

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT¹

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What is at stake?

Parents' position in raising their young children has changed significantly over the last decades. Today's rising generation in the countries of the OECD is the first in which a majority are spending a large part of their early childhoods not in their own homes with their own families but in some form of child care (UNICEFa, 2008).

Parents' willingness to delegate part of the care for their children to ECEC services does not mean that the importance of the parents' role has diminished. It is still widely acknowledged that parental behaviour in the child's first five years of life is critical for the development of important academic and social outcomes.

The current challenge for ECEC services is to embrace the crucial role of parents in young children's development and to involve them in the services as much as possible. When well done, it will improve the quality of the centre and the quality of the parenting at home.

What is it?

Parental involvement refers to the formal and informal relations that parents have with ECEC services.

Does it matter to improve child development and/or quality of services?

Parental involvement in young children's education is a fundamental right and benefits children's development. Both UNICEF (2008a) and the OECD (2006) argue that ECEC services should recognize mothers' and fathers' right to be informed, to comment, and to participate in key decisions concerning their child. Parental involvement however, is not just a fundamental right. Research shows that parental involvement also matters because it can be highly beneficial to children's development (Mc Wayne et al., 2004; Powell et al., 2010; Sylva et al., 2004; Weiss et al., 2006).

ECEC services that are effective tend to value good communication with parents and encourage parents to actively participate in their children's learning (Edwards et al., 2008). Examples of successful ECEC services that promote parental involvement (e.g. Early Headstart, the Perry Preschool and the Chicago Parent Centers) have been described in the Innocenti Working Paper UNICEF (2008b). The paper offers evidence that parental involvement really matters, because it improves children's later achievements and adaption in society. ECEC projects that include parent training lead to more appropriate parenting at home. Research shows that these positive effects are mediated by increased self-confidence in parents who feel supported in good parenting (Epstein, 2001). This finding may be particularly significant for poor families. Brooks-Guns and Markman (2005) state that about one-third to one-half of the variation in school outcomes between poor and not-poor children can be accounted for by differences in parenting [Harvard Family Research Project].

¹ Toolbox OECD

What aspect matters most?

Support for a nurturing, sensitive and stimulating home environment

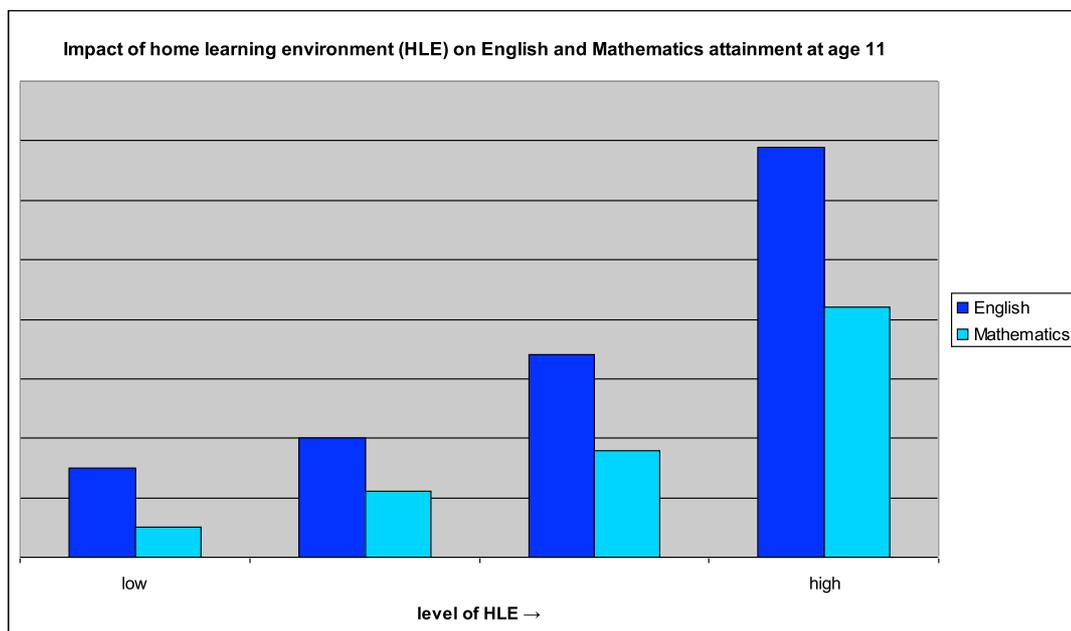
Neuroscientific research has shown that loving, stable and stimulating interactions are critical for every aspect of a child's development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Confident parents who are well informed about what is best for their child's development are able to provide this nurturing environment. However, many parents feel limited in their abilities to do so and there is an increasing demand for good parenting programs (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003). Parenting programs are provided at comprehensive ECEC services, and the programs are often highly appreciated by participants (Howard, 2003; Walthamstow, 2003).

It is essential that ECEC services do not convey the message that 'parents need to be taught how to be parents'. Parents indicate that they want support in regaining feelings of control and learning to think about matters calmly (Barlow & Stewart-Brown, 2001). Reviews show that parenting programs affect both parents and children positively. Parenting programs make parents feel more secure in the interactions with their children and boost their sense of wellbeing and benefit their children as well (Diamond & Hyde, 2000; Scott, 2003; Sylva et al., 2004).

Parent support to improve the home environment is especially important for dysfunctional families (NESSE, 2009). Young children are vulnerable and growing up in families with unhealthy relationships, sadness, grief or abuse blocks children's development. All children are born wired for feelings and ready to learn (Shonkoff, 2003). But this promise can easily be frustrated by early negative experiences in the home. Therefore, it is essential that ECEC services include support for good parenting to help parents to create a warm and loving home environment for their children.

Support for a 'home curriculum'

Interventions to promote parental involvement consist of numerous approaches, including parent training programs, initiatives for enhancing home-school links, and programs for family and community education. Reviews by Deforges and Abouchar (2003) and Harris and Goodall (2006) indicate that the most effective approach to boost children's later achievement and adjustment is support for parents to actively engage in children's learning activities at home. The Home Learning Environment (HLE) is one of the most powerful influences upon children's development (Belsky et al., 2007; Melhuish, 2010). HLE includes such activities as reading to children, singing songs and nursery rhymes, going to the library, playing with numbers, etc.



ECEC services can inspire parents to offer their children all kind of learning situations at home, both informal and explicit. Henderson and Mapp (2002) stress the importance of seizing learning opportunities during informal interactions. Parents can involve children in daily routines (e.g. meals, phone calls, making grocery lists, getting dressed), enrich these routines with stimulating discussions and trigger their children's curiosity and exploration urge. This kind of 'home curriculum' boosts children's language development, cognitive development and academic achievement (Foster et al, 2005; Weigel et al., 2006).

An effective home curriculum also includes more explicit learning activities such as shared book reading. This activity has a major impact on children's cognitive and language development (Ermisch, 2008; Leung et al., 2010). There is strong evidence that parents can be trained to participate in book reading in ways that boost this development effectively (Huebner et al., 2010).

Support for parents to foster their children's learning is especially needed in low income families. The evidence suggests that mothers from poor homes do worse in preparing their children for the specific requirements of school, irrespective of ethnicity or any other variable (NESSE, 2009). Parents with limited education and low social status tend to be less capable of engaging their children in learning activities (Ermisch, 2008; Feinstein et al, 2007, 2008). ECEC services can support these parents effectively to realize a successful curriculum at home (Boyce et al., 2010).

Partnerships for complementary home and centre based approaches

ECEC professionals have various views on parental involvement (NESSE, 2009; OECD, 2006). Some see parents mainly as loyal supporters of the ECEC facility, who assist as volunteers. Others view parents as partners in a joint enterprise (Bloomer & Cohen; 2008 Moss, 2007). Here, parents and professionals strive for the same educational aims at home and at the centre and harmonize their activities to achieve the best possible results for children.

For this joint effort, it is critical that professionals communicate with parents about their aspirations for their children's achievements and their expectations about the best educational practice. ECEC facilities should inspire parents to have high hopes for their children, because parental aspirations and expectations are strongly related to children's achievement (Fan and Chen, 2001). It is especially important to raise the aspirations of low-income parents. Research suggests that children from low-income families enter a path of diminished expectations (Hauser-Cram et al., 2003)

ECEC professionals must communicate with parents about educational goals and the best way to achieve them (Bodrova et al, 2004). Some parents have misconceptions about school readiness. They conceive readiness largely in terms of the ability to name objects, letters or numbers, without recognizing the importance of inferential skills. Therefore, informational programs for parents about the critical role of higher order cognitive skills and ways to promote them are needed (Barbarin et al., 2008).

There is evidence that a combined home- and center-based ECEC approach has a positive impact on children's development (Blok et al., 2005; Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005; Sylva et al., 2004), but for the best results real partnerships and complementary practices will be essential (Bodrova et al, 2004; Van Tuyl and Leseman, in press).

What implications for policy?

Include parental involvement as a benchmark for quality ECEC services²

The argument for promoting the inclusion of parental involvement in ECEC services is threefold:

- It is a fundamental right for parents to be involved in their children's education (OECD, 2006; UNICEF, 2008a).
- Research shows that there is a substantial need and demand for a parental component in ECEC services (Deforges and Abouchaar, 2003).
- Research shows that parental involvement in ECEC services enhances children's achievements and adaptation (Blok et al., 2005; Deforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Edwards et al., 2008; Harris and Goodall, 2006; Powell et al., 2010; Sylva et al., 2004; Weiss et al., 2008).

Promote support for a 'home curriculum'

The predominant finding is that supporting parents to engage in learning activities at home is related to better cognitive achievement. Other types of parental involvement, such as volunteering and participation in parent councils or parent-teacher organisations have little or no impact on children's achievement (Deforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2006).

Focus on low-income families

Families with a low socio-economic status struggle to provide appropriate care and enrichment for their children (Barbarin et al., 2008; Boyce et al., 2010; Ermisch, 2008; Feinstein et al., 2007, 2008; Hauser-Cram et al., 2003).

What is still unknown?

Hard to reach groups

Relatively little is known about effective ways of increasing parental involvement in hard-to-reach groups (Harris & Goodall, 2006). More research is needed on targeted strategies to involve parents from ethnic minority children and parents who are not interested in being active ECEC participants.

Different countries and cultures

Most large-scale and technically sound studies on the impact of parental involvement were conducted in the U.S.A. and the U.K. (Deforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2006; OECD, 2006). Sound research in other countries and cultures is needed. Parental involvement in children's schooling may have different meanings in different cultures (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Little is known about how these differences affect the outcome of parental involvement.

² At this point in time, parental involvement is not a benchmark in the league table for ECEC services in OECD countries (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre. 2008. *Report Card 8*).

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