



Learning in families with digital technologies

Policy recommendations

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Aim of this report

This report is intended to provide guidance for policymakers on the use of digital technologies to support learning in families. It draws on a research project conducted by Futurelab and funded by Becta on 'Learning in families with digital technologies'. It identifies significant gaps, challenges and opportunities for policy developments to support and enhance the outcomes of learning in families. This report is not intended to act as definitive evidence for a programme of policy. Instead it suggests potential activities and areas for activity to address gaps and challenges highlighted during this research project.

Recommendations

1. Supporting local and informal learning for parenting and family relationships

Developing parenting skills and strengthening intra-family relationships to create strong, resilient families is a key part of creating cohesive communities and provides a positive, stable environment that supports children's health and wellbeing, supporting PSA 12 (Improving the health and wellbeing of children and young people). There is a growing demand for parenting skills resources, and supporting parenting in the early years is a priority for the Social Exclusion Task Force¹. However, there are many practical (time, money, childcare) and social/emotional (anxiety, embarrassment) barriers to attending parenting classes and many parents are turning to more informal resources such as TV, internet resources and books instead, with 28% of parents learning parenting skills from books, TV programmes or internet resources, which parents report as being helpful and helping them to improve their children's behaviour². This highlights a continued need for resources to support parenting and family relationships via a range of media and digital channels. Progress is being made in this area with DCSF's Parent Know-How initiative via a range of channels including social media, helplines and text messaging, however it is still too early to provide evidence of their effectiveness³.

Informal peer networks are particularly valuable and most successful when operated from a 'grass-roots' level rather than as centralised resource, but there is currently less support for this approach⁴. Parenting is not something that happens in isolation from the wider world and informal peer networks offer an opportunity to embed support for parenting and family relationships within families' local contexts. Digital technologies offer opportunities for such informal peer support using online forums and social networking technologies that can be created and managed from a local grass-roots level. As well as providing centralised resources, Parent Know-How services should support such local, informal peer networks by providing disaggregated digital tools, resources and content that can be included in developing ad hoc networks. They should also explore the possibility of giving customisable tools and training resources to local groups to create and develop their own networks.

2. Enhancing communication and partnerships between learning in the family and learning at school

Parental engagement in the form of engaging with children's learning, encouraging high aspirations and instilling a pro-learning identity all support children's school achievement by building on what parents do as part of their day-to-day parenting role in the home⁵. Parental engagement is thus one of the Children's Plan priorities in 2009, supporting PSA 10 (Raise the education achievement of all children and young people) and the Every Child Matters outcome 'Enjoy and Achieve'. Parental engagement is also seen as a critical factor in narrowing the gap between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers (PSA 11).

Schools can play a role in supporting parents to engage with their children's learning in the home, and schools are moving towards developing communication and partnership strategies that provide information to help parents support their children. In order to maximise the benefits of parental engagement for school achievement, schools also need to understand, support and build on the learning that already happens in children's families, which currently receives far less attention and is far more of a challenge⁶. Genuine two-way communication and partnership strategies need to involve children themselves as active and valued participants in conversations, respect parents' roles as parents rather than requiring them to take on teaching roles they may be unwilling or unable to perform, and respect boundaries and differences between home and school. Communication and partnership strategies also need to achieve this without making additional demands on teachers' workloads – by reducing workload in other areas, providing additional staff to manage communication and partnership strategies and by using technologies to manage information efficiently.

Building on the opportunities afforded by Home Access, and treating the Online Reporting requirement as a starting point, schools should be supported to use technologies to enable parents, teachers and children to make connections between their learning in and out of school. Further research is required to provide schools with detailed guidance on how to make best use of technologies to support such communication and partnership strategies in their own circumstances. However, research and developments in digital technologies suggest some fruitful possibilities. Parents and children could use a range of technologies such as mobile phones, digital cameras and internet technologies to capture evidence of their out-of-school learning, feeding it in to schools' learning platforms, or using customised versions of social networking platforms. Teachers could also feed in and comment on content and conversations. Social media and mobile technologies allow many-to-many communication which could support a lightweight flow of multimedia information and conversation between teachers, children and parents.

Schools should fully consult with parents and children in developing partnership and communication strategies, using internet and mobile communication methods to increase responses and allow parents and children to contribute ideas as well as respond to plans.

3. Maximising diverse family learning benefits of Home Access

The forthcoming Home Access scheme will remove many of the financial barriers to home access to a computer and internet connection for school children and their families, and support families to recognise the educational value of home access.

The benefits to families of home access are likely to go well beyond the core goals of raising children's educational attainment; and this is already being considered as part of the Home Access pilot. The potential benefits for families are broad and diverse. Activities that may at first appear tangential, such as chatting on online forums or participating in social network sites, may in fact constitute important learning experiences, developing social capital and providing sources of family advice and support.

Both desired and realised benefits are likely to differ for families who have diverse needs and aspirations; good and effective use for one family may not be the same as for another family. The challenge is to provide ongoing support and guidance for families in making decisions about the opportunities and possibilities within their own context. An awareness-raising campaign as part of Next Generation Learning and building on trusted sources of information via schools and TV should highlight the range of possible benefits of Home Access including both educational and wider benefits such as leisure and entertainment, financial, employment and social benefits. Contextualised, local support should also be provided, via schools and other avenues such as libraries and community centres, linking new users to existing expertise amongst local peer networks, and creating new networks where new users can support one another and share learning.

4. Harnessing the potential of technologies in family learning courses

Many traditional family learning courses, eg Family Language, Literacy and Numeracy (FLLN) make limited uses of digital technologies, in contrast to schools which make extensive use of technologies to support children's learning. FLLN, including courses funded through Family Learning Impact Funding (FLIF) focuses on the Government's 'Skills for Life' (literacy, numeracy and language), yet in schools, ICT joins literacy and numeracy as part of the core curriculum of skills seen as necessary for participation in modern life. Courses involving technologies have also been seen to be particularly effective at engaging male family members in their own and their children's learning⁷.

There is an opportunity to harness the potential of digital technologies in family learning courses, both as a tool to enable learning, and as a set of skills worthy of study in its own right. The vision of technology as an essential tool for learning, enabling flexible and customised learning as well as supporting leisure and informal learning, as set out in the Harnessing Technology strategy⁸, should be extended to FLLN and Wider Family Learning (WFL) provision. ICT skills should be given greater prominence within both FLLN and WFL courses. Mobile and internet technologies should also be used more to support learning in between face-to-face classes and after courses have finished, blending physical events with online and mobile interaction. This is likely to require training for family learning practitioners. Mobile and internet should also be used to extend access to family learning courses, overcoming some of the practical barriers to attending face-to-face classes, making it easier for people to participate in learning at times and places that suit them, and avoid the initial anxiety and embarrassment over attending basic skills courses.

5. Recognising the diverse ecology of learning in families and overcoming barriers to participation

There is broad agreement amongst parents that it is important to do learning activities within the family⁹.

However, there are significant demographic differences in the types and amount of family learning that parents report they engage in. Parents from social grades DE, parents with no formal qualifications and parents from Black and Minority Ethnic backgrounds report lower participation in many types of family learning activities¹⁰. These are groups who are already disproportionately likely to be experiencing disadvantage in other areas of their lives. Of those families who described barriers to family learning, 40% stated lack of time; with 7% (rising to 12% amongst social groups DE) stating cost and 5% stating access barriers. Younger parents (aged 18-25) were more likely to consider that there were no suitable opportunities for learning in families available to them. Overcoming these barriers to learning in the family is likely to support narrowing the achievement gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers (PSA 11) as well as supporting the Every Child Matters outcome 'Enjoy and Achieve'.

There is therefore an urgent need make provision for the diverse and specific family learning needs and aspirations for under-represented groups of learners. Marketing and signposting from other services should be developed and improved to promote existing available opportunities. Good and effective provision is likely to be different for diverse groups of learners, and therefore needs to be designed more specifically for particular groups' needs. Families from groups who are underrepresented should be involved in consultation at a local level to ascertain their needs and aspirations and work with them to develop new solutions – working with intermediaries who already engage with these groups in order to gain access to and trust from groups labelled as 'hard to reach'. Families themselves should be brought into the early stages of the commissioning process to ensure provision genuinely engages and meets their needs by making sure that providers understand their needs and aspirations and build this into provision from the outset.

Mobile and internet technologies can extend learning opportunities to the home, potentially overcoming some of the barriers of time, access, transport and cost of courses. Family learning providers should consider making greater use of technologies to extend access to family learning opportunities, including separated and divided families who have less opportunity to learn with and from one another in shared spaces.

6. Embedding digital literacy and participation

Digital literacy is not just about functional ICT skills, it is about accessing, creating and communicating using ICT and being able to critique and evaluate the impact of media and technologies that pervade our lives. Digital literacy is also therefore about digital participation; about having the skills and competencies to use digital technologies to communicate, collaborate and be active citizens participating in local communities and wider society. It therefore supports the community cohesion agenda, and can play a role in supporting participation in positive activities (PSA 14). The family can be seen as the foundation of how we learn to participate in society, therefore it is also provides an important context for how we develop the skills and competencies of digital literacy and participation. It is argued that being able to engage with the digital 'participatory culture' is crucial to wider participation in society in the 21st century; those without the skills and attitudes to do so may find themselves disadvantaged¹¹.

Education programmes that aim to enhance digital literacy and engagement with participatory culture should build on the role and influence of families in developing such skills. For example, school literacy programmes should include discussion of children's literacy practices in the family and home, including their use of digital technologies, enabling them to apply critical skills to a range of literacies, both traditional and digital. Equally, family learning courses such as FLLN should include such critical digital literacy skills alongside their offering to support operational literacy.

7. Developing home family learning digital content and software

Educational content and software producers see the home learning market as an area of growth¹². They are developing plans to create further materials for children's learning at home and to support parents in helping their children learn, designed to be supplied directly to parents. Given the extent of computer and internet access in families of school-aged children and the impact of Home Access in extending these opportunities, there is also a specific market for internet and software-based home learning materials. Suppliers involved in the Home Access pilot are already responding to this demand, but the challenge will be to ensure that quality resources get into the hands of parents and children learning at home.

There are extensive opportunities for using technologies to create and support engaging and creative learning opportunities in the home environment. Such creative and engaging home learning resources should build on family practices and the relationship between parents and children, allowing for open-ended, playful interaction, fitting in with daily routines such as bedtime, and be flexible, portable and durable. Using such learning resources can support children's learning both at home and at school, and facilitate parental engagement in children's learning, contributing to raising children's educational achievement (PSA10) as well as building on family relationships, enhancing both children's and parents' emotional wellbeing (PSA12). However, many commercially available educational technologies marketed for learning in the home environment do not meet these criteria, and instead use designs that emphasise more didactic modes of learning.

Guidance should be produced and promoted to enable families to choose appropriate content and software for their needs as part of the Next Generation Learning campaign, and for suppliers themselves to produce more creative and engaging software. The Next Generation Learning campaign should also consider the extent to which opening up the home to such learning resources risks bringing further commercial interests into the home environment, and contain guidance for how families can deal with these issues.

8. Connecting and valuing the wide range of outcomes and progression opportunities

Learning in families can offer a wide range of benefits; from formal and measurable outcomes such as children's educational achievement and adults gaining employment to more holistic and subjective outcomes such as developing confidence and enabling more cohesive communities. Progression therefore needs to be widely understood to include not only formal accredited qualifications and completed courses, but also to include more informal, holistic and practical outcomes such as engaging in cultural activities, increased family resilience and access to public services. With such a wide range of outcomes, not all of which can be objectively measured and compared, tracking the outcomes of family learning opportunities is a challenge.

Tracking outcomes and progression is important to ensure that participation in family learning activities is not a 'one-off' experience that grants the learner no benefits. Tracking allows learners to reflect on a cumulative learning journey and make connections between different specific episodes of learning. This reflection can aid learners to recognise their own achievements, and identify directions in which they may want to or need to progress further, thereby contributing to raising children's achievement (PSA 10), and connecting measures to increase participation in positive activities (PSA 14) with more formal learning activities. It is difficult if not impossible for any central provider or service to track such diverse learning journeys. Family members themselves are in a much better position to do this. Digital records owned by family members themselves could allow them to track outcomes and connections between different episodes of learning, and between family members. Enabling family members (including children) to take personal ownership of such records, while also allowing them to connect with friends and family in a social context would allow a more

personalised and holistic approach to individuals' and families' learning journeys. The Parent Held Record pilot is already exploring ways for parents to take on some of this responsibility on behalf of their children. The Parent Held Record pilot should be extended to enable the record to include the learning of the whole family rather than just children, and allow children to input into their own records as well as parents. It should also allow families to track connections between the learning journeys of different family members, which would enable families to support one another's learning more effectively.

9. Creating spaces and opportunities for intergenerational learning

We live in an ageing society. Despite longer working lives, there is likely to be an increase in the population of older adults who are retired from full-time working, yet are still active members of their families and communities. Many public and private spaces are segregated by age and there are limited opportunities for people from different generations to interact with each other. This can lead to fragmented communities and contribute towards a fear of and negative attitudes towards each other from younger and older people. Many older adults are not as familiar with the opportunities for learning and participation offered by new technologies as younger people who routinely encounter new technologies at work, home and school. Older adults may also have more time to offer younger people to support and encourage them in their learning. Intergenerational learning therefore provides an opportunity for the young and old to learn from one another, with technologies providing a potentially ideal domain for such intergenerational learning. Intergenerational learning also contributes to PSA 14 by fostering participation in positive activities that improve relationships across generations and so support community cohesion.

Research suggests that technologies can support intergenerational learning in which older and younger people mutually generate and share cultural artefacts. Technology provides an important context for intergenerational learning as it is a domain in which both younger and older people are interested but are likely to have different experiences, and can be used as a tool to support the capture, creation and sharing of content¹³. Rather than only focusing on home and schools, intergenerational family learning highlights the importance of spaces for learning throughout the community, making use of the wide range of public spaces available such as parks, libraries and even spaces such as supermarkets and cafes. Local authorities should work with existing agencies, providers and public services such as libraries, sports centres and cultural venues to promote and build in opportunities for family learning in new developments, and existing events such as local festivals.

Definitions

The research project on which this report is based used a wide and inclusive definition of learning in families in order to ensure that a broad scope of evidence and argument was considered. The following description of learning in families was used to frame this project and is used in this report:

- either adults, children, or both, learning in a family context
- learning involving family members from different generations
- learning that takes place in formal, informal or non-formal contexts
- 'family' includes extended and separated families and individuals in kinship relationships or similar, eg step-parents and carers.

In the research project on which this report is based, six broad 'types' of learning in families were developed, which are listed here to indicate the broad range of learning that happens in families.

1. Supporting children's formal learning
2. Family engagement in learning for pleasure
3. Supporting children's personal, social, emotional development and life skills
4. Participation and acculturation in family life
5. Developing adult basic skills in family context
6. Enhancing family relationships

A poster will be available illustrating a learning journey supported by technology for each of these types of learning in families from:

www.futurelab.org.uk/projects/learning-in-families.

Notes on method

This report draws on recent original empirical and desk-based research conducted by Futurelab in 2008. In August 2008 Futurelab hosted an online discussion with parents on www.mumsnet.com and in October 2008 Futurelab commissioned Ipsos MORI to conduct a national survey of parents about their experience of and attitudes towards learning in families and the relationship between learning in families and learning in schools. Current research literature, policy and examples of practice relating to learning in families was reviewed and analysed, identifying key sources of evidence and main arguments, as well as gaps and omissions in the field. Key stakeholders from the fields of policy, research, practice and non-governmental organisations were interviewed during the course of the research project.

The full review of literature and discussion of key arguments will be available in the full report accompanying this research project, which also includes complete findings from the Ipsos MORI parents' survey and a transcription of the online discussion, at www.futurelab.org.uk/projects/learning-in-families.

References

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Footnotes

- ¹ FPI (2006); Social Exclusion Task Force: www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/social_exclusion_task_force/context.aspx
- ² Ipsos MORI 2008 Report on Family Learning for Futurelab
- ³ www.dcsf.gov.uk/parentknowhow
- ⁴ FPI (2006)
- ⁵ Desforges (2003) and Melhuish et al (2007)
- ⁶ The Ipsos MORI survey found that while 50% of parents agree that their child's school builds on the learning that they do as a family, 63% of parents think that their child's school should build on the learning that they do as a family, suggesting that the expectations of some parents are not being met.
- ⁷ For example, Tim Smith at Prudhoe Community High School, Northumberland, finds high participation from fathers and sons in his 'Robot Olympics' family learning events focused on design and technology.
- ⁸ Becta 2008
- ⁹ Futurelab's Ipsos MORI survey found that 90% of parents agree that it is important to do learning activities within the family.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. However, Black and ethnic minority parents report higher than average participation in religious learning as a family.
- ¹¹ Jenkins et al (2007)
- ¹² Many content providers are submitting resources to be used in the Home Access initiative; this view is also supported by personal conversation with two major UK educational publishers and public sector broadcasters.
- ¹³ Barajas Frutos (2006)



About Futurelab

Futurelab is passionate about transforming the way people learn. Tapping into the huge potential offered by digital and other technologies, we are developing innovative learning resources and practices that support new approaches to education for the 21st century.

Working in partnership with industry, policy and practice, Futurelab:

- incubates new ideas, taking them from the lab to the classroom
- offers hard evidence and practical advice to support the design and use of innovative learning tools
- communicates the latest thinking and practice in educational ICT
- provides the space for experimentation and the exchange of ideas between the creative, technology and education sectors.

A not-for-profit organisation, Futurelab is committed to sharing the lessons learnt from our research and development in order to inform positive change to educational policy and practice.

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