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## Every Child Matters: Working with Parents - the role of Family Learning

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### **Summary**

A note for the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee from NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education).

November 2004

1. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education works to encourage more and different adults to engage in learning of all kinds. NIACE's functions include research, development and consultancy; advocacy to inform and influence public policy; information services and dissemination; campaigning for, and celebrating the achievements of, adult learners. Established in 1921, NIACE is an independent non-governmental organisation, a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. While receiving core grants from the DfES, National Assembly for Wales and through the 1988 Local Government Act, the majority of its income is earned through research, development and consultancy work - including contracts with the UK government, the Learning and Skills Council, the EU and the national lottery.
2. NIACE has a strong interest in community-based learning, family learning, widening participation, and neighbourhood renewal. In addition, it has played a significant role in the development of policy in these areas, working closely with the Government and strategic agencies such as the LSC. This note is intended to brief the Committee on the potential that family learning and intergenerational education can play both in delivering the reforms to children's services in 'Every Child Matters'. It may also be of interest to members considering the Committee's 'Teaching Children to Read' inquiry.

*The role of education in integrated services for children and families*

3. 'Every Child Matters' recognises that only by putting parents and families at the heart of its reforms can the 5 desired outcomes for children be achieved. A key role of education in integrated services for parents and families is in developing the understanding, skills and values of parents to underpin the 5 desired outcomes. Adopting an educational model, as opposed to a therapeutic or medical model, signals powerfully that parents are respected for the skills and experience they bring to parenting and that families have the potential to learn and develop. Furthermore, family learning, where parents and children are jointly involved in learning, strengthens family relationships, thus contributing to the achievement of the desired 5 outcomes. Finally, the creation of a 'learning culture' throughout integrated services will raise aspirations in families and communities, with greater potential for long-term and lasting change from grassroots level upward.
4. Fragmented family structures mean we can no longer assume new parents will learn informally about parenting and families from their own extended families and communities. Through adult community learning, and family learning in particular, informal programmes that build parents' confidence and develop social networks can help to address this gap. In its forthcoming policy discussion paper on family learning, NIACE argues that family learning should be available as a universal non-stigmatising service, in the same way that the national health service is available to all, though some services may be available at a cost to those who are able to pay.
5. Some parents will benefit from specialized programmes to address particular needs, for instance, help in tackling basic skills, which must be addressed if they are to support the language development of their children. Family literacy, language and numeracy programmes are examples of effective programmes developing essential skill areas to enable parents to support their children's learning.

6. A significant proportion of parents will have left formal schooling with few or no qualifications and disillusioned with education. The arrival of children can reawaken and renew their interest in education, as their desire to see children succeed is a strong motivational force. There is strong evidence that many parents embark on learning in order to help their children, but develop the confidence to tackle their own learning needs. Many progress on to further learning, vocational training, volunteering or employment.
7. Learning can also address the needs of that small percentage of families most at risk. For example, where compulsory parenting classes have been developed using an adult learning model, they have been welcomed by the community as a valuable form of support and an opportunity to develop skills in managing children's behaviour, rather than as punishment.
8. For a small but significant number of parents, family learning serves as a progression route into the children's workforce, into paid employment in childcare and education. Progression of this kind will enable the Government to achieve its goal of ensuring that the new children's workforce reflects the diversity of families and communities.
9. The benefits to parents of family learning are wide-ranging. Evidence from a national evaluation of family programmes conducted by NIACE for the LSC (2003) highlighted that parents feel more confident in supporting their children's learning and gain a better understanding of the education system. Furthermore, family learning can powerfully transform parents' views of themselves as learners, giving them the confidence to re-engage with learning and leading to further education, training, volunteering and employment opportunities. Evidence from an evaluation of the impact on adults of family learning in a major shire county (2004) confirms these gains, and furthermore, demonstrates the role of family learning in creating social capital by strengthening friendship networks, enhancing community participation and developing trust between individuals and organisations.

*Good practice in working with parents*

10. Working with parents entails a fundamentally different value base than that underpinning learning in school. It involves respect for parents as adults, bringing a wealth of life experience to the learning experience. Parents' needs and interests are the starting point for developing the curriculum and they should be involved in shaping it. Those who work with parents are facilitators of change rather than teachers. They are also role models of healthy family-like relationships, able to nurture and provide boundaries.
11. NIACE research shows that a broad range of learning opportunities is most successful at engaging parents and families and in building commitment to learning over time. While all learning opportunities should be purposeful, there is a role for short, informal learning that enables returners to regain confidence in their own abilities. Making a start is the most important thing, for once they have started, learners tend to keep on a learning trajectory.

12. Current LSC funding of family learning is heavily weighted towards programmes meeting the Skills for Life programme, with a much smaller resource available for 'wider family learning'. In practice, providers report that a wider curriculum is essential in gaining the trust of parents so that their need for specialised help such as basic skills can be identified. A wide range of choices facilitates the engagement of some of those parents most difficult to engage, such as fathers, who respond well to practical, action learning based on, for example, sport or design and technology.
13. Once parents have been engaged, a high level of support should be provided to ensure that they make progress against their learning goals. Support encompasses practical issues such as quality childcare and transport, as well as support on learning issues, such as help with basic skills or study skills. Every learner has a unique learning history and family context that requires individual attention. A learner centred approach like this cannot be rushed and standardised; regaining the confidence and trust of parents as learners requires time and sensitive facilitation by skilful professionals.
14. In its last round of inspections, the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) has identified family learning as one of its stronger areas of learning, a small number of authorities achieving a grade 1, the highest grade possible and many more achieving a grade 2, considered 'good. Amongst the strengths of the provision ALI inspected were a wide range of achievements by parents. Enhanced confidence was the major achievement reported by learners, but others include qualifications, better understanding of the education system, the ability to support their children's learning, and motivation to progress to further job-related training.

NIACE would be pleased to provide the Committee with further information about anything covered in this note or any aspect of lifelong learning policy. In the first instance please contact Sue Meyer (Director of Policy and Programmes) or Jeanne Haggart (Development Officer, Family Learning).

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