



Encouraging Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)

HIGHLIGHTS FROM “RESEARCH BRIEF: PARENTAL AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MATTERS”

Why do parental and community engagement matter?

- Parental and community engagement can:
 - Improve the quality of ECEC provision, the quality of parenting and the home-learning environment.
 - Enhance children’s early development, their later academic success and high school completion, their social development, and result in greater social cohesion.
 - Mitigate the negative effects of family backgrounds and act as a social network that supports parents and empowers disadvantaged families.
- Its influences are critical, especially in the first five years of a child’s life.
- The continuity of children’s experiences across different environments is greatly enhanced when ECEC centres co-operate with parents and communities and adopt consistent approaches to child development and learning. This makes ECEC (and other) services more responsive to what children need.

Which aspects of parental and community engagement matter most?

The home-learning environment (HLE)¹

The home-learning environment (HLE) is one of the most powerful influences upon child development. Improving the HLE has been found to be one of the most effective approaches to boost children’s later achievements.

- **The quality and frequency of parent-child interactions** have strong positive effects on children’s cognitive (e.g., math) and literacy development.
- What parents do to engage children in everyday activities that contribute to their development is often referred to as “**home curriculum**”; it can have positive effects on

¹ HLE includes activities from which children’s development can benefit, such as reading to children, singing songs and nursery rhymes, going to the library and playing with numbers.

children's curiosity, exploration and cognitive development, especially for children in disadvantaged families.

- **Reading stories at an early age at home** can improve reading performance: children who are frequently (on a daily basis) read to and told stories are more likely to recognise letters of the alphabet, count to 20 or higher, and write and read at an early age than children who are less often involved in home literacy activities.
- ECEC centres that are effective in enhancing the HLE often provide **activities and materials for parents and children to do together** and offer **tips on how to get children engaged in early learning at home**.

Parenting at home

- Gains in **parenting skills** and **knowledge of child development and learning** are largest when parents participate in education/training courses or are advised (e.g., by ECEC centres) on these topics. This has positive results on the quality of the HLE, self-confidence in good parenting, and ability of parents to help children in their learning activities.

Participating in ECEC activities

- **Volunteering** and **participating in decision making bodies** by parents has been found to have little or no impact on children's achievement, although it does contribute to a better understanding of the ECEC curriculum, a greater respect for ECEC professionals, and a closer involvement of parents in the development and learning of their children.

Partnerships between parents, communities and ECEC centres

- **Frequent communication** between ECEC staff, community services (such as health services) and parents enhances opportunities for mutual learning.
- It is important for parents, ECEC centres and community services to **share common goals** for child development, while inspiring parents to have high but **realistic aspirations** for their children.
- **Home visits** by ECEC professionals are associated with greater confidence in parents' interactions with children's ECEC programmes, a greater knowledge in child development, and a greater engagement in home-learning activities; while children are found to be more engaged in centre-based activities and are more likely to participate in group activities. Professionals increase their understanding of how the child's home environment might affect their performance in ECEC.

Partnerships with the wider community

- **Tapping into community resources** (e.g., libraries, museums, telephone support) can positively correlate with an increase in the quality of the HLE and enhance children's social and cognitive development.

- **Supporting hard-to-reach families and neighbourhoods** is important in achieving improved child outcomes for all children and increasing equity. Special programmes or targeted materials in combination with involvement of community services, such as health or social services, can be developed for such families and neighbourhoods to ensure appropriate needs-based implementation.

Combining different approaches

- **Implementing plural approaches** may encourage wider parental and community engagement and might better serve the needs of centres, families, communities and children. Different approaches can be combined to increase the success rate of meeting ECEC policy goals and can contribute to greater child development.

Policy implications

- Since the HLE has a large impact on child development, close partnerships between ECEC centres and parents concentrating on improving the HLE in the early years is of particular importance. Focus on development or stimulation of implementing a home curriculum, conducting home visits, and raising awareness among practitioners and parents on the importance of the HLE are effective measures in raising the quality of the HLE.
- Including parental engagement as a benchmark for quality ECEC services encourages ECEC providers to more frequently involve and co-operate with parents.
- Recognising parents and wider communities as strategic partners for integrated ECEC services helps to ensure broad public support and a multi-perspective contribution to decision making.
- Because leadership is critical in family and community engagement, ECEC workers might need special or additional training to help them develop the skills needed to promote family-centre partnerships and community involvement.

Research gaps

- Sound research on effective parental and community engagement approaches and the effects of engagement on child development or ECEC quality from non Anglo-Saxon countries is needed.
- Effects of targeted strategies regarding parental/community engagement on hard-to-reach groups is needed.
- Evaluations on the impacts of community initiatives, especially non-formal initiatives, to strengthen ECEC services are rarely conducted.
- The effects of parental and community engagement on neighbourhoods (e.g., incidences of violence or the socio-economic situation of the neighbourhood) remain largely unknown.