

HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

WORKS

What role does the home learning environment play in supporting good child development in the early years and positive outcomes in later life?

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Home is the young child's world

The 'home learning environment' (HLE) is a reflection of the home environment and interactions in and around the home with family members. Learning experiences are vital for young children's development and are shaped by the nature of everyday life and activities for a small child. Children learn to investigate the world through the family context and as such it provides the blueprint for learning, behaviour, and attitudes. Positive early learning experiences within the home can lead to substantial social and educational benefits that can have lasting and life changing impacts; however neglect or abuse inhibit learning and can also have lasting consequences.

Home learning activities that have been studied by early years research primarily involve parent-child activities that are educational or developmentally stimulating in nature. When the child is very young this might include simple activities such as reading to a child, playing with numbers or letters, sorting or counting things, painting and drawing, or learning songs/poems/rhymes.¹ They can also include the provision of learning resources such as books and puzzles² or educational visits.

What role does social class and disadvantage play?

Well it's complicated. Most parents want the best for their children, and self-reported parental engagement in home learning activities has increased within the last generation for all social groups.³ The gap between rich and poor is also narrowing. But children from advantaged homes still typically receive more enriched home learning,⁴⁻⁶ will be read to more,⁷ will hear more words, will have more books available and will be taken on more out of home activities.⁸⁻¹¹ Recent research suggests these differences are generally fairly modest in size^{5, 12, 13} but are likely to accrue over time to create larger disparities and a poorer HLE has been shown to contribute significantly to overall familial risk.¹⁴

Research has also shown that children in extreme family environments, such as chaotic households and those experiencing high levels of risk, not only have poorer outcomes¹⁵⁻¹⁷ but also receive poorer quality home learning.^{18, 19} It is not surprising that risks such as maternal depression, maternal basic skills, and violence within the home impact on the kind of home learning experienced.

Do boys get a raw deal?

Yes, home learning is gendered. As infants, girls will be spoken to more by their mothers,²⁰ and as they grow older, girls will experience more learning activities in the home than boys.¹³ Specifically, in the early years girls are read to more, told more stories, more likely to be taught the alphabet, play more games with their parents, and experience more creative activities in

the home than boys.²¹ Why this is the case is hard to establish. Relationships may be reciprocal, parents and carers responding to a child's interest in some kinds of activities, but may also be a reflection of cultural stereotypes and expectations. Some suggest the gender gap in HLE experiences is relatively smaller for advantaged groups.

But does the early home learning environment really matter that much? Home learning and child outcomes

Yes it does. A positive early years home learning environment can provide many benefits, and there is a wealth of literature on the relationship between early home learning activities and enhanced cognitive, social and physical development of children. Home learning has been found to predict higher levels of vocabulary, spelling and emergent literacy in young children.^{8, 22-24} Reading to children has also been found to be particularly beneficial, improving vocabulary,^{16, 25, 26} reading ability, and encouraging positive attitudes to reading. Home activities such as counting and doing simple sums with children or playing games with numbers have been found to predict better numeracy ability and attitudes.^{22, 26-28}

If more evidence is needed the Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education Project (EPPSE 3-16) has shown immediate and long term benefits. The longitudinal study (EPPSE 3-16) tracked over 3000 children in England from preschool entry to age 16, investigating the impact of HLE on child outcomes across childhood. After controlling for family influences, early years HLE (during the pre-school period) was positively related to attainment throughout primary and secondary education,^{1, 29-31} and lower likelihood of Special Educational Needs.³² Children with better early years HLE were also better adjusted in terms of behaviour, well-being and school during both the primary years and secondary schooling.^{13, 33-35} The impact of early HLE was still apparent in late adolescence, predicting both A level uptake and achievement.³⁶

Achieving against the odds: the role of home learning

Inequalities in children's outcomes related to disadvantage are well established yet some children still succeed against the odds. And here's the crucial part: children from disadvantaged families who buck the trend, and perform above expectation, tend to come from families with high aspirations for their

children, who provide additional educational support for learning,³⁷ and who show an interest in their child's education.³⁸ Parental interest in education in particular really should not be underestimated; it may be fundamental and has been found to be as or more important than social class in some studies.^{39, 40}

Can it be bottled?

Two nationwide evaluations of children's centres in England found that Home Learning Environment can be improved through local community support. The National Evaluation of Sure Start⁴¹ found that families living in deprived neighbourhoods with Children's Centre provision had more enriched home learning than families in similarly deprived areas but without Children's Centre provision. The more recent Evaluation of children's centres in England⁴² collected data on approximately 4000 families registered at Children's Centres in England. The evaluation found that families visiting their registered children's centres for activities or support had better HLE and improved family functioning than families not using these services.⁴² Randomized Control Trials (RCTs) also provide evidence of the efficacy of specific parenting programmes⁴³ and have provided evidence that some programmes that promote home learning and literacy skills can be

successful in improving cognitive outcomes⁴⁴. In a review including twelve reading RCTs involving young children Senechal and Young⁴⁵ found significant effects for eight, especially when the intervention involved training parents how to teach their children literacy skills. The Birth to School study, a family intervention based on improving parenting skills found benefits to parent-child interaction, the care-giving environment, children's cognitive progress and children's self-esteem.⁴⁶

Additionally, improving the formal early learning experiences of disadvantaged families has been found to narrow the developmental gap between these children and their more affluent peers,⁴⁷ and has been found to have greater social, and motor benefits for children with less educated mothers.⁹

The way forward: what to do with this knowledge?

A large developmental gap remains in young children's that is linked in part to the nature of the early years HLE.⁴² Longitudinal studies such as EPPSE3-16+ point to the continuing impact of the HLE to provide a better start to school and shape future trajectories. From this and other studies we now have a reasonably good handle on what 'good home learning' looks like when families are self-motivated. However, some interventions to improve home learning in disadvantaged families have shown only modest or no effects,⁴⁸ so expanding our knowledge of what is successful for different types of families is vital. A shared Department of Education grant of nearly half a million pounds was recently awarded to four charities to work in six disadvantaged neighbourhoods to do exactly this, as part of wider early years funding,⁴⁹ and is a real step forward. Previous research suggests teaching parents specific skills maybe more beneficial for at risk families than those that rely on more general activities such as reading to the child.^{45, 50} Interventions that focus on language and literacy development may reap greater benefits, and are relatively easy to implement. Although it is beneficial to provide a HLE that involves literacy, numeracy and arts activities, language and literacy activities have been consistently found to have the greatest impact on child outcomes.

However, without supporting a more holistic approach to enhancing the quality of the home learning environment, some families may not be able to provide this for their children. A successful home learning environment requires much more than simply engaging in specific activities, and to address these skills alone, particularly for disadvantaged families, is short-sighted. It requires a stable home environment, responsive parenting and crucially, motivated and confident parents who value education and have high aspirations for their children. Home learning does

not occur in a vacuum. It is complexly related to the overall home environment, including family functioning and parental mental health as well as the social and physical environment. It is vital that any interventions trying to improve it, takes this broader context into account. Families may require multiple strands of support to enable a positive home learning practices to thrive. Some families will need additional support to help with acute problems such as chaotic lifestyles, substance abuse, mental health and confidence,⁵¹ as well as basic literacy and numeracy skills.⁵

Evidence suggests that interventions can be successfully provided in a community setting. Support will get to the people who need it most if it is local, as disadvantaged families are less likely to attend activities or services outside of their own area.^{42, 52} Universal provision has been found to be successful in local community support, such as provided by children's centres, and avoids the issue of stigma. Supportive local communities, in the form of children's centres can provide the resources, local libraries, and early childcare to families who otherwise may not be able to afford or access activities outside of the home. Sadly there have been major cuts to children's centres and their services across the country in England, despite evidence of positive effects on family outcomes. Family hubs, whilst taking over much of the work of children's centres, need to be found in every community to work effectively. Health visitors can also play a key role in the early months and years, as differences in HLE are already apparent when the child is as young as 9 months old.⁴² Early intervention is not a new concept. Local Authorities work closely with struggling families and are perfectly placed to provide additional advice and support on how to provide an enriching home environment, particularly during early parenthood. Raising awareness of the importance of

the quality of parental support and the home learning environment should remain an important priority for policy makers seeking to narrow the educational equity gap that emerges early and becomes wider as children move through different phases of education. The role of the early childcare and the education system more broadly should not be overlooked. With increases in childcare provision, especially for the most disadvantaged, brings the opportunity for increased guidance and support for families. This requires effective early intervention and resources. Early years

staff especially childcare providers, pre-school workers and teachers in schools may also need guidance to help them provide extra support, as they may feel under-confident at present to do this.⁵ This would facilitate the provision of additional learning opportunities for vulnerable groups of children that have been disadvantaged by poor quality HLE experiences. Using the Pupil Premium to address such needs should be a priority and an early years Premium would be a valuable way forward.

About the authors

Pam Sammons is a Senior Research Fellow at Jesus College, Oxford. She has a particular interest in the evaluation of education policy initiatives including both formative and summative approaches. She was principal investigator on a major longitudinal study of effective pre-school, primary and secondary education, that tracked children from age 3 to 16+ years (EPPSE 3-16+, 1996-2014) funded by the DfE. This has informed the development of pre-school education policy in England. She was also a principal investigator on the DfE funded longitudinal Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE 2009-2015)

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