Encouraging Quality in
Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

RESEARCH BRIEF: PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS

What is parental and community engagement?

Parental engagement refers to the formal and informal relations that parents have with ECEC services. The engagement can take a variety of forms and meanings, depending on the education stage of the child concerned (*e.g.*, early child care or preschool) and the perspective taken on the issue (*e.g.*, early years practitioner, teacher, parent, researcher). Literature often uses the terms "family-school partnership", "parental involvement", "family involvement" and "parental engagement" interchangeably.

Community engagement refers to the connections between the ECEC services and all forms of input and contribution by community services to ECEC (Litjens and Taguma, 2010). Community can be defined as "people from the same neighbourhood" in a narrow sense or "the whole community, including NGOs, etc." in a broader sense.

The most common and widely used parent and community engagement strategies (Oakes and Lipton, 2007; Epstein, 1995) can be summarised into six categories of constructive engagement.

Table 1: Types of parental and community engagement

Child-focused	
Communicating	Design effective forms of centre-to-home and home-to-centre communications about programmes and children's progress.
Parenting	Help all families establish home environments to support children as learners (*e.g.*, parenting classes).
Stimulating development at home	Provide information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with stimulating children's development and other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning.
Centre-orientated	
Volunteering	Recruit and organise parent/communities help and support (*e.g.*, helping to plan and run centre events and fundraising activities, accompanying trips, donating their time to improve facilities, or assisting in the centre and sharing their skills and expertise).
Decision making	Include parents/communities in centre decisions, develop parent councils and parent-staff organisations.
Collaborating with community	Identify and integrate resources and services from the community to strengthen programmes, family practices and children's learning and development.

Source: Adapted from Epstein *et al*., 1995.

What is at stake?

Children spend the larger, if not largest, part of their young life in their direct home environment, interacting with their parents[1], siblings, other family members and neighbours. Over the last decades, however, the amount of time children spend with their families and neighbours, as well as the types of interactions with them, have changed due to factors, such as changing family structures, increasing maternal employment and increasing immigration in many OECD countries (OECD, 2006).

Parents' willingness to delegate part of the care for their children to ECEC services does not mean that the importance of the parent's role has diminished. It is still widely acknowledged that parental behaviour in the child's first five years is critical for the development of important academic and social skills and abilities. The current challenge for ECEC services is to embrace the crucial role of parents in young children's development and involve them in the services as much as possible (OECD, 2006).

The continuity of children's experience across environments is greatly enhanced when parents and staff members exchange information regularly and adopt consistent approaches to socialisation, daily routines, child development and learning. When done well, it can improve the quality of the centre, parenting at home, and the home-learning environment. Families with low socio-economic status (SES) could particularly struggle to provide appropriate care and enrichment for children due to lack of resources to do so (Barbarin *et al.*, 2008; Boyce *et al.*, 2010; Ermisch, 2008; Feinstein *et al.*, 2007, 2008; Hauser-Cram *et al.*, 2003).

Young children's development is not exclusively dependent on the input of parents and ECEC centres (day care, early education). Children grow up in a neighbourhood and are part of a community. Therefore, it is important that different services – formal ECEC services, day care, health services, out-of-school services – work together and create a "continuum of services" that is reassuring for parents and can meet the needs of young children. Community involvement in ECEC is important not only for providing expanded services and referrals where necessary, but also as a space for partnership and the participation of parents.

Patterns of parental, family and community engagement in ECEC differ from country to country. Several formal and informal mechanisms are used to foster full participatory and managerial engagement. Some of the challenges to active engagement of parents include cultural, attitudinal and linguistic barriers. It is particularly difficult to ensure equitable representation and participation across families from diverse backgrounds (OECD, 2006).

Why does it matter?

Parental engagement

The involvement of parents in young children's education is a fundamental right and obligation. Both the OECD (2006) and UNICEF (2008a) argue that ECEC services should recognise mothers' and fathers' right to be informed, comment on and participate in key decisions concerning their child. Research shows that there is a substantial need and demand for a parental component in ECEC services (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Research also demonstrates that parental engagement in ECEC services enhances children's achievements and adaption (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).

Examples of successful ECEC services that promote parental engagement (*e.g.*, Early Headstart, the Perry Preschool and the Chicago Parent Centers from the United States) offer evidence that parental engagement matters (UNICEF, 2008b). The federally funded Chicago Parent Center's programme in the United States has been cited as evidence that parent participation has a major impact on children's academic success and social development, and that it is an effective strategy for reducing the dropout rate. Each year parents took part in the programme increased the chances – by 16% – that their child would complete high school. For students whose parents were involved for the whole six years of the

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[1] For the purpose of this paper, the term "parents" refers to all carers holding prime responsibility for the upbringing and care of a child.

project, more than 80% graduated from high school, compared with 38% of students whose parents did not participate (Reynolds and Clements, 2005).

Community engagement

The involvement of wider community services (*e.g.*, health or social services and sport organisations) or community members in ECEC plays an important role in the development of young children. Community support of the early development process is considered as one of the characteristics common to high-quality ECEC centres (Henderson *et al.*, 2002). The earlier the role of the community in the lives of young children is recognised, the better the chances children have of achieving at school and in life in general (Cotton, 2000). If the connection between schools and communities is strong, it is easier for children to develop the skills needed to be successful socially and emotionally, physically and academically (Edwards *et al.*, 2008, Oakes and Lipton, 2007; OECD, 2006).

Families with different socio-economic backgrounds (defined by factors such as parental education, income and occupation) have different capacities to provide their children with a nutritious and healthy lifestyle, provide for quality child care and invest in other learning resources, *e.g.*, books and visits to libraries and museums (Bradley *et al.*, 1989). Family's socio-economic background is, therefore, powerfully associated with children's educational development (Duncan *et al.*, 1998).

A study of children adopted between the ages of four and six into families that vary widely in socio-economic backgrounds highlights the impact of the environment children grow up in (Duyme *et al.*, 1999). Adopted children (without any genetic links with their adoptive parents) have shown that non-genetic parents' SES factors can impact the cognitive development of a child. The IQ of these children was measured before adoption, and all children, whether adopted by low- or high-SES families, had higher IQ's after adoption. But children adopted by higher-SES families had significantly larger gains in IQ than children adopted in lower-SES families because they were raised in richer, more stimulating environments. ECEC services, in collaboration with other services that can mitigate the negative effects of family backgrounds, are especially important for children with socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

In the child's environment (the family, the neighbourhood), risk factors have a negative effect on the child's development of intellectual skills, school achievement, social-emotional competence, social adjustment and health (Van Tuijl and Leseman, in press) even to the extent that poverty leads to irreversible effects on brain functioning (Hackman and Farrah, 2009). Edin and Lein (1997) show that, in poor families, child care and medical care arrangements are unstable or of low quality. Additionally, their economic hardship often results in chronic stress. This is more prevalent among low-income populations because they have fewer resources to mitigate these events (McLeod and Kessler, 1990; Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). The connection between economic status and mental health is important because poor mental health is related to harsh, inconsistent, less involved parenting and less caring interactions. In turn, this has been associated with behavioural problems, for example, children are more often involved in fights and less capable of collaborating with peers; and it can cause severe attention issues leading to decreasing school performance (Shonkoff and Philips, 2000). A strong community can act as a social network that supports parents to reduce stress and maintain positive emotions, and gives them tools for raising their child.

If the quality of the social network is low, it may lead to low emotional involvement and cohesion (Van Tuijl and Leseman, in press). Community engagement means a higher level of social cohesion (mutual trust between neighbours and common values) and (informal) social control and collective efficacy (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). Collective efficacy relates to neighbourhood levels of violence, personal victimization, homicide, etc.

Moreover, a continuum between ECEC services, parents, neighbours and other civil society stakeholders can enhance co-operation between different services leading to a comprehensive services approach. Comprehensive services are more responsive to what children actually need in terms of their overall development and to what parents need for child care, health care and other opportunities. A strong comprehensive system of community and formal ECEC services empowers disadvantaged families to cope with their specific poverty-related problems (Van Tuijl and Leseman, in press, Weiss *et al.*, 2008).

A precondition is that ECEC programmes and communities – as well as parents – design and implement common standards and foster similar goals, because standards reflect the values of people who set them (Bodrova *et al.* 2004). ECEC services engaging families and communities is especially important in low income, minority communities where differences in socio-economic background and cultural values about child rearing and education are likely to negatively affect child development (Larner, 1996).

What aspects matter most?

It has been argued that evaluating outcomes of parent or community engagement on children's performances and development is difficult due to varying definitions of what constitutes engagement and disagreement on how best to measure such engagement (Marcon, 1999). However, a few studies have compared different effects of parent or community engagement.

Home learning environment (HLE)

Parent-infant interactions within the HLE

Children of parents who were least involved in the HLE at ages 10 to 36 months scored less well on cognitive skills test (*e.g.*, in mathematics) later in life than children who experienced positive parent-child interactions in the HLE (Figure 1). The same effects were shown in research by Sylva *et al.* (2004), and these outcomes were still continuing at age seven plus.

Figure 1. Impact of home learning environment (HLE)

English and Mathematics attainment at age 11
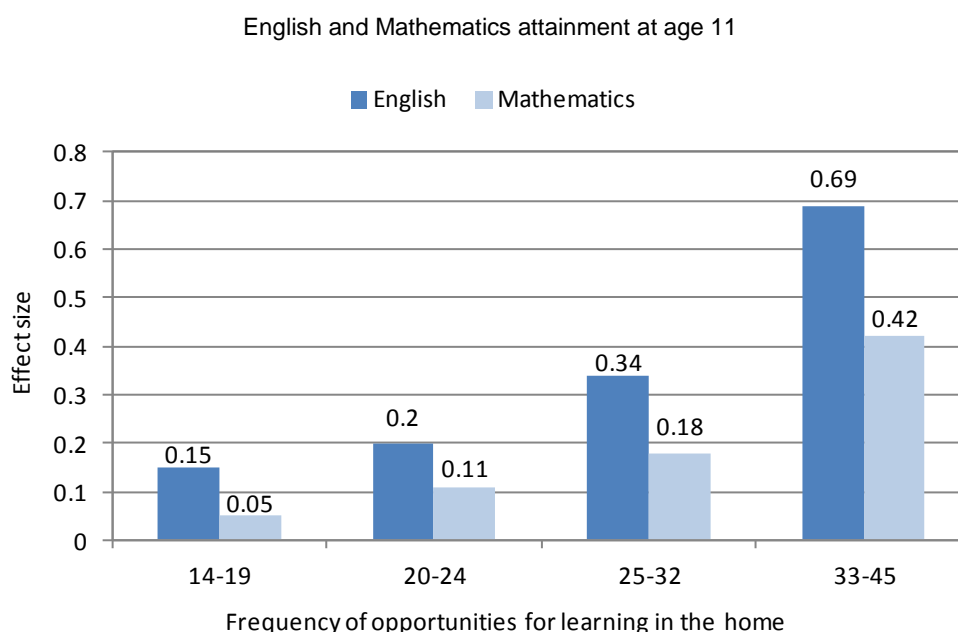
Source: Melhuish, 2010.

Programme guiding parents and providing materials

Reviews by Deforges and Abouchaar (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 HLE is one of the most powerful influences upon children's development (Belsky *et al.*, 2007; Melhuish, 2010). It includes such activities as reading to children, singing songs and nursery rhymes, going to the library and playing with numbers.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study of England (United Kingdom) has shown the importance of parent-child activities in contributing to the quality of children's HLE. The research

results indicate that programmes which directly promote activities for parents and children to engage in together are likely to be most beneficial for young children (Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

The quality of the HLE is also found to be strongly associated with the child's "at risk" status. A poorer quality HLE in the early years has been put forward as one of the possible reasons for the lower attainment levels observed at the start of compulsory education in "at risk" children. There are several ways in which ECEC services can help enhance the HLE, including providing activities and materials for parents and children to do together, offering parents tips on reading aloud to children and offering literacy learning kits. ECEC staff can also encourage parental engagement in early learning by providing them with resources and activities that further the work that is being addressed within the classroom. This helps families feel more connected to their child as well as to the programme (Halgunseth and Peterson, 2009).

Home curriculum

ECEC services can inspire parents to offer their children all kinds 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).

Scandinavian research reveals that existing social, cultural and religious practices in the home provide children with a variety of written activities (Hjort *et al.*, 2009). A more 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 and dysfunctional families. Parents with limited education and low social status tend be less capable of engaging their children in learning activities (Ermisch, 2008; Feinstein *et al.*, 2007, 2008). ECEC services can effectively support these parents to realise a successful curriculum at home (Boyce *et al.*, 2010).

Reading stories at an early age at home

A popular form of parental engagement seems to be helping with children's reading development: this has been well researched, and clear benefits have been found (Keating and Taylorson, 1996). Research undertaken in the United States with three- and four-year-olds has shown that early learning activities at home make a difference: children who are frequently read to and told stories are more likely to recognise all letters of the alphabet, count to 20 or higher, write their own names and read. In addition, children who are taught letters, words or numbers and are taken to the library regularly are more likely to show signs of emerging literacy (Nord *et al.*, 1999).

The PIRLS study[2], undertaken across 40 countries, has also shown a positive relationship between engaging in early literacy activities at home prior to compulsory education and reading performance at the age of ten. The study recorded the following parent-child activities: reading books, telling stories, singing songs, playing with alphabet toys (*e.g.*, blocks with letters of the alphabet), playing word games and reading aloud signs and labels. Findings show that the reading performance of children in the highest frequency of parent-child activities (*i.e.*, on a daily regular basis) is well ahead of that of their peers with lower frequencies of parent-child activities (Mullis *et al.*, 2003; 2007).

Volunteering and participating in decision-making processes

Other types of parental engagement, such as volunteering and participation in parent councils or parent-teacher organisations, while recognising its importance for parental satisfaction and staff support – have been found to have little or no impact on children's achievement (Deforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2006).

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[2] Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, http://pirls.org.

Knowledge about parenting and child development

Reviews show that parenting programmes affect both parents and children positively. The OECD found that children whose parents often read to them show markedly higher scores in PISA 2009 than students whose parents read with them infrequently or not at all, regardless of their family's socio-economic background (OECD, 2011). The Harvard Family Research Project found 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 (Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005). Parents strongly influence child outcomes and children's cognitive and linguistic development. Parental attributes found to be important are education, training and employment. Aspects of parenting that are found to matter for child development include the interactions with children, the HLE and parental understanding or knowledge of child development (Yoshikawa, 1995).

The overall findings from parenting programmes indicate that:

- parents feel more secure in interactions with their children, boost their sense of well-being and benefit their children (Diamond and Hyde, 2000; Scott, 2003; Sylva *et al.*, 2004);

- parents increase self-confidence in good parenting, particularly for poor families (Epstein, 2001);

- parents better understand appropriate educational practices and improve children's educational outcomes, especially in literacy (Cooter *et al.*, 1999; Bryant *et al.*, 2000);

- parents are more likely to talk directly with the practitioner and be better able to help their children at home with learning and homework (Corter *et al.*, 2006);

- participants reduce their reliance on public assistance, find employment, earn college credit or degrees, and own homes after their experience with the programme (Halgunseth and Peterson, 2009); and

- access points provided at ECEC centres or through home visits have been reported as key in empowering parents to engage in their children's learning (Sime *et al.*, 2009).

Gains in parenting skills and knowledge of child development and learning were found through participation in education courses and engagement in the ECEC service (Mitchell *et al.*, 2008). Furthermore, training parents of preschoolers to help their children's learning at home has been found to have positive results on later school achievements, regardless of family background or income (Graue *et al.*, 2004). Early Head Start parents participating in programmes offering child development services with parenting education through home visits were found to be more supportive of their children during play, more likely to read to their children every day, and less likely to smack their children than parents who did not participate (Love *et al.*, 2005).

Strategic partnership between parents, communities and ECEC services

Frequent communication

Starting Strong II pointed out that the frequency of parent-staff relationships is linked positively with the quality of care provided in centres (OECD 2006), although a High/Scope study suggests that much depends on the content of the contact (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997). Drop-off and pickup meetings, for example, can remain routine and focus only on immediate concerns. For this reason, it was emphasised in *Starting Strong II* that if these encounters do not provide opportunities for mutual learning, they should be supplemented by focused parent-staff meetings, newsletters and home visits (OECD, 2006).

A survey on parental needs shows that parents in Korea mainly utilise media and the on-line community to obtain and share information about child rearing and early childhood education. In contrast, parents in Japan regard neighbourhoods and grandparents as main sources for child-relevant information. Japanese parents frequently use child welfare centres to meet other parents and also visit local public health centres to consult issues on child care and support (Hwang, Nam and Suh, 2010).

Shared goals

It is important for ECEC staff to communicate with parents about programme goals and the best way to achieve them since parents can have misconceptions, such as school readiness (Bodrova *et al.*, 2004). They conceive readiness largely in terms of the ability to name objects, letters or numbers, without recognising the importance of inferential skills. Parental views and expectations of ECEC may, however, vary among countries and even regions. In Sweden, for instance, parents are found to demand that ECEC focus on both play and learning-oriented activities (Sheridan *et al.* 2009).

The EPPE study found ECEC settings that produced good socio-cognitive outcomes for children had "strong parental involvement, especially in terms of shared educational goals with parents" and provided "regular reporting and discussion with parents about their child's progress" (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003). There is also evidence that a combined home and centre-based ECEC approach has a positive impact on children's development (Blok *et al.*, 2005; Brooks-Gunn and Markman, 2005; Sylva *et al.*, 2004). However, real partnerships and complementary practices are essential to achieving the best results (Bodrova *et al.*, 2004; Van Tuijl and Leseman, in press).

The Early Authors Programme is a United States-based 12-month early literacy intervention implemented in child care centres in ethnically and linguistically diverse, urban low-income communities. [3] The programme approaches literacy skills by emphasising highly meaningful language interactions and positive attitudes through empowering activities involving children and families (Bernhard *et al.*, 2008).

Parental aspirations

Some see parents mainly as supporters of the ECEC facility, assisting as volunteers; others see them merely as users or clients of ECEC services. Some view them as partners in a joint enterprise (Bloomer and Cohen, 2008; Moss, 2007); parents and professionals strive for the same educational aims at home and at the centre and harmonise 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)

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[3] The intervention stresses the importance of active parental engagement and collaboration in ECEC. It contains five key aspects: a) involving literacy specialists working with preschool teachers; b) bringing technology and book-making equipment into the classrooms; c) children self-authoring books with the help of literacy specialists, educators and parents; d) parents coming in for on-site group parent/family meetings in which parents and other family members share family stories and, together, make books based on the stories; and e) frequent reading, sharing, display and dissemination of the children's self-authored books in the classroom and the larger community. The intervention did not focus on teaching children literacy skills specifically but concentrated on children and families creating meaningful self-authored texts on the assumption that this approach would motivate children, teachers and families to engage in literacy activities. The evaluation included pre- and post-test assessments. Evaluation findings were found to be positive: the participating three- and four-year-olds' language and literacy developmental outcomes were found to be enhanced by the programme activities. The programme appeared to not only increase children's absolute language skills but also prevent children living in poverty from continuing to fall further behind in comparison with national age norms. There was also evidence of a qualitative change that took place in classrooms: teachers and literacy specialists noted that "the children became more verbal, formed fuller sentences and saw the connections between writing and reading". Qualitative data indicated that the programme strengthened the children's identities and fostered their self-esteem (Bernhard *et al.*, 2008).

Home visits are associated with greater confidence in parents' interactions with children's education programmes and greater knowledge in children's development. Children who receive home visits from ECEC practitioners have been found to have greater engagement in literacy activities and are more likely to choose to participate in group activities. Staff also benefit, as they gain positive relationships with children and families and better understand how the child's home environment might affect school performance (Halgunseth and Peterson, 2009).

There is wider evidence on the benefits of targeted home visitation programmes, such as HIPPY[4]. HIPPY is a home-based programme that centres on the role of parents as home educators. It focuses on pre-literacy and pre-numeracy and is provided for two years, starting when the child is four. The HIPPY evaluation in New Zealand showed that children who have participated in HIPPY have scored higher in a variety of school achievements (literacy, reading, word recognition, numeracy), adjust better in class and show less disturbing behaviour (less fighting with peers and more active participation). In particular, HIPPY children have been found to be less likely to become in need of targeted support for literacy skills development (BarHava-Monteith *et al.*, 1999).

The High/Scope Perry Preschool programme [5] provides preschool education and home visits to disadvantaged children during their preschool years (from age three). The Perry Study stemming from the programme follows participants from ages three through to 40. The programme lasts two years and consists of two-and-a-half hours a day of preschool in addition to weekly home visits by preschool teachers. Findings show that the impact of the programme varies by gender and with age. The programme appeared to have a significant effect on males' criminal activity, later life income, and employment at ages 27 and 40; whereas it had more effect on education and early employment for females ages 19 and 27. The general pattern is one of strong early results for females and later results for males (Heckman *et al.*, 2010).

Strategic partnership with the wider community

Tapping into community resources

Research cites family and community engagement as key to children's motivation for learning and development (Barton, 2003). In Canada, engagement with local organisations offering information to ECEC providers and the use of community-based resources (toy lending libraries, telephone support, etc.) positively correlates with more sensitive care giving and children's early social development (Doherty *et al.*, 2000).

Supporting harder-to-reach families

In Ireland, partnerships between ECEC programmes and community services have been found to be effective in approaching and supporting harder-to-reach families, such as Roma and travelling families. Specialists offer those families tailored services designed with respect to their cultural context, which improve children's skills as well as those of parents. The development of distance learning materials in collaboration with community members and consultants specialised in travelling education has enhanced the likelihood of achieving improved child outcomes on literacy rates and math skills. Specialists understand how to design effective learning materials for children within their communities, and parents learned how to implement different learning approaches for young children (Robinson and Martin, 2008).

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[4] HIPPY is the Home Interaction Programme for Parents and Youngsters which originated in Israel in the late 1960s and has been implemented with positive results in a number of countries. More details are available at: www.hippy.org.il/.

[5] The High/Scope Perry Preschool approach has its own curriculum (High/Scope curriculum) and is used in both public and private half- and full-day preschools, nursery schools, Head Start programmes, day care centers, home-based day care programmes, and programmes for children with special needs. Originally designed for low-income, "at-risk" children, the High/Scope Perry preschool approach is now used for the full range of children and has been successfully implemented in both urban and rural settings both in the United States and overseas.

Targeting families and neighbourhoods

Neighbourhood conditions matter more for disadvantaged than advantaged children (Cook *et al.* 1998). In 1994, five Head Start programmes developed model substance abuse prevention projects with a goal to strengthen families and neighbourhoods of economically disadvantaged preschool children. The initiative, named "Free to Grow", targeted families and neighbourhoods of Head Start children in an effort to protect them from substance abuse and its associated problems. It included a strong focus on community-based strategies in the form of coalitions, implementation of "safe space" task forces that ensured safe and substance abuse-free spaces for young children, and training in substance abuse prevention. Different community services were included in the implementation, *e.g.*, local police forces, youth organisations, churches and numerous grassroots organisations. Outcomes included increased parental engagement in ECEC, cleaner and safer schools and neighbourhoods, improved relationships among residents and between ECEC practitioners, parents and community members, and stronger community norms against drug and alcohol use (Harrington, 2001).

Combination of different approaches

A programme or centre does not need to limit itself to one approach. Several forms of parental and community engagement can be used simultaneously and complement each other. Since ECEC settings provide services for a range of people with different backgrounds, not every strategy or type of engagement meets all needs or is suitable for each child, family or community. Therefore, implementing plural approaches may encourage parent and wider community engagement. An example of combining different engagement approaches is the REAL project, explained below.

The REAL project (Realising Equality and Achievement for Learners)

Hannon and Nutbrown (2001) have reported on the REAL project, where ten preschool centres in areas of high deprivation in Sheffield (England) took part. Eighty-eight families participated in the 12-18 month programme. The programme included a combination of five components, including home visits by the preschool teachers; provision of literacy resources; centre-based group activities; special events (*e.g.*, group library visits); and postal communication. Adult education for the parents was also incorporated into the programme through an accredited course on REAL along with information, advice and support for accessing other providers' courses. Each preschool teacher was funded to work one half-day per week with eight families.

The evaluation provided strong evidence of the benefits of the programme to the children, parents and teachers. Parents' experiences were reported as "extraordinarily positive". Preschool teachers greatly valued the opportunity to work closely with parents and found it changed their thinking, although they felt that other responsibilities in the school made their work on the project difficult. Parents and teachers noted "global benefits", as well as specific literacy benefits, for the children. Results showed the programme group was ahead of the control group in terms of literacy development and letter recognition (Hannon and Nutbrown, 2001).

What are the policy implications?

Including parental engagement as a benchmark for quality ECEC services

One suggestion is the use of a "quality report card" based on a list of dimensions and critical components by which any non-formal, informal or formal activity can be evaluated. This should include support for the sharing of educational aims and regular communication about the child's progress (Jualla and Van Oudenhoven, 2010).

Engaging parents and wider communities as strategic partners for integrated ECEC services

This means that national authorities involve regional and local authorities, NGOs, private businesses and community groups in policy and decision making and recognise them as partners in the ECEC coalition. This helps ensure broad public support and a multi-perspective contribution to decision-making. A key

success factor is the availability of substantial funding, for example, to pay parents and community members who are the main implementers of the programme. Funding can also be used to encourage and implement co-operation.

Concentrating efforts on improving the HLE in the early years

Early literacy projects for children, as well as parenting and empowerment activities for parents, can be delivered through ECEC services and in close partnership with parents. The focus should be on "home curriculum", especially shared book reading at home as well as home visits. Focusing on socio-economically disadvantaged families and children is of particular importance. Awareness should be raised about the importance of good HLEs and the possibilities available in local communities to engage in ECEC. This can be done through public relations campaigns, parental education, etc.

Training staff on parental and community engagement

ECEC centre's attitudes and actions toward parent involvement are largely influenced by administrators and practitioners. Because leadership is critical in family and community engagement (OECD, 2006), administrators and practitioners may need special training to help them develop the skills needed to promote family-centre partnerships and community involvement (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2003; Sime *et al.*, 2009).

Practitioners' training programmes can include general information on the benefits of and barriers to parental and community involvement; information on awareness of different family backgrounds and lifestyles; techniques for improving two-way communication between home/community and the centre; information on ways to involve parents in helping their children learn in school and outside; and ways that centres can help meet families and communities' social, educational and social service needs (Litjens and Taguma, 2010; OECD, 2006).

What is still unknown?

Research from non-Anglo-Saxon countries

While there is a general recognition of the importance of parental and community engagement in improving children's learning outcomes, determining what precisely constitutes successful parental or community engagement in ECEC services is much harder. A number of long-term child outcomes could be measured to test the effectiveness of involving parents or communities in different ways; but for robust data to be gathered and sound conclusions to be made about "what works", significant investments would be required to undertake well-designed experimental longitudinal research. Most large-scale and technically sound studies on the impact of parental engagement were conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Harris and Goodall, 2006; OECD, 2006). Sound research in other countries and cultures is needed. Parental engagement in children's schooling may have different meanings in different cultures (Huntsinger and Jose, 2009). Little is known about how these differences affect the outcome of parental engagement.

Research on effects of different communication strategies

Although there is a growing body of research that points to the importance of communication between parents and ECEC staff, there is no strong evidence as to which particular strategy works best.

Effects on hard-to-reach groups

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

Evaluation of community initiatives

There is hardly any literature describing the difference in impact between community initiatives with the aim to strengthen educational programmes and community initiatives with a more autonomous goal. A challenge is the evaluation of the quality of non-formal/informal community-based activities because they are heterogeneous and, therefore, hard to compare. Elaborate research on the effects of non-formal activities remains necessary.

Neighbourhood effects

Although there is a large body of literature suggesting that neighbourhood conditions influence development and behaviour, it seems hard to define "precise, robust and unbiased" estimates of neighbourhood effects (Duncan and Raudenbusch, 1999; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

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