



National Research and Development Centre  
for adult literacy and numeracy

# The impact of family literacy programmes on children's literacy skills and the home literacy environment

## Executive Summary

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This report presents findings from a study of family literacy programmes in England carried out by the National Research and Development Centre for Adult Literacy and Numeracy (NRDC) at UCL Institute of Education (IOE) between July 2013 and May 2015. This mixed-methods study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation and explored: 1) the impact of school-based family literacy programmes on young children's progress in reading and writing; and 2) how parents translate and implement what they learn in these classes into the home literacy environment.

## **Key Findings**

This research produced two principal findings. Firstly, family literacy programmes have a positive effect on Key Stage 1 (5-7 years old) children's reading scores: children who attended the programmes made greater gains in their reading than children who did not attend programmes.

Secondly, extensive changes in the home literacy environment (HLE) were self-reported by the families participating in the programmes: strong evidence emerged of increased parental understanding of school literacy processes and pedagogies over the course of the intervention, and of increased frequency in parent-child shared literacy activities. However, as no comparison group of parents not participating in the programme was available, this finding has a lower reliability than the finding on children's attainment and cannot provide evidence of a direct causal relationship between programme participation and changes in the HLE.

The study both builds on previous research and serves to confirm to policy makers that family literacy programmes are highly effective in reaching both generations. Programmes can improve reading skills, enrich family relations, increase parental empowerment, develop levels of social and cultural capital, enhance parent-school relations, increase home school partnerships and improve parent school alignment. Therefore family literacy programmes provide a wide range of benefits for family literacy providers, schools, parents and their children. There is a strong case, therefore, for maintaining and supporting these programmes.

## **Research background and aims**

Even though previous studies have evaluated family literacy programmes, there are important gaps in the evidence base. Although several studies demonstrate literacy gains to children attending family literacy courses, few explore whether this attainment is any greater than would occur without the intervention. Little is known about whether and how family literacy programmes change home literacy attitudes, beliefs and practices, and how literacy acquisition in the home setting is achieved. Much less qualitative data has been collected, including from parents, as compared with quantitative data on children's skills. And there are very few methodologically sound empirical studies based in England.

This study aimed to address these gaps by investigating three questions:

1. What impact does participation in family literacy programmes have on children's progress in reading and writing?
2. To what extent does parental participation in family literacy programmes change family literacy practices, attitudes and beliefs outside the classroom?
3. How do parents translate and implement what they learn from family literacy programmes into the home setting?

## **Methodology**

The study combined a quantitative quasi-experimental design with the collection and analysis of qualitative data from in-depth observations and parental interviews.

The final sample of family literacy programmes consisted of 27 courses for Year 1 and Year 2 pupils and their parents, running in 18 Local Authorities in England. On average, these courses ran for 30 hours and enrolled nine parents and their children.

Children on the family literacy programme (the intervention group) and their classmates (control group) who did not attend the programme had their reading and writing measured using two standardised assessments at the start and end of the course. The achieved matched (using propensity scores) sample for reading consisted of 315 children (174 intervention, 141 control group) with valid data at the two test points. The final sample for writing across the two groups was 212 (108 intervention, 104 control).

Parents and carers on the programmes completed pre and post course questionnaires (118 achieved sample at both time points): a sub-sample of 24 parents participated in two telephone interviews. These methods focused on gathering quantitative and qualitative data about the home literacy environment, and parental motivations and attitudes. Survey and interview data, as well as documentation on teaching practices, were collected from course tutors, and observations took place in a sub-sample of nine family literacy classrooms. Findings about parents and the HLE are based on self-report evidence from those participating in family literacy programmes only, and are not made in comparison to a control group of non-participating families.

## **Findings**

### **Impact on children's literacy skills**

The family literacy programmes had a positive effect on children's reading scores: children in the intervention group made greater gains in their reading than children in the control group. This difference was statistically significant, with an effect size of 0.17, which, although relatively small, is both robust and directly comparable with the

effect sizes found in other family literacy evaluations. It is also noteworthy that these gains were measured in the context of short courses. The data did not provide evidence to support the impact of family literacy programmes on children's writing.

Some course characteristics appear to have an impact on attainment in reading, which has implications for the design of family literacy programmes. Children showed a greater increase in reading scores when their course tutors had received specific training in family literacy. The use of 'Big' books, and making story boxes, contributed to significant gains. Larger positive outcomes in children's reading were found when the reading process was modelled between adults and children during classes, when parents were promoted as role models and encouraged to have greater involvement in their children's learning, and when parents could focus on their own learning experiences. Further research is required to explore whether these gains are sustainable in the longer term.

One factor in the home literacy environment had a significant effect on improving children's reading scores: when parents read more after the family literacy course, their children's gains in reading were greater.

## **Impact on the Home Literacy Environment**

The study examined four aspects of the home literacy environment.

### **1. Family Resources**

In line with previous research, most parents who attended the family literacy programmes were women in their mid to late 30s. Two-fifths of parents were qualified to Level 3 or above, broadly in line with that of the general population, suggesting that the 27 family literacy courses did not disproportionately involve disadvantaged parents with low qualifications. In keeping with this educational profile, there were relatively high levels of book ownership: 67% of parents reported that they had more than 25 books (excluding children's books) in their home. Most parents (62%) spoke either mainly, or only, English at home; therefore parents with English as an additional language comprised a substantial minority of participants. For almost a quarter of parents (23%), this was not the first family literacy course they had attended.

### **2. Parental Literacy Behaviours and Attitudes**

Parents' attitudes towards reading showed significant improvements between the start and the end of the course. There was no difference in reading behaviours, which generally take longer to change. Family literacy programmes that utilised the learning experiences and interests of parents were associated with greater positive changes in parents' attitudes towards reading.

### **3. Parental Beliefs and Understandings**

The study found a significant increase in parents' confidence, which enabled them to better support their child with their homework. Parents also improved their understanding of how reading (including the use of phonics) is taught at school, and we observed closer parent-school alignment. As with changes in attitudes to reading, the data indicate that programmes which focused on parents' own learning experiences and interests were associated with greater increases in parental understanding of school literacies.

### **4. Family Literacy Activities and Practices**

Overall parents reported reading with their children every day, or almost every day, and regularly supporting children with literacy work sent home from school. A much smaller proportion used specific reading strategies or practices, such as taking turns, reading loud or asking their child to re-tell a story. Although there was no significant change in the frequency of shared reading, or in parents helping with homework, there were important changes in the quality of the interactions in joint reading; many parents were found to be asking more questions to assess comprehension and there was a greater general focus on understanding. A further and potentially far-reaching change was that the reading experience had become more pleasurable for both parent and child.

Greater positive changes in the frequency of shared family literacy activities at home were experienced by parents on courses that offered more flexibility, took greater account of their own interests and involved them more in the programme activities.

#### **Impact on school-home partnerships**

The findings on the links between school and home literacies are particularly striking. The four reasons most frequently mentioned by parents for joining a family literacy class all related to school: 82% wanted to learn how to help their child with homework; 79% wanted to be involved in their child's school life and education; 79% wanted to learn how the school teaches their child to read and write; and 68% wanted to increase their own confidence in helping their child with schoolwork. After the course, parents reported that the most useful aspect was learning more about school literacies in order to support their child at home.

Family literacy courses demystified school literacy pedagogies and processes. Over half the parents said that, as a result of attending the course, they now felt more confident to go into school and talk to their child's teacher. At the same time, however, although a "top down" model of literacy, importing school values into the home, clearly worked for the parents in the sample, courses that in their content built on parents' own interests were associated with greater gains in children's reading, and with more positive changes in parental attitudes and understanding.

## **Conclusions and Implications**

This study provides important evidence that should inform the design of future family literacy programmes. Certain characteristics of provision appear to have an increased impact on reading attainment. Moreover, programmes that utilised the learning experiences and interests of parents were associated with greater positive changes in parental understanding of school pedagogies, literacy attitudes, and in the quality and quantity of shared literacy activities in the home setting.

The study shows that the most common motivation for parents to enrol in a family literacy programme is to learn about school literacies and pedagogies, in order that they are more able support their children at home. Although almost all parents were aware of the importance of their children having sound literacy skills, parents also reported gaps in their understanding of how reading is taught at school, including the role of phonics in the literacy curriculum. Our evidence suggests that family literacy courses are an effective way of developing and improving parental understanding of these aspects of literacy.

Although much of the underlying pedagogy of programmes appears to require the transmission of school practices from tutor to parent to child, family literacy involves much more than simply 'teaching school literacy'; it puts the family at the heart of the educational enterprise and increases parental appreciation of their central role in their child's education in general, and literacy development in particular.

### **Implications: policy makers**

- Family literacy provision should remain integral to government educational policy.
- Local Authority managers frequently suggest that family learning provision (including family literacy) is undermined by a lack of long-term, consistent funding. If funding were ring-fenced, it would be possible to plan provision strategically.

### **Implications: practitioners and providers**

- Continue to use wider family learning (small 'taster' courses) as a first step to engaging schools in family literacy provision.
- Allow for the extension of short courses into standard courses where there is demand from parents.
- Build up and maintain key partnerships with schools.

- The messages that family literacy programmes lead to higher levels of literacy attainment and aid school improvement needs to be communicated more effectively to schools and LAs in order to encourage more schools to become involved.
- Some family literacy courses could be better advertised, and their aims spelt out more clearly to parents, particularly those harder to reach, with low level qualifications in areas of multiple deprivation.
- Tutors should receive specific training in family literacy pedagogies.
- There were larger positive outcomes in children's reading when the reading process was modelled between adults and children during classes. Providers should consider making this practice integral to all programmes.

### **Implications: research**

Although the study has shown that family literacy provision has a substantive positive impact, further research is needed to:

- Explore whether changes in children and parents are greater when programmes are longer than the average 30 hours of contact time found in this study.
- Investigate whether gains in children's reading and writing are likely to be greater if more programmes return to the original "classic" model of the 1990s, including discrete provision for children in addition to parents-only and joint sessions.
- Investigate, using longitudinal methods, how enduring the effects of family literacy courses are on skills, attitudes, understanding, practices, relationships and aspirations, and whether these continue to change over time.
- Compare the impact for disadvantaged groups to explore if the programmes have any potential to reduce the attainment gaps. For example, to compare effect sizes between EAL and non-EAL children, low and high achievers using larger samples.
- Carry out further studies on parental attitudes and behaviours and broader HLE using larger sample sizes and control group to check the robustness and reliability of the findings from this study.

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