

**The Impact of Adults' Participation in Family Learning – a study based in
Lancashire**
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Summary of Research Findings

Key findings

- **The majority of parents experienced increased levels of confidence as a result of their participation in family learning. (60 per cent of parents who participated over a year ago reported that they felt higher levels of self-confidence and/or more confident to undertake further learning);**
- **Three-quarters of parents at the end of their course intended to progress on to further learning, a voluntary activity or work-related activity following their participation in family learning;**
- **80 per cent of parents who had previously participated in family learning (between one and four years ago) had gone on to do at least one activity. Of these parents, two-thirds indicated this was due to their participation in family learning;**
- **A third of parents progressed on to further learning, including 20 per cent who undertook learning/training for a job as a result of their participation in family learning. A fifth of parents volunteered within their child's school or wider community, 15 per cent became paid classroom assistants, and 5 per cent obtained a job (if unemployed) or a better job;**
- **Parental interest and involvement in children's learning often increased following participation in family learning. Half of those parents who participated in family learning over a year ago stated that their child was doing better at school;**
- **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;**
- **Headteachers recognised the benefits of parents' participation in family learning to schools. Around half of parents communicated with their children's teachers more and/or had a greater level of involvement in their child's school as a result of their participation in family learning.**

The primary focus of this research was to assess the impact of adult participation in family learning programmes. This encompassed the outcomes for adults in their own right, together with the outcomes for children, schools and the wider community that result from adult participation in family learning. The research was based in Lancashire in the north-west of England.

Outcomes for adults in their own right

Over 80 per cent of parents who were at the end of their family learning course stated that they felt or did something different as a result of their participation in family learning. This result was supported by parents who had participated in family learning over a year ago, with 70 per cent of parents identifying that their participation in family learning had changed how they felt and/or the types of activities that they engaged in (a further 10 per cent were unsure).

An increase in confidence in at least one aspect of their life was cited by 85 per cent of parents at the end of their course. Around 40 per cent of parents indicated that they felt more confident as a parent and/or in communicating with their children's teachers; over a third of parents stated that they had more self-confidence. However, the largest number of parents, over 55 per cent, indicated that they had higher levels of confidence in doing further learning themselves. Alongside this, some parents indicated that they felt more confident in their own skills, for example in literacy or numeracy. Those parents who had participated in family learning over a year ago also displayed high levels of confidence; around 60 per cent of parents stated that they felt more self-confident as a result of their participation in family learning, with a similar number of parents stating that they felt more confident in doing further learning.

Progression

Enhanced confidence in undertaking further learning by parents at the end of their family learning course in undertaking further learning was translated into a high level of intent to do a further activity. Three-quarters of parents at the end of their family learning course indicated that they intended to progress on to further learning, a voluntary activity or work-related activity following their participation in family learning.

In terms of actual progression, the research found that 80 per cent of parents who had participated in family learning between one and four years ago had gone on to do at least one activity following their participation in family learning. This progression rate was fairly consistent across qualification levels.

Of course, some of these parents may have moved on to do another activity regardless of their participation in family learning. Therefore parents were asked to distinguish between those activities that were due to taking part in family learning and those they thought would have happened anyway. Two-thirds of these parents, or over half of the total number of parents surveyed, attributed at least one of their next step activities to their participation in family learning.

In terms of the type of next step activities that were attributed to taking part in family learning, the research found that a third of parents surveyed went on to do further learning. This included over 20 per cent of parents who undertook further learning or training for a job. Parents with level 1 and level 2 qualifications were most likely to have engaged in further learning of some kind as a result of their participation in family learning. Around a fifth of parents volunteered within their child's school or in the wider community as a result of their participation, whilst 15 per cent went of parents went on to become paid classroom assistants in schools. A small minority of

parents (fewer than 5 per cent) obtained a job (if unemployed) or a better job as a result of their participation in family learning.

The research also found that 45 per cent of parents went on to do more than one activity, i.e. they had a progression route. Around a third of these parents (or 17 per cent of the total number of parents surveyed) indicated that all of their next step activities were due to their participation in family learning. The remaining two-thirds of parents (or 28 per cent of the total number of parents surveyed) indicated that undertaking at least one of their activities was due to their participation in family learning, with many of these parents attributing the majority of their next step activities to taking part in family learning.

Outcomes related to parenting, children and families

The research assessed the outcomes related to parenting, children and families that result from adults' participation in family learning.

Parenting

Similar to previous research, this study found evidence that parental interest and involvement in children's learning and development increases as a result of adults' participation in family learning. Around half of parents who participated in family learning over a year ago stated that they read and played more often with their children. Just under 70 per cent of parents stated that they talked to their children more and had a greater level of involvement with their children's homework. The research findings suggested that some parents not only spent more time helping children with their homework but that the quality of help with homework had improved due to parents' increased understanding and confidence in how to support their children.

In the context of parental support, it should be noted that some parents at the end of their courses stated that they already played with and read with their children prior to participating in family learning and that the course had not changed the amount of time they spent doing these activities. In the same vein, some of these parents commented that they thought family learning was not being targeted at the right groups of parents and that many of the parents attending family learning were already highly motivated and involved in supporting their children and doing activities. Nevertheless, many of these parents still benefited from a greater understanding of how to support their children, even if they did not spend more time doing certain activities.

Children

The research was interested in whether parents' participation in family learning had made any difference to their children's performance at school. Half of those parents who participated in family learning over a year ago indicated that their child was doing better at school. This fits in with the finding that 39 per cent of headteachers thought that a parent's participation in family learning leads to an improvement in children's academic performance at school. Similarly, nearly a third of adults who participated in family learning over a year ago reported that their children's behaviour had improved. Some parents also commented that their children were more confident and outgoing as a result of participating in family learning.

Families

Over half of parents who were at the end of their family learning course stated that their participation in family learning had not made any difference to their family. In this context it is interesting to note the comments made by some parents in the face-to-face interviews that they already talked a lot as a family. It was also evident from the face-to-face interviews that some parents found it more difficult to identify impacts on their family compared to changes in their own activities and feelings. Some parents also stated that it was too early to tell whether family learning had made a difference. This fits in with the finding that parents who had participated in family learning over a year ago identified higher levels of outcomes related 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. 45 per cent of parents reported that they had better family relationships. Around a third of parents indicated that other family members or that the family as a whole were more interested in learning. Some mothers indicated that their partners were more involved in supporting their children's learning despite not having participated in family learning themselves.

Outcomes related to schools and communities

The research was interested in the outcomes for schools and communities that result from adults' participation in family learning. The social capital literature shows that it is the features of social life, i.e. networks, norms, trust and reciprocity, that build social capital within a community. Therefore, the research assessed parents' levels of interest, trust and involvement with institutions and organisations that operated within their local community, as well as the extent to which new friendships and relationships had been formed. For many communities, schools are the most important institution within their locality.

Around half of the parents who had been on a family learning course over a year ago indicated that they communicated with their children's teachers more often as a result of their participation in family learning. Parents spoke about how they would now approach teachers straight away if there were any issues or problems with their children and that they had a greater understanding and appreciation of the role of teachers. Around half of the parents surveyed also indicated a greater level of involvement in their child's school as a result of their participation in family learning. This involvement took many forms, including parents who volunteered within the school, parents who had become paid classroom assistants and a small number of parents who had become school governors. Headteachers recognised the benefits of parents' participation in family learning, with the majority of headteachers stating that participating in family learning had resulted in benefits to their school.

In terms of other outcomes related to the community and building social capital, over half of parents who were nearing the end of their family learning course indicated that they had made more friends as a result of their participation in family learning. Over a quarter of parents stated that they got out of the house more. The findings were similar for parents who had participated in family learning over a year ago, with 15 per cent of these parents indicating that they were more involved in the community as a result of their participation in family learning.

These outcomes should not be underestimated, both in terms of their contribution towards building social capital and in impacting positively on the lives of some parents. It was clear that in some cases increased levels of social contact had led to increased levels of self-confidence in many areas, including approaching and dealing with official organisations within the community and in undertaking further learning. It was also clear that the various outcomes of adults' participation in family learning were often intertwined in terms of making a real impact on the lives of individuals.

Family literacy, language and numeracy and wider family learning

It was not an aim of the research to ascertain or understand how the impact of family learning differed across family learning courses. Nevertheless, the results did allow a broad based comparison between FLLN and wider learning programmes.

The research findings suggested that the outcomes arising from adults' participation in both areas of family learning were broadly similar, even though there were differences in some aspects. Parents who participated in both areas of family learning indicated similar increased levels of confidence. A very similar number of parents progressed on to do other activities as a result of their participation in family learning. In terms of outcomes for families, a similar proportion of parents who had participated in FLLN and wider family learning identified that family relationships had improved following their participation in family learning.

There are somewhat clearer differences between the two areas of family learning in terms of the outcomes for children and families. A higher number of parents who participated in FLLN courses indicated increased levels of activities that supported children's learning than did parents who participated in wider family learning. Differences between adults' participation related to schools and communities were neither large nor conclusive.

Other findings -impact on Lancashire and lessons for the future improvement of family learning programmes

The findings of the research suggest that family learning in Lancashire is meeting its objectives of raising educational achievement, widening participation, community capacity building and countering social exclusion. However, despite Lancashire County Council (LCC) targeting its family learning programmes in disadvantaged areas, the research findings suggested that a disproportionate number of parents participating in family learning in Lancashire were qualified to what the Government, in the context of the Skills Strategy, would regard as an adequate level (i.e. Level 2 or above). Therefore targeting educationally disadvantaged parents, i.e. those parents with below Level 2 qualifications, living in both deprived and affluent areas is recommended. This will also help to better meet LCC's objectives for family learning. This may also apply to other LEAs who are targeting their family learning provision.

Definition of family learning and methodology

The research adopted the definition of family learning used by the national Learning and Skills Council (LSC), i.e. 'family programmes' are those which "...aim to encourage family members to learn together. They are learning as or within a family. They should include opportunities for intergenerational learning and, wherever

possible, lead both adults and children to pursue further learning.” The term ‘family’ is purposely not defined to encompass adults and children with a range of relationships.

The research was designed to assess the wide range of outcomes that result from adults’ participation in family learning. A number of surveys, capturing parents who lived in both deprived and affluent areas, were carried out to obtain this information. 188 adults who had participated in family learning between one and four years ago were interviewed over the telephone. A postal survey of adults at the end of their family learning course was also carried out (97 respondents), backed up by 29 face-to-face interviews in order to explore key issues in more depth. 18 headteachers of schools who had participated in family learning were also surveyed. All surveys included parents who had participated in Family Literacy, Family Numeracy and Keeping up with the Children courses. Wider family learning courses were predominantly Parents as Educators.

The full report can be downloaded from the NIACE website.

<http://www.niace.org.uk/Research/Family/>