretion to identify schools to participate, with attention to the following principal criteria:

- **Levels of risk** - there was a priority to ensure that no school was set up to fail, so the schools were identified on the basis of having some level of experience of working with parents; and,
- **Design factors** - the individual schools were selected to match the focus of each scheme. So, for example, two nurseries were identified in Rochdale to retain the focus of the home visits on 0-4 year olds and their families, whereas Northampton selected two primaries to enable the transfer of a KS2 curriculum package from Tower Hamlets.

An illustration of the 'pairing' model is provided below.

¹ 1) family learning, 2) developing home-school relationships, and 3) community engagement

Table A1.3 Action research model



The linking model presents both advantages and drawbacks from a research perspective. Whilst providing a defined geographical scale and focus for the activities, it also introduces certain 'design effects' to the research process. The research findings must be considered in the context of local authorities that had demonstrated elements of good practice for parental engagement, and schools that were receptive to trialling a new approach. Although the schools were by no means all at an advanced stage in working with parents, and a number of the schools were located in areas of high socio-economic disadvantage.

A1.3 Scheme implementation and support

The following summarises the activities that were delivered by each scheme. NIACE provided support during the implementation of each scheme, provided additional capacity to develop the schemes of work for Law and Citizenship, and ran focus groups with the practitioners from each 'pairing' to reflect on the key learning points after each scheme was completed.

1. Community Arts and Literacy (CAL)

- Sefton Extended Schools worked with Rochdale Family Learning Service to adapt and deliver a series of arts and literacy sessions to families in partnership with four schools, involving community artists and poets. The delivery took place in spring term 2008. A total of 47 parents and 57 pupils attended, across the four schools.
- Follow-up assemblies were held in each school, at which the parents and pupils received a framed copy of their artwork and poetry. Pictorial minutes from the day were displayed at the schools as a lasting record of the project.

2. Educational home visits

- Rochdale Family Literacy Workers received training and support from the Sefton FAST team, to deliver a set of educational home visits to parents of children at pre-nursery stage, with a focus on communication skills and learning through play.
- Home visits were provided to 12 parents during the summer and autumn terms of 2008. Parents were provided with the opportunity to progress to 'Start Right' family learning groups at two local nurseries, building relationships with nursery staff.

3. Curriculum workshops

- Family Support Workers, curriculum staff and teachers in two Northampton primary schools received support and training from Tower Hamlets Parental Engagement Team to deliver curriculum workshops to parents and pupils, on a literacy theme.
- A total of 25 parents attended the sessions across the two schools. The parents were supported to develop a board game and activities to play with their child at home.

4. Working with Families scheme

- Tower Hamlets Parental Engagement Workers and school staff took part in exchange visits, to observe the role of the Family Support Workers in Northampton, and identify elements of the role and approach to transfer to two Tower Hamlets primary schools.
- A scheme was identified, to include: building parents' confidence to run their own activities, setting-up spaces for family learning in the schools, and organising parent-led conferences. Parent-to-parent visits took place in spring 2009 to launch this work.

5. Law and Citizenship scheme

- Nottingham Family Learning Service worked in partnership with community safety and crime organisations and school staff, to deliver an eight-week law and citizenship course to groups of parents in two Nottingham primary schools. The model was adapted from the successful OCN accredited Law and Order scheme (Isle of Wight).
- Two parallel versions of the scheme were tested: with / without pupils. A total of 16 parents completed the schemes, and gained OCN accreditation.

6. Family SEAL

- The Isle of Wight Family Learning Service undertook information gathering visits Nottingham, to observe the Family SEAL and ESOL Learning schemes in action and to review course documents, session plans and training frameworks.
- The Family Learning Service has collaborated with the Children's Service on the Island, to review how elements of the approach can be transferred to the Isle of Wight without duplicating existing SEAL activities. Piloting will take place, post-project.

A1.4 Scheme evaluation

The evidence for the effectiveness and outcomes from the schemes was captured by combining primary research and secondary data collection. The work was carried out as follows:

- A series of research observations were conducted at different stages throughout the project, to capture the lessons learned from joint planning and delivery. A structured pro-forma was designed for this task, to help standardise the data collection. 29 observations were conducted in total. None of the educational home visits were observed, due to concerns by the practitioners that this would adversely affect the session.
- An evaluation checklist was distributed to each of the LA managers, outlining the additional sources of data that might be provided. These data included: self-evaluation sheets completed by school staff, attendance logs, parent feedback forms, planning notes and session plans. The documents from each scheme were compiled and reviewed at the analysis stage.
- A set of qualitative interviews was conducted for each scheme. The interviews took place at an interval of between two and four months from the initial activities, to allow time for reflection by staff and parents and to capture any subsequent application of the activities within the home. The qualitative interviews comprised of the following:
 - In-depth interviews were conducted on a face-to-face with parents who participated in each of the schemes. The interview profile was cross-checked with the profile of each scheme, and booster interviews conducted to prevent any skewing. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes, using a semi-structured topic guide, and were recorded using digital equipment wherever parents gave their consent. A total of 74 interviews were completed. Most of the interviews took place in the respondent's home, but a small number were completed at a school or a community venue at the parents' request. Table A1.1 (overleaf) provides further details of the achieved interview sample.
 - A small number of interviews were conducted on a paired basis with parent and child present, as a feasibility test. Following the completion of 5 such interviews with children aged between 5 and 7, the decision was taken to discontinue this approach due to the restrictions that it placed on the child discussing their experiences openly with the researcher. A decision was taken not to conduct group-based consultations with children, given that the main focus of the research was on the 'at home' interaction of parent and child on an individual family basis and that the format was therefore inappropriate.
 - In-depth telephone interviews were conducted with a cross-section of LA and school staff who had a role in planning or delivering the schemes. A total of 21 interviews were completed. These interviews lasted between 40 minutes and one hour, and were conducted by telephone using a semi-structured topic guide. A sample of these interviews were recorded where staff gave their consent, to enable the inclusion of longer quotes and case study examples within the report.

- Finally, a set of 4 practitioner focus groups were conducted by NIACE with a cross-section of staff from each scheme. The groups took place within the action research 'pairings' of LAs, to reflect on their experiences of the exchange process, and to identify lessons learned for other practitioners who might aim to undertake a similar approach. The focus groups particularly examined the issues raised for practitioner's skills and qualifications.

Transcription analysis was first conducted, to extract key information from the interviews against each of the key topic headings. This information was entered manually to a pre-populated spreadsheet, which was coded to identify page and paragraph numbers for the identification of possible quotes. Secondary analysis was then conducted, to draw out key findings in relation to each of the key themes for the report. These data were cross-checked with the documentary evidence collected from each of the schemes, to assess the strength of the research evidence.

The researchers provided four drafts of the main research report, and a parallel guide for practitioners with more practical information about each of the individual schemes.

Table A1.1: Achieved sample for the parent interviews

Monitoring criteria		Totals
Age	0 - 15	-
	16 - 24	5
	25 - 49	63
	50 - 59	2
	60 - 64	-
	65-74	1
	75 and over	-
	Not stated	3
Gender	Female	69
	Male	5
Parental disability <i>Self-reported disability</i>	Yes	8
	No	35
	Not stated	31
Marital status	Married	39
	Single	16
	Partner	7
	Divorced	4
	Separated	3
	Not stated	5
Employment status	In work or training	32
	Unemployed	31
	Not Stated	11
Numbers of children	1	15
	2	28
	3	16
	4 or more	12
	None (other caring role)	3
Child disability <i>One or more child with a disability</i>	Yes	16
	No	33
	Not stated	25
Interview total		74

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