

# The links between family learning and parenting programmes:

a discussion document for  
local authorities



Penny Lamb, Lorraine Casey and Rachel Spacey  
**May 2007**

**niace**  
promoting adult learning

This discussion document has been produced as an outcome of a DfES funded exploratory research project examining the links between family learning and parenting programmes in local authority settings.

The study took place between October 2006 and March 2007 during a time of rapid change in this area.

This document outlines some of the challenges faced by colleagues across England and some of the imaginative responses to providing coherent services. It highlights areas for local debate and contains some recommendations for changes in policy.

## CONTENTS

1. An overview of the research and methodology
2. A proliferation of policies

### The key challenges for local authorities

3. Developing a Joint Strategy
4. Language and terminology
5. Location of services
6. Partnership working
7. Local Area Agreements
8. Funding and Resources
9. Strategic positioning
10. Quality Improvement and commissioning
11. The curriculum offer
12. Publicity
13. Measuring Progression
14. Recommendations



## 1. Overview of the research and methodology

The Department for Education and Skills commissioned this exploratory research to identify the overlaps and positive synergy between family learning<sup>1</sup> and parenting skills programmes in local authority settings. The brief included identifying the barriers to effective working and making recommendations on how policy can be developed to support more effective joint working. The research was carried out between October 2006 and March 2007.

The methodology included: a desk review of current policy; a paired seminar attended by a family learning manager and a parenting practitioner / manager from nine invited local authorities; three in depth case studies in local authorities and supplementary interviews and follow up of areas of identified best practice in additional local authorities.

Attendees of the seminar completed a questionnaire and took part in open discussions. Interviews followed a base framework of questions whilst exploring the issues from the position and perspective of the interviewee.

The full report will be available at a later date at <http://www.niace.org.uk/Research/Family/Default.html>. This document examines the challenges faced by local

authorities, shares some of the responses being adopted and identifies areas for discussion at a local level. It concludes with the recommendations made to support more effective joint working.

## 2. A proliferation of policies

Policy initiatives and changes in this area are extremely fast flowing. During the period of the research there has been the introduction of a £40 million national pilot for Parenting Support Advisors (PSAs), the introduction of the Parenting Support guidance, the nomination of the parenting Commissioners and the financial support for the development of a local authority parenting strategy. The Social Exclusion task force is currently reviewing Families at Risk. At the same time adult learning is dominated by the Leitch report and the increased focus on skills.

Currently there are major national pilots running in selected local authorities on providing information sessions to parents at times of Transition (Transition Information Scheme, TIS) and the Parent Early Intervention project (PEIP) supporting and testing a range of parenting initiatives for differing ages of children.

This is in addition to the recent major local authority restructures for the Every Child Matters agenda, the establishment of Children's Trusts, the development of children and young people's plans (CYPP), the development of Extended Services, the growth in Children's Centres and

<sup>1</sup> In this document we are using family learning as the overarching term to include the LSC funded family programmes of Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy and Wider Family Learning and programmes funded through other streams using the same intergeneration learning approach.

the high priority given to parenting in the Respect Agenda.

Set all of this in a framework of workforce reform, a move towards integrated service provision, in a framework of Local Area Agreement, CYPP, a review of professional qualifications for staff teaching in adult learning and developing work on a framework of qualifications to meet the national occupational standards for working with parents and family learning and the forth-coming national Parenting Academy. It presents a very challenging environment for those who work in it.

One of the key recommendations from the research is an improved approach to joining up policy developments in this area, as one colleague requested:

*“Ask for recognition from Government of the huge job we’ve got to make sense of and implement the new policy agenda. It takes time.”*

## THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR LOCAL AUTHORITIES

### 3. Developing a joint strategy

Some authorities are developing a cross-directorate and multi-agency joint parenting support and family learning strategy. All acknowledge that the journey to joint strategic working in this area has been a challenging one, but say it pays enormous dividends. One interviewee stated: “the lack of mutual professional knowledge is the single biggest barrier to effective inter-agency working.”

A joint strategy gives the advantage of being able to build a complete picture of support for families at all levels of intervention. It makes clear the overt links between parenting skills and family learning programmes whilst recognising the difference in focus of the two programmes.

This is the approach adopted in Suffolk County Council and Essex County Council.

Staff highlighted the need for additional training and Continuous Professional Development to ensure effective multi-agency working.

#### Areas for discussion:

- Is shared ownership of the strategy being secured across department and agency boundaries?
- Does the strategy include quality improvement, monitoring and commissioning requirements?
- Does it map programmes to levels of intervention?
- Where does the strategy group report to?
- Who monitors the action plan from the strategy?

### 4. Language and terminology

Policy documents are sometimes unclear in their use of terminology and definitions of parenting support, parental involvement, family support, family learning and the overarching nomenclature for all provision. Different policy documents from different government departments use terminology in varying ways.

Professionals interviewed across local authorities and partner organisations also had a different understanding of the terminology in use depending on their background. Some authorities have spent time and energy defining their programmes, the interactions between programmes and in developing a common understanding of the language and terminology they use.

Interviewees stressed the importance of having a wider concept of parenting to include both parents and carers and the family as a whole.

In Coventry this time of change is being used to review its methods of engaging families and communities in learning, staff are using some of the new parent / family interventions to break the cycle of disadvantage by empowering communities through learning by offering them help to develop strategies to “cope” and “change”.

There is a whole debate to be had by policy makers, professionals and learners both locally and nationally to ensure that parenting skills programmes are seen as a key plank of intergenerational learning along with family learning, both with distinctive features and both crossing directorate boundaries, however, both relating to adults gaining new knowledge and skills. New structures in many locations have dismantled the traditional concepts of a lifelong learning division and the speed of policy change has not yet enabled sufficient debate to maintain a coherent structural ethos for lifelong learning.

#### Areas for discussion:

- How is an authority-wide concept of lifelong learning in new structures being continued?
- Is time being set aside to develop a common understanding of terminology and language?
- Can staff recognise the differences and synergy between family learning and parenting skills programmes?

### 5. Departmental location of services within a local authority

All three local authorities participating in the research as in-depth case studies are currently undergoing further re-structures of their services: either adult learning services or children and young people’s services. This is indicative of the continuously changing policy and funding agendas.

The location of family learning provision, and in some cases parenting skills provision, has proved challenging for many authorities. It is a strength of this area of work that it bridges provision for both adults and children and contributes to many PSA targets<sup>2</sup>. However, this has left some services feeling displaced or not regarded as a core activity. As one officer interviewed expressed it: *“it’s not that we aren’t being allowed out to join in on the new initiatives, it’s that we are on a totally different playground.”* In some parts of the country this split is causing a disjointed approach to provision for families, often resulting in areas of the council

<sup>2</sup> Haggart and Spacey (2006), Linking the Thinking, Embedding Family Learning across policy areas, NIACE, <http://www.niace.org.uk/Research/Family/Default.htm>

“re-creating the wheel” and not capitalising on existing expertise held elsewhere within the authority.

In Coventry, the service has developed an effective way of joint working. The manager responsible for family learning and parenting skills programmes is currently based with the Children and Family Education Service in the Children’s and Young People’s Directorate but is also a member of the Senior Management Team of the Adult Education service based in the Community Services Directorate.

**Areas for discussion:**

- Has an audit taken place of provision across the whole council and partners?
- Do strategies exist to ensure joint working continues across directorates after restructure?
- Has family learning and parenting provision been reviewed and strategically linked to PSA targets?

## 6. Partnership working

A clear message from this research is that the best practice in joint working and partnership has taken many years to develop. In Essex work has developed from an early Education Action Zone; on the Isle of Wight joint working started with a Single Regeneration project. The Coventry approach has taken seven years to build and is based on a lengthy history of work on parenting programmes. Partners stressed the time it takes to build up these working relationships and establish levels of trust.

At the research seminar, colleagues raised the issue of wanting to work in partnership and work together but say they now need some support with the “how to” across complex new agendas and structures.

The research highlighted the change in focus of some partnership arrangements where resources were being moved from universal and preventative provision to more targeted interventions. For example, the changing roles of school nurses and health visitors means less scope to be involved in the joint delivery of family learning and parenting skills programmes in some localities.

**Areas for discussion:**

- Are examples of past approaches in partnership working being capitalised on now or do some of these need changing?
- Have key staff been allocated time to develop partnership work?
- Is there any local guidance to support staff in partnership work with the new agendas?
- Do all staff have access to training to the common issues for the Children’s Workforce, for example, safeguarding awareness?
- Are health partners fully involved in planning and provision?

## 7. Local Area Agreements

For the majority of local authorities participating in this research LAAs are not the key driver for multi-agency provision in this area. In some authorities the strategic links are in place but there has not yet been time to follow through to action plans which impact on managers at an operational level. Varying requirements from regional government offices have impacted on local flexibility to include targets for this area.

In many local authorities the Children and Young People’s Plan is being used more effectively than the LAA to develop multi-agency working.

However, the approach on the Isle of Wight is more effective. Two years ago the priorities of the Council changed. There is now a commitment from the Council to increase enrolments for adult learning on the island and to deliver family learning in every one of its schools. The island had an early Local Area Agreement and family learning has benefited from its inclusion in this.

Family Learning features in all four blocks of Portsmouth’s LAA and a target has been set for parenting courses. This has enabled the Adult and Family Learning Service to provide expertise to improve the quality of data available through their Management Information system, the quality of provision, and begin to measure impact through their learner post course postcard tracking system.

**Areas for discussion:**

- Is this area of work included in the Local Area Agreement?
- If yes, are action plans in place to support operational delivery?
- Is the purpose and role of the LAA effectively communicated to managers?

## 8. Funding and resources

Ensuring a consistency of resourcing of programmes remains a challenge in some areas, particularly with funding pressures on adult learning and more general local authority budgets. The availability of childcare was seen as a critical success factor to all courses. In some areas, there is a need to ensure effective “buy in” from partners, for example, to ensure parents in some school settings have access to adequate accommodation.

Some providers use a small proportion of Learning and Skills Council funding to provide parenting skills courses. These courses are not always automatically free, as it depends on the income level of the learners and the LSC funding stream. In some areas the need to charge fees is seen as hampering the inclusion of a few “hard to reach” parents.

Many local authorities have been particularly successful in attracting additional project funding to support this area of work. However, concerns were raised about short-term funding initiatives and the damage on communities of start / stop partnerships, particularly in areas of multiple

deprivation. It was seen that additional skills were needed to overcome the local cynicism in communities from “initiative overload.”

#### **Areas for discussion:**

- Is there access to childcare for all programmes?
- Do all partners fully understand the need to make available appropriate facilities for programmes?
- Are parents involved in developing local strategies?
- How are new initiatives marketed in communities where there has been many previous initiatives?

## **9. Strategic positioning**

---

A clear message from the three detailed case studies is that with such rapid policy change and internal restructuring it is critical to review the strategic positioning of family learning programmes. In particular, to ensure that family learning’s contribution to the school improvement agenda and other strategic objectives is recognised and developed.

In some places, staff referred to an “artificial divide” between family learning and parenting skills. Where effective practice was most evident there was a clear understanding of the different roles and remits of the two areas but also very clear models for joint working and exploiting the synergy between the two programme areas. Some services, for example, the Isle of Wight, have produced publicity material outlining these roles, links and responsibilities.

#### **Areas for discussion:**

- Is there inclusion in strategic documents to show the role of family learning in the school improvement agenda and other priorities?
- Is there local evidence to show improvements in achievement through involving parents and families in intergenerational learning?
- Are there recording systems in place to show the impact of involvement on local communities?

## **10. Quality improvement and commissioning**

---

Multi-agency working across parenting skills and family learning programmes is bringing challenges as to the types of quality improvement frameworks to be used and the methods of ensuring consistently good experiences of the participants. The learner focused quality agenda has been a hard fought journey in the adult and community learning sector: this approach is not always being replicated in some of the new areas of work. Existing expertise built up around subcontracting is not always being transferred into the developing commissioning approach.

Some local authorities are using imaginative combinations of funding and expertise across directorates to address this issue, for example, in Portsmouth, amounts of funding from different sources have been combined to fund a post for an additional quality officer whose role is to extend, improve the quality and quality assure the locally developed Parenting

Courses. This includes developing specialist courses, for example, parents of teenagers, parents with basic skills needs. This post is line managed within the Adult and Family Learning team and also reports to the Parents Commissioner.

In Essex, the Family Learning and Parenting Support Group has started work on developing an overarching quality framework. The group has taken the range of quality frameworks needed for the provision that falls under its remit, for example, the Common Inspection Framework, Building Blocks of Quality, Inspiring Learning for All, National Standards for Childcare and Early Years and mapped these against the five Every Child Matters Outcomes.

The DfES has recently funded NIACE to develop with colleagues in the sector and the Parenting Academy a new version of Building Blocks of Quality in Family Learning<sup>3</sup> to cover parenting skills programmes as well as Family Learning to support the effective development of the quality agenda.

#### **Areas for discussion:**

- Are developments in quality systems being linked to the parenting and family learning strategy?
- Are proposed commissioning arrangements sufficiently robust to meet all inspection and monitoring needs?
- Do partner organisations support and fully understand the requirements?

## **11. The curriculum offer**

---

Local authorities are finding it a challenge to keep a broad and balanced curriculum, particularly for parenting skills programmes. Concerns were expressed about the dominance of the evidenced based / manual based parenting skills programmes when other programmes are also available and sometimes more appropriate. Participants highlighted the need to ensure effective measurement and evaluation of the impact on children and families of a full range of programmes from universal to high level interventions. Services felt that some of the programmes they had developed focussed on local needs were not always considered.

Professionals working with families requiring a high level of intervention stressed the differences in needs and curriculum for targeted interventions to universal programmes. Concerns were expressed about the need to develop systems to ensure that families are referred to the most appropriate programme for their needs and that differences in issues such as attendance rates were recognised and acknowledged in monitoring systems. Family learning staff were keen to ensure that it was recognised that much of their work was carried out with families needing level 2-3 interventions. Staff recognised the challenges of addressing compulsory attendance on parenting skills courses and the need to build an ethos of learners wanting to attend and making the decision to commit to the courses.

---

3 Haggart and Spacey (2006) The Building Blocks of Quality in Family Learning, NIACE, <http://www.niace.org.uk/Research/Family/Default.htm>

### Areas for discussion:

- Is there a full range of parenting skills programmes available?
- Is the impact on the children and families of all programmes being measured?
- Are family learning programmes being effectively used to support families at level 2-3 interventions?
- Are there specific referral methods in place to ensure that families who may self refer receive the appropriate level of support?

## 12. Publicity

From each of the detailed case studies parents and carers were very clear about needing easier access to information on courses, programmes and how to gain support. Learners expressed the desire for different types of local publicity that attracted fathers, reduced the stigma of parenting courses and enhanced the understanding of employers.

Coventry has used project funding from the Parent Early Intervention Project to create and recently launch a one-stop central point for information, publicity and support on all parenting and family learning matters throughout the city.

### Areas for discussion:

- Do parents and carers know where to go for help and support?
- Are courses clearly publicised?
- Is there positive local publicity of parenting skills programmes?
- Does publicity attract under-represented groups?

## 13. Measuring progression

The research highlighted that a new approach to measuring progress and outcomes is needed for this area of work. Many learners in this area have “*spiky learning journeys*” and move between college courses, parenting skills programmes, wider family learning programme, family literacy, language and numeracy programmes and employment depending on personal circumstances and over varying periods of time, but never in neat straight lines. Managers are currently struggling to develop systems to capture and measure this and to capture the wider community development elements whilst also meeting the requirements of funding and inspection bodies for systematic monitoring of progression.

### Areas for discussion:

- Are there systems in place to measure the impact of this area of work?
- What alterations need to be made to management information systems?
- Are there effective systems in place to measure children’s achievement on family learning programmes?
- Can the methods in place be described as systematic?

## 14. The recommendations arising from the study

### RECOMMENDATION ONE:

#### Develop closer working across government departments on parenting and family learning initiatives

Participants requested closer working across government departments on parenting and family learning initiatives with:

- A clearer focus on joint targets across agencies to diminish difficulties around competing agendas,
- simpler outcomes and targets that can be decided at local level and passed out between services and partners,
- clearer co-ordination of funding at a national level with more emphasis on secured long-term funding
- the joining up of pilot initiatives
- clearer guidance on the use of funding allocated to extended services,
- more guidance on commissioning,
- a clearer recognition of the differences between types of authorities and the challenges faced by county councils.

### RECOMMENDATION TWO:

#### Agree the definitions and terminology to be used and adopt a consistent approach across policy documents

Research participants highlighted the differences of use of terminology in policy documents and the need to establish a clearer set of definitions to support their work and ensure that there is no confusion between the distinctive roles of family learning, parenting skills and individual parenting support interventions.

### RECOMMENDATION THREE:

#### Promote a recognition of the equal and inter-related nature of all work with parents and families in policies relating to the current change agenda

Participants emphasised the need for a balanced approach across policy developments for both parenting support and family learning.

The research has highlighted the need for the debate about the respective roles of parenting support, parenting skills programmes and family learning and a clearer recognition as to how family learning supports the Every Child Matters agenda.

Participants suggested the following actions to support this recommendation:

- a recognition that family learning and parenting support each other and can sit together: “*bolt the two strategies together more effectively*”
- support with more written guidance and practical strategies to make the new agendas happen, with the guidance informed by practitioners on the ground,

- improved integration of family learning and parenting policies with the extended services agenda,
- a requirement that the parenting support strategy in every local authority includes family learning.

**RECOMMENDATION FOUR:**  
**Enhance the support for preventative work in the new agendas**

This research has highlighted the valuable contribution of parenting skills and family learning as preventative work with families, for example, some courses have given parents and carers the skills and confidence to seek help and address concerns at an early stage. However, participants highlighted the trend towards moving resources to more targeted interventions was having an adverse effect on the more universal preventative services for families at lower levels of risk. The change was particularly being felt in relation to health provision. Participants requested a review of this approach and the impact of these changes on local families.

**RECOMMENDATION FIVE:**  
**Develop a quality framework for both parenting skills and family learning with effective recognition of the costs involved**

Local authorities are facing challenges to develop a wide-ranging quality framework that puts the family at the centre and meets all the needs of funding and inspection regimes. There is no consistency of approach in the move towards commissioning and existing expertise built up around subcontracting is not always being used.

Participants highlighted the need for the new quality framework to:

- work across all agendas and outcomes
- be built around effective quality indicators,
- to include staff time for developing and ensuring implementation of effective quality improvement agendas,
- for funding streams to have an element dedicated specifically for the quality improvement role and evaluation against common criteria.

**RECOMMENDATION SIX:**  
**Provide further guidance on ensuring effective partnership working**

Participants stressed that everyone had a tremendous will to work together on the new agendas but needed further guidance on the “how to” and capacity built into job roles to make this happen.

Elements of this guidance were suggested as:

- support to ensure multi-agency working at the delivery stage of both family learning and parenting skills programmes,
- a clear steer that both family learning and parenting programmes should be delivered in a wide range of

venues and not just schools because of the impact on “school-phobic” parents and children,

- dedicated resources to make partnership working happen,
- resources for multi-disciplinary support teams to be based around local schools, children’s centres and health centres.

**RECOMMENDATION SEVEN:**  
**Require that parents and carers and voluntary sector representatives are actively involved in the development of the joint parenting support and family learning strategy**

The views of learners and voluntary sector partners have been critical in shaping this research, in particular the responses to needing clearer publicity, views about programmes, progression and the images of courses and the developments for partnership working.

**RECOMMENDATION EIGHT:**  
**Ensure that there is a flexible curriculum for parenting skills programmes**

Concerns were frequently expressed about the focus on the promotion of the manual based parenting skills programmes, for example, Webster-Stratton and Triple P, when other programmes developed locally to meet local needs may have equal merit and be appropriate to use.

Local authority staff requested a balanced local curriculum to ensure that all models were included.

**RECOMMENDATION NINE:**  
**improve national publicity on parenting**

Parents and professionals alike highlighted the impact of negative publicity about parenting. Parents wanted a clear recognition that they were doing a hard job and “doing their best” and professionals highlighted the difficulties of the images in the media of parenting skills courses being seen for “parents who are failing”.

Parents highlighted the need to have publicity for fathers and to sell the message of the benefits of parenting skills programmes to employers.

Equally practitioners wanted to ensure that the new Parenting Commissioners were well informed about the full and incredibly wide range of work in this area.

A key element throughout the research was the need to foster greater recognition of parenting skills programmes as an element of adult learning.

**RECOMMENDATION TEN:**  
**Implement a training strategy for all staff in the schools sector on working with families**

Interviews highlighted gaps in understanding across agencies on working with families. Specific actions to support this recommendation are:

- build sessions on family learning, working with parents and the role of an extended school into the initial training of all teachers
- provide a similar capacity building programme for all staff working on the Extended Services agenda and the Parent Support Advisors programme developed and delivered by parenting skills and family learning experts
- multi-agency training

**RECOMMENDATION ELEVEN:**  
**Ensure that all staff providing courses in parenting skills and family learning are trained for purpose**

The research interviews identified varying levels of staff training prior to delivering programmes, in some cases with as little as three days training before delivering parenting skills programmes. Qualifications are currently being developed for Working with Parents matched to the National Occupational Standards<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, development work is taking place to create qualifications for family learning staff linked to the Family Learning national occupational standards. It is planned that there will be a common set of modules for working across parenting and family learning with additional specialist modules.<sup>5</sup>

Interviewees were keen that joint multi-agency training takes place locally and that effective referral systems are built into the training.

4 This is being developed by Parenting UK, for further information see <http://www.parentinguk.org/>

5 NIACE will be publishing a position paper on the developments in June 2007.

**RECOMMENDATION TWELVE:**  
**Commission long term research on the impact of parenting skills and family learning**

Practitioners highlighted the need for a longitudinal study on the impact of parenting skills and family learning programmes to explore the life-changing impact of both programmes. Participants were clear on the need to gain long term evidence of the outcomes and effectiveness of both areas of work.

**RECOMMENDATION THIRTEEN:**  
**Commission research on the methods of recording the social benefits of family learning and parenting skills programmes**

The research identified the challenges of measuring and capturing progression in this field, in particular in relation to the outcomes related to gains in community coherence, the wider family and in terms of the building blocks of social mobility. Providers highlighted their need for support in developing a systematic approach in this area.

**RECOMMENDATION FOURTEEN:**  
**Set up a reference group of expert practitioners in the field to inform Government discussions**

This research has highlighted many of the realities of the challenges of implementing policy on the ground. Practitioners wanted to share their experiences of attempting to weave all the policy changes together so that they support local families.

**Acknowledgements**

We would like to thank colleagues from across England for their support in this research, in particular those who attended the seminar and colleagues in Coventry, Suffolk and Essex for their time and support for the in-depth case studies and for the support of the members of the Family Learning Local Authority Group (FLLAG) in developing the research methodology.



NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training, particularly for those who do not have easy access because of class, gender, age, race, language and

culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

You can find NIACE online at [www.niace.org.uk](http://www.niace.org.uk)

The family learning team at NIACE work to support the development of a broad vision of intergenerational learning opportunities for all families.

For more information contact:  
 Penny Lamb, Development Officer,  
[Penny.Lamb@niace.org.uk](mailto:Penny.Lamb@niace.org.uk),  
 Clare Meade, Project Officer,  
[Clare.Meade@niace.org.uk](mailto:Clare.Meade@niace.org.uk),  
 Rachel Spacey, Research Assistant,  
 (currently on maternity leave)  
 Clare Chisholm, Administrative Assistant,  
[Clare.Chisholm@niace.org.uk](mailto:Clare.Chisholm@niace.org.uk)  
 Telephone: 0116 204 4200