



SUPPORTING PARENTS TO STRENGTHEN CHILDREN'S EARLY LEARNING

Sharing evidence and practice
from the independent evaluation
of Save the Children's
Families Connect programme
March 2021



**Save the
Children**

Early childhood is a period of rapid physical and mental growth and change; this period offers the greatest opportunities for learning and development. Research consistently demonstrates that how parents interact with their children in both quality and quantity has the greatest influence on children's learning and development. However, living in poverty creates barriers and pressures that can prevent families from engaging in early learning when it matters most.

More than 4 million children across the UK are growing up in poverty. By the age of three the average child from a low-income family is 17 months behind their better-off peers.¹ This gap widens at every following stage of education, affecting qualifications and employment, entrenching inequalities across generations.



Save the Children's UK Impact mission is to secure a sustainable reduction in the number of children growing up in poverty and work to narrow the early learning gap between children growing up in poverty and their peers. The mission is ever-more important in the context of COVID-19, with the devastating effect of the pandemic hitting the most vulnerable the hardest. Recent research has also shone a spotlight on the risk of feelings of judgement and isolation for parents and the importance of trusted support networks.² Prioritising parental engagement in early years settings and schools may be particularly important at a time when there is a heightened need to support children and families' wellbeing.

¹ Institute of Education (2014) *Child Poverty and Deprivation, Initial Findings from the Millennium Cohort Study*, University of London

² Royal Foundation (2020) *State of the Nation: Understanding public attitudes to the early years*, Ipsos MORI

OVERVIEW OF FAMILIES CONNECT

Families Connect is an evidence-based programme developed by Save the Children UK to support parents to engage in their children's learning. Building on parents' existing skills and knowledge, Families Connect provides them with the confidence to support their children's learning in the home. Families Connect builds relationships between parents and settings (schools, nurseries and children's centres) and provides opportunities for parents to share their parenting experiences with others.

Families Connect is delivered through a series of two-hour workshops in settings over eight weeks to groups of families. The programme is usually delivered by early years practitioners, teachers, teaching assistants or family support workers. Facilitators are provided with a package which includes training, a delivery manual, printed resources and quality improvement support.



The programme uses play as a vehicle for learning and interaction. Each workshop involves a range of fun activities, techniques and games with a topic focussed on one of three key areas:

- Social and emotional development
- Literacy and language development
- Numeracy and mathematics

The cultural principles that guide delivery of Families Connect are:

- Children are curious and capable learners
- Play is central to children's learning; children learn through play, cooperation and exploration
- Parents are welcomed and supported with unconditional positive regard
- Parents are recognised for their knowledge, experience and skills
- Parents are equal partners in supporting their children's learning and development
- All families are equally valued and included
- Social networks are valuable
- The voices of children, families, and partners help to shape what we do

INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF FAMILIES CONNECT

To support our mission in the UK, Save the Children generates evidence that demonstrates what is impactful in improving lives for children and families, through reducing the prevalence and negative effects of poverty. We develop and test promising, sustainable interventions in communities, collecting evidence directly from children and families and the professionals who work with them, then share our findings in order to influence policy and practice.

The association between parental engagement and a child's academic success is well established and there is robust evidence that parents' engagement in their children's early learning has the greatest influence on children's development at all ages. However, there is surprisingly little robust evidence about the effectiveness of approaches designed to improve learning through increased parental engagement.

Previous in-house evaluation of Families Connect, which used a quasi-experimental design and standardised measures for intervention and control groups, demonstrated a statistically significant improvement between pre-programme and three-month follow-up receptive vocabulary scores for children participating in the programme. Significant improvements were also seen in children's attitudes towards school and learning, such as general progress, motivation, concentration and enjoyment.³

In order to build on this emerging evidence base, Save the Children sought funding from The Nuffield Foundation to partner with NFER and Queens University Belfast to undertake an independent randomised controlled trial and implementation evaluation of Families Connect.⁴ This was designed to build on the promising findings of the internal evaluation, to strengthen our understanding of the programme's impact on parent and child outcomes and identify where the programme could be strengthened and improved, along with continual delivery feedback and review. Our aim was to advance our collective understanding, as a sector, of how best to support parental engagement and children's early learning.



PHOTO: CLAUDIA JANKE/SAVE THE CHILDREN

³ You can read more at www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/families-connect/fc-summer-evaluation-2016.pdf and www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/families-connect/fc-autumn-evaluation-2016.pdf.

⁴ Lord, P., Rennie, C., Smith, R., Gildea, A., Tang, S., Miani, G., Styles, B. and Bradley, C. (2020). *Randomised Controlled Trial Evaluation of Families Connect*. NFER, Slough. Available online at www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/uk-work/in-schools/families-connect.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

Thirty-one schools from disadvantaged areas across the UK (England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) delivered Families Connect as part of the independent evaluation. A total of 499 children aged four to six from 483 families took part.

The evaluation found that Families Connect increases parental engagement in children's learning, improves parental skills, and improves aspects of children's social and emotional development.

In contrast to the findings from the earlier internal evaluation, the results showed that Families Connect did not have an impact on children's receptive vocabulary. Nor was there evidence of impact on children's numeracy skills. This is discussed in more detail below. However, it identified key areas for improvement that would further strengthen the programme and contribute to our broader understanding of how to support those key early learning outcomes.

The headline findings are summarised below and can be read in full at www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/uk-work/in-schools/families-connect.⁵



Children

The programme supports longer term improvements in children's social and emotional behaviour and wellbeing, demonstrated by teacher reports six months after programme delivery.

- Such behaviours include dealing well with mistakes, getting on well with peers, and adapting well to new tasks and challenges.
- There was no evidence of impact on children's receptive vocabulary or numeracy skills, which is discussed in more detail below.

**“It helps me
when I feel sad.”**

Child

⁵ As note 4.

Parents and the home learning environment

The programme supports parents to strengthen the home learning environment through developing parental skills and confidence to engage in their child's learning at school and in activities undertaken at home.

- There was no evidence of impact on what parents felt they should be doing to support their children's learning, though parents who had taken part in Families Connect reported feeling more confident and skilled with regards to supporting their children's learning, than parents who had not yet taken part.
- Families Connect had a positive effect on the home learning environment immediately following the intervention, with parents who had taken part engaging in more learning related activities with their children at home, than the parents of families who had not yet taken part.
- Parents reported longer term improvements to their relationships with their children, the continued use of learning-related activities with their child at home and better home routines. Parents reported focussing on supporting their children's social and emotional development and on improved parenting across all their children in the longer-term.
- Parents reported greater involvement in their child's learning at school, with more confidence and awareness of how to help their children reach the goals of the school curriculum. Parents and practitioners communicated more about children's progress.
- In the longer term, parents benefitted from taking part in the programme through developing new friendships and social connections, in some instances overcoming parents' sense of isolation.

"The games you take home,

he loves doing them

and we use them all the time

and he plays [them] with his sisters

as well as when his daddy

comes home from work."

Parent

Settings and implementation

School leaders, teachers and practitioners reported enhanced school capacity to connect with parents, enhanced understanding of the barriers to parental engagement, and enthusiasm to run Families Connect again.

- Practitioners and parents reported that the following key features made the programme effective: the balance of topics (social and emotional, language/literacy and numeracy development); the structured elements within each session; the facilitative delivery style; the reflective nature of the programme; and the high-quality training, delivery manual and the ongoing support from Save the Children.

"Parents are coming into school more.

They are doing more

to support their child with homework.

They are more involved

in school-based activities."

Class teacher

- Senior leaders and practitioners within the schools felt the programme was manageable to deliver, the strategies for recruiting and engaging parents were appropriate, and there was adequate time for planning and preparation.
- The key conditions in schools that supported successful implementation included: school leadership committed to the values of the programme; a school ethos that is welcoming and inclusive of all parents and families; alignment with school policies on parental engagement; a whole-school approach to implementing the programme; the practitioners knowing the families and school community; responding to school context; and school commitment to space, time and resources.

Reflections on attainment outcomes

The theory of change for Families Connect posits that improvements to children's receptive vocabulary or numeracy skills may occur over time as a result of improvements in parents' confidence, knowledge and skills and of changes to the home learning environment. However, this evaluation showed no impact on those outcomes.

While families did continue to use the activity suggestions and ideas from the programme over time, parents reported focussing more on supporting their children's social and emotional development than literacy or numeracy. Whilst there are two sessions dedicated to literacy, communication is embedded throughout the whole programme, though the report authors note that this might need to be strengthened in order to sustain and maximise any benefit. For example, direct follow-up activities in schools or greater encouragement for parents to focus on language and communication at home.

It is worth noting that certain activities that are usually recommended to embed the messages from the programme – such as displays and wider communication with parents – were discouraged during the evaluation to mitigate the risk of contamination of the control groups. It is not known however what impact these messages and actions do have, which we will explore further with future research.

Numeracy sessions within the programme are framed around improvements in children's interest in and understanding of numeracy, rather than development of numeracy skills. The authors conclude that this, and the relatively low number of sessions that focus on numeracy, may have contributed to the lack of impact on numeracy attainment. As such, further consideration needs to be given to the theory of change and focus of the programme regarding communication and numeracy.

The following sections will explore how we have used these findings and recommendations to strengthen the programme and consider how the positive outcomes demonstrated in the report can be embedded into wider, sustained support and impact for families.



PHOTO: NINA RAINGOLD/SAVE THE CHILDREN

DEVELOPING FAMILIES CONNECT

Families Connect was originally designed for children aged four-to-six years within school settings. As part of continuous improvement, Save the Children began to adapt the programme to make it suitable for a spectrum of ages and stages of development and to strengthen the programme's child-centred approach, including children from the age of three and a wider range of early years settings. Co-design with families and practitioners and extensive piloting with nurseries across the UK was used to introduce and adapt flexible example activities to enable children's choice and opportunities for children to take the lead in their play.

During this process, indicative early findings from the independent evaluation and feedback from delivery were used to further strengthen the programme across the following areas:

- **Foregrounding play** as the foundation for children's learning and development. The link between play and the home learning environment have been made explicit by introducing the topic in the first workshop. This includes introducing fun activities that help children to learn and parent strategies for supporting children to learn through play.
- **Refinements to the numeracy workshops.** Feedback received from families and practitioners and consultation with an educational specialist resulted in an increased focus on the different skills needed for counting, and on recognising and understanding numbers.
- **Speech and language**, including strengthening messages on speech, language and communication development across every workshop, by highlighting opportunities for introducing new vocabulary, listening to children, singing songs and rhymes, extending conversations, and engaging in positive interactions.
- **Impact on the home learning environment.** Increased emphasis has been given to adapting activity examples showcased through the programme to align to children's interests and development. Families are encouraged to bring items from home to use in the sessions, to encourage sustained use of new learning strategies in the home.
- **Inclusion and diversity**, including increased support for parents to understand children's different stages of development alongside a child-centred approach to encourage parents to adapt activities in line with their child's interests and development. Opportunities to identify, celebrate and value cultural difference have been strengthened.
- **Children's participation**, emphasising child-centred approaches and supporting parents to recognise and respond to their child's interests, needs and capabilities. Practical approaches for parents and practitioners to demonstrate a commitment to receiving and valuing children's views, perspectives and ideas have been strengthened.



PHOTO: OLIVIA HARRIS/SAVE THE CHILDREN

PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE

Save the Children will continue to champion the key role parents play as their child's first educators, and parents' commitment to their children's early learning. We will continue to develop and evidence effective approaches to enable parents in low-income families to support young children's speech, language and communication and social and emotional development, which can be built into early years settings in a sustained way at scale.

We will:

- Explore how services can sustain changes to the home learning environment
- Continue to respond to the COVID-19 crisis
- Listen and respond to what children and parents are telling us



Sustain changes to the home learning environment

The main recommendation from the independent evaluation of Families Connect is for the early years sector to develop a better understanding of how to sustain changes within the home learning environment that will lead to stronger outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Save the Children will use learning from our research and the schools we have supported over the years to build on the Families Connect approach to parental engagement. We will co-produce and pilot projects that provide the knowledge and tools to promote the embedding of the programme's principles into practice across the whole setting. This will sit alongside programme delivery and integrate new, stronger approaches to sustain the commitment and motivation of participant families beyond the existing eight sessions. We will test the impact of this whole-setting approach to parental engagement on sustaining outcomes for practitioners and parents in terms of their knowledge, skills and confidence alongside children's experiences.

Respond to COVID-19

Given the positive engagement and pro-social outcomes achieved and families' overwhelmingly positive experience of the programme, the evaluation report authors suggest that prioritising parental engagement in schools may be particularly important at a time when there is a heightened need to support children and families' wellbeing. In response to the pandemic, Save the Children has developed an evidence-informed, adapted version of Families Connect that enables families with children aged three to six to access the programme online. Through the structure of the programme, facilitators can respond to parents' concerns around their child having missed out on learning opportunities, or about settling back into their setting when disruptions occur, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions and experiences on family life and children's wellbeing.

The independent evaluation demonstrated the positive impact of Families Connect on relationships between parents and between parents and settings. Building on this, the adapted online delivery is intended as an interim measure until face-to-face group meetings can resume. This adapted online delivery additionally affords an opportunity to explore ways in which settings can engage parents who may otherwise be reluctant to engage in activities based within a formal setting such as a school.



Champion the voices of children and parents

COVID-19 has exposed and then amplified existing inequalities facing children, meaning those children already facing the worst life chances have felt the greatest burden from the pandemic and our response to it. Families are facing unprecedented levels of stress, and the system that should be there to help is complex and frequently makes life harder.

We have a real opportunity to listen to what families are telling us and to act.

Our work with settings will focus on demonstrating that it is possible to enhance positive parental behaviours, improve practitioners' confidence, skills and practice, and ultimately improve children's outcomes. To do this, we will focus on:

- 1** Evidencing effective approaches that support parents to support children's learning which can be built into schools and nurseries in a sustained way, at scale. By demonstrating impact in local areas more deeply we will be able to better make the case for more investment nationally and locally in supporting parents through early years settings. We will use the evidence generated to make the case:
 - a. To national government, to create a system where the benefits of parental engagement are recognised, promoted and demonstrated.
 - b. To local government, to fund the delivery of effective parental engagement approaches.
 - c. To other partners, to build on our work or to develop more interventions using the same types of proven approaches.
- 2** Evidence direct from parents and children about their experience of engaging with settings, to better understand and respond to their motivations and opinions.
- 3** Exploring and identifying the best ways of ensuring practitioners have the skills to work effectively with parents and developing the infrastructure to support settings. For example, via initial professional training, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or whole-setting approaches that are packaged alongside intervention programmes.
- 4** Understanding, promoting and applying evidence from across the sector. To be active in lobbying for positive parental engagement we will need to better understand local and national incentives, supports and barriers to embedding parental engagement beyond programme delivery. We will work closely in partnership with the early years sector across the UK to build a collective voice.

The commitment of the early years sector provides real hope, but there is much to do and many challenges to overcome. The promising findings and further research opportunities identified by this independent evaluation of Families Connect are a positive step in the right direction. As a sector, we must continue to listen to and promote the evidence we generate and take action to galvanise society behind this pressing and critical imperative to support and improve outcomes for low-income families.

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Lord, P., Rennie, C., Smith, R., Gildea, A., Tang, S., Miani, G., Styles, B. and Bradley, C. (2020). *Randomised Controlled Trial Evaluation of Families Connect*. NFER, Slough. Available online at www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/uk-work/in-schools/families-connect.

For more information on Save the Children's work in the UK, visit
www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/uk-work.

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