

Written evidence submitted by Susannah Chambers

Evidence Submission to the Inquiry into the Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services

Written evidence submitted by Susannah Chambers, Family Learning Consultant/Campaigner/Founder of Families Learning (website is at familieslearning.space)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- For the last 15 years I have been directly involved with the delivery and enablement of Family Learning as well as researching and campaigning for this provision to be an embedded requirement of statutory education across the whole of the United Kingdom. I managed Family Learning provision for nurseries, schools/academies (including primary and secondary) and community venues for a local authority's adult learning service for 9 years before progressing to work as the national policy lead at what was formerly the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) before the role was made redundant through a merger.
- I have seen first-hand through my work with many hundreds of families with children/young people and my ongoing teaching using video technologies the transformational and unique intergenerational effect of Family Learning that is highly effective and low cost to the public purse, compared with other support measures/interventions, to reduce stress and improve outcomes for families. This is more important than ever under the current requirements for home schooling during COVID-19 lockdown, even with gradual opening of school settings. This is about future-proofing and positively transforming education so should a similar situation arise families are much better equipped - including those that are more at risk of not progressing as well as their peers - to ensure learning occurs and that the experience of home schooling in the future is not as traumatic as it has proved to be for many families. This is an unprecedented opportunity for the Government to align Family Learning funding currently available with guidance offered to schools/academies/nursery settings and to give this provision the attention it deserves.
- As there is no over-arching body across the UK that has been actively promoting awareness of the evidence base for the effectiveness of a Family Learning approach I have continued to work in this field as a consultant but also generally campaign for the importance of it being provided as a universal entitlement of a family's journey interfacing with accessing statutory education in the UK. That is why I am submitting evidence. Because I feel the extensive positive evidence base for Family Learning and planning for it to be part of the Government's current response to the impact of COVID-19 on Education and Children's Services is being systematically ignored. It is still not forming part of the public narrative and I feel for the Government to continue not integrate Family Learning provision would be a dereliction of duty on the part of the Government. The change can begin by linking in existing

Government-funded Family Learning provision through Adult Learning services with support schools/academies are asked to offer families, particularly during COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION/REASON FOR SUBMITTING EVIDENCE

1. As required by the call for evidence, I will outline why I am submitting evidence as an individual. I have extensive experience of working with educational establishments and Family Learning providers. My first-hand experiences throughout my career to date make me a credible contributor to submit this evidence for consideration. In addition to me previously having managed Family Learning through local authority for almost a decade and then my subsequent policy and lobbying experience through my previous national role my background includes the following:
2. I have large-scale education research experience, including working as Project Manager for a national charity on the 2-year long Education Endowment Foundation-funded Randomised Controlled Trial 'The Learning Together Study'. This involved the team of mentors I led recruiting 139 nursery settings in primary schools and across England to test the impact of a 20-week intergenerational parenting programme for parents/carers and their 3-year-olds. This involved designing training for school/academy teachers to equip them to deliver the programme. The evaluation report and associated methodological documents are published at <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/peep-learning-together-programme/#closeSignup>
3. I have a reputation in Family Learning that means I continue to be invited to speak at events such as the Global Social Leaders international summit at the end of June 2020 and the European Basic Skills Conference in Bratislava in November 2020 to share information and ideas about how Family Learning needs to be an integral part of any education offer from the early years through to secondary education. Schools from over 100 countries are due to attend this former event and here is a link to an unlisted/unpublished video I have prepared for the conference which contains a lot of the evidence and argument I feel is in favour of the Government incorporating Family Learning into support packages/approaches to mitigate against the negative impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services: <https://youtu.be/3zMV35cv8tE>
4. Following managing around 8 concurrent central Government-funded Family Learning/Community Learning projects over 2 years nationally I was nominated by the former Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, BIS (now known as the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy - BEIS) to attend HRH Queen Elizabeth's Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace in recognition for my services to Community Learning (of which Family Learning formed a large part).
5. As the only delegate from Europe represented in both 2018 and 2019 at the National Center for Families Learning conference in the USA (working as part of their conference team in 2019 and presenting to delegates on best practice in Family Learning in both years) I offer those making decisions in the Government about the

most effective support/interventions to enable learning in the home learning environment both insight from my work funded previously via the European Commission as well as being able to share insight and best practice I gathered from these USA conferences.

6. When the Government launched the School Readiness funding package a couple of years ago it was one of the parenting programme sessions at a family centre in Luton that the Schools Minister attended that was televised that was a session forming part of a research programme for which I was Project Manager.
7. I bring insight about possible leverage of existing funds from Government and how Family Learning can create state-of-the art cross-departmental working and very high quality Family Learning provision through strategic review work I've undertaken for adult learning services such as the Manchester Adult Education Service. In this service I saw gold standard examples of best practice that is scalable nationally and provides an example of how such provision can engage families through online learning.
8. I am a parent of 3 school-aged children so have an active direct interest in terms of seeing the way in which my children's schools/academies have interacted with us as a family regarding supporting learning in the home and the active role we have played as a family in that experience. As a parent I've received no information via schools/academies about the National Oak Academy or the BBC materials developed. Therefore I believe that many other families won't have benefited from these initiatives either.

EVIDENCE SUBMISSION

9. The proposal related to the evidence I am submitting is that Family Learning should be a funded universal entitlement through the Government ensuring that the Department for Education and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy align support/interventions to support children and young people learning in the home/out of school both during the COVID-19 pandemic school closures and encourage Family Learning to be a standard approach in the future. This can be achieved by the departments communicating more effectively to channel existing funded Family Learning provision via the Skills Funding Agency to support families learning at home during school closures.
10. The **definition of Family Learning** is any activity where there are learning outcomes for both the children/young people and parents/carers involved. This might be synchronous intergenerational learning between parents/carers and children/young people. Or it may be asynchronous intergenerational learning where, for example, parents/carers are learning strategies from tutors about techniques their children are taught via school in order to better be able to support with enabling learning in the home environment/support with homework. It directly supports and works well with the efforts of education providers.

11. Family Learning is important. Arguably *more important* than any purely child-focused support/intervention that schools/academies/nurseries might offer and offers great potential for improved home-school communication and better outcomes for children and young people. This is because, as the Department for Education¹ have acknowledged and publicly emphasised in the past the crucial importance of parental involvement in their child's learning – although DfE haven't yet done anything to date to directly support this important provision in practice – supports the fact that Family Learning is effective because:

“... research shows that parental involvement in children's learning is a key factor in improving children's academic attainment and achievements, as well as their overall behaviour and attendance. The role of parents during a child's earliest years is the single biggest influence on their development. Good quality home learning contributes more to children's intellectual and social development than parental occupation, education or income. A parent's attitudes, aspirations and behaviour are all important, as is their ability to:

- *Understand their child's day-to-day progress;*
- *Undertake family learning together;*
- *Talk regularly with their child about their learning.*

For some parents, developing this confidence can be difficult... especially if they also need help with their own literacy, language and numeracy skills.”

TERMS OF REFERENCE FOR THE INQUIRY THIS EVIDENCE SUPPORTS

12. This evidence supports the following Terms of Reference set out in the call for evidence as embedding Family Learning for children, young people and families directly supports:
- The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people.
 - Support for pupils and families during closures, including:
 - The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning
 - Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside the structure and oversight of in-person education
 - The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to.... the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need) and
 - What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency
13. I will set out some headline evidence – that merits further exploration by the Government – and I would be happy to advise pro bono for how Family Learning can be embedded as an integral part of the solution to address each of the Terms of Reference set out above.

¹ www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/families/a00203160/role-of-parents-in-childrens-learning; accessed March 2013.

The capacity of children's services to support vulnerable children and young people

14. Family Learning is crucial to offer as a complementary, embedded and universally available provision through children's services, but ideally offered in the immediate term during COVID-19 through partnership working with existing provision and budget already issued for Family Learning from BEIS/Skills Funding Agency. This is to raise aspirations of vulnerable children and young people by mixing with those where the home learning environment may be more developed and because the evidence base shows that Family Learning is highly effective in closing the gap in educational attainment for those pupils eligible for Pupil Premium.
15. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)² - whose mission is to break the link between educational achievement and family income, and so pays close attention to best practice with Pupil Premium and reducing the gap in educational attainment for those pupils eligible for Pupil Premium – has clearly recognised this by publishing a report entitled '*Working With Parents To Support Children's Learning: Guidance Report*'³.

Support for pupils and families during closures, including:

- *The consistency of messaging from schools and further and higher education providers on remote learning*
 - *Children's and young people's mental health and safety outside the structure and oversight of in-person education*
16. Family Learning, as it directly lends itself to occurring in the home learning environment, directly supports both remote learning and prioritising mental health and resilience through learning.

The effect on disadvantaged groups, including the Department's approach to.... the long-term impact on the most vulnerable groups (such as pupils with special educational needs and disabilities and children in need)

17. The Inquiry Into Family Learning in England and Wales⁴ references case study evidence from Family Learning provision at Sheffield City Council where "... looking at pupils deemed to be achieving a good level of overall development at the end of the foundation stage, Sheffield City Council's analysis shows that the difference between those pupils involved in a family learning programme is as much as 15 percentage points higher for some groups compared with those that have not been involved in family learning programmes."

² Education Endowment Foundation, https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/ParentalEngagement/EEF_Parental_Engagement_Guidance_Report.pdf (accessed 14/06/20)

³ Education Endowment Foundation (07/12/18) https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/ParentalEngagement/EEF_Parental_Engagement_Guidance_Report.pdf (accessed 14/06/20)

⁴ NIACE (2013) 'Family Learning Works: The Inquiry Into Family Learning In England and Wales', https://www.schooleducationgateway.eu/files/esl/downloads/53_NIACE_family_learning_works_report.pdf (accessed 14/06/20)

18. Other work by the Legatum Institute⁵ – a think-tank whose mission is related to “... increasing prosperity and human flourishing.” – identified one of its findings as parenting classes being “... a way of reflecting on and embedding family values that support positive long-term outcomes.”. Parenting classes are ideally delivered through a Family Learning model and still are in areas in spite of the provision having been forced through Government policy historically to focus more on functional English and mathematics accredited outcomes.

What contingency planning can be done to ensure the resilience of the sector in case of any future national emergency

19. In uncertain times – during the COVID-19 pandemic and in order to ‘future-proof’ children’s positive outcomes educationally and in terms of health and wellbeing as much as possible it is crucial for solutions to be invested in that work with the most likely context to offer children and young people stability – that is through contact with their parents/carers.
20. As Nunn *et al.*⁶ reported, “Studies show that parental involvement in school is more than four times as important as socio-economic class in influencing the academic performance of young people aged 16.”
21. Another advantage to investing in Family Learning as a core element of supporting learning in the home is because the evidence shows that it boosts attachment between parents/carers and their child through shared learning and enhanced communication. Access to Family Learning would ideally begin from the earliest stages of a child’s life/engagement with early years settings as it supports the development of secure attachment. As renowned psychotherapist, author and broadcaster Benjamin Fry⁷ states, “The quality of attachment not only affects future relationships, but also the child’s ability to self-regulate. They learn from the example set by their primary caregivers. In parenting, it is an innate response to a baby’s distress to soothe them.” This is directly relevant to the attachment a child from the earliest years builds with their parent/carer and learning together creates an ideal vehicle for supporting this attachment developing in a secure way that furthers both the parent’s and the child’s learning.
22. A review conducted by Ofsted⁸ has found that the wider benefits of Family Learning include “... increased parental involvement in school life... improved parenting skills

⁵ Legatum Institute (March 2017) ‘Parenting Skills Classes: Transforming The Next Generation’, <https://lif.blob.core.windows.net/lif/docs/default-source/default-library/170410-final-parentingskillsweb.pdf?sfvrsn=0> (accessed 14/06/20)

⁶ Nunn, A. *et al.* (2007) *Factors influencing social mobility, Research Report No. 450*, London: Department for Work and Pensions.

⁷ Fry, B. (22/04/2020) ‘Attachment – Blog 24’ relating to the book *The Invisible Lion: Flatpack Instructions for Life*, <https://www.theinvisiblelion.com/post/24-attachment> (accessed 14/06/20)

⁸ Ofsted. 2009. *Family Learning: An evaluation of the benefits of family learning for participants, their families and the wider community*. 080265. London

and... increased ability to manage their children's behaviour, communicate with them and support their learning at home effectively.”

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATION

23. There is a significant body of evidence (including at Randomised Controlled Trial large-scale level) confirming that Family Learning is effective to improve outcomes in a range of aspects (including skills, health and wellbeing and employment prospects) for both children/young people and their parents/carers. This intergenerational approach is unique in creating positive outcomes in tandem for both generations. One of the outcomes of this is that Family Learning is a high impact yet cost effective approach to improving outcomes for children and young people.
24. There are opportunities to scale existing provision and undertake emerging research opportunities to realise Family Learning's potential. For example, in response to the COVID-19 context The Cynefin Centre has created a version of SenseMaker, a software platform combining contextual stories and quantifiable data, designed to collect stories in parallel from parents, students and teachers. This can be applied as a one-time collection of can be used as a journal by the participants. Through talking directly to young people, they can listen to their unique perspectives on what matters in their life and education at a critical time of unparalleled change and support them in becoming active participants in shaping their future. Meanwhile, through the parallel points of view of teachers and parents, hidden interactions, connections and divergences can be revealed.
25. I recommend that the Government mandate the Department for Education to collaborate with immediate effect (to support those struggling in the current COVID-19 related school closures) with providers of Family Learning to offer a coherent approach to enabling learning in the home learning environment. I recommend that this is a universal entitlement for all families to enable all children and young people to fully reach their potential and, as has been done so effectively in Scotland, to make Family Learning a mandatory requirement in all early years settings so the impact can be fully realised. To not embed Family Learning into education support at this stage would be a clear dereliction of duty on the part of Government. Please seize this unprecedented opportunity to transform our education system both during the COVID-19 pandemic and in the process build resilience to cope with future spikes of the virus/other crises which may emerge. Thank you for taking the time to consider my evidence submission. I hope to have the opportunity to provide further evidence as a witness.

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