

## South Australia

### Learning Together

*This is an innovative program within which the traditional roles of families, teachers and students are reconstructed in relation to children and their learning. The social landscape is one of significant inequity. The program is unique in that, it focuses on both children and adults, and often in combination. Parents/carers (as young as 14 years of age) and their young children are brought together to learn within the same space simultaneously. Teachers act as learning facilitators, providing for the individual needs of program participants. Curriculum is crafted around involving parents in their children's learning. Adult (parent) learning is interest-driven, relevant to both their own and their children's development. Furthermore, the curriculum is aligned with the formal state-based senior secondary curriculum to enable parents to complete their secondary schooling certificate. This non-traditional approach to learning builds up learners' confidence and resilience and makes learning a more relevant and holistic experience.*

**Main focus of innovation:** LEARNERS, TEACHERS, ORGANISATION

**Other keywords:** equity

#### General Information

**Name of the ILE:** Learning Together

**Location/Address:** Murray Bridge, 25-27 Burdekin Ave Murray Bridge, South Australia 5253

**Website:** [www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au/pages/Programs/learning\\_together\\_parents/?reFlag=1](http://www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au/pages/Programs/learning_together_parents/?reFlag=1)

[www.kidspot.com.au/parenting-directory/Early-learning+110/The-Learning-Together-projects+12008/Adelaide.htm](http://www.kidspot.com.au/parenting-directory/Early-learning+110/The-Learning-Together-projects+12008/Adelaide.htm)

**ILE submitted by:** South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services

**Rationale**

*Why do you suggest that it should be included in the project? How does it respond to 21<sup>st</sup> century learning challenges?*

*Learning Together* is an innovative program within which the traditional roles of families, teachers and students are reconstructed in relation to children and their learning. The program is unique in that it focuses on both children and adults, and often in combination. Parents/carers (as young as 14 years of age) and their young children are brought together to learn within the same space simultaneously. Teachers act as learning facilitators, providing for the individual needs of program participants. Curriculum is crafted around involving parents in their children's learning. Adult (parent) learning is interest-driven, relevant to both their own and their children's development. Furthermore, the curriculum is aligned with the formal state-based senior secondary curriculum to enable parents to complete their secondary schooling certificate.

The *Learning Together* program was devised to address the ongoing and significant challenge of engaging those in the community who are traditionally 'hard to reach' or educationally excluded. Many of the parents participating in the program have previously left school or become disengaged from formal education. The program recognises both the increasing importance of providing education for all citizens, as well as the critical significance of early childhood experiences for future outcomes. There is a strong focus on community partnerships, having relied on intensive consultation with local families and agencies since the program commenced, in order to ensure its accessibility and relevance. Early childhood and secondary level teachers work collaboratively with each other, as well as with both government and community organisations. The establishment of these partnerships is a key, and useful, outcome of the program.

Since it began in 2003, the outcomes for participating families highlight the success of the innovative approach adopted. Despite being non-compulsory, the rate of attendance continues to be very high. In response to a survey of participants at one of the program sites, 72% of families reported feeling more confident as parents as a direct result of their attendance. Seventy-four percent said they understand their child more and 75% reported being more confident about talking to their child's educator. Eighty-one percent have noticed their child being more confident, while 76% feel that their child communicates better. The results of this survey are consistent with further evidence collected over the eight years the program has operated at numerous sites in South Australia. Positive changes in behaviour relating to literacy and learning among both adults and children, as well as a correspondingly high change in their confidence and understanding, have been recorded.

**Learning Aims / Intended Learning Outcomes of the ILE**

*What are the core learning aims and which knowledge, skills or attitudes are to be acquired? (These may include outcomes related to learners' social, interpersonal, or meta-cognitive development)*

*Learning Together* at Fraser Park recognises learning as a socio-cultural process wherein learning occurs through relationships. The program has three main dimensions: parent/child engagement, child involvement in learning, and parent learning and support. The aims are to:

- improve early learning opportunities for children;
- assist parents (including very young parents) to support their child's early learning and development;
- support parents' own learning and determination;
- strengthen communities through inter-agency collaboration and coordination in the provision of family focussed programs and services; and,

- promote and support positive relationships between families and early childhood services and schools.

In order to support parents' own learning and determination, the program provides the opportunity for them to engage in activities/courses towards the completion of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). The *Learning Together* SACE program aims to:

- engage parents (from the age of 12-19 years) in learning that is based on their interests, maintaining relevance to children, parenting and family matters;
- re-engage parents as learners in activities which contribute to their own educational attainment;
- enable parents to develop meta-cognitive skills, in order to improve their understanding of their own learning while supporting that of their children;
- develop reflective capacity in parents, an attribute strongly linked with effective parenting; and,
- develop local co-constructions of learning and understandings relating to children, parents and families.

### Learners

*Which group(s) of learners is it aiming at? Who is eligible to take part? How many learners are there? What are their ages?*

The *Learning Together* program is provided in communities of aggregated disadvantage. While anyone in the local area can attend the programs, in practice the overwhelming majority of participants are in groups that could be categorised as:

- families living in poverty;
- young parents;
- unemployed;
- new arrivals and refugees;
- families with mental health issues, particularly post natal depression; and/or,
- Aboriginal families.

The local community of Murray Bridge is home to people from a diverse mix of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, which more recently include Turkish, Afghani, Korean, Chinese, Sudanese and Bhutanese. There is also a significant local Aboriginal population. A large number of households are sole-parent (generally headed by women) and many have high welfare dependency. Only 70% of young people aged 16 in Murray Bridge are in full-time education. As many as 58% of the adult participants in the program did not complete year 12 (final year of secondary schooling), while 31% did not even complete year 11. Only around half of the local parents are actively involved in their child's learning at school. The levels of physical domestic violence, as well as alcohol and substance abuse within the community are significant in the Australian context. The area is predominantly Housing Trust (governmentally subsidised) and rental housing, primarily as a result of the degree of unemployment. The parents of as many as 24% of children are jobless, with unemployment impacting on the third generation in some families. Sections of the community are affected by relative poverty. Access to services is also limited by poor public transport services in the area.

Fraser Park School, the local primary school at which this *Learning Together* site is located, has an Index of Community Socio Education Advantage (ICSEA) score of 768, well under the state average. The Australian Early Development Index (AEDI) found that more than 36% of five year olds in Murray Bridge were vulnerable in one domain, while 22% were vulnerable in two or more domains, that is they are a particularly high risk. The domains include physical health and wellbeing, social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive skills, communication skills and general knowledge.

Across South Australia, 987 adults and 1173 children are currently attending *Learning Together* programs. The Murray Bridge program at Fraser Park School currently serves 239 adults and 308 children. Children are involved from birth until age four, while participating adults range from 12 to 63 years of age. Of these, 18 adults are under 19 years of age, with the bulk being 18-30 years.

### **Facilitators**

*Who are the teachers/facilitators? Who are the leaders? What are their professional backgrounds? What are their roles?*

*Learning Together* managers are qualified early childhood teachers and leaders. They have an active role working with families and children as well as line management and management responsibilities. They are equivalent to principals. Outreach teachers are also qualified teachers and work in outlying schools running *Learning Together* programs.

*Learning Together* SACE also has a senior secondary teacher working in partnership with the *Learning Together* manager. This partnership enables rich, relationship based learning to occur within the SACE requirements. The early childhood qualified teacher brings knowledge of young children and families while the senior secondary teacher brings knowledge and skills relating to working with young people and specific skills relating to the SACE.

The teachers' role in working with the parents, particularly those aged 14-19, includes the above interactions as well as more formal opportunities such as *Learning Together* SACE or TAFE groups where some formal teaching is combined with individual and small group work as parents work on projects of interest to them.

At Fraser Park *Learning Together* the staff team consists of the manager as the qualified early years teacher and leader. This is a full time position. The senior secondary teacher works 0.2, which is configured as a day a week. Additionally there are seven early childhood workers, or school services officers, who work sessionally. Up to four of these staff will be in group at any one time. These staff support the children when the parents are studying and support families during playgroup sessions. Three of these seven staff are former parents in *Learning Together*. This is seen as an important strategy in engaging community and as a model for employment.

### **Organization of the ILE**

*How is learning organised? How do learners and facilitators interact? What kind of pedagogy do they follow? What curriculum is used?*

The *Learning Together* program has devised and adopted an innovative, non-traditional approach to learning. There are some general features of this approach which define the organisation of learning within the program. All learning is strengths-based, that is, it builds upon the abilities, knowledge and understandings of participants. The specific knowledge families bring about their children is recognised by the educators involved to inform the generalised knowledge they have about children and families. All learning is also personalised, tailored not only to the local community, but to the individual needs of each program participant. This refers not just to the provision of a uniquely devised curriculum, but also to the timing of learning. All learning is connected within families, that is, adult learning is related to their child's development. These elements of the program's approach allow the learning to become more meaningful for participants, while contributing to the development of a local learning community.

The formality of learning in the program ranges from informal interactions to formalised, assessed educational activities, and include:

- supported playgroups, often with multiagency and multidisciplinary involvement;
- parents making books for and about their children (combining the literacy engagement and development of both parent and child);
- cooking groups (developing literacy, numeracy, parent-child attachment and nutrition);
- Learning Dispositions and Circle of Security groups (which are slightly more formal and focus on the development of dispositions that support learning and secure attachment); and,
- Learning Together SACE (formalised learning for parents aged from 15 years within the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) which is developed individually and crafted around parent interests generally relating to children, parenting and families).

The needs of children participating in the program are met in part through their involvement in playgroups and crèches, and in part through the increase in their parent's understanding of children's learning and development, and the availability of other support services. The children's learning is guided by the Early Years Learning Framework: Belonging, Being, Becoming.

Adult/parent or carer learning is more complex, but also informed by the same framework. There are five key elements.

- Noticing, Naming and Next Steps: This technique was developed within the *Learning Together* program to enable families and educators to identify child learning, to name it, and then to make decisions about what can be done next to build on this learning event.
- Learning Dispositions: Also developed through the *Learning Together* program, this relates to families beginning to support their children to develop the kinds of dispositions they need to be successful learners. These dispositions include curiosity, resourcefulness, a sense of purpose, persistence and confidence. This learning strategy is supported by a workbook, and has been developed as an Integrated Learning subject which can form part of SACE.
- Developing attachment: Through use of the Circle of Security Parenting Resource (all educators in the program are registered trainers for this program) and the Building Blocks resource (developed within the *Learning Together* program by 4<sup>th</sup> year university students of occupational therapy in conjunction with participating families), families are supported to understand and develop attachment.
- Literacy: Developing an understanding of early literacy and learning development is central to adult learning in the program. The approach was again developed within the *Learning Together* program and focuses on talking, reading, singing, looking, laughing, playing and learning with one's child.

The fifth element includes a slightly more structured program which allows parents to undertake study towards the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE), the formal senior secondary certificate in this state. Learning is informed by the general commitment to personalisation, connection with family and the need to build on existing strengths. There is also an emphasis on the development of strong and supportive relationships between educators and learners. Although there is some group work, learners general work at their own pace. Participants may take as long as they like to complete their SACE, as it is recognised by the program that family obligations will take precedence. This is particularly important for those who previously struggled at school and feel insecure about their own abilities, as well as about the level of commitment required.

*Learning Together* SACE students undertake study in the form of:

- Integrated Learning, a course developed from the Learning Dispositions element of the program).
- Community Studies, an independent study project which is negotiated and assessed for each student. In the past, students have done projects such as, 'My drug and alcohol abuse and how it effects my children', 'Welfare to work', 'A daughter's journey: Supporting my child through pregnancy' (this won a merit certificate), 'A teenage mothers' story', an interactive Learning book for children (which also won a merit certificate), 'Supporting children with speech problems', as well as a resource on surviving rape and bringing up a child who was the result of rape.
- Reflective project, a very similar project based course like Community Studies.
- Literacy and numeracy work grounded in daily life experience.

Students meet together once a week for a day to work on Community Studies and Integrated Studies programs. Part of this day is focussed on Learning Dispositions, part of the day will be spent on independent study and part of the day will involve structured skill based work, such as writing contracts for learning.

### **Learning Context**

*In which context does learning take place? What does the physical learning environment look like? Are community resources used to facilitate learning and how?*

The *Learning Together* program at Murray Bridge is located within the Fraser Park Primary School. Rather than using a purpose built facility, the physical learning environment is essentially excess classrooms from the school that have been adapted to suit the program. Both adult and child learning spaces are often combined into the same room during supported playgroup sessions. At other times, adults and children may be separate. But, importantly, children have free access to adults (their parents/carers) at all times.

### **History of ILE**

*Who initiated it? For what reasons was it started and with what purpose? Have these changed since?*

The South Australian Department of Education and Children's Services (DECS) has led the way within Australia in terms of recognising the importance of early childhood education and care. That is, they appreciate the profound benefits of early intervention and integrated services for improving educational outcomes over the long-term. The *Learning Together* program was piloted by the Curriculum unit within DECS in 2003 and has since gained program status. It was intended to be a long-term strategy aiming to encourage pre-school educational engagement, adult-child interaction, as well as adult learning and support.

Engaging families with children from birth to four years was seen as a possible strategy to lessen the risk of poor outcomes for children at school in some areas of aggregated disadvantage throughout South Australia. *Learning Together*, which is built on a strong base of evidence from early learning, emergent literacy and community capacity building, was devised to address these issues. Through extensive consultation with communities, a range of activities have been developed and implemented to support families in their role as a child's first and most influential educator, and to involve them in their children's learning. A particularly successful, and innovative, part of *Learning Together* has been the re-engagement of parents/carers as adult learners in formal education through their own children's learning and development.

This has the dual effects of improving outcomes for children as their home environment changes, and influencing the adults' view of themselves as successful learners, which in turn creates a positive learning model for their children. In addition, families' aspirations for their children change, with many of the parents and carers become active participants in their children's schools and the broader community.

The *Learning Together* program operates in several areas of disadvantage across South Australia. Murray Bridge was one of the program's original sites and continues to operate successfully within the local community. This particular site will be the focal *Learning Together* case throughout this document. Murray Bridge is a large regional centre (population of over 18,000 people) about 80kms from Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. Murray Bridge services towns and communities within the region, including Mannum, Tailem Bend, Jervois, Wellington, Myponga, Coomandook, Coonalpyn, Karoonda and Meningie. Like many other Learning Together sites, the Murray Bridge program is located at a local primary school, in this case Fraser Park Primary. The program commenced here in 2003, however, a number of changes since 2009 have resulted in a rapid increase in both the provision of activities and the engagement of families. Strategic liaisons have been developed with Community Health, the Innovative Community Action Network (ICAN), local non-governmental organisations and the Murray Bridge Children's Centre. These partnerships have resulted in an increase in the number of participating families, including refugee and new arrivals, and the establishment of a South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) program to provide a formal secondary education qualification to participating parents.

### **Funding of the ILE**

*How is it funded?*

*Learning Together* currently has two funding streams. DECS provides ongoing program funding in a lump sum grant paid annually. The Communities Making a Difference strand of a program called the Smarter Schools National Partnership has provided funding for four years to 2014, which has recently enabled the *Learning Together* programs to expand.

### **Learning Outcomes**

*What are the learning outcomes achieved by the ILE, including academic, social, interpersonal and meta-cognitive outcomes? How is learning assessed?*

Other than through SACE related activities, neither adult nor child learning is formally assessed within the *Learning Together* program, as these participants do not fall into the compulsory years of pre-school or schooling. Instead, changes in the behaviour, understanding and confidence of both parents and children has been measured through an annual Family Survey. Results of the survey for 2010 can be seen in the table below.

Learning Together Annual Family Survey 2011, n=271									
	1	2	3	4	5	More	Total		
Number of years spent in <i>Learning Together</i>	169	44	21	11	17		262		
% of total responses	<b>65</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>7</b>				
Number of groups	111	78	31	16	18	1	255		
% of total responses	<b>44</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>7</b>				
About the Parent	Less	The same	A bit more	A lot more	Much more		Total	Agree	% Agree
Play more	0	95	84	57	35		271	<b>176</b>	<b>65</b>
Talk more	0	108	62	63	37		270	<b>162</b>	<b>60</b>
Read more	4	115	70	49	31		269	<b>150</b>	<b>56</b>
Sing more	1	76	88	65	36		266	<b>189</b>	<b>71</b>
Understand my child more	0	68	96	54	45		263	<b>195</b>	<b>74</b>
More confident parent	0	76	86	66	43		271	<b>195</b>	<b>72</b>
More confident about talking to educators	0	67	86	65	52		270	<b>203</b>	<b>75</b>
About your Child/Children	Less	The same	A bit more	A lot more	Much more		Total	Agree	% Agree
Child communicates better	0	61	96	60	32		249	<b>188</b>	<b>76</b>
Child plays more with other children	0	41	85	88	36		250	<b>209</b>	<b>84</b>
Child is more confident	0	47	89	78	35		249	<b>202</b>	<b>81</b>
Child sings more	4	51	84	58	27		224	<b>169</b>	<b>75</b>
Child asks me to read to them more	5	83	69	47	32		236	<b>148</b>	<b>63</b>

In response to the annual Family Survey, families have reported significant changes in many areas of behaviour and confidence, including the confidence to talk to their child's educator. This is an important outcome of the program, as recent research into educational outcomes points to the benefits of positive relationships between home and school, as well as positive family attitudes towards education and learning, for students' educational achievement.



The experiences of the *Learning Together* program support these findings. A small scale research project carried out in 2006 showed that those families who had been involved in the *Learning Together* SACE program (senior secondary school certificate) had significantly changed their messages to their children about the value of learning and of school.

#### **Documentation describing or evaluating the ILE**

*Is there documentation on this learning environment? Is there a website? Films? Research reports or evaluations? Other forms of documentation? (please supply references or links)*

The original *Learning Together* programs were evaluated by a consortium from the University of Newcastle. The final report from this evaluation was presented in 2007 and is available on the Learning Together website.

A very thorough evaluation is currently being undertaken internally on the National Partnership expansion of *Learning Together*. Although this evaluation is in its early stages, a report on the Implementation phase will shortly be available on the *Learning Together* website. This evaluation will capitalise on the learnings from the past eight years of the program. Of course, the program itself is now in a more mature stage than it was when the original evaluation was undertaken. Consequently, the new evaluation is able to focus on aspects of the program, such as adult learning, which had just begun when the original evaluation was undertaken. Furthermore, new research tools have been developed to evaluate aspects of the program, such as relationships and wellbeing, which are significant for learning.

A small research project was undertaken in 2010 by Masters level students from the Flinders University of South Australia. The investigated the perspectives families have of the factors supporting their changes in confidence (as observed in our Annual Family Survey). This research found that families attributed this outcomes to a number of key factors, including respect for program participants shown by the educators in the program, the interest and strengths based approach to learning, and the amount of knowledge they felt they had learned. Further information on this research project will also be available on the *Learning Together* website shortly as part of the 2010 annual report.

#### **Other information you consider to be relevant to describe the ILE**

*Learning Together* is unlike any other program being run in South Australia, likely even unlike any other within Australia. The program has been designed with a powerful and intentionally sustainable combination of features, including:

- long-term goals;
- locally tailored program implementation;
- dual emphasis on the learning of adults and children;
- collaborative partnerships with other services;
- merging of accredited adult learning objectives with parenting and early childhood learning; and
- an interest and strengths based approach to learning.