



# Early Home Learning **matters**

A brief guide for practitioners

Kim Roberts

This is the short companion  
volume to *Early Home  
Learning Matters:  
A good practice guide*



The Family and Parenting Institute researches what matters to families and parents. We use our knowledge to influence policymakers and foster public debate. We develop ideas to improve the services families use and the environment in which children grow up.

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Family and Parenting Institute  
430 Highgate Studios  
53–79 Highgate Road  
London NW5 1TL

**Tel** 020 7424 3460

**Fax** 020 7485 3590

**Email** [info@familyandparenting.org](mailto:info@familyandparenting.org)

**Websites** [www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)  
[www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk](http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk)

ISBN 978-1-903615-79-9

Registered charity number: 1077444

Registered company number: 3753345

VAT registration number: 833024365

The Family and Parenting Institute is the operating name of the National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI). NFPI is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales.

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*Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide* and this short companion volume have been funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) gratefully acknowledges their support.

Thank you to everyone who helped with the content and design of this book, particularly to the many parents and practitioners who shared their stories, information and learning and who agreed to be photographed.

# Foreword



The evidence for making early years support an essential part of a child's development is now incontrovertible. We know that action in the early years represents our biggest chance to sever the link between disadvantage and low achievement. Research tells us that by the age of 22 months the learning development of children from disadvantaged backgrounds can start to slip back behind that of other children from more advantaged backgrounds. We know that the home learning environment is the single biggest influence on a child's development. If we want to give every child the best possible start in life, in every setting, all our services must be delivered in partnership with parents – mothers and fathers. This book sets out clearly how people working in the early years and those commissioning early years services can support mothers and fathers to offer their child the best possible start in life. There isn't a one-size-fits-all solution. It's all about relationships, and we're all very different. This guide sets out clearly how children develop, and shows the kind of interactions that make a big difference, to children, to parents, and to practitioners.

In a lot of cases, mothers and fathers want help, but help of a particular kind. They need practical ideas, advice and confidence to do the right things at the right time. Often it's simple things – getting parents to sing nursery rhymes with the children, read with them, play with letters and numbers – that have the biggest effect. Many don't realise this kind of play and communication can make such a difference. My ambition is to ensure the support mothers and fathers want is there where – and when – they need it, without judgement, without prejudice. Evidence shows that most parents, including the most vulnerable and those whom services find it hardest to engage, want the best for their children. And it builds up a virtuous circle – parents getting this kind of support gain confidence in their abilities, greater appreciation for the skills of the professionals involved, and fresh ideas for playing and talking with their children. But, perhaps more importantly, they also often find their relationship with the child improves – more cuddles, more showing of affection, more attachment and frankly, in many cases, more fun.

This is an exciting time for the sector – a time of real growth and big opportunity. In September 2008, we launched the Early Years Foundation Stage, which has at its heart the relationship between providers and parents. In January 2009, we published *Next Steps for Early Learning and Childcare: Building on the 10-Year Strategy*, alongside the Child Poverty Bill. This set out our continued commitment to promote child development, supporting employment and recognising families' preferences, and included a comprehensive assessment on parental leave policies, an expansion of Every Child a Talker in the most disadvantaged areas, a new childcare price comparison website for parents, piloting raising the tax credit limit for families in London and those with disabled children as part of the Childcare Affordability Pilot. There's also the entitlement to free nursery care, which we have pledged to expand to 15 hours for every three- and four-year-old by 2010, and increasing the offer more flexibly to meet parents' needs. And by 2010, there will be a Sure Start Children's Centre for every community – already we have over 3,000 up and running. So, against this background of continuing development and activity in the early years sector, I commend this book as essential reading for all those working to support the best possible outcomes for children.



**Dawn Primarolo**

**Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families**

# Introduction

This short companion to *Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide* has been written to provide a quick reference guide for practitioners. It summarises the essential information you need to involve parents as active partners in their children's early learning – an explicit expectation and commitment of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

*Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide*, and the accompanying website [www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk](http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk), are key resources for all early years practitioners and those involved in planning and implementing services for parents of children aged birth to five years. They are about supporting parents, fathers as well as mothers, to help them create the kind of relationships and experiences at home that very young children need in order to flourish – while enjoying family life and time together.



Early home learning is not just about the kind of pre-educational activities that the words may suggest. It encompasses a much wider range of experiences that provide the foundation from which babies and young children can grow to achieve their full potential. How parents relate to their children from the moment of birth and the activities they do with them inside and outside the home during their early years has a major impact on children's later social, emotional and intellectual development.

The word 'parent' is used throughout to include anyone involved in bringing up children, including fathers, mothers, grandparents, step-parents, other family members and carers.

# Chapter 1

## Why work with parents?

Social disadvantage has a major impact on children's outcomes. However, research shows that the link between deprivation and under-achievement is not set in stone. When parents are able to provide the kind of relationships and experiences that children need in the early years, this makes a real difference to children's futures and is key to narrowing the gap between children from different backgrounds.

### Key messages from research

- It is possible to engage vulnerable parents and improve the home learning environment (Evangelou et al., 2008).
- Parenting behaviour influences children's development from the moment of birth (Gutman and Feinstein, 2007; Feinstein, 2003).
- The quality of the home learning environment is more important for a child's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income (Sylva et al., 2004).
- Children whose fathers are involved in their learning do better at school and have better mental health (Flouri and Buchanan, 2001).
- The influence of the home is "enduring, pervasive and direct" (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003).

### Example from practice



**Redcar and Cleveland** has developed a project called 'Play-at-Home' to reach families who are not accessing local family support. Weekly visits (for up to 16 weeks) are adapted to individual needs and build confidence by focusing on a parent's strengths – the things they do already – as well as the things they would like to learn more about. Each session usually begins with a rhyme or song, followed by a play activity and then a book or story. As the weeks go on, parents begin to take the lead in playing with their child, with support. They are also gradually introduced to, and encouraged to attend, group-based sessions within the local community.

Source: Wheeler and Connor (2009)

## Chapter 2

# What is a good home learning environment?

The quality of the relationship between a parent and child during the first three years is fundamental to children's later success in school and their longer-term development and wellbeing. This chapter is about what parents, both fathers and mothers, can do from the moment of birth to support their child's development and learning as a natural part of daily family life at home.

### Attachment and the developing child

Attachment research by John Bowlby highlights the fact that both sensitive and loving caregiving and the development of a secure relationship are central to optimal child development, as described in *A secure base: parent-child attachment and healthy human development* (Bowlby, 1988).

Bowlby's colleague, Mary Ainsworth, observed that mothers who responded to their infant's need for attention sensitively and appropriately were more likely to have infants who cried little and who were content to explore their environment in their mother's presence. She concluded that these infants were 'securely' attached, and that this security was supported by warm and sensitive parenting behaviour (Ainsworth et al., 1971).

Findings consistently suggest that a secure attachment status is related to greater self-confidence, improved social skills and higher school achievement (Sroufe et al., 2005).

### The building blocks for learning: early brain development

In recent years, technological advances have enabled important new discoveries to be made about the growth of the human brain, demonstrating that a young child's experiences have a neurological, as well as a psychological, impact on their long-term development.

The human brain is unfinished at birth. A baby's brain develops at an astonishing pace; it develops from 25 per cent at birth to 80 per cent of the fully formed brain by the age of three.

This development is 'experience dependent'. A baby is born with most, if not all, of its brain cells in place. After birth, however, connections (synapses) are developed that pass information between the brain's nerve cells. Imagine a new house with all the wiring in place, but not yet connected; the electricity will only work once the circuits have been properly and effectively connected.

The patterns of connection that form between the brain's nerve cells govern the development of linguistic, as well as emotional, physical and sensory abilities. The more an experience (positive or negative) is repeated, the stronger the connection. The brain of a baby or young child who gets the interaction and stimulation needed for healthy development is literally larger and more completely formed by the age of three than the brain of a child who has experienced neglect.



*"I'm quite logical and need a good reason to do things. I couldn't see the point of doing the same thing over and over again with my baby. Then I joined a dads' group and the worker said, 'Well, actually, with repeating this activity, which is probably boring you to tears, you're actually reinforcing the connections in your baby's brain and then it grows . . . because it's like a road and you're reinforcing a road and it stays there, so obviously your child is able to do more things from that.' That's really good. So now I can see the point and know that what I'm doing is actually making a difference and is important."*

A father

## **Bringing it all together: birth to toddlerhood**

So what are the most important things parents can provide during babyhood to promote development and emotional wellbeing?

**Figure 2.1** Activities that promote babies' development



## **Bringing it all together: toddlerhood to starting school**

### **The importance of talking to young children**

Hart and Risley's long-term study (1995) highlighted the direct connection between talking to children and children's linguistic and intellectual development. Five specific ways that parents talked to children consistently had the most positive impact:

- **They just talked**, generally using a wide vocabulary as part of daily life.
- **They tried to be nice**, using lots of praise and few negative commands.

- **They told children about things**, using language with a high information content.
- **They gave children choices**, asking them their opinion rather than simply telling them what to do.
- **They listened**, rather than ignoring what they said or making demands.

### **Play is children's work**

Play is the way children learn new skills and make sense of their world. The activities in the figure below, derived from research including the EPPE study (Sylva et al., 2004), have been identified as having a marked impact on children's learning.

**Figure 2.2 Activities that promote young children's development**



# Chapter 3

## Engaging parents

### Who are you trying to reach?

Practitioners need to target and engage vulnerable families before children start to fall behind, if they are to succeed in their aim of preventing learning delay. The term 'learning delay' is used broadly in this context to describe children who are falling behind their peers in terms of intellectual, emotional and personal development.

The well-established link between social disadvantage and learning delay means that targeting services within identified geographical areas of deprivation can be helpful in reaching families who most need support. However, geographical targeting is not on its own sufficient. Effective early intervention needs to reach vulnerable families within targeted areas in which one or more of the following risk factors are evident:

- poverty, which affects certain ethnic groups disproportionately
- health issues, such as illness and disability
- low parental aspirations and disinterest in education
- parents with limited English or literacy
- family instability
- lack of bonding and attachment to parents
- controlling, critical and harsh parenting.

Crucially, if targeting is to achieve its aim of engaging the parents of children at risk of learning delay, it needs to be done in a way that is empowering and valuing and which avoids creating stigma by labelling families as 'problem families'.

### Barriers to parental involvement

Research has identified a range of barriers to parental involvement in children's early learning (Wheeler and Connor, 2009). Some of these barriers are to do with how the service is provided and parents' experiences of using services. Others relate to individual parents and their circumstances.

### **Barriers at the service/practitioner level**

- Negative attitudes towards parents and poor communication on the part of practitioners, such as behaving like the expert when talking to parents.
- Lack of practitioner confidence and skills to work effectively with parents.
- Services not tailored to parents' needs, level of knowledge or circumstances.
- A lack of knowledge about the importance of parental involvement.
- Location of settings, unwelcoming venues and poor access, e.g. inadequate transport, lack of childcare facilities and inflexible timings of services.
- Staff teams that don't reflect the community they are trying to reach, for example low numbers of male role models in the workforce is a barrier to engaging fathers.
- Lack of funding and capacity.

### **Barriers at the parent level**

#### **Experiences and beliefs**

- Poor experiences of school or professionals, leading to lack of trust.
- Fear of being judged as a failing parent.
- Past and ongoing experience of discrimination.
- Low value placed on education.
- Beliefs about keeping children at home until they are old enough to start school.

#### **Life factors**

- Work pressures and patterns.
- Family responsibilities, such as caring for children of different ages or dependent adults.
- Stressful circumstances such as poverty, mental health, single parenthood, disability, illness, domestic violence and changes in the family.

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*Continued*

### **Knowledge**

- Not aware of the difference they can make to their child's development.
- Lack of confidence and knowledge about how to be involved.
- Inappropriate expectations of children's development.
- Lack of knowledge about local services or opportunities.
- Low levels of parental literacy and numeracy.
- Lack of confidence in English if it is not their first language.

## **The importance of relationships and partnership**

We know that parents want to remain in control of their family lives, be listened to and be treated as active participants in meeting their children's needs (Quinton, 2004). Effective parental involvement is based on respect and partnership. Relationships are at the heart of this process. For a parent, forming a warm and positive relationship with a practitioner can be the bridge to available support and information.

### **Key messages: overcoming barriers to parental involvement**

- Allow enough time for focused and persistent outreach to ensure that vulnerable families in targeted areas of need are included.
- Take the service to the parent where necessary – support in the home is particularly helpful in reaching the most vulnerable parents.
- Provide services in responsive and flexible ways and at flexible times.
- Tailor activities to make them appealing to parents who make less use of early years provision, for instance fathers.
- Respond to the support needs of individual parents – other issues, such as financial worries or depression, may need to be addressed before, or at the same time as, helping parents to support their children as learners.
- Use the expertise of voluntary organisations that have links within the local community.

A checklist to enable services to review and develop their ability to engage and involve parents is available in the full *Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide* ([www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/resources](http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/resources)).

## Chapter 4

# Involving parents as active partners in children's early learning

The goal of services to support early home learning is to enable fathers and mothers to provide positive learning experiences as part of normal daily life – through play, the way they interact with their children and the experiences they provide for them.

Achieving this goal depends on two crucial factors: first, the skills of practitioners and second, developing services with the range and flexibility to meet the needs of parents in differing circumstances.

### A skilled workforce

*"It's having an appropriately skilled workforce, to make sure that whatever work they're doing with the parent that they've got the skills to be able to manage it in an effective manner."*

Children's Centre coordinator

Effective practitioners are able to:

- recognise which groups of children are vulnerable to learning delay and undertake creative outreach activities to reach these families
- build supportive relationships with parents within an ethos of partnership
- understand why parents and the home learning environment are so important
- work with a wide range of parents, including fathers, parents from different cultural backgrounds and parents with additional support needs
- identify parents' starting points, and make informed and responsive decisions about how to tailor support to their particular needs
- support parents to develop the confidence, knowledge and skills to help their children
- identify difficulties early and know when and how to involve other specialist services
- reflect on their practice
- work effectively in multi-agency teams.

The Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) model provides a framework for good practice in working in partnership with parents, together with training for practitioners. More information and contact details are available in the full *Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide* and at [www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/Filestore/Documents/Resources.pdf](http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/Filestore/Documents/Resources.pdf)

## **A range of responsive services to meet needs**

Effective services to promote early home learning are likely to include support in three key areas:

- the parent–child relationship
- play and learning at home
- parental involvement in early years settings.

### **Support for the parent–child relationship**

The quality of the parent–child relationship underpins early home learning. A warm, loving relationship that builds a child's sense of security and self-esteem is crucial for development and wellbeing. Many early years settings offer baby massage groups, widely valued by parents and practitioners as a non-threatening and fun way to promote attachment and develop parents' understanding of their baby's communication and needs.

Some parents need more intensive support to enable them to meet their child's needs for care and nurturing. Programmes such as Parents as First Teachers, Family Nurse Partnership and Mellow Parenting provide intensive and structured support for the parent–child relationship, often on a one-to-one basis in the home.

Group parenting programmes can also fulfil a useful role through toddlerhood and beyond, enabling parents to share experiences with each other and develop the skills and confidence for daily life with young children.

*"I now understand more why he behaves that way. I used to just get angry and try to control him. I'm more permissive now and try to be more positive and praise him more."*

Parent

Further information about parenting programmes and interventions is available in the full *Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide*.



## Example from practice

C and T both have learning difficulties and sought support in managing the behaviour of their young child, N.

A Parents as First Teachers worker started visiting regularly to increase the parents' understanding of positive interaction with their child, discuss practical behavioural strategies (e.g. rewarding positive behaviour) and provide emotional support and encouragement to build their confidence as parents. This required lots of repetition and adaptation of the Parents as First Teachers programme to allow for their learning difficulties.

The health visitor also continued to support C and T and helped them to access other local family support services at the local Children's Centre.

N now has access to a greater range of activities appropriate to his stage of development and mixes with other children. Both parents show greater confidence and are more able to interact with their child in a positive way.

Source: Family and Parenting Institute (2008)

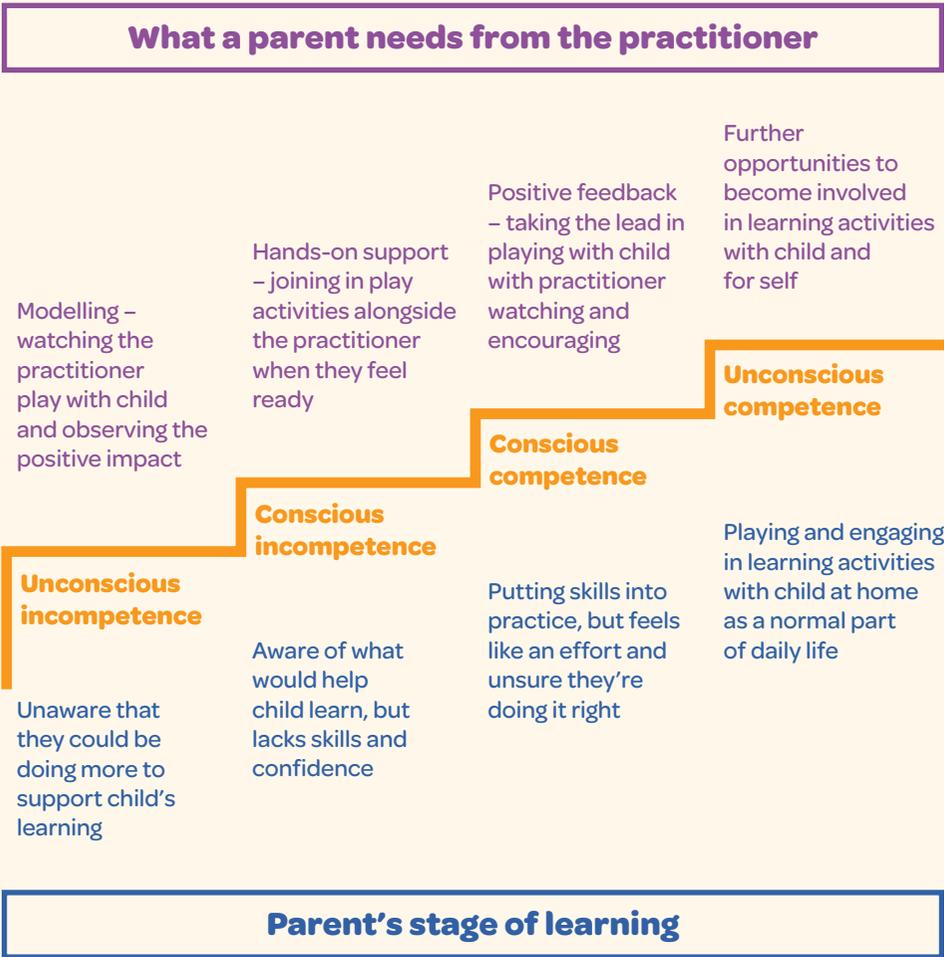
## Support for play and learning at home

Effective interventions to increase parents' knowledge, skills and confidence to play with their child and engage in learning activities at home share common features:

- They happen within the context of a supportive, respectful and affirming relationship between parent and practitioner.
- Practitioners are able to make informed, responsive decisions about appropriate activities, pace them to suit individual parents and work flexibly to take account of the stresses parents may be facing in their life.
- Practitioners or volunteers reflect the cultural or gender profile of the parents with whom they are working.
- Practitioners use modelling to allow less confident parents to observe practitioners, gain ideas and develop skills at their own pace.
- Support is offered in both the home and early years settings, depending on the needs and preferences of the parent.

Enabling parents to make lasting changes and integrate the learning into their daily life as a parent at home may require sustained time and support. This incremental process can be helpfully illustrated using the concept of the 'learning stair'.

**Figure 4.1** The learning stair: helping parents gain confidence and competence in supporting their children’s early learning



*“The worker comes to see me at home and gives me emotional support by talking to me. I don’t feel judged and it’s given me confidence. She shows me how to use house things as toys and always brings books and toys with her.”*

Parent

There is a wide range of materials that early years services can draw on to support their work with parents. The most effective services use these materials as a starting point and tailor them to local needs and individual families.

Further details and contact information are available in the full *Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide* and at [www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/Filestore/Documents/Resources.pdf](http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk/Filestore/Documents/Resources.pdf)

## Example from practice



M was 20 and expecting her second child when her health visitor referred her to the Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP) because of concerns about her two-year-old daughter, W.

W's language development was delayed, with only five recognisable words, and her attention span was very limited. M's interactions with her daughter included a great deal of negative instruction.

M and the ELPP worker agreed to weekly home visits. The worker was very aware of all the pressures M was dealing with and focused on making the visits fun and relaxing for her as well as for her daughter. Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP) Learning Together Folders were used to introduce play activities that encouraged talking, singing and looking at books.

The relationship that M built with the ELPP worker also gave her the confidence to join a PEEP group at a local centre run by the same ELPP worker, which she attended regularly, sometimes with her partner.

The double intervention of home visits over several months and participation in a PEEP group was extremely effective for this family. M's knowledge and understanding of her daughter developed, as did her confidence as a parent. She came to recognise real value in W's play and actively offered more play opportunities.

Source: Family and Parenting Institute (2008)



## Support for parental involvement in early years settings

Effective early years settings actively involve parents, fathers as well as mothers, in decisions about their child's learning and encourage them to join in activities with their child. Building strong links between settings and parents is particularly important during transitions into and out of pre-school settings, which can be

stressful times for children – especially for children from minority backgrounds, who may also have to cope with a culture and language that is unfamiliar to them.



A proactive approach to involving parents may include:

- 'stay and play' sessions
- trips and fun events
- parents participating in and helping with family events and activities
- transition information sessions
- parent rooms and resources
- father-friendly activities and sessions
- strategies to reach parents who are not making use of settings-based support
- practical resources, such as washing machines, for families to use
- practitioner–parent conferences to share child-related information.

### Example from practice



At **Thomas Coram Children's Centre** in the London Borough of Camden, one week in the year is designated as Languages Week in order to celebrate the varied home languages spoken by children and families in the community.

Parents are invited into the centre to cook, talk, play, read stories or sing songs and rhymes using their home language. The school library service and a local bookshop are invited to bring resources into the centre, including dual language texts. Many activities are organised by parents themselves.

The week helps everyone – parents, children and practitioners – to gain more understanding about different languages and cultures. Parents who are uncertain of the importance of maintaining a strong first language, while acquiring English as a second language, are reassured that speaking, playing and reading to children in their home language is a helpful thing to do.

Source: Wheeler and Connor (2009)

# Chapter 5

## Working inclusively

Consulting parents with differing needs about the design and implementation of local activities is essential in ensuring services are inclusive.

### Including fathers

#### Key messages

- Embed 'father friendliness' into training, supervision and staff discussions.
- Offer activities that appeal to fathers and provide services at flexible times.
- Explicitly include fathers in information materials.
- Employ male staff in parent contact roles.

#### Example from practice



**Action for Children** in North Solihull used Parents as First Teachers and Campaign for Learning (CfL) Best Coach resources to develop different access points for fathers, depending on their needs and confidence. These included outreach and social opportunities, such as a photo shoot, a 'stay and play' group for fathers, and individual work in the home. The very practical approach was effective in keeping fathers involved. The development of a website ([www.activ-dads.org.uk](http://www.activ-dads.org.uk)) also helped to promote the project and engage fathers.

Source: Family and Parenting Institute (2008)

### Including parents from black and minority ethnic communities

#### Key messages

- Avoid assumptions and stereotyping.
- Ensure that services and activities are culturally sensitive.
- Employ staff whose ethnicity reflects the local community.
- Involve other parents as key communicators, either in formal roles such as parent champions or through local friendship and peer support groups.

- Support parents' language and literacy development, especially where English is not the primary language spoken at home.



### Example from practice

**Involving Polish Fathers** in Cumbria developed activities to involve fathers from the Polish community. These included computer skills workshops with a play theme for fathers and their children, and residential outdoor pursuits workshops. Literacy and numeracy courses were also provided to enable fathers with low literacy levels to be more involved in their children's education.

Source: Family and Parenting Institute (2008)

## Including parents with additional support needs

Parents with additional support needs are a diverse group, which includes parents with physical or sensory impairment; learning disabilities; mental health needs; difficulties associated with substance misuse; long-term medical conditions; and parents who identify as part of the deaf community.

### Key messages

- The children of disabled parents should not automatically be seen as children 'in need'. Rather the aim should be to prevent children becoming 'in need' by prioritising services to support those parents with their parenting responsibilities (Wates, 2002).
- Ensure information is accessible, including British Sign Language translation of materials, Easy Read formats and video-phone interpreting.
- Carefully consider the access and support needs of individual parents to enable them to participate in mainstream parenting services.



### Example from practice

B had very recently separated from the mother of his children. He was isolated, misusing substances and depressed. His health visitor visited regularly and when B asked for help to play with his young children, she brought a worker from the local Children's Centre to meet B and let him know about the PEEP sessions that were run at the centre. This initial personal contact in his home enabled B to start attending these sessions. Initially he lacked confidence to participate, but gradually became more involved as he saw the positive impact on his children.

Source: Family and Parenting Institute (2008)

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This brief guide provides an overview of the key messages for practitioners contained in *Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide*. This is an essential resource for anyone working with parents of children from birth to five years of age, or developing early years services.

The link between social deprivation and poor outcomes for children is well established but, crucially, it is not set in stone. What the evidence also tells us is that when parents provide the experiences that children need for their early development, this has a huge and lasting impact on their future wellbeing and achievement, irrespective of their parents' material or educational background.

Involving and supporting parents by working in partnership is therefore an essential part of early years services.

This brief guide will help you:

- understand the evidence about brain development and the vital role of parents, both fathers and mothers
- reach and include vulnerable families
- enable parents to gain the understanding, skills and confidence they need to help their children flourish.

Further information on a wide range of examples from practice, as well as the development and evaluation of services, the equipping of the workforce, and the location of key resources, can be found in *Early Home Learning Matters: A good practice guide*, available from [www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk](http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk)

The Family and Parenting Institute researches what matters to families and parents. We use our knowledge to influence policymakers and foster public debate. We develop ideas to improve the services families use and the environment in which children grow up.

ISBN 978-1-903615-79-9

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Family and Parenting Institute  
430 Highgate Studios  
53–79 Highgate Road  
London NW5 1TL

**Tel** 020 7424 3460

**Fax** 020 7485 3590

**Email** [info@familyandparenting.org](mailto:info@familyandparenting.org)

**Websites** [www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)  
[www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk](http://www.earlyhomelearning.org.uk)

Registered charity number: 1077444

Registered company number: 3753345

VAT registration number: 833024365