

# How Can Family Learning Promote Educational Resilience In Children And Young People?

## Introduction

One of the most compelling priorities on the current national educational agenda is to close the achievement gap between those pupils who are academically successful and those who are at risk of failure. Pupils at risk of academic failure often live in socio-economic conditions that have made it difficult for them to succeed in school. Identifying interventions that will promote educational success has become increasingly important in the attempt to improve the life chances of children and young people living in disadvantaged circumstances.

One area of research that has significant implications for the educational improvement of pupils at risk of academic failure is focused on “educational resilience”, -

“the capacity of students to attain academic and social success in school despite exposure to personal and environmental adversities” (Wang, Haertel & Walberg, 1998)

The construct of “educational resilience” is not viewed as a fixed attribute but as something that can be promoted by focusing on “alterable” factors that impact on an individual’s success in school. Research identifies particular personal attributes, and features of families, schools and communities, which can be viewed as “protective”. These features promote the development of beliefs and behaviours in pupils that result in positive educational outcomes and foster educational resilience.

The Family Learning Service has been commissioned by the Education and Learning Panel of the Birmingham Strategic Partnership to produce this report, which will focus on the context of the family, and how services can work in partnership with parents and families to promote these ‘protective’ features and thereby encourage the development of educational resilience in children and young people. It will:

- Provide an overview of the research and evidence around what works

- Identify models of good practice in Birmingham settings
- Outline key factors that seem to facilitate good practice

It is intended to be a guide to practitioners developing their work with parents at a time when the impetus to extend and integrate services to families is gaining momentum.

## **Policy Context**

The 2003 Green Paper 'Every Child Matters' announced the ambition of government to radically reshape and integrate services to children and families in order to improve outcomes for children and young people in five key areas: being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and achieving economic well-being. The green paper also recognised that only by putting parents and families at the heart of its reforms could the five desired outcomes for children be achieved, and stated in its aims that parents, carers and families must be enabled to promote healthy choices, provide safe homes and stability, support learning, promote positive behaviour and be supported to be economically active.

The green paper emphasised the interdependence of educational achievement and well-being, advocating that educational achievement is the most effective way to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children, and that children learn and thrive when healthy, safe and engaged. Promoting educational resilience can therefore be viewed as central to achieving the aims of 'Every Child Matters'.

It is also now widely accepted that there is a significant gap in the relative levels of attainment between children in different social classes and that this gap can be linked to different levels of parental involvement. This assumption is implicit in 'Every Child Matters', and complemented by a raft of educational strategies and policies.

The Government is consequently looking to children's centres and extended schools to develop a coherent set of services both to support parents and to involve them properly at all stages of a child's learning and development. A key function of these new services will be to support parents to develop the understanding, skills and values that will be necessary to underpin the five desired outcomes. Over time it is expected that all schools will provide a core offer of extended services, that will include family learning, either on site or across a cluster of local schools. Family learning programmes are highlighted in the green paper in the section on universal services as a useful intervention stating that "these programmes focus on

engaging parents in their children's development and offer opportunities to increase involvement in learning, to break down the barriers between school and parents and act as a link to targeted help and support"(p.46).

New inspection arrangements mean that schools will soon be assessed against their ability to fulfill these new roles and responsibilities, and the extent to which they contribute to the well-being of the pupils and parents they serve in the context of the five outcomes of "Every Child Matters". All settings working with children and families will therefore need to review their practices around working in partnership with parents.

## **What The Research Says**

This section will review the evidence around the nature and impact of parental involvement, what the barriers and obstacles are, and what the evidence says about the impact of family learning as an intervention used to promote parental involvement. It intends to demonstrate that implementing and embedding family learning can make a significant contribution to the achievement of the five desired outcomes.

In 2003 Professor Charles Desforges was commissioned by the Department for Education and Skills to conduct a literature review of research findings, **The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment**. He found that recent research into the nature of parental involvement and its impact on pupil achievement is generally of a very high quality. This section draws on, amongst others, the work of Professor Desforges, as well as the **Review of Research on Educational Resilience** (2003) by Waxman, Gray and Padrón for CREDE (Center for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence) and J.L.Epstein's **Fact sheet on Parental Involvement** (2002) produced for the Michigan Education Department.

### **What parental involvement is:**

"good parenting in the home, including the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of constructive social and educational values and high aspirations relating to personal fulfilment and good citizenship; contact with schools to share information; participation in school events; participation in the work of the school; and participation in school governance."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Desforges, C. & Abouchar, A., 2003, The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental

## Impact of Parental Involvement:

Decades of research show that when parents are involved students have<sup>2</sup>:

Higher attainment in the classroom and in test results

Better school attendance

Increased motivation, better self-esteem

Decreased use of drugs and alcohol

Better social adjustment in schools

Families whose children are doing well in school exhibit the following characteristics<sup>3</sup>:

- Establish a daily family routine, i.e. providing time and a quiet place to study, being firm about bedtime and having dinner together.
- Monitor out-of-school activities, i.e. setting limits on TV watching, arranging for after-school activities.
- Model the value of learning, self-discipline, and hard work.
- Express high but realistic expectations for achievement, i.e. setting goals and standards that are appropriate for children's age and maturity, recognizing and encouraging special talents, informing friends and family about successes.
- Encourage children's development/ progress in school, i.e. showing interest in children's progress at school, helping with homework, staying in touch with teachers and school staff.
- Encourage reading, writing, and discussions among family members, i.e. reading, listening to children read and talking about what is being read.

The most effective forms of parent involvement are those that engage parents in working directly with their children on learning activities at home<sup>4</sup>.

'At-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's attainment and adjustment even after all the other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the

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Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Review of Literature, DfES Research Report 433, DfES, Sheffield.

<sup>2</sup> Epstein, J.L., 2002, What Research Says About Parent Involvement In Children's Education In Relation To Academic Achievement , Michigan Education Dept. (unpublished).

<sup>3</sup> Henderson, A.T. (ed) (1987) *The evidence continues to grow: parents involvement improves student achievement*. Columbia, MD: National Committee for citizens in Education. Arizona Centre for Educational Research and Development. University of Arizona

<sup>4</sup> Cotton, K., Wikelund, K., Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, School Improvement Research Series. In Parent Involvement in Education.

equation<sup>5</sup>. Family participation in education has been demonstrated to be *twice* as predictive of students' academic success as family socio-economic status. In some of the more intensive programmes studied, family participation was shown to have effects that were 10 times greater than other factors<sup>6</sup>.

Other forms of parental involvement do not appear to contribute to the scale of the impact of 'at-home' parenting<sup>7</sup>.

The earlier in a child's educational process parent involvement begins, the more powerful the effects<sup>8</sup>.

The more intensely parents are involved, the more beneficial the achievement effects<sup>9</sup>.

Research indicates that 25% of a child's achievement in school relates to parental involvement in their learning<sup>10</sup>.

When parents come to school regularly, it reinforces the view in the child's mind that school and home are connected and that school is an integral part of the whole family's life, and consequently increases the likelihood of successful educational outcomes<sup>11</sup>.

Parental involvement brings a number of benefits to the school:

- Improves teacher morale
- Higher ratings of teachers by parents
- More support from families
- Higher student achievement
- Better reputations in the community<sup>12</sup>

## Major Factors Affecting Parent Involvement

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<sup>5</sup> Desforges, C. & Abouchar, A., 2003, The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Review of Literature, DfES Research Report 433, DfES, Sheffield.

<sup>6</sup> Walberg, H. (1984). "Families as Partners in Educational Productivity," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 65, 397-400.

<sup>7</sup> Desforges, C. & Abouchar, A., 2003, The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Review of Literature, DfES Research Report 433, DfES, Sheffield.

<sup>8</sup> Cotton, K., Wiklund, K., Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, School Improvement Research Series. In Parent Involvement in Education.

<sup>9</sup> Cotton, K., Wiklund, K., Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, School Improvement Research Series. In Parent Involvement in Education.

<sup>10</sup> Horne, J & Haggart, J., 2004, The Impact Of Adults' Participation In Family Learning – A Study Based In Lancashire, NIACE, Leicester.

<sup>11</sup> Wang, M. C., Haertel, G. D., & Walberg, H. J. (1998). Educational resilience (Laboratory for Student Success Publication Series No. 11). Philadelphia: Temple University Center for Research in Human Development and Education.)

<sup>12</sup> A New Generation of Evidence: The Family is Critical to Student Achievement, edited by Anne T. Henderson and Nancy Berla, Center for Law and Education, Washington, D.C., 1994 (third printing, 1996)

Differences between parents in their level of involvement are associated with social class, poverty, health and also with parental perceptions of their roles and their levels of confidence in fulfilling it, including:

- Parents' beliefs about what is important, necessary and permissible for them to do with and on behalf of their children;
- The extent to which parents believe that they can have a positive influence on their children's education; and
- Parents' perceptions that their children and school want them to be involved. Some parents are put off by feeling put down by schools and teachers.<sup>13</sup>

### **How does the research support Family Learning as an intervention that promotes parental involvement?**

Most of the research into interventions designed to promote parental involvement has been descriptive, comparative, or correlational. There have been few experimental and longitudinal studies in this area. Still, Professor Desforges concluded that while the research was technically much weaker, the findings were still promising. Family Learning fosters many of the experiences and qualities that research has identified as beneficial, as outlined below.

Parents need specific information on how to help and what to do. Although most parents do not know how to help their children with their education, with guidance and support, they may become increasingly involved in home learning activities and find themselves with opportunities to teach, to be models for and to guide their children<sup>14</sup>.

When schools encourage children to practice reading at home with parents, the children make significant gains in reading achievement compared to those who only practice at school<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A., 2003, The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Review of Literature, DfES Research Report 433, DfES, Sheffield.

<sup>14</sup> Epstein, J.L., 2002, What Research Says About Parent Involvement In Children's Education In Relation To Academic Achievement , Michigan Education Dept. (unpublished).

<sup>15</sup> Epstein, J.L., 2002, What Research Says About Parent Involvement In Children's Education In Relation To Academic Achievement , Michigan Education Dept. (unpublished).

Parents, who read to their children, have books available, take trips, guide TV watching, and provide stimulating experiences contribute to student achievement<sup>16</sup>.

School initiated activities to help parents change the home environment can have a strong influence on children's school performance.<sup>17</sup>

The OFSTED (2000) report on family learning surveyed 28 Local Education Authorities and found that successful family learning programmes resulted in the following benefits for children: accelerated development of oracy and pre-literacy skills, improved standards in literacy and numeracy, positive behavioural and attitudinal changes, enhanced confidence and self-esteem, awareness that learning is a normal activity throughout life, and pleasure from collaborative learning. Benefits for parents included: improved competence in literacy and numeracy, progression for over 50% participants to Further Education and training or more challenging jobs, increased confidence in contacts with schools, teachers, and the education system leading to becoming more active partners with schools, a greater understanding of child development and of the strategies that can be used to help children to learn at key points in development, improved parenting, and better relationships with their children.

A study by NIACE based in Lancashire into the impact of adults' participation in family learning involving 188 parents and 18 Head Teachers shared many of the same key findings. Eighty per cent of parents who had previously participated in family learning (between one and four years ago) had either gone on to further learning, volunteering, or an employment-related activity. Of these parents, two-thirds indicated this was directly attributable to their participation in family learning. A fifth of parents volunteered within their child's school or wider community, fifteen per cent became paid classroom assistants, and five per cent obtained a job (if unemployed) or a better job. In addition, adult participation in family learning resulted in benefits to the family; around half of parents stated that they talked more as a family and/or did more activities as a family as a result of their participation in family learning; that their interest /involvement in their children's learning had increased and their child was doing better at school.

Headteachers also recognised the benefits of parents' participation in family learning to schools. They believed that as a result of their participation in family learning around half of

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<sup>16</sup> Epstein, J.L., 2002, What Research Says About Parent Involvement In Children's Education In Relation To Academic Achievement , Michigan Education Dept. (unpublished).

<sup>17</sup> Epstein, J.L., 2002, What Research Says About Parent Involvement In Children's Education In Relation To Academic Achievement , Michigan Education Dept. (unpublished).

parents communicated with their children's teachers more and/or had a greater level of involvement in their child's school.

## **Case Studies**

It is clear that a strong case can be made for the implementation of family learning activities in settings that wish to work in partnership with parents to promote the healthy development and academic success of children. What is more challenging for practitioners, however, is making decisions about what kinds of activities to implement, how to implement them, and what results to expect from them.

This section will highlight four examples of good practice in Birmingham in order to give a fuller picture of what these extended services might look like, and the values that underpin them. It will then attempt to identify common factors that appear to indicate success and offer a framework within which settings can evaluate their own practices and plan to build upon them.

### **Allens Croft Children's Centre**

Allens Croft Children's Centre was established in April 2005 and constitutes a formal partnership between the Allens Croft LEA nursery school and two registered charities, the Allens Croft Early Years Centre for children under 3, and the Allens Croft Project, a community development initiative offering a wide range of complementary services with a focus on family support. The Children's Centre is situated in the middle of an outer city council estate and most children live in the immediate area. There are high levels of deprivation within the local community. Almost half the children receive free school meals and twenty five per cent have been identified as having special educational needs, although fifty five per cent of pupils are on the Early Intervention Project, which works intensively with children believed to be vulnerable to being registered as having special educational needs. Thirty nine per cent of pupils are classified as having English as an additional language. Children's attainment on entry to school varies considerably but is below average overall. Many children are arriving in school with delays in their language skills and in their personal, social and emotional development.

The last Ofsted inspection, dated March 2001, reported that "parents are fulsome in their praise of the headteacher and staff; they are overwhelmingly positive about the provision made for their children, they feel very well informed about what the school is trying to provide

and how well their child is progressing.” The report noted that unusually, no negative comments were made by parents/carers, and that in fact “parents consider(ed) the school to be a refuge...often turn(ing) to staff for support, advice and help”. It also concluded that these excellent relationships with parents were well utilised to support and extend children’s learning.

The value of parental involvement is embedded at the heart of the organisation. Their ‘Statement of Aims’ includes “us(ing) fully and mov(ing) forward from those home and pre-school experiences the children bring to the centre” and “form(ing) and support(ing) positive partnerships between home, school and community”. Supporting the whole family is always featured as a target on the Centre Improvement Plan, and is a high priority for the governing body and staff. Three of the governors are parents, and this role is actively promoted and supported within the Centre. The Head Teacher is clear that developing trusting and respectful partnerships with parents is key to success, with parents being seen as having a shared responsibility and equal capacity to contribute to the education of their children. She is also clear that different levels of involvement must be offered to allow for progression and to ensure that interventions remain relaxed, comfortable and helpful.

On visiting the centre, the environment seems immediately welcoming to parents. The Centre has an open door policy, with both nursery staff and family support workers on hand at the gates at the beginning and end of the day. Much day-to-day information is shared at these times and staff are careful to point out any areas of success or concern. A parent notice board shares information, and for parents who are unable to spend time in school a video of recent activities is played in the entrance area to show the range of learning opportunities that are on offer and how children have acquired new knowledge in different curriculum areas. The staff room/kitchen doubles up as a parents’ room, and there is always the offer of a cup of tea and a chat. Parents know that they can access their child’s records at any time. This informal openness is supplemented by regular home-school communication using a variety of methods, such as ‘settling in’ reports for parents of new starters, regular newsletters, questionnaires, parents’ meetings and consultation events. The centre seeks feedback from families on all areas of their performance and attempts to address all concerns and suggestions.

The Headteacher is very proactive and resourceful in the ways she tries to encourage parents to take an interest and become involved in their children’s education, and always remains sensitive to the confidence and skills of individual parents. Family Learning at the

Allens Croft Children's Centre takes many forms, beginning with shared activities that can be completed at home in the evenings or at weekends. There is a toy library, a music library and CD Rom Library (with accompanying laptops), as well as 'Top Tots' resources, story sacks and mathematics bags, which offer parents the chance to support the physical or academic development of their children at home through packs of practical activities. There is a weekly 'stay and play' session, regular coffee mornings and three separate parents groups that offer informal learning opportunities and bring in other professionals to deliver workshops on practical issues such as sleeping and weaning. Each member of centre staff also runs a parents' education workshop, covering subjects such as 'early reading and writing', 'the Foundation Stage curriculum', 'going to school' and 'family art'. Programmes that are more intensive are also offered, such as positive parenting, and Family ICT. Some projects target specific needs, such as 'SPICEY' (Specialist Project for Inclusion of Children in Early Years), which involves the parents of children with special educational or medical needs learning how to support their children's Individual Education Plans in the home, using art therapy, music therapy, and physical therapy techniques.

The collaboration between the nursery school and the Allens Croft Project demonstrates the benefits that can be achieved through collaboration between education services and community organisations. Mentoring, and one-to-one support, is offered to particularly vulnerable parents, who can access advice and support on a range of issues such as domestic violence, mental health, and drink and drug misuse. Non-education staff can seem less threatening to some parents, and often perform the role of advocate, mediating between the nursery, family and other services. These workers often begin their relationships with parents by providing support with 'crisis management', but then offer opportunities for personal development through both informal and accredited learning, i.e. assertiveness, managing children's behaviour and ICT. This can lead to parents gaining new skills and qualifications, assists them to progress as individuals, and to gain confidence as parents and role models for their children.

The Children's Centre clearly plays a key role in transforming people who have been dependent upon community resources into emerging community leaders, with many moving into community activism, becoming members of decision-making groups, and undertaking voluntary work. It is noteworthy that of 21 paid employees, 16 began their involvement with the centre as parents. It seems common that parents progress through activities, becoming volunteers first, accessing vocational training and then moving on into paid employment. At the time of writing, the centre had three parent volunteers timetabled into the weekly

activities, and 10 further volunteers who worked more flexibly in a range of areas such as clerical work, fundraising and accompanying children on trips.

## **Bordesley Green Girls School**

Bordesley Green Girls School is a secondary school based in the inner city ward of Nechells. 99.5% of its pupils do not have English as their first language, with 85.7% of pupils being of Pakistani heritage. 54.6% receive free school meals.

The last Ofsted inspection report (10/99), though needing to be updated, commended the school on the quality of its partnerships with parents and the community, believing that they made “a significant and positive impact on pupils’ attainment and progress”. The school was said to “positively encourage and welcome parents to become involved in school life”, and in addition to the high quality of formal communication with parents, it was also pointed out that senior management and governors played a strong role by making themselves freely available for parents at the beginning and end of the school day.

Due to the specific needs of the school community, family learning and parent’s own learning are inextricably linked at Bordesley Green Girls’ school. Pupils here, as everywhere, need their parents to support them in their schoolwork, but this is complicated by a number of cultural issues, including language.

Family Learning has proved a vital tool in gaining the involvement of families, particularly female relatives, normally perceived as ‘hard to reach’. One off parents’ information workshops on subjects such as ‘SATS’, ‘Tips on how to work together’ and ‘Learning Styles’ help to support learning in the home, and are delivered alongside joint activity sessions. These and longer programmes, such as the Learning and Skills Council funded ‘Keeping Up With the Children’, are also offered and intend to increase parents’ knowledge of curriculum and teaching practices, and their understanding of how they can support their children in the home.

It has been found that mothers who attend Family Learning workshops and courses, and begin to feel more confident and relaxed about coming onto school premises, often move on to join the ‘Women’s Study Group’. This case study will focus largely on the work of this group.

The group provides learning opportunities for mothers or other female relatives whose family circumstances prevent them from travelling far from home or from making a commitment to attend courses regularly. It aims to improve the literacy of pupils' mothers to support learning within the family. Sessions focus on strengthening student's self-confidence and on providing information and developing skills of practical use to the women and their children. Participants also have the opportunity to take nationally recognised examinations in Literacy, Numeracy, ICT and Urdu.

The facilitator of the group has worked hard to gain the trust of the community, which has been vital in overcoming the reluctance of some of the members' families to allow them to participate. Consequently there is a crèche facility for members with children, placed within the classroom as is most culturally appropriate, support is available for students in their first language, and class times are designed to accommodate the women's child care and other domestic responsibilities.

The curriculum is decided in consultation with the group and it has been estimated that 90% of the course content is generated by the women themselves. As well as working on their own basic skills, and achieving nationally recognised qualifications in these, the group has been supported by community members and other professionals who have been able to give input and expert advice on a range of issues around the physical and emotional health of participants' and their families. These have included diet and fitness, childhood illnesses, women's health, diabetes, drugs awareness, community safety, depression and local policing.

As well as the benefits to be gained by the girls at the school by having a mother with improved English language skills and practical knowledge, a continuing aim of the group is to facilitate improved understanding and communication between the two generations, in particular but not exclusively as is related to school life and achievement. To this end, several specific projects have been delivered. A number of the mothers enrolled on the 'Successmaker' programme, a computer package used within the school to create Individual Learning Programmes for key stage three pupils identified as needing extra support, giving mothers personal experience of the type of learning activities their daughters might be undertaking. Funding was also obtained to enable mothers to accompany their daughters on school visits, increasing their understanding of the relevance and importance of these visits to their daughters' schoolwork. Currently the women are involved in a project that will

see them selecting resources for 'book boxes' that will be available on loan to parents to support family learning in the home.

The group have been utilised as an informal 'parent's forum' proving a vital conduit for the flow of information between the community and the school. The group has proved effective in allowing pupil's mothers to discuss and share issues of concern, and has been used to trial documents aimed at parents. Occasionally a teacher will provide a 'model' lesson, with the women as her 'students'. The group is also used as focus group by other agencies that hope to deliver more culturally appropriate services to Muslim women.

Another significant outcome of the group is the personal development and support offered to members. A safe, positive environment outside of the home for women suffering from stress and depression is provided, and if appropriate women can access information, advice and guidance relating to their own career development. It has been estimated by the group facilitator that one third of participants every year move on to further training, voluntary activity or paid employment. In order to facilitate this the group has links with numerous local services and employers, such as Heartland Hospital and the WISE (Women into Self Employment) Initiative.

It is believed that members of the 'Women's Study Group' are enabled to be more active educators of their children, as well as to become more positive role models.

It is significant that since the beginning of the 'Women's Study Group', the girls who attend the school have moved from feeling embarrassment that their mothers and other female relatives are a presence in the school to feeling proud and wanting to be more involved.

### **Four Dwellings High School**

Four Dwellings High School is a secondary school based in a predominantly white, outer city estate. Only 5.2% of its 650 pupils have EAL needs, compared to an LEA average of 28.9%, and 48.8% are in receipt of free school meals.

Four Dwellings High School has been included in this guide to demonstrate the benefits that can be achieved through allocating adequate resources and support to Family Learning. The school's Development Plan set out it's aspirations to become an Extended School, and Family Learning was seen a key tool that would enable them to achieve this goal.

The school had offered some Family Learning activities for several years, particularly with parents of children with Special Educational Needs, and recognised the benefits to be gained in terms of pupil attendance, attainment and behaviour. It found, however, that without viewing Family Learning as core school activity it would be met by some resistance from staff and would not gain the momentum it needed to effect lasting change. In May 2004, Four Dwellings High School and the Birmingham Family Learning Service agreed to jointly fund the post of Family Learning Co-ordinator. The worker's remit would be to roll out the family learning provision to all parents, to engage and recruit parents onto courses, establish a parents' room within the school, co-ordinate the input of school and college staff into the programmes and be a first point of contact for all matters relating to Family Learning activities. The school also decided to timetable four of its teachers to each deliver one Family Learning programme every term, in total nearly the equivalent of a full time post.

The Family Support Co-ordinator built up links with a wide range of local organisations and services, including feeder schools, leisure centres and community centres, and attended parent's evenings and consultation events in order to promote her work. She was also responsible for securing the collaboration and support of school staff, including learning mentors, integration assistants and the Attendance Officer as well as teachers, and liaising with them in order to target the families who would benefit the most.

The school now delivers twelve intensive Family Literacy or Numeracy courses in each academic year, and the benefits in terms of pupil attitude, attainment and attendance are very evident. In the assessment results looked at for this report, pupils had improved their marks in test results by an average of over nine percent by the end of an intensive programme.

This has not been the only outcome from the greater focus on Family Learning. The last Ofsted report (May 2001) found that while the school made considerable efforts to involve parents, there were many families with whom little or no contact had been established. This is beginning to change. The creation of a parents' room has given parents a space of their own within the school, where they can pop in to have a chat, pick up information on a range of issues and services, ask questions and voice any concerns they may have. These are fed back to teaching staff and senior management either at morning briefings or through the regular reports prepared by the Family Learning Co-ordinator. More recently, the worker has begun to support a Parents' Forum, thereby giving parents formal access to decision-making

structures within the school. Parents volunteer their time in the school, including helping with fundraising and contributing to the writing of school newsletters, making them more accessible and interesting to parents.

The school is also exploring working in partnership with Adult Education and Halesowen College to provide community education on the school premises, enabling parents to continue the development of their own skills. Some of the most active parents are also undertaking training to set up a 'Learner's Forum', which will aim to promote and distribute information about learning opportunities to other parents.

Four Dwellings High School was announced 'School of the Year 2004/5' by the Learning and Skills Council, and has now had its Extended Schools status confirmed. The Headteacher believes that Family Learning has played a key role in these successes.

### **Stechford Health Centre Health Visiting Team**

This model is different from the others featured in this report, as it is the only non-education based setting. Its inclusion is important as it demonstrates the relevance and value of family learning within a variety of disciplines. This case study places Family Learning firmly within a strategy for the empowerment of parents, and places a focus on the significance of a holistic approach and partnership working.

The Health Visiting Team based at Stechford Health Centre covers a deprived neighbourhood within the Stechford and North Yardley ward. The mothers they work with often have multiple needs, live in difficult socio-economic circumstances and are isolated. Frustrated that they had no means of maintaining their initial contact with families, they set up the 'Blakesley Hall Family Learning Group', involving three health visitors, a nursery nurse, a clerk and a range of partner agencies who input into the sessions when appropriate.

Objectives of the group are to:

- Encourage families to identify their own developmental needs, and work out a programme that will work towards meeting these
- Develop skills and understanding around family roles, relationships and responsibilities
- Build participant's self-confidence as parents and individuals
- Provide opportunities for parents to learn how to play with their children

- Provide opportunities for parents to learn how to support the emotional and intellectual development of their children.
- Bring families into contact with a range of services in a safe and secure environment; i.e. Child and Mental Health Services, Educational Psychology
- Develop knowledge of healthy lifestyles
- Encourage parents to think about their own learning
- Signpost to appropriate community resources/support services

The health visitors use their home visits to build relationships with families they feel would most benefit from the programme, using indicators such as postnatal depression, poor parenting techniques, poor literacy, social isolation and poverty. Families are encouraged to attend a weekly group session at Blakesley Hall museum, often by personal invitation, where up to 35 families participate in a varied programme of workshops, discussions, family activities and trips. These have included baby massage, baby signing, healthy eating, family swimming, budgeting, smoking cessation, complementary therapies, music and movement, educational play, safety in the home, and managing behaviour, as well as introductions to local services such as childcare providers and colleges.

The curriculum is decided in consultation with parents, and members are encouraged to feel a sense of ownership over the sessions.

The health visitors who co-ordinate the group ultimately hope to enable the parents they work with to understand the process of learning, and their own role as the most important educators in their children's lives. They hope to transfer skills and knowledge that will facilitate this. In addition, of importance are the social networks formed through involvement in the group, which sustain and support individual members in times of difficulty.

The team believe that empowering families to make healthier lifestyle choices, to nurture one another and to become effective sites of learning is central to the public health agenda, and plays an important preventative role within child protection. The team believe that their innovative approach should be adopted as a tool to modernise health visiting and enable the profession to meet current challenges.

### **Key Indicators of Success**

This section is divided into two parts; the first considers the ethos and values that underpin the work of successful settings, the second will offer more practical pointers, and will be structured according to Joyce Epstein's framework of six types of family involvement (1995).

## **Underpinning Values**

- Successful settings have made a shift from seeing parents as peripheral to education, and as deficient, to seeing them as valuable resources that have a shared responsibility and equal capacity to contribute to the education of their children.
- They believe that all parents want their children to be safe, successful, happy and well, and that a key role of their service to families is to transfer the skills and knowledge that enables them to achieve this.
- They embrace a philosophy of partnership and are willing to share power.
- They focus on developing trusting and respectful relationships.
- They seek the active participation and contribution of their users.
- They are staffed by individuals who can be viewed as 'champions', who are passionate about the aims and potential benefits of family learning and can inspire both parents and colleagues
- These settings have adopted family-centred practices that emphasise support to families as an important goal in and of itself, not just as a means of supporting the child. Families are viewed as the primary decision-makers for their children, and their needs beyond the education of the child are also considered.

## **Indicators of Quality, as related to Epstein's Six Types of Involvement**

This section builds on the six types of parent involvement identified by Joyce L. Epstein of the Center on School, Family, and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University (1995). The most successful settings seem to involve and offer opportunities to parents within each of the six areas, and in addition they view partnerships with parents as core activity and therefore commit long term resources and support.

### **1. Communicating** - Communication is regular, two-way, and meaningful.

- All settings aim to improve communication and dialogue between parents/carers and children, between partners, and between families and services.

- They actively promote open dialogue with parents - listening respectfully, valuing each others opinions and respecting diverse views.
- They use a variety of communication tools on a regular basis, i.e. meetings, letters, phone calls, home visits, workshops, seeking to facilitate two-way interaction through each type of medium.
- Language translators are utilised to assist families as needed.
- Parents are communicated with regarding their child's positive behaviour and achievement, not just regarding difficulties or failure.
- Informal activities at which parents, staff, and community members can interact are promoted.

## **2. Parenting** - Parenting skills are promoted and supported

- Settings communicate the importance of positive relationships between parents and their children, and demonstrate respect for the family's primary role in the rearing of their children.
- They link parents to resources within the community that provide support services to families, including specialist advice and guidance.
- They provide an accessible place where parents can come to meet with other parents, access relevant resources and information, attend training, and have parent group meetings.
- They offer or have close links with providers of parent education and family learning programmes, including health and nutrition.

## **3. Pupil Learning** - Parents play an integral role in assisting the learning of their children.

- Successful settings ensure that parents and staff understand that the responsibility for children's educational development is a collaborative venture.
- They link efforts to engage families explicitly to pupil learning.
- They provide information and ideas to families about how to help their children at home.
- They regularly assign interactive activities that will require children to discuss their learning with their parents, or give parents an opportunity to trial new strategies for better supporting their children.

**4. Volunteering** - The support and assistance of parents is actively sought.

- Successful settings actively recruit parent help and support.
- They are flexible to individual wants, needs and abilities, allowing for progression
- They ensure that all interactions with parents communicate to parents that they are valued and welcome.
- They create opportunities for those with limited time and resources to participate by welcoming different levels of involvement, and by addressing child care, work schedule and other specific needs.
- They demonstrate clear appreciation for all contributions.

**5. Decision Making and Advocacy** - Parents are full partners in the decisions that affect children and families.

- Successful settings work to support and develop parent leaders and representatives.
- They establish and support networks to link all families to parent representatives.
- They encourage the formation of parent groups to identify and respond to issues of interest to parents.
- They treat parental concerns and preferences with respect and demonstrate genuine interest in developing solutions in partnership.

**6. Collaborating with Community** - Community resources are used to strengthen settings, families, and children's learning.

- Successful settings develop a range of partnerships that make health, social and educational resources more available to children and families. They link parents to other family support services and adult learning opportunities, enabling parents to more fully participate in activities that support the development of their children.
- These partnerships are designed to meet local needs and address risks prevalent in the lives of families served.

## **Recommendations and Conclusions**

There is clearly a need for more evaluation and longitudinal studies into the efficacy of Family Learning as an intervention to promote educational resilience, and this report would wholeheartedly support the recommendation of Professor Charles Desforges for a

programme of parental involvement development initiatives, in the form of multi-dimensional intervention programmes, steered by a design research brief.

It would also be useful to develop a self-evaluation framework, informed by Epstein's six identified forms of parental involvement and the indicators of quality highlighted in this report. This would enable settings to consider their own practice and the quality of their partnerships with parents, and to plan practical steps they might be able to take in order to develop a more family centred approach to their work.

Initial findings should nevertheless be a source of encouragement and inspiration to all professionals working with children and families. Clear insights have been offered into how children and young people can be supported to overcome endemic difficulties and become successful, motivated individuals. It has been demonstrated that when settings engage with parents in ways that are linked to improving the learning and development of their children, and support parental involvement at home and school, that pupils achieve greater attainment.

The next challenge is to expand the information and guidance available for teachers, parents and other professionals on how to create environments that advance the academic and social abilities of the most vulnerable.