

Early Years, Childcare & School Readiness Service

Home Learning Strategy 2023/24

Introduction

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).

Research tells us that what parents and carers do makes a real difference to young children's development. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project developed an index to measure the quality of the home learning environment (HLE). To investigate the effects of pre-school education, the EPPE team collected a wide range of information on 3,000 children. The study also looks at background characteristics related to parents, the child's home environment and the pre-school settings children attended.

The project also showed that there are a range of activities that parents undertake with pre-school children which have a significant positive effect on their development. For example, reading with the child, teaching songs and nursery rhymes, painting and drawing, playing with letters and numbers, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet and numbers, taking children on visits and creating regular opportunities for them to play with their friends at home, were all associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores. These activities could also be viewed as 'protective' factors in reducing the incidence of SEN because children whose parents engaged regularly in home learning activities were less likely to be at risk for special educational needs. The home learning environment was only moderately associated with parents' educational or occupational level and was more strongly associated with children's intellectual and social development than either parental education or occupation. In other words what parents do with their children is more important than who parents are.

Parenting behaviour influences children's development from the moment of birth (Gutman and Feinstein, 2007; Feinstein, 2003).

Settings in the private, voluntary, and independent (PVI) sector play a vital role in promoting the home learning environment (HLE) and improving young children's communication, language and literacy skills. Their efforts to raise awareness about the HLE can reach families who need it most. In 2023, Early Years settings in Cambridgeshire provided funded childcare for 2819 disadvantaged children, representing about 19.7% of our total funded cohort. The early years sector is made up of a range of support and childcare models including day nurseries, pre-schools and play groups, childminders, school-run early years settings and child and family centres. This means there is a large variation in setting size and staff capacity to support families.

Children whose fathers are involved in their learning do better at school and have better mental health (Flouri and Buchanan, 2001).

Numerous studies demonstrate that language exposure in very early life has a significant effect on later verbal skills. It is therefore not surprising to learn that:

- High quality (sensitive/supportive) and substantial father involvement from the month following birth relates to a range of positive outcomes in babies and toddlers including better language development and higher IQs at 12 months and 3 years.
- The 'IQ effect' continues: a significant relationship is found between positive father engagement at age 6, and IQ and educational achievement at age 7.
- The social class effect is substantial: Nettle (2008) found highly involved middleclass fathers having a greater (positive) impact on their children's IQs than highly involved working-class dads.

(GEO 2019; BEIS 2018; Hutchinson 2019; HoC Education Committee 2019)

A key predictor of fathers' involvement in children's learning is having been involved in their care very early on. When parents share care more equitably, fathers engage in more early literacy activities with their young children than in families where childcare tasks are divided traditionally by gender. Around one in three fathers of young children read with them at least several times a week, with fathers reading habits having a substantial influence on especially their sons' reading interest, levels, and choices. Some studies suggest that fathers' verbal interactions with their children may differ from mothers'; and that this may sometimes be to their children's advantage. Fathers have been found to use different and longer words with their children and more abstract words. Topics may also vary by gender, with mothers referring more frequently to emotions (this has been found to predict children's emotional understanding) and fathers more often using causal explanatory language, which predict their children's theory of mind. (See, for example, *National Literacy Trust research summary on fathers and children's literacy Compiled January 2012*).

Key priorities:

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) 2023 data in Appendix One demonstrates the biggest gaps in Literacy and Managing Self/Self-Regulation between children eligible for FSM and those not and these Areas of Learning and Development also have the lowest achievement rates overall. These, along with research data, lead to three key priorities:

1. Developing understanding of the importance of a wide vocabulary and back and forth conversations.

“During toddlerhood, make-believe play and conversations about feelings and memories are also associated with children’s vocabulary development and expressive language use” Witzman & Greenberg, 2002, *Learning Language & Loving it*.

Hart and Risley’s long-term study (1995) highlighted the direct connection between talking to children and children’s linguistic and intellectual development. Experiences support vocabulary development in young children (see Kolb’s experiential learning theory), how can you talk about a pineapple if you’ve never seen one, tasted one, smelt or felt one? The best way to understand what a postie is to visit a post box and post a letter.

The amount and style of language that caregivers use when talking with their child is one of the strongest predictors of children’s early language development. In particular, back and forth conversations between the parent and child that are age-appropriate and reflect the child’s personal interests are consistently associated with increases in vocabulary and use of language throughout development. The activity that parents most frequently report doing with their child is looking at books or reading together. Book sharing explicitly supports the kinds of caregiver-child conversations that are found to be associated with children’s early language learning. A wide variety of other activities have also been proven to be beneficial. For example, conversations about toys, food and other household items during infancy are consistently associated with accelerated vocabulary growth and awareness of the communicative purposes of language. During toddlerhood, make-believe play and conversations about feelings and memories are also vitally important.

2. Ensure good understanding of the skills needed to be “ready to write”.

“Writing activities provide a unique opportunity for young children to practice fundamental early language, literacy, and fine motor skills in a meaningful and engaging context” Bindman et al, 2014, *Parental Writing Support and Preschoolers Early Literacy, Language and Fine Motor Skills*

Parental support for children’s early writing tends to focus on letter formation, phoneme-grapheme correspondence, and phonological awareness. However, it is recognised that prior to being able to hold a writing implement in a tripod grip children must first develop skills such as crossing the midline, core strength, control of shoulder, elbow, wrist and finger joints and visual-motor integration alongside a wide vocabulary and a desire to want to record their thinking. By ensuring parents are aware of these skills children will be better equipped to start writing when they are ready to.

3. Enabling parental understanding of the importance of children being confident, resilient, and working towards the ability to self-regulate.

‘Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or any other experience that reveals the human spirit’ - E.E. Cummings.

Personal, social and emotional development is not only crucial to enabling children to be confident and resilient learners, able to try new experiences and risk failure but is also critical for children to lead healthy and happy lives. Relationships lie at the heart of all human experience and interaction, and it is vitally important that young children are helped to learn the social skills needed to interact successfully with other people and to form good relationships. By enabling parents to understand how to support their children to develop these skills through enabling them to try experiences for themselves and experience success and failure children will be better able to manage their feelings in a busy, group-based environment.

Understanding Barriers for children and families

To have a meaningful impact on the HLE, any approach must understand and seek to address the barriers faced by parents. The National Literacy Trusts document Improving the home learning environment A behaviour change approach looks at barriers to parental engagement in the HLE in detail. Some of the barriers it considers are:

- Lack of awareness as to why and how it is important to communicate with their child,
- Low literacy skills in parents,
- Economic barriers,
- No network of support,
- Reliance on mobile phones/social media for support.

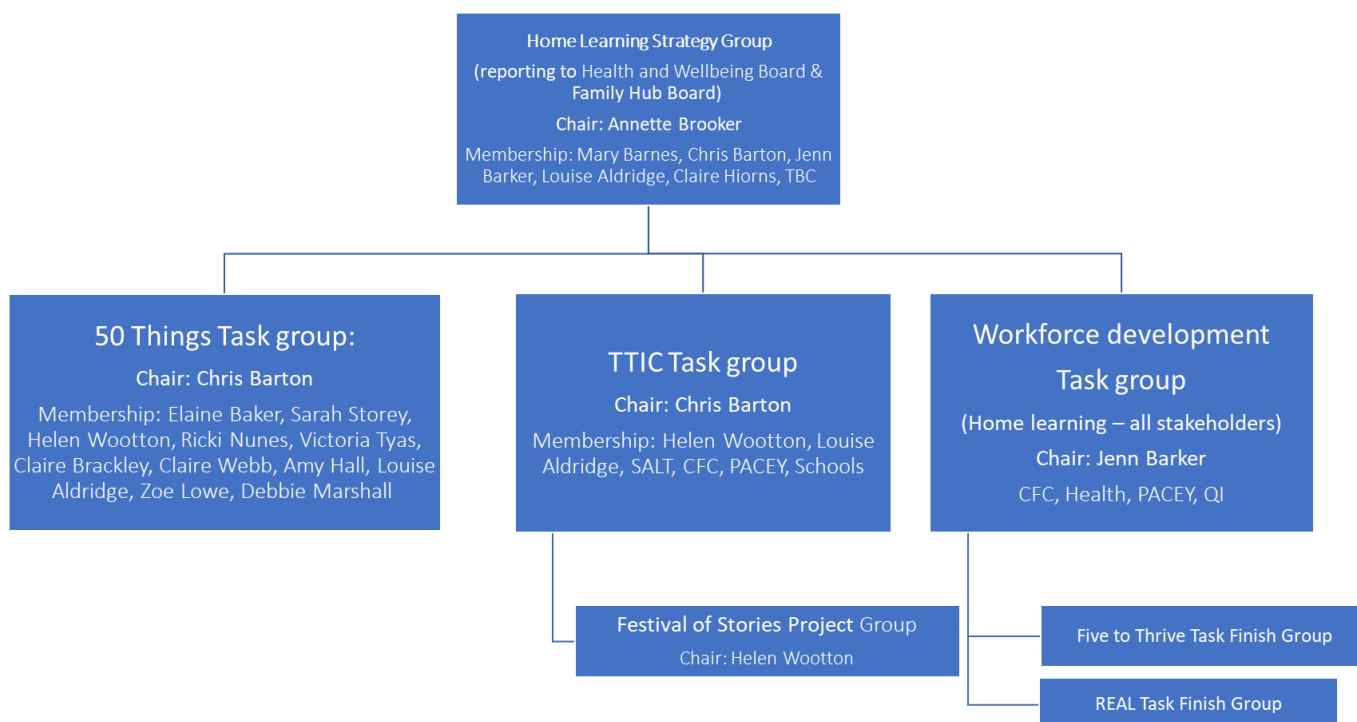
Our strategy seeks to raise awareness of these barriers and support practitioners to seek sensitive ways to overcome them.

In addition, research shows that the barriers to school readiness for children are:

- Support in settings where there is a lack of trained staff, coordination, funding, and linkage between services.
- Overly academic programmes for children under five can undermine their cognitive, physical, and socio-emotional skills, as well as their motivation to learn.
- Physical and emotional well-being and fine and gross motor development.
- General knowledge and cognitive skills (from home or pre-primary, capacity to acquire new knowledge and to have a cognitive flexibility with working memory).
- Pre-academic abilities (language, curiosity, emotional security, self-regulation, self-confidence through play, exploration, and interaction with others).

These link with our data analysis to influence our response and key priorities.

Home Learning Governance Structure



Appendix 1 - Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) Data 2023

	Percentage of children with a good level of development (GLD)		Percentage of children at expected level across all early learning goals		Average number of early learning goals at expected level per child	
	2022	2023	2022	2023	2022	2023
ENGLAND	65.2%	67.2% ↑ 2.0	63.4%	65.6% ↑ 2.2	14.1	14.1 ↔
CAMBRIDGESHIRE	65.9%	66.2% ↑ 0.3	64.2%	64.7% ↑ 0.5	14.4	14.3 ↓ 0.1

While Cambridgeshire's data has shown an increase this is not as significant as the increase at a national level.

There are more significant differences between National data and different characteristics data:

	TOTAL	Girls	Boys	FSM known to be eligible	FSM not known to be eligible	No identified SEN	All SEN
CAMBRIDGESHIRE	66.2%	73.7%	59.2%	39.8%	71.6%	72.6%	17.2%
ENGLAND	67.2%	74.2%	60.6%	51.6%	71.5%	74.0%	19.8%
GAP	-1.0%	-0.5%	-1.4%	-11.8%	0.1%	-1.4%	-2.6%

In addition, analysis of individual Early Learning Goals (ELGs) indicates areas of the curriculum that should become a focus for further support:

	Listening, Attention & Understanding	Speaking	Self-Regulation	Managing Self	Building Relationships	Gross Motor Skills	Fine Motor Skills	Comprehension	Word Reading	Writing	Number	Numerical Patterns	Past & Present	People, Culture & Communities	The Natural World	Creating with Materials	Being Imaginative & Expressive
CAMBRIDGESHIRE	82.4%	83.6%	84.4%	86.4%	88.6%	92.6%	86.6%	82.6%	75.8%	70.3%	80.7%	80.0%	84.3%	83.6%	88.2%	88.9%	87.9%
ENGLAND	82.2%	82.8%	85.1%	87.2%	88.4%	92.1%	86.0%	80.6%	76.2%	71.0%	78.9%	78.3%	82.1%	81.8%	85.4%	87.5%	87.0%
GAP	0.2%	0.8%	-0.7%	-0.8%	0.2%	0.5%	0.6%	2.0%	-0.4%	-0.7%	1.8%	1.7%	2.2%	1.8%	2.8%	1.4%	0.9%

Proportions of Early Years funded children who are disadvantaged:

Year	Number of disadvantaged children receiving funding	Total number of children in receipt of Early Years Funding	Percentage of children.
2023	2891	14663	19.71%
	2911	14618	19.9%
2021	2977	14553	20.4%
2020	2738	15386	17.8%
2019	2751	15543	17.7%

Appendix 2 - Data from Child and Family Centres

- **1,447,831** views of Child and Family Centre Facebook posts
"I find the Facebook page so helpful to find out what is on in my local area"
- **1841** posts have been shared on Child and Family Centre Facebook pages with an average of **786** views per post
- There has been **3,510** views of Child and Family Centre YouTube videos. **58.9%** of these views were from male's
- **264** calls were made to families open to Early Support
"I found your phone call so reassuring at such a difficult time"
- **21,602** adults and children have accessed a Child and Family Centre Stay and Play or Pop-Up activity
"We absolutely loved attending baby sensory, and you can see the hard work the staff put into each session."
Of these, **5150** attended an activity at an outreach venue and **16,452** attended an activity at a Child and Family Centre venue
- **5089** families accessed a health service at a Child and Family Centre
- **108** families accessed a Child and Family Centre Clothes Swap
- **361** families attended a structured Child and Family Centre group or workshop
"The group has been great for me to meet new mums and chat about development"
- **260** families received family worker support by a Child and Family Centre Family Worker
"I can't thank you enough for all your advice and support. I have now been able to access the feeding support I needed."
- **297** families accessed an evidence-based parenting programme via the Child and Family Centre
- **255** Armed Forces families have accessed Child and Family Centres
- **306** families have accessed SEND services through the Child and Family Centres
"The group has been wonderful, Sophie is a joy to work with, brilliant with children and parents"
- **157** families received grant support via the Child and Family Centre (e.g. Cambridgeshire Local Assistance Scheme, Household Support Fund)
- **45** young parents have been supported by the Child and Family Centre team
- **184** contacts have been made with families as part of the Families and Babies (FAB) project

How will this align with Family Hub priorities?

Core services of family hubs include:

- Parenting programmes for 0-2s
- Infant feeding support
- The publishing of a Start for Life offer
- Establishment of parent and carer panels
- Home Learning Environment programmes and training
- Infant and parent relationships and perinatal mental health support

Services will include infant-parent mental health support, wider mental health services, breast feeding, midwifery, health visiting, oral and child health, early language support, SEND support, parenting programmes, debt and welfare advice, housing, reducing parental conflict, domestic abuse support, substance misuse, family support, early childhood support, youth support, and youth justice.

[Family Hub Service Expectations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

Appendix 3 – Work to Support the Key Priorities

Developing understanding of the importance of a wide vocabulary and back and forth conversations.

Activity	Lead Service	Main Contact	Predicted Impact
Festival of Stories	EYCCSRS	Helen Wootton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> communication, language, and literacy skills. model book-sharing strategies for parents such as pausing to look at the illustrations, pointing to the illustrations when talking about what can be seen, as well as using more comments than questions, supports children's interest and engagement in books and develop the notion of reading for pleasure across the community.
Talking Together in Cambridgeshire Community Group & Partners Training	EYCCSRS	Helen Wootton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> By empowering communities to build on their own understanding of child development and the role of adults in young children's learning, we are building skills, knowledge, and understanding of the importance of early communication, messaging and modelling being given by all contacts with parents is clear.
Practitioner Training	EYCSRS	Jenn Barker	Training early years practitioners widens our reach as each practitioner trained reaches all parents attached to their setting.
SALT Surgeries for settings	EYCSRS	Lucy Frain	Timely referrals for children and in setting support for emerging needs, allowing parents to advise practitioners appropriately.
Library 0-5 offer	Library Service	Louise Aldridge	

Ensure good understanding of the skills needed to be "ready to write".

Activity	Lead Service	Main Contact	Predicted Impact
Practitioner Training	EYCSRS	Jenn Barker	Training early years practitioners widens our reach as each practitioner trained reaches all parents attached to their setting.
CFC 50 things linked activity sessions	CFC	Sara Bailey	Parents have better understanding of activities they can carry out with their children to support early writing skills

Enabling parental understanding of the importance of children being confident, resilient, and working towards the ability to self-regulate.

Activity	Lead Service	Main Contact	Predicted Impact
50 Things to do Before You're Five	EYCCSRS	Chris Barton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improved school readiness • Improved parental confidence in engaging in playful family activities with their child • Improved early speech, language and communication/oracy skills • Better fine and gross motor skills • Change in behaviours, leading to better health, especially lower obesity, coronary and respiratory fitness • Improved self-regulation, metacognition and resilience
Practitioner Training	EYCSRS	Jenn Barker	Training early years practitioners widens our reach as each practitioner trained reaches all parents attached to their setting.
Getting reading for reception and developing independence leaflets	EYCSRS	Jenn Barker/Chris Barton	Parents have a good understanding of the characteristics of effective learning and how these support children becoming more independent/ready for reception.

Wider Activity

Activity	Lead Service	Main Contact	Predicted Impact
Early Childhood Film	EYCSRS	Sarah Storey	Better understanding of how to interact with their children.
Supporting practitioner understanding of disadvantaged groups	EYCSRS	Sarah Storey	Better understanding of the needs of disadvantaged groups and how to narrow the gap in achievement if needed.
HCP Online offer: Child development and growing up (cambcommunityservices.nhs.uk)	Health	Andrea Graves	Better parental understanding of child development
Child & Family Centres offer	CFC	Sara Bailey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Five to thrive training for practitioners • TTIC and CEYC FB, insta and twitter feeds • Providing info to projects to ensure parents know how to access our services • Joint working as part of BSIL • Links with Cambridgeshire Skills to deliver adult learning for practitioners • Links with libraries and other partners to co-deliver outreach e.g. 50 Things • Partnerships with businesses and other organisations to support families, e.g. Cambridge Utd offering

			free and reduced price tickets to targeted groups
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Plans – next steps

- Home Learning Champions in settings networked with capacity in Family Hubs – EYS to facilitate.
- Web presence.
- Evaluation of evidence-based programmes.
- SEND Toolkit information for parents.
- STEM pathway to include parents as users.
- Inclusion of “How to support home learning” slide on every training session delivered.
- Inclusion of discussion of how settings are supporting home learning for each team meeting (QI/IVG) to raise priority of home learning.
- Development of REAL training offer across EY sector and CFC work including trained trainers for REAL in each service
- Development of 50 Things to include wider support for vocabulary (developing more than nouns in each section).

Appendix 4 - Good practice Example

South Cambs Day Nursery

Within our setting we have created home learning boxes. We based each box on one of the areas of development e.g. physical development, PSE

We created within this box the importance of supporting this area of learning and some fun idea cards to support all families with different incomes etc. Our families sign them out free of charge and return them one they are done

South Cambs Day Nursery

We support our families by sending home resource packs for the children to complete.

In the summer we made a pre-school pack to prepare our children for school readiness. The pack consisted of an information sheet so the children know what was expected of them at school and what they will learn. An information sheet about feelings so the child can express how they are feeling about the different aspects of 'school life' An activity section for maths, sound matching game.

At Christmas time we have made little Christmas activity packs and included some activity ideas from 50 Things to do Before You're Five.

We have termly parents' evenings, and we have craft mornings throughout the year so parents can meet the team and join in with activities their children do at nursery. We also send out weekly newsletters updating the parents what the children have been learning throughout the week at nursery.

We have a baby's days app so the staff can send out quick messages to the parents informing them of illness within the nursery, staff changes and any other important information.

Huntingdonshire Day Nursery

One of our practitioners records a 'Makaton sign of the week' video with a different selection of children each week. We send this via our app each week so parents can practise too.

We pass on all information given to us from the child and family centres or early years information etc and display posters too.

We have really good open communication with parents and at handover times we will offer ideas of how to support learning at home. Most recently we supported a family whose son was using several different schemas that meant they viewed him as 'naughty'. We had a meeting and explained how schemas work and discussed what he did at home and nursery then what we could all do to meet his need for these behaviours rather than stopping him.

Appendix 5 - References & Useful resources:

- [Early Home Learning Matters Short Guide](#)
- [Improving the Home Learning Environment: A behaviour Change Approach](#) (National Literacy Trust)
- [Home Matters: Making the most of the home learning environment](#) (NCB)
- [Effective Provision of Preschool Education \(EPPE\) Project](#) (Sylva et al, 2004)
- [National Literacy Trust Time together booklet](#)
- [Closing the attainment gap in maths: a study of good practice in early years and primary settings, Dr Catherine Knowles – Achievement for All/KPMG/Fair Education Alliance](#)
- https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/At_home_booklet_for_parents_final_digital.pdf
- [EEF Parental Engagement Guidance Report.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#)
- [EEF Parental Engagement Summary of recommendations.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#)

Further research underway:

PIECE (Paternal Involvement and its Effects on Children's Education), funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, will conduct the first longitudinal empirical analysis in England, exploring the relationship between fathers' childcare involvement and their children's attainment at primary school. It will focus on:

- whether paternal childcare involvement increases primary school attainment, and at what stage of the child's life this is most important
- whether fathers' childcare involvement has different effects for boys and girls
- whether fathers' involvement helps to moderate the known negative effects of poverty on children's educational development, and
- which kinds of father-child activities have the strongest effects.

The PIECE project team is led by Dr Helen Norman (University of Leeds) with Dr Jeremy Davies (Fatherhood Institute) and Professors Mark Elliot and Colette Fagan from the University of Manchester.