

Helping families learn

Involving parents in their children's learning can reap many rewards, for child and adult alike, says **Tim Kahn...**



Photos: James Tweed, Pre-school Learning Alliance

Amir and his mum are taking part in a family learning session. It is the last in a series of six sessions in 'stop motion animation' – making cartoon films. Amir is hard at work with his mother. They have made five little duck models out of plasticine and are using them in their animation to illustrate *Five little ducks went swimming one day*. Mum reads the story and moves the ducks in accordance with the story. Amir presses the button on the computer when mum tells him to. And when they have finished they sit back and view the film they have made together.

Not only can Amir call himself a film-maker but mum is amazed at how long he could concentrate and what he could do. She had no idea that five-year-olds could do that, even though Amir, her first child, has spent most of his waking time with her. That short course changed the lives of one mother and her son.

You may well have come across family learning. It is, as its name suggests, where

members of a family learn together. This could be mothers, fathers, grandparents (or anyone who cares for the child) learning together with the child. Family learning takes place in one-off workshops – on messy play or making puppets, for example – or as part of a longer programme such as the one described above. What is important is that both the children and the adults take away something they have learned.

Why family learning?

Evidence shows that children do better when their parents are involved in their learning. Research from 2003 in the Campaign for Learning's 'Give Your Child a Better Chance' found that a quarter of the attainment of top-scoring children at the age of 16 was primarily explained by the interest their parents took in their children's education. Common sense, maybe, but fortunately backed up by research.

The other main benefit of family learning is that it can be a step back into learning for the parent. Parents, who for whatever reason did not fulfil their potential at school, can be motivated by their desire for their children to

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Getting started

IF YOU'D LIKE TO OFFER FAMILY LEARNING SESSIONS AT YOUR SETTING, YOU CAN FIND MORE INFORMATION FROM THE FOLLOWING ONLINE RESOURCES:

- The family learning section on the Pre-school Learning Alliance website provides a good overview of family learning in the early years: pre-school.org.uk/family-learning
- Visit the National Family Learning Network to get information and sign up for a regular newsletter with information on funding and other relevant news. familylearningnetwork.com
- Head to familylearning.org.uk for ideas, resources and online games that parents can use to support their children's learning.
- Type 'NIACE' and 'Family Learning' into a search engine. One of the first results will be NIACE's family learning page, which has lots of useful information.

succeed to learn what they missed out when they were young. In other words, family learning kills two birds with one stone: it can be the first step that leads parents towards gaining a qualification, and it can create the right atmosphere in families for children to learn. There is an additional benefit – with parents and children on a journey of learning together, the relationship between them is likely to improve too.

Family learning and early years settings

When there was more money for the early years, some of it was made available for projects aimed at improving the relationship between parents and early years practitioners – on such projects as PEAL (Parents, Early Years and Learning) and PEPL (Parents as Partners in Early Learning) – but in the current climate funding for these has all but dried up, though the rhetoric of 'early intervention' has continued. This rhetoric recognises that it is beneficial for children's learning and development that practitioners have good relationships with parents, because most learning takes place informally in and around the home, not in the setting. The oft-quoted statistic that says that children under 16 only spend 15 per cent of their waking life in educational settings – they spend the other 85 per cent in the company of their parents and other carers – illustrates the central role of parents in the learning of their children.

One of the mechanisms for early years settings to develop their relationships with parents and ensure that the same messages are sent out by home and setting is to run family learning sessions. At the same time,

family learning is an effective way of engaging parents in the life of the setting.

Early years settings are 'natural' places for family learning to take place – they are places that parents go to with their children, which they see as community facilities rather than as part of the (seen by some as intimidating) education system. Parents are more likely to feel comfortable in their setting and to sign up for a workshop or course there. Baby and toddler groups in particular may be ideal places to introduce family learning activities.

Funding for family learning

Family learning (and especially family literacy and numeracy) used to be flavour of the month, and more local funding was available to put on family learning programmes. There are no easy answers for getting hold of funding now; each local area is different, but more and more local authorities have taken family learning in-house, so it can be difficult to access money. Possible sources of funding include the Big Lottery's 'Reaching Communities' and their 'Awards for All' funds. Another possibility, particularly for settings attached to schools, is for the school to use its pupil premium to put on family learning sessions. Schools are likely to encourage families with pre-school-age children to attend such sessions, recognising that the younger the child the greater the benefit for families getting involved in family learning. Funders

look positively at partnership bids, and anything which includes the buzzword 'health' is likely to be considered favourably...

Remember dads

Family learning programmes tend to attract female carers, so think about your audience and target programmes at fathers as well. Croydon Pre-school Learning Alliance has been running a fathers group for a number of years. A creative writing course they put on attracted eight fathers and their children, and, at the end of the sessions, a book of stories written by the fathers and illustrated by their young children was published and distributed locally.

Consider planning any family learning sessions to coincide with the Family Learning Festival, which runs from Saturday 13th October to Sunday 28th October and/or Adult Learners Week, which takes place between 12th and 18th May.



about the author

Tim Kahn has worked with parents and families for some 20 years, including eight years spent working at the Pre-school Learning Alliance's national centre.

