

# HOME MATTERS: making the most of the home learning environment

Guidance for schools, nurseries, local  
authorities and public health partners



National Children's  
Bureau



Changing life stories

people supporting parents and  
children to learn together

The partnership that has developed  
between the school and the parents  
that attend the groups is equally  
important as the direct impact on the  
home learning environment

Head Teacher

# Introduction

A consortium of charities – the National Literacy Trust, National Children’s Bureau (NCB), Peeples and the Foundation Years Trust – has been funded by the Department for Education to deliver a range of projects that support the home learning environment. All the charities have championed the home learning environment (HLE) for many years and the projects and this guidance, draw on that knowledge and experience.

This publication shares the approaches taken in areas of relative disadvantage in Bradford, Leicester, Hastings and Rother, the Wirral Peninsula, Oxfordshire, Bognor Regis and Knowsley. Different chapters have been written by each charity. They describe well-established, evidence-based and effective ways of working, in which parents, teachers and practitioners are recognised as mutually supportive partners in children’s learning and development.

Support for the home learning environment in the early years is critical and needs to become embedded as part of all early childhood education and care, early health and family-support services. The report has been written to encourage leaders and frontline staff across the early years, education and public health to do more to engage parents and help develop the home learning environment.

## What is the home learning environment?

This refers to the learning environment children experience at home in the context of their family and community. Parents who engage in meaningful activities that encourage thinking and talking to stretch a child’s mind as part of everyday life can enhance their child’s development significantly.

Based on evidence, the activities that have the biggest impact are:

- ❑ Reading, sharing books and going to the library
- ❑ Going out on visits
- ❑ Playing with print (letters and numbers)
- ❑ Singing songs and nursery rhymes
- ❑ Drawing and painting (making meaningful marks) and playing with friends

This assumes a context of warm relationships in which children are listened to, their contributions are valued, their ideas are taken seriously and their language and thinking are encouraged.

## How to support a strong HLE

Working closely with parents to support children’s learning at home is a statutory requirement of the Early Years Foundation Stage. Nurseries and schools assign a key person to each family (the childminder takes this role in a home-based setting) to engage with and support parents in guiding their child’s learning and development at home. However, there are large variations in the quality of provision or the degree to which this support for parents happens, and children who are not engaged in some form of regular education or care setting are not included.

Research over many years suggests that all parents are keen to support their children, especially when services are led by sensitive practitioners who work hard to forge relationships, welcome

<sup>1</sup> Wheeler and Connor, 2009 and Whalley, M. et al., 2007

parents in a warm and consistent way and offer a range of opportunities to engage. This can mean challenging organisational inflexibility and particular assumptions, such as labelling some families hard to reach or assuming others have no interest in their children's learning. All parents are interested in their children doing well, but they often lack confidence and knowledge about how to help<sup>1</sup>.

Research<sup>2</sup> shows that the overarching elements for success can be summarised as:

- ❑ Designated staff with responsibility for supporting parents
- ❑ Good knowledge of the local community and its strengths
- ❑ Building trustworthy relationships and parents' confidence
- ❑ Reaching out to families with flexible times and a range of ways to engage (e.g. home visits and evening or weekend sessions)
- ❑ Book, toy and equipment libraries to offer resources to parents
- ❑ Regularly sharing educational knowledge and observations about children's progress
- ❑ Listening to what parents say about their child's development and sharing decision making

This matches what parents say works for them: they welcome confident practitioners who talk with them and offer their knowledge and expertise, but they also like to be listened to and have their views and knowledge taken seriously. They are fascinated to hear about the development of babies and young children, they enjoy learning how to recognise the small steps babies and young children take as they learn, and they want to share in decisions regarding their child's learning. They appreciate being treated as partners with ideas that are valued<sup>3</sup>. They want to do more – “A third (34%) of parents with a child aged 0 to 5 wanted to do more learning and play activities at home”<sup>4</sup>.

### A call to action

Small changes in parents' knowledge, behaviour and routines can have a lasting impact on their child's development. Scotland's Play, Talk, Read campaign, the Flying Start programme in Wales and the Department for Education's recognition of the HLE in its Social Mobility Action Plan<sup>5</sup> all suggest momentum is building around this agenda. We believe that support for the home learning environment now needs to be prioritised. We also believe that a wide range of sectors can drive this forward in a number of ways:

- ❑ Mainstream support from leaders and staff for parents to enrich the home learning environment across early years, education, healthcare and social services
- ❑ Ofsted should include support for home learning in early years inspections
- ❑ Initial teacher training and other early education courses should include modules on the home learning environment and working with parents
- ❑ Early education messages should be integrated into health services and messaging so that anyone in contact with families pre-birth and from birth to the age of three delivers the HLE message
- ❑ There should be national and local public health campaigns on the importance of early childhood development, specifically talking with babies

<sup>2</sup> Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2003, Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003, Sylva et al., 2004 and Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2007

<sup>3</sup> Moran et al., 2004, Quinton, 2004, Tunstill et al., 2005 and National Literacy Trust, 2010

<sup>4</sup> Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents in England, Department for Education, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential, Department for Education, 2017

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# The home learning environment in research and policy

By Edward Melhuish and AL van der Merwe

The importance of family context on a child's attainment has a long-established history in both academic studies and practical application. Sociological studies in the 1950s and 1960s were already pinpointing the class gap in children's outcomes. Floud, Halsey and Martin (1956) and Douglas (1964) used longitudinal data to document the poorer academic attainment of working-class pupils and related it to many factors including health, family size, the quality of the school and, most importantly, parents' interest in education. In the 1970s, Bronfenbrenner elaborated the ecological systems theory, and he noted that the "family is the most effective and economical system for fostering and sustaining the development of the child" (Bronfenbrenner, 1974).

How can parents have such a significant impact on a child's outcome? As Desforges comments in his review of parental involvement research (Desforges with Abouchar, 2003): "parenting has its influence indirectly through shaping the child's self-concept as a learner and through setting high aspirations". While early years practitioners and teachers provide essential support in academic learning, parents have a greater influence on attitude and propensity for learning in the earliest stages of a child's life. Further to this, parental involvement is especially beneficial when parents and professionals negotiate a continuity of experience for children (Siraj-Blatchford, 2002).

Today there is a persisting attainment gap between children from families with low socio-economic status and their wealthier peers. However, the mounting evidence that what parents do is more important than their level of education or social class provides an opportunity to refocus early years policy to help establish a sustainable path towards closing the gap and potentially contributing towards breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

Early in the new millennium, two major longitudinal studies highlighted the critical role of parents in determining children's outcomes in the early years: the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPSE) project (e.g. Sylva et al., 2004, 2010, 2014 and Melhuish et al., 2008) and the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS; [www.ness.bbk.ac.uk](http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk)).

The EPPSE study echoed previous evidence that three to four-year-olds' cognitive, language and socio-emotional development were influenced by demographic factors such as social class and parents' education. The study went on to identify the importance of high-quality care and education provision on a child's development and, significantly, the study captured and defined the powerful influence of the variable that became known as the home learning environment. One outcome of the study was the integration of the concept of the home learning environment into early years practice. The EYFS specifically identifies the requirement for partnership working between practitioners and parents.

The NESS study demonstrated that Sure Start children's centres could have a positive influence on the home learning environment and on parenting more generally (Melhuish et al., 2010). However, the expansion of children's centres coincided with the global recession so the programme was underfunded, and subsequent cuts to public funding have seen a steady decline in their services.

With the changing context of early years provision following policy adjustments made on the strength of the two previous longitudinal studies, the government commissioned a new longitudinal study to inform future policy on early years in 2013. The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED; [www.seed.natcen.ac.uk](http://www.seed.natcen.ac.uk)) is ongoing. Several publications have already emerged from the research. As was discovered previously, a consistent finding in the most recent study is the link between a good home learning environment and higher cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes at the age of three (Melhuish, Morris & Gardiner, 2017) and four (Melhuish & Gardiner, 2018). A related research report (Callanan et al.,

2017) captures some of the strategies settings adopted to help parents provide a good home learning environment.

Given the evidence that the parents' role is key to determining successful outcomes for children in the early years, the question before policymakers is how to incorporate effective home-learning practices with parents into early years and educational policy.

## **Barriers to engaging parents and influencing HLE**

Helping parents improve the home learning environment meets the challenge of engaging parents in the process. Desforges in his review on parental engagement presents a list of potential barriers preventing parents from engaging. These include the effect of barriers set up by schools, the impact of belief systems that place a lower value on education, parental lack of confidence in being involved, and the effects of poverty and social chaos.

Breaking down these barriers is a complex process. The evaluation of the Early Learning Partnership Programme (Evangelou et al., 2008) recognised the potential tension between a dual focus on developing the confidence of more vulnerable parents and equipping them with the skills to support their children's learning. Any policy that seeks to incorporate support on the home learning environment into early years provision will need to encompass both aspects and recognise that it requires time and commitment to establish critical relationships.

All of the interventions in this publication try to address these barriers by:

- Building parents' confidence and their sense of responsibility as their child's first educator
- Changing parents' behaviour in relation to their children in a supportive and strength-based way
- Supporting professional development of early years practitioners and teachers to help parents improve the home learning environment

## **Conclusion**

Studies continue to highlight the importance of the home learning environment in closing the attainment gap before a child starts school at the age of five. However, there is an enormous challenge in terms of engaging the most vulnerable families in the process of supporting their children's learning. Indeed, social and economic vulnerability is associated with less engagement in a child's education and learning at home.

Along with continuing to improve the quality of early childhood education and care settings, we should seek to improve the evidence on effective interventions with parents to support the home learning environment, as well as our understanding of how we can engage the most socially vulnerable families.

# Making it REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy)

## National Children's Bureau (NCB)

The Early Childhood Unit (ECU) at NCB has worked with the University of Sheffield and local education authorities since 2008 to develop 'Making it REAL' projects. These are inspired by the success of the original Sheffield REAL project (95-98) led by Professors Cathy Nutbrown and Peter Hannon, which raised and sustained literacy achievement for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.



Mixed teams of teachers and practitioners in one area train together, plan the project over two days and then work with families in their homes and at special literacy events on four interrelated strands of emerging literacy: books; early writing; environmental print; and key aspects of oral language (rhyme, storytelling and literacy language).

Central to the REAL approach is the ORIM framework, which represents the four ways parents help their children learn. Parents are supported to create **O**pportunities for learning; to **R**ecognise and value small steps in development; to **I**nteract in positive ways; and act as a **M**odel of explicit literacy use (e.g. telling children when they are reading a text message or explaining they are reading a notice or the number on a bus).

The four literacy strands are mapped against the **ORIM** framework.

### EARLY LITERACY STRANDS

		Env. Print	Books	Writing	Oral language
<b>FAMILIES PROVIDE</b>	<b>Opportunities</b>				
	<b>Recognition</b>				
	<b>Interaction</b>				
	<b>Model</b>				

By working in this way and thinking through provision for parents in each row, column or individual cell, teachers and practitioners can evaluate practices to see what needs to improve. The framework also enables activity to be matched to each family and child, as well as looking at their strengths or where gaps in experience and knowledge might be further supported.

A teacher explains the difference this has made:

*“We’ve worked hard at getting families to borrow books from the nursery regularly, but we haven’t done nearly enough to support families over how to use books at home – how to interact and recognise what progress looks like. So, we’ve worked on making books come alive with voices and props, letting the children hold the books and join in. Sharing the development jigsaws also helps us to tease out the small steps children make.”*

The key concepts and research messages are shared with parents, and practitioners are often surprised at the positive response:

*“I’ve been really amazed at how they are all so keen for new ideas. Our parents are thirsty for knowledge about how to help their children and are grateful for the time we’ve spent with them.”*

#### **A home visit and event supporting the use of print:**

A matching game is made using familiar logos and print from packets, and a scrapbook is started using labels and photos. The families are asked to continue the collection and play the game again. A box of writing/drawing equipment and a children’s comic are left for the family to use.

A bus is taken into town, followed by a walk to a playground or park. Children have a sheet to tick when certain signs or symbols are spotted. Families play, have a snack and return to the nursery together.

#### **A home visit and event supporting books and rhymes:**

A storybook with props chosen by the child is shared at home. One or two nursery rhymes are introduced with props/puppets and recorded. The story and rhymes are left with the family to share again and the child is encouraged to learn one rhyme. Material is left with the family to make simple stick puppets to match the rhyme. A jigsaw of development with books is introduced to parents.

Walk to the library to enrol and borrow books. Join in story and rhyme sessions led by the librarian. All families then walk to the local café for a snack. Children are encouraged to read the menus.



REAL home visits and events have a powerful impact on the early home learning environment. Teachers and practitioners improve their confidence and skills when working with families, and parents are encouraged to notice changes in their children’s responses and learning.

Parents have commented that:

*“I didn’t know they could remember the words to all the stories like that. They have great memories, don’t they?”*

*“We do more things, making things and things like that. Usman is more confident, and his sister. We’d have liked more home visits.”*

*“Zain has enjoyed all the things you brought and he uses them a lot. He never used to ask for things, but now he asks for them and wants to use them.”*

## REAL – The local authority experience

The local education authority team provides the co-ordination and support for a REAL project, inviting a range of schools and nurseries to participate in training, and organising regular network meetings where experiences are shared and challenges overcome. When a REAL network is up and has been running well for at least a year, NCB then offers train-the-trainer events and hands over the training and materials to local teams to continue across the area. This has evolved further through the addition of *Sharing REAL with Parents* sessions for families, a four-week course with endorsements for learning through the National Open College Network. As a result, some parents have become volunteers and now support REAL home visits and events.

### Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

Sandwell has been a partner in REAL since 2013, initially running a two-year project with 128 three- and four-year-old children and their families across a mix of primary and nursery schools, children's centres and private nurseries. Childminders were also included from inception. REAL matched the need in Sandwell to improve early achievement for a diverse population with high levels of deprivation. The EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) profile data showed Sandwell behind national averages, despite a strong focus on attainment and year-on-year improvements. Reading and writing had the lowest scores. In the first year of REAL, simple observational measures showed promising changes such as an increase in library enrolment to 80% of project children; an increase in children drawing/painting/play-writing regularly at home from 47% to 80%; and an increase in the number of children able to sing a nursery rhyme from 22% to 83% of the group.

After two years, the Sandwell early years team joined a train-the-trainer event run by the NCB in London and then co-trained with ECU Associates to consolidate their skills. They now train and lead their own REAL projects each year. REAL has been embedded in strategic improvement plans and into children's centres. Led by qualified teachers (QTS), the programme has helped parents improve their confidence and knowledge.

REAL material has been adapted by NCB to include two-year-old children, and Sandwell has supported early thinking about how younger siblings and babies might be provided for when they are present at home visits. NCB has delivered several *Sharing REAL with Parents* programmes and the early years team is now offering regular sessions for families. A special school has introduced and adapted REAL for its families with great success, and REAL has even been included in the induction for foster carers in the area to ensure their children benefit from a strong early home learning environment.

The Sandwell team believe REAL is improving children's outcomes. Data from 2017 shows that 74% of schools increased their GLD (good level of development) from the previous year, with the overall GLD increasing by 3% to 64%. There was also an increase in achievement in literacy from 62.2% (2016) to 65.1% (an increase of 2.9 percentage points) and in communication and language from 75.1% (2016) to 78.2% (an increase of 3.1 percentage points).

More can be read about REAL and its impact at the University of Sheffield site:

<http://www.real-online.group.shef.ac.uk/index.html>

And about NCB's training and projects inspired by REAL:

<https://www.ncb.org.uk/what-we-do/our-priorities/early-years/projects-programmes/making-it-real>

## Peep

**Peep** is a charity based in The Leys area of Oxford whose mission is to narrow the attainment gap by working with parents/carers to support their children's learning through everyday activities at home. We have been a trusted provider of services to local families since 1995, enabling them to take part in our **Peep Learning Together Programme**.

Peep is also a national training organisation. Since 2002, we have trained practitioners from across the UK to use the Peep Learning Together Programme in their work with families. We now train and resource around 1,000 practitioners per year.



### Peep Learning Together Programme

The Peep Learning Together Programme is an adult learning programme. It is informed by **research** that tells us the three key elements for a child's development:

- ❑ Quality of relationships within the family
- ❑ Quality of the home learning environment
- ❑ Quality of pre-school provision

The Programme comprises five learning strands: personal, social and emotional; communication and language; early literacy; early maths; and health and physical development. The Programme is structured but can be used flexibly in the home, in universal or targeted groups, in drop-in sessions, in nurseries and in schools, or wherever families spend time together.

The Peep Learning Together Programme teaches parents about how babies and young children learn and develop and helps them build on what they are already doing at home to support their child's education. The Programme also promotes parental confidence, self-esteem and social support.

Peep-trained practitioners are provided with comprehensive materials that give background theory and clear guidance for practice as well as resources for parents.

The Programme is based on the **ORIM** (opportunities, recognition, interaction and modelling) framework developed by Peter Hannon and Cathy Nutbrown at the University of Sheffield. This allows practitioners to begin with, and then build on, parents' strengths. Parents feel valued rather than judged, which provides a strong platform to extend their support for their child's learning.



## Evidence base

The University of Oxford conducted a **quasi-experimental longitudinal evaluation** of the Peep Learning Together Programme involving 600 families. It found that Peep children made significantly greater progress in a range of literacy-related skills and had higher self-esteem. It also found that Peep parents had an enhanced view of their parent-child interaction. These findings support evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) and Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) studies that show what parents do with their children at home has a significant impact on their long-term outcomes.

The Education Endowment Foundation has been tasked by the UK government to identify effective interventions with proven outcomes for parents and children. A **randomised control trial** (RCT) of the Learning Together Programme involving 150 settings is already underway, and the results will be available in 2019.

## Home learning environment and health

Peep is funded by the Department for Education to provide the Peep Learning Together Programme in Oxford. We work with Peep-trained Home-Start volunteers to deliver the Programme at home. Peep also provides Peep baby groups and groups for toddlers aged one and two, as well as home-learning workshops to practitioners in a variety of settings.

The Programme is offered in partnership with three child health clinics (Early Explorers). The health visitors and Peep practitioners work closely together and share knowledge about families. Where the health visitor identifies a home learning or play need in the family, such as understanding the importance of tummy time or messy play, they will refer the family to the Peep practitioner. When the Peep practitioner identifies a health concern such as weaning, they will refer the family to the health visitor. As the Peep team and health visiting team become familiar with each other's work and develop deeper relationships with the families, they are better placed to respond to their needs.

Here is some feedback from parents and health visitors:

*"I came back today for the second time in the hope that I would feel a little more at ease. I was very lucky as today the Peep lady was here and it was instantly clear to me that it was her 'role' that was missing in my first week. [She] was very warm and welcoming but most importantly held the communications between parents to help conversations build. Ideas were shared and I found myself coming away feeling positive about my return. Thank you." – Parent*

*"The playtime is so much fun. Being from another country, I was happy to learn some English nursery rhymes. There are always clever, creative toys and games, and I got inspiration for activities to do at home." – Parent*

*"Thank you for coming to the clinic. There is a noticeable positive change since you have been coming and it feels a more relaxed and fun and interesting session for professionals and clients. Thank you very much for your positive energy. We are all benefiting." – Health Visitor*

*"When visiting a client, she reported that she had attended the Health Visitor Clinic and really enjoyed the play session provided by the 'ladies' and would continue to use the clinic so she could attend the play aspect provided." – Health Visitor*



*“I have been able to sell attending the Peep sessions to clients from a wide range of educational and cultural backgrounds who might not have had their own positive experience of the home being a learning environment and are at a loss as to what ‘to do’ to nurture their children’s learning and development specifically in the 3 month onwards pre-mobile babies. Many parents are able to overcome their own issues and come to such a group as it is in the best interests of their child and not stigmatising them as non-coping parents.” – Health Visitor*

The work in child health clinics builds on the findings of the *Early Explorers: Integrating partner professionals to support parents with their children’s development from birth* (2011) study. This was carried out by Professor Jane Barlow and Chris Coe at the University of Warwick. The study evaluated the benefits of Peep practitioners working alongside health visitors in child health clinics. It reported that the process of joint working was effective in terms of:

- ❑ Promoting positive infant mental health and development
- ❑ Working together to reach those most in need, and identifying and supporting vulnerable groups
- ❑ Overcoming barriers and building relationships, trust and confidence
- ❑ Delivering an enhanced service through integrated working with a complementary agency

The Programme was able to engage families who do not regularly access services. For these families, the outcomes identified were:

- ❑ The Early Explorers clinics promote maternal mental health, helping support parents so that they can support their children
- ❑ The child health clinic offers a unique opportunity to meet and forge relationships with parents in a non-stigmatising and non-threatening environment in a place they already attend
- ❑ The opportunities for social engagement created by an Early Explorers clinic help increase parental confidence and reduce social isolation
- ❑ Parents report spending more time in the clinic when the practitioners are there. They also learn new skills and have a better appreciation of infant development
- ❑ Families can be signposted to Peep and other local services

# National Literacy Trust

## The amazing reach of nurseries

Settings in the private, voluntary and independent (PVI) sector play a vital role in promoting the home learning environment (HLE) and improving young children's communication, language and literacy skills. Their efforts to raise awareness about the HLE can reach families who need it most. In 2016, PVI settings provided childcare for 665,630 disadvantaged children in England, including 88% of disadvantaged two-year-olds and 62% of three-year-olds<sup>6</sup>. The early years sector is made up of a range of support and childcare models including day nurseries, pre-schools and play groups, childminders and children's centres. This means there is a large variation in setting size and staff capacity to support families.

The National Literacy Trust has partnered with PVI settings in some of the UK's most disadvantaged areas to look at how they can best use their staff and resources to improve the communication, language and literacy skills for children in their care by supporting parents to improve the HLE. This benefits their children and all nursery work. From this work, we've identified an approach for PVI nurseries (and others) to use to promote and support the HLE.

## Form a network with other practitioners and settings in the area

*"I think that is the most useful thing, the time to chat with other practitioners."* – HELLO project participant

You can enhance the quality of provision by developing strong and effective working relationships with a range of early years professionals. Ofsted found that settings can better support disadvantaged children when they collaborate with others by sharing a site, being managed by a single organisation or forming a network in the local area.<sup>7</sup>

In 2015-16, the National Literacy Trust worked with teaching schools and local authorities to pilot the **Helping Early Language and Literacy Outcomes (HELLO) improvement framework** with 74 PVI nurseries across England. The nurseries were in deprived areas where parental engagement was low and where a large proportion of children had communication and language delay. Nursery practitioners came together at least three times a year to implement the self-assessment framework, compare notes, discuss practice and receive training and support. They also shadowed one another and visited each other's nurseries.

We asked practitioners to use the HELLO framework to look closely at how communication, language and literacy was supported across three areas:

- Their practice, capabilities and knowledge
- The nursery environment
- Their work with parents

At the beginning of the project, only 15% of practitioners strongly agreed that they confidently talked to parents about their children's communication, language and literacy, and only 22% strongly felt that the activities they delivered had an impact on children's communication, language and literacy.

<sup>6</sup> Department for Education. Provision for children under five years of age in England, January 2017

<sup>7</sup> Ofsted. The Report of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills 2015: Early years. Accessed at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/445730/Early\\_years\\_report\\_2015.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/445730/Early_years_report_2015.pdf)

We found several key actions were critical to working together and improving child outcomes:

### 1. Look at what you already do

*“... the [HELLO] tool made you sit down and evaluate practice ... time to think before you did something”* – HELLO project participant

Think about how to improve provision by first understanding your current practice with regard to 1) working with parents 2) staff capabilities and knowledge and 3) quality of environment.

What can be done to better engage families? How can settings address gaps in knowledge or practice? In what ways does your environment stimulate communication and language?

Nurseries surveyed parents to find out about parental confidence in supporting their child's communication and learning and their desire to find out more about their role as their child's first educator.

Staff were encouraged to review their own practice using observation and video. They looked at the frequency of activities they plan to support children's communication, language and literacy development and their methods for observing, tracking and reviewing children's progress.

They also reflected on the way they planned activities and routines, and how they used displays, posters and room layout. Using the HELLO framework in combination with other environmental ratings tools such as the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS) helped nurseries look closely at the quality of the environment in their setting. After using HELLO, many nurseries saw an increase in their ECERS and ITERS ratings.

### 2. Develop an action plan

*“We are working on the library because that was the main thing that came up in the parent questionnaire. We are planning to take small groups of parents to the library to get them to register and show them what's accessible.”* – Nursery setting in HELLO project

HELLO helps nurseries action plan to improve practice in the three areas. Base your action plan around an area of need in your setting. Think about what needs to be done, who will do it, by when, and how it will be measured.

### 3. Review, evaluate and measure

*“Parental comments on shared learning increased by 200%. Parental submissions for learning stories increased by 500%.”* – Childhaven Community Nursery School on the impact of their new approach for communicating with families

After implementing any action planning, nurseries reflected – in the setting and in the network – about progress and impact before adjusting the plan further. Reviewing parents' feedback, children's outcomes and practitioner surveys allowed nurseries to see how staff have progressed.

As a result of using HELLO, 75% of practitioners increased their confidence in talking with parents about ways to develop their children's communication and language. Eighty percent of practitioners increased their confidence in developing children's listening skills, and 80% of settings adapted their environment to increase support for communication, language and literacy.

# Working with parents

Nurseries focused the parent partnership section of their action plans around three aims:

## 1. Increase access to learning resources to use in the home

One way to support the home learning environment is to lend or give families resources they can use at home with their children.

One nursery sent home learning packs that included different activities to promote mark-making and language skills. Several settings created lending libraries so that parents and children could borrow books and toys from the nursery to use together at home.



## 2. Increase communication between the home and nursery

Children benefit when parents and practitioners share information with each other about the child's interests and their development. How do you invite parents to talk about their children? How do you balance parents' timetables with your time constraints at the setting?

One setting invited parents to post notes and photos of their child's home activities on a parents' bulletin board called the 'WOW' board. In return, practitioners sent home WOW notes about the child's achievements at nursery. Almost three quarters of the nursery's families shared a WOW moment on the board.

Practitioners shared photos and observations via text, email or digital logs, including Tapestry and closed Facebook groups.

Nurseries organised regular times for parents to engage in activities and evidence-based stay and play sessions with their child at the nursery. During these times, parents can be shown simple learning activities that they use at home, and they can learn what the child likes to do at home.

The National Literacy Trust's **Early Words Together at Two** programme is designed to support these parent and child sessions. This evidence-based programme has five family activity sessions that take place in the nursery. Practitioners, families and children engage in playful activities proven to support a positive home learning environment and boost language, communication and early literacies.

## 3. Promote languages and cultures used by families

Children with English as an additional language (EAL) need to feel that their home language is valued and accepted. Create an inclusive environment by inviting families to share stories about their language and culture in the setting.

Ask families with EAL to provide your staff with simple words or phrases in their native





tongue. One nursery using HELLO posted ‘home language’ sheets around the nursery to aid children’s understanding and pride in their culture.

You can also build a cultural area in the nursery that incorporates books, toys and environmental print from different countries.

### A larger community

Nurseries are part of a much wider ecosystem that supports communities, parents and children. The National Literacy Trust supports local businesses, charities and public sector organisations to join up to promote the home learning environment, language and literacy throughout the **community**.

In Middlesbrough, Bradford, Leicester, Peterborough and Manchester, we have brought together early years staff, local authority teams and public-health leads and practitioners to look at how they can deliver consistent messaging to parents about the HLE and their child’s communication, language and literacy. In Bradford, this work complements the Better Start Bradford activity

that is already underway. In other areas, the National Literacy Trust’s Hubs have taken the lead.

Agreeing simple, shared messaging across early years, education and health saves time and money and increases the power of the message.

In 2017, at workshops in Bradford and Leicester, we challenged participants to think about barriers to a positive home learning environment and how to engage other community organisations and businesses.

Stakeholders in both areas devised action plans, which involved creating consistent parent-facing messaging about the HLE. In Bradford, the stakeholder group meets half-termly to reflect on actions, make adjustments and discuss any other HLE initiatives taking place in the area.

With support from the National Literacy Trust, in Peterborough, partners mapped a school-readiness pathway for parents that drew on local expertise and existing offers.

In Middlesbrough, a literacy pathway has been developed that ensures parents (and all practitioners) know what early language and literacy support is available to them from across early years, public health and schools.

By working in a network with other nurseries or a wider network looking at early years as a whole, we can significantly improve the way we support parents’ home learning environments and increase the communication, language and literacy skills of all children.

# Foundation Years Trust

## Putting parents at the heart of early years education

The Foundation Years Trust (FYT) operates in Birkenhead and the surrounding areas of Wirral Borough. Birkenhead has some of the most deprived wards in England, with child poverty at around 40% in the areas where we work<sup>8</sup>.

We target communities and not families within communities, as we believe our model should be accessible to all, and that all parents can benefit from a better understanding of how to support their children's development.



FYT developed its programme around the three main objectives of improving the home learning environment, increasing parental warmth and sensitivity, and supporting parental wellbeing.

Our Little Explorers groups are designed to reach, engage with and support parents to improve their confidence and skills in their role as their child's first educator.

The Little Explorers programme is relatively new (we are only in our second school year of delivery). What has become immediately clear is that working with parents and setting staff simultaneously is key to maximising the opportunity to improve the home learning environment through nursery settings.

## Providing opportunities for parents and children to explore and learn together

Little Explorers groups run throughout the school year, with parents invited into the nursery on a weekly basis. In this way, the sessions become embedded within nursery culture, and it helps parents become part of nursery life.



Both teachers and parents have told us that parents' presence in the setting helps children settle into nursery, and regular contact builds relationships between nursery staff and the parents and enhances the sense of partnership at this early stage.

We use People's Learning Together Programme as our core curriculum. The groups are friendly and informal, but they always incorporate the key elements of the Learning Together Programme, which encourages shared activities between parents and children, and 'talk time' in which the subject being covered is discussed with parents.

## Providing professional development opportunities for practitioners and teachers

The Programme's sustainability will depend on setting staff being able to run their Little Explorers groups without FYT. We train nursery staff to deliver the Learning Together curriculum and continue to provide mentoring and shared learning across settings once the groups are being run independently.

<sup>8</sup> End child poverty campaign, 2015 data

Early years teachers and practitioners are trained to work with children, not parents. But we know that up to five years of age, the parents' influence is key to closing the attainment gap. We have found that some nursery staff can benefit from additional professional development training to understand the value of the HLE and how to engage parents in their child's learning.

In response to this, FYT provides information workshops on the home learning environment for nursery staff or whole-school staff. Additionally, we are now incorporating a 'Partnership with Parents' training course into our core programme, which looks not only at why HLE is important and how to promote the HLE, but also how to build effective partnerships with parents. Our programme has shown repeatedly that establishing trusting, non-judgemental relationships enables messages on the home learning environment to be successfully passed on to parents. When parents feel welcome, they are more open to learning and sharing ideas.

### Creating a space for parents' involvement

In partnership with the Family and Childcare Trust, FYT has incorporated a parent champion scheme into the programme. Our parent champions have been trained to use everyday opportunities to chat to other parents about the value of the home learning environment. Our parent champions can also encourage reluctant parents to participate in the Little Explorers groups, either by offering to accompany them to the group or by explaining what the group is about. Importantly, parent champions can also be a resource for nursery settings and help nursery staff build bridges with other parents.

### Tapping into partners' skills

As a local charity, FYT benefits from the skills provided by partner agencies. In addition to our work with People and the Family and Childcare Trust, FYT also partners with The Reader, a Liverpool-based charity supporting literacy. The Reader provides short courses to help parents understand the value and joy of shared reading. The 'Stories for you and yours' programme enhances our work on early language and communication.

### What have we learned from parents and nursery staff?

Head teachers and nursery managers have voiced concern over whether they have the resources to extend direct support to parents as part of nursery life. This is a valid and pressing policy issue.

Our experience suggests that the combination of leadership and staff who are committed to engaging with parents, FYT's support in the initial stages



The partnership that has developed between the school and the parents that attend the groups is equally important as the direct impact on the home learning environment

#### Head Teacher

I found myself doing a lot more with my daughter at home. This group made me realise your child's education should never stop.

#### Parent attending a Little Explorers group

of establishing the groups, and a great deal of flexibility on the part of the settings has enabled nursery-based support for parents to be a success. Some of our settings have, for example, overcome issues with ratios by holding their Little Explorers groups in the nursery class itself rather than in a separate room. Having parents in the class creates a positive dynamic, and the children love having younger siblings around.

Where parents are concerned, formal pre- and post-test questionnaires show that the majority of parents report positive changes in all areas of warmth and sensitivity towards their children. The most marked change was that parents were more frequently able to see the world through their child's eyes, indicating an increased understanding that their children's perceptions are vastly different from their own. Understanding this is key to managing a child's behaviour and supporting their development. Three quarters of parents reported increased confidence in helping their child's development and learning. This key indicator shows that we are having the desired impact on parents. Parents reported doing more activities like singing, reading and encouraging free play.

What remains to be seen is the impact on children's development, and whether changes experienced and instigated by parents lead to better outcomes for their children. As the programme evolves in its second year, the FYT will be looking for ways to measure children's outcomes.

## Acknowledgements

All the parents, children, volunteers and practitioners who have taken part in the projects

The Department for Education, particularly the early years and social mobility teams

Leicester City Council

St Edmund's Nursery School and Children's Centre, Bradford

Wirral Borough Council and all the nurseries and parents across the Wirral Peninsula participating in FYT's programme

Saeeda Norris, Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council

West and East Sussex Councils

Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

Oxford Health NHS Foundation Trust

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