

**Early Learning Partnership
Project (ELPP)
Strand 3 workforce development:**



**Evaluation of Parents, Early Years and
Learning (PEAL) training**

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1. Introduction

This report presents the findings from an evaluation of Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) training, rolled out as part of the Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP) Strand 3: workforce development.

1.1 Background

Strand 3 of the ELPP was delivered by a consortium of organisations: the National Children's Bureau (NCB), the National Childminding Association (NCMA), the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) and the Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA). This programme of work was designed to provide specialist training, on a large scale, to equip the early years workforce with the skills to engage effectively with parents and to support them in their involvement in their children's early learning.

The Strand 3 programme itself consisted of three elements:

- Roll out of PEAL training.
- A programme of training delivered by 15 sub-contracted organisations¹.
- Accreditation of PEAL and training packages delivered by sub-contracted organisations.

The core element of Strand 3 was the large-scale roll out of PEAL, a DCSF commissioned training package originally developed by a consortium consisting of NCB, Coram Family and the London Borough of Camden in 2005.

An expanded team of 40 trainers was recruited to deliver the PEAL training within the ELPP programme. Consortium members were instrumental in rolling out PEAL training across the early years sector, including recruiting trainers, modifying training materials for specific audiences and playing a role in organising and publicising training events. PEAL training packages were also offered directly to those local authorities in receipt of Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) project funding.

PEAL training aims to support practitioners in developing work to engage parents in their children's learning. The training involves preparatory activities for practitioners to reflect on their current practice, followed by a training day. The key elements of the PEAL model – authentic relationships,

¹ A separate evaluation report on the training delivered by the sub-contracted organisations can be found at www.peal.org.uk

communication and partnership with parents – are explored and the links between current research into what works best and why are examined.

1.2 About the evaluation

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) Research, Evidence and Evaluation Department was commissioned to evaluate the roll out of PEAL training as part of a wider evaluation of strand 3 of the ELPP.

Specific evaluation questions were as follows:

- How was the training received by participants?
- What was the actual and potential impact of the training on the workforce, early years settings, parents and children?

1.3 About this report

This report presents the results of in-depth interviews with 45 practitioners who attended PEAL training events between September and December 2007 and four in-depth interviews with key contacts from local authorities who commissioned PEAL training for staff in their localities during the same period. The report explores interviewee views on the training received, how they have implemented the learning from PEAL to date, and their views on the impact this has had on their practice, their settings and families.

Section two outlines the methods used during the evaluation and the characteristics of sample. In section three we present the findings from interviews with practitioners who attended PEAL training and section four examines the views of local authority contacts who commissioned PEAL training. The conclusion in section five considers the findings of the evaluation with reference to the specific evaluation questions outlined in section 1.2.

2. Methodology

This evaluation draws on data from the following sources:

Table 1: Data collection

	Method	Numbers
PEAL training	Semi-structured telephone interviews with practitioners who attended PEAL training	45 practitioners
	Semi-structured telephone interviews with local authority contacts who commissioned training	4 local authority contacts

2.1 Interviews with practitioners who attended PEAL training

Interviewees were randomly selected from PEAL records of all practitioners who attended CC, NCMA, NDNA and PLA training events between September 2007 to December 2007 (n=882). Interviews were carried out with forty-five interviewees in March and April 2008. Thus interviewees had had between three and seven months to implement the learning in their settings.

The telephone interviews focused on the following topic areas:

- Gathering background information about the interviewee.
- Their experience of PEAL training.
- Their subsequent use of the learning from PEAL.
- Their perceptions of the impact to date of the learning from PEAL on their own practice, their settings and on parents.

2.1.1 Characteristics of interviewees

While the vast majority of practitioners interviewed were female (table 2), men were nevertheless somewhat over-represented in the sample of interviewees, given that only two per cent of PEAL trainees were male.

Table 2: PEAL training interviewees (by event type and gender)

Event type	Female	Male	Total
Children’s Centre (CC) event	11	-	11
National Childminding Association (NCMA) event	12	1	13
National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) event	11	2	13
Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA) event	8	-	8
TOTAL	42	3	45

Interviewees held a wide range of roles in their settings, from administration, nursery assistant/officer level to managers and owners of settings (figure 1).

Figure 1: Roles of interviewees

CC events interviewees – current role	NDNA events interviewees – current role
Nursery Nurse (n=2)	Nursery Manager (n=6)
Family Resource Co-ordinator	Supervisor
Birth to Three Advisor	Nursery Nurse Assistant
Health and Family Support Co-ordinator	Owner
Nursery Manager	Project Manager for Local Authority (parenting strategy development)
Education Assistant/Outreach	Head of Nursery
Language and Literacy Co-ordinator	Early Years Professional Manager (involved in a Local Authority PPEL project)
Assistant Manager	Deputy Manager
Speech and Language Therapist	
Senior Nursery Officer	NCMA events interviewees – current role
PLA events interviewees – current role	Childminder (n=13)
Development Manager	
Adult Services Officer	
Nursery Nurse	
Owner	
Supervisor	
Pre-school manager	
Deputy Head and SENCO	
Admin officer and toddler group worker	

Interviewees were asked how long they had been in this role. The average (median) was three to five years. However, as the table below reveals, a substantial minority (42 per cent) had been in their current role for less than three years whereas around one in five had been in their job for 13 years or more.

Table 3: Length of service

Length of service	Number	%
0 – 11 months	5	11
1 to 2 years	14	31
3 to 5 years	11	24
6 to 8 years	2	4
9 to 12 years	3	7
13 plus years	10	22
TOTAL	45	*

*Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding

The table below shows the qualification levels of the interviewees (as reported by interviewees and checked against PEAL records). Around half had qualifications below level 5, and half at level 5 or above.

Table 4: Qualifications of interviewees by type of event

Qualification level	Number	%
Level 3 - <i>Level 3 Certificate in Childcare, Level 3 NVQ, A Levels, BTEC ND</i>	7	16
Level 4 - <i>Level 4 Certificate in Early Years or other certificates of Higher Education</i>	16	36
Level 5 - <i>BTEC HND, diplomas of Higher Education, foundation degrees & Level 4 NVQ</i>	7	16
Level 6 - <i>BA Hons, Graduate Certificates & Diplomas</i>	5	11
Level 7 - <i>Masters Degrees, postgraduate certificates & diplomas & Level 5 NVQ</i>	9	20
No response	1	2
TOTAL	45	*

*Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding

The sample of interviewees had attended events across the regions, as outlined in table 5.

Table 5: Interviewees by region and month of training

Region	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
London	4		1		5
Yorkshire and the Humber		2	3	1	6
North West	3	1	3		7
South West			2		2
East of England		10			10
West Midlands		5	2		7
North East		4			4
South East			3		3
East Midlands		1			1
TOTAL	7	23	14	1	45

2.2 Interviews with local authority contacts

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with four contacts from local authorities who had commissioned PEAL training. The sample was drawn from a list of twelve local authorities who commissioned training between September and December 2007. All contacts were sent an email and project information sheet about the evaluation and were followed up with a telephone call.

The telephone interviews with local authority contacts focused on the following topic areas:

- Reasons for commissioning PEAL training.
- Views on the training provided by PEAL.
- Implementation of the learning from PEAL to date (including any monitoring/evaluation of the impact).
- Future plans for using the learning from PEAL.

Interviews lasted around 25 minutes on average and were digitally recorded and transcribed with the informed consent of interviewees. All the interviews were analysed using NVivo 7, a qualitative data analysis package, adopting a thematic approach to data analysis.

3. Experience of PEAL training

All forty-five PEAL interviewees were asked for their views on the PEAL training they had received.

3.1 Reasons for attendance and expectations of training

Table 6 shows that interviewees found out about the PEAL training from a variety of sources, most commonly from their line manager or other colleagues. Other sources of information were local authority or Sure Start training bulletins, PEAL partner organisations (NCMA, NDNA & PLA) or directly from PEAL.

Table 6: How interviewees found out about PEAL training

Source	No.
Manager or colleague	13
Local Authority or Sure Start bulletin/newsletter	8
NCMA	7
NDNA	3
Not sure of source of information	4
Directly from PEAL	2
PLA	1
TOTAL	38

Interviewees were asked to identify their reasons for attending and their expectations of the PEAL training. A majority could see the relevance of the training to their role and setting. While many interviewees reported having prior experience of working towards building relationships with parents and encouraging them to engage with their children's early learning – indeed few felt that they were inexperienced in this area they were nevertheless keen to build on and develop their existing practice. In addition they viewed the training as an opportunity to keep up to date on new research, learning and knowledge in this area, to share ideas on good practice, and to learn from others.

Table 7: Reasons for attending PEAL training

Reason	No.
Training relevant to own role in setting	25
Looking to gain and share ideas around good practice	8
Continued professional development opportunity	5
Links in with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)	2
PEAL training recommended by colleague	3
Free training	1
TOTAL	44

3.2 Content of the training

Overall, interviewees expressed satisfaction with the content of the PEAL training, variously describing it as ‘interesting’, ‘relevant’ and ‘informative’:

‘It was all just so helpful and the way it was put across, it was absolutely brilliant.’ Deputy Manager, NDNA event

‘Some of the practical sessions I found really interesting and putting yourself in that position of a parent...it made you look at a different perception really of how you sometimes come across or how you could sometimes be judgmental.’ Senior Nursery Officer, CC event

Whilst for some, not everything that they heard was new to them, the consensus was that the training had nevertheless been useful, even if it did little more than confirm for them that their policies and practices were ‘along the right tracks’.

‘...it wasn’t a waste of time because it brought to me, I suppose, reassurance that what we were doing, we were doing some very good stuff, but it also brought forward some areas where we could still actually make a difference in our practice as well.’ Language & Literacy Co-ordinator, CC event

‘...it reassured me that actually what I was doing was pretty much what they were trying to tell us, there were just a few bits and pieces that I thought, yeah, I could add that to it, and know it’s going to make a difference.’ Childminder, NCMA event

A small number of interviewees commented that they would have liked more depth on some of the areas covered in the training events, in particular more practical ideas on how to involve parents in their children’s learning, in addition to presenting the research and theory behind it.

‘I had hoped to get and probably didn’t get very much of, was practical strategies for dealing with difficult relationships. What we did get, I guess, was a lot of research, knowledge and information.’ Childminder, NCMA event

‘I thought it was very thorough in looking at the attitudes of practitioners towards parents and thinking about things from parents’ perspectives...but on the actual day I would have liked more emphasis on things to do with parents...I appreciate that it’s really important to get people’s attitudes right but for me I wanted the practical suggestions.’ Nursery Officer, CC event

These interviewees viewed themselves as more seasoned practitioners, already signed up to principles of parental engagement, who were specifically looking for practical strategies to engage with parents.

A few of the more experienced practitioners also felt that the content of the PEAL training was more targeted towards newly qualified practitioners or those who were less confident in dealing with parents. An extreme example of this was an experienced childminder who considered that the training had provided no new ideas nor opportunities to network with other more experienced childminders and therefore constituted a “waste of a day”.

3.3 Delivery of training

Overall, the vast majority of interviewees spoke positively about the training events, describing them as enjoyable, interesting, fun and a good opportunity to network with other practitioners. The delivery of the training was felt to be ‘lively’, ‘good fun’, ‘enjoyable’ and ‘not stuffy’. Some interviewees commented favourably on the range of different ways in which the trainers engaged with attendees, including role-play, group discussions and DVD presentations. For some, it was the more ‘interactive elements’ of the training, including participation in role-plays and other activities, which particularly stuck in interviewee’s minds.

The following comments illustrate the range of feedback received about the training events:

‘I found it a really good day actually...even though it was a room full of strangers when you walked in, there was a really good atmosphere, there were lots of shared practice going on and it was a learning experience....’ Senior Nursery Nurse, CC event

‘...you had the opportunity to work in small groups, and speak to people from all different settings, and areas...And I think that, in itself, was really valuable, because you could get talking to somebody, and they have maybe have had a similar problem...and you can bounce ideas off other people as well.’ Early Years Manager, NDNA event

‘The thing that was valuable for me was that they used a variety of different ways to give you the information. And for me that was really fantastic because it made everything stick in my mind better.’
Childminder, NCMA event

3.4 PEAL resources

All PEAL trainees received a resource pack that contained materials from the training. The packs included:

- PEAL training guide
- PEAL reader

- PEAL activities booklet (containing a series of activities to be completed prior to attending the PEAL training event, to be worked over the equivalent of one day in the setting)
- 28 practice example cards
- CD-ROM containing all the training materials.

The PEAL resource packs were singled out for praise from many interviewees, with terms such as 'user friendly', 'informative', 'professional' and 'fantastic' used to describe the packs.

Many interviewees reported that they had been able to complete the PEAL activities booklet prior to attending the training event, in line with the expectations of the programme.

However, some interviewees described delays in receiving PEAL activity booklets, rendering it impossible for them to complete their pre-course activities, whilst others reported that they simply had not had the time to complete all of the activities prior to attending the training.

A couple of interviewees mentioned that whilst they had found the pre-training preparation useful in reflecting on their own practice, they had assumed that they would have had more of an opportunity to share these insights from their preparatory work with others during the course of the day.

'...I felt that it was a waste of time, because when we got there we never looked at it, or didn't reflect on it, they didn't feedback on it. So that bit, even though it were good for me to do it before I went, I felt that the course didn't really reflect what they'd asked us to go with. They'd asked us to do some groundwork and some thinking, but when we got there, we didn't do anything with it... I was a bit disappointed with the whole thing after that.' Childminder, NCMA event

3.5 Overall satisfaction with PEAL training

Just three interviewees were dissatisfied on balance with the PEAL training. These were all childminders who had each attended a different training event, and expressed disappointment with the PEAL training for a range of different reasons. However, this experience was not typical, and overall, the vast majority of interviewees, regardless of their professional background or level of prior experience, were pleased with the PEAL training they had received. For some, it provided new ideas and strategies to take back to their settings and for other, more experienced, practitioners it provided up to date guidance and a general 'reassurance' that their practice was good.

Over 90 per cent of interviewees said that they would recommend PEAL training to other practitioners; indeed many had already encouraged others to attend the training.

'I would recommend it to everybody that works in early years settings, because there's so many different ideas that you can take away from there. And even if you just do one of them, one of those ideas, you're working towards a better relationship with the parents and helping them understand that they are their children's primary educators, even before they actually come to preschool.' Nursery Supervisor, NDNA event

'I think PEAL's a good way of supporting parents in a non threatening way, through activities with the children...so yeah I recommend it every time.' Development Manager, PLA event

'We recommended it, just said it was very stimulating and gave us a good insight into the early years and parents engagement.' Nursery Nurse, PLA event

Some interviewees felt that PEAL training would be of particular benefit to newly qualified practitioners or those who felt less confident in working with parents.

'I would recommend it perhaps to less experienced practitioners who haven't done much training, I think it would be really, really valuable if they haven't done any training that involved working with parents I think it would be excellent training for them.' Nursery Nurse, CC event

3.6 Implementation of the learning from PEAL training

Although it had been only a few weeks since attending the PEAL training, 35 interviewees reported that they had already started to implement some of the learning in their settings, including all the interviewees who had attended NDNA events (table 8).

Table 8: Implementation of PEAL learning

Event type	Starting to apply the learning	May apply the learning in the future	No plans to use
CC trainee	8	3	0
NCMA trainee	7	3	3
NDNA trainee	13	0	0
PLA trainee	7	1	0
TOTAL	35	7	3

Eight interviewees stated that at the time of interview they had not yet had an opportunity to draw on the PEAL training, but that they might do so in the near future. The main reason for not yet drawing on the PEAL learning was having had insufficient time to reflect on the training and consider whether to adopt any of its principles/ideas into their practice (n=6).

Three interviewees, all childminders, stated that they had no intention of implementing any elements of the PEAL training. As noted earlier, these three

interviewees had expressed disappointment with the training events they had attended, and had not drawn on the training since.

Those interviewed who had used some of the learning from PEAL training had done so in a number of ways, and these are described below.

3.7 Pursuing accreditation

After attending PEAL training, practitioners can seek accreditation at level 3, through City and Guilds, upon the submission of a portfolio. Since the PEAL training, five interviewees had been inspired to sign up for the PEAL accreditation. These included three nursery managers (one based at a Children's Centre, the others based in private settings), a nursery officer (based at a Children's Centre) and a childminder.

In interviews, twenty-five practitioners stated that they were not currently planning to undertake the accreditation. Reasons cited include:

- Already undertaking a course of study (n=8).
- No time at the moment to undertake accreditation (n=6).
- Not sure of the benefit or relevance of accreditation (n=4) (All of these interviewees already felt that they were well qualified).
- Not undertaking accreditation now, but may consider at a later date (n=4).
- Unable to access locations where accreditation is supported (living in rural locations) (n=2).
- Have never considered accreditation (n=1).

3.8 Refreshing existing practice

Ten interviewees said that whilst they had not adopted any specific practice ideas from the PEAL training, they had explored some of the more general ethos of PEAL and integrated this into their own practices. In particular, they felt that PEAL training had acted as a 'reminder' or 'refresher', providing them with ideas to extend and build on existing practices within their settings:

'Yeah, I enjoyed it but... we just felt that it was just reinforcing what we're doing and it was good to know that we are doing it right and ... the parents are involved.' Childminder, NCMA event

'...we are particularly looking for simple ways that we can involve parents like inviting them to provide things for the topic work that we do, which I suppose was something that we were doing anyway but this has reminded us to do it more.' Nursery Nurse, CC event

'...it was a good opportunity to review practice and as you said to set a plan as to things that we may implement subsequently. And yeah, anything to do with partnership with parents is always an ongoing thing, it's not something that's a one off, and so it's always good to just take that opportunity to look at it and to consider what we're doing.' Nursery Owner, NDNA event

3.9 Using PEAL resources in staff training and development

Eight interviewees, the majority of whom were in management roles in private/independent settings reported that they had used their learning and the PEAL resource pack to support and train other members of staff. Mostly this had involved feeding back information in staff meetings. In particular, one nursery manager reported that the pre-course activities booklet had been used with all staff to explore their views on how the setting was meeting the needs of its parents.

Another manager of a pre-school had used the PEAL resource pack extensively with over 40 practitioners as part of training on exploring parental engagement. In particular, they found that the role-play activities for practitioners worked “really well” and “got discussions going”. It was felt that PEAL:

'...had a big influence on staff and it really made them think really hard about how they approach parents, because we do forget, I think you do your job and you're just going along and you're quite happy all the time, so it just brought it all really to the forefront again.' Manager, NDNA event

3.10 Introducing new activities

Some interviewees had initiated specific activities to help engage parents in their children's learning (see figure 3 below). For some, the ideas for their activities came directly from the PEAL training and the PEAL pack. For others, networking with other practitioners at the PEAL events gave them further ideas on how to support parents' engagement. One interviewee who was involved in managing a local authority Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) project had used some of the ideas and ethos of PEAL in creating resources to support practitioners to engage parents in their child's learning, specifically around language and literacy.

Figure 2: New activities introduced since PEAL training

Treasure boxes/travelling teddy bear (n=5)

Sharing equipment in boxes to take home, to encourage parents to engage in their child's learning and share their observations

Story sacks (n=3)

Developing story bags for parents to share and read with their child at home

Sharing observations with pictures and videos (n=2)

Sharing pictures and video observations with parents, planning on the basis of observations

Play projects (n=2)

Working with parents to help them engage with their child's learning through play

Key working

Allocating key workers to children and their parents so practitioners can get to know children and their families better to help the children's learning

Head Start group

Supporting and preparing a group of children and their parents for the transition to primary school helping parents to support their child's learning

Learning Tree

A visual display where parents can place short notes about what their child learns at home, to celebrate ways that children learn and to give parents ideas on activities they can do with their child to support learning

Parent/home observations

Supporting parents to make observations at home about what their child enjoys and how they learn

Home visits

Visiting children and their families at home prior to attending setting, establishing positive early relationships between parents and the setting

Many of the specific activities identified in figure 2 aim to encourage parents, including in some instances fathers, to become more involved in the setting. They are also intended to build better relationships and to demonstrate to parents how they are important to their child's learning.

A number of settings had introduced treasure boxes, an activity which parents and children alike were reported to really enjoy. In one instance, a setting developed 14 boxes in consultation with a group of parent volunteers, who compiled each of the boxes and then demonstrated these to other interested parents.

Elsewhere, story sacks had been developed as part of a speech and communication programme. The packs contained books and suggested exercises that parents could do with their child to aid their communication skills.

In another example, a childminder introduced a travelling teddy bear, with a suitcase of mementoes, birth certificate and diary, that children could take home for the weekend. Parents were asked to record something in the diary

or take pictures of the bear involved in an activity with the child or the whole family.

3.11 Barriers to implementation

At the time of interviews, the majority of practitioners were in the early stages of implementing the learning from PEAL training and few interviewees had faced major difficulties. As most interviewees were building on existing policies and practices, in many cases barriers encountered were seen as the 'usual' issues around time, capacity and resources that settings have to deal with every day and it was hoped that work to engage parents would gather momentum over the following months. Overall, most interviewees considered ideas from the PEAL training "easy to implement" thus far.

3.12 Future plans

Interviewees' enthusiasm for the PEAL model of engaging parents was evident when they discussed their future plans for developing practice in their settings. Most of the practitioners interviewed planned to continue developing their work with parents and drawing on the PEAL resources. Many interviewees commented on the introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage in September 2008 and its emphasis on parental engagement, and felt that the information and guidance they had received from PEAL would prove to be very useful in the coming months.

Eleven interviewees had specific plans for activities to engage with parents in the near future and were busy planning and securing resources. Areas of work include:

- Training staff in their setting (n=6).
- Consultation with parents about the setting and the extent to which it meets their needs(n=2).
- Developing activities to involve more fathers in the setting (n=2).
- Rolling out the use of treasure boxes.

Several interviewees (mainly from the private and voluntary sector) stated that they had plans to use the PEAL materials for staff training in the coming months, despite the practical and logistical challenges in arranging such training, suggesting that PEAL was worth the upheaval involved:

'We are having an in service training day coming up this year, which is always a difficult thing to do in a day nursery, but we've actually notified our parents that three of our nurseries that will be doing that. And as part of that we will be using some of the materials from the PEAL training. As I said particularly the role play, which we thought was good, just to do that training with staff about how we interact with parents and how we deal with the situations.' Nursery Owner, NDNA event

3.13 Impact of PEAL training

The overarching aim of the PEAL training programme is to help create an early years workforce with the skills, knowledge and drive to build respectful relationships with parents. PEAL seeks to support early years practitioners to work in partnership with parents, to support their children's learning. Interviews with practitioners explored the impact that the PEAL learning has had on their own practice, their settings and on parents and families to date.

3.14 Impact on practitioners

Practitioners identified a number of ways in which PEAL training had made a positive contribution to their own practice and personal and professional development.

- Improved knowledge and understanding

One of the key objectives of PEAL training is to improve workforce knowledge the role of parents in their children's early learning, and to raise practitioners' awareness of the barriers to parental engagement and strategies on how to overcome these. Two thirds of interviewees reported that the training had indeed enhanced their knowledge, understanding or awareness. Specifically, interviewees reported that they had gained:

- Increased knowledge of the policy and research that underpins parental involvement in their child's early learning.
- Improved understanding of the needs of parents.
- A greater awareness of some of the barriers to parental involvement and strategies to help overcome these.

The comments below illustrate the ways in which some individuals had benefited from the training:

'A reminder to keep parents' involvement high on the agenda and not forget about getting them, keeping them involved, making that an important aspect of what we do. It's very easy to concentrate all your efforts on the children and I think it was a good reminder that parents need to be kept involved as well.' Nursery Nurse, CC event

'A better knowledge of how to work with, how to involve parents in children's learning and how to work with parents. We talk to parents and tell them what their child's been doing and things like that, but I think we do have to bear in mind that parents are a child's main educator and how we do need good relationships with all parents.' Deputy Head, PLA event

'Because just from starting out there's nothing that I'd had, courses I'd previously done, they hadn't really given information on how to involve the parents or that you should involve the parents to be honest. It's been learning that.' Childminder, NCMA event

As previously mentioned, the majority of interviewees reported that they were already involving parents in their children's early learning and had prior knowledge of some of the issues involved. However, they welcomed the reinforcement of their existing knowledge provided by the training and reassurance that their own practice and settings' policies were not 'too wide off the mark.'

'Well, as I say, I think I found that it did enhance my knowledge base, in terms of strategies to support parents and just I think reaffirmed that what I'm doing is right as it were.' Development Manager, PLA event

A number of interviewees stated that they had increased their knowledge around parental engagement through talking to other practitioners at the training and hearing firsthand about their experiences of involving parents.

'...I think talking to the other people in the group we came up with a lot of ideas that set the ball rolling that what we could do here. So I think it was a lot of food for thought that came from the training, it was good.'
Nursery Manager, CC event

- Increased confidence and motivation

Another objective of the PEAL training is to develop practitioners' confidence in building relationships with parents and many of the interviewees reported that this had indeed occurred.

'I would probably say that I'm a more confident and probably more competent childminder from having being able to reach out to the parents. And having the background knowledge that I've had from the PEAL course, I'd probably say if I hadn't had that information then I would be stabbing in the dark, if you like.' Childminder, NCMA event

'So personally it's probably given me more confidence to know that I'm doing the right thing but also if I do need some tips and things I can go back and read the booklet again and look through what the pack includes.' Senior Nursery Officer, CC event

Some reported feeling more motivated to reflect on their practice and to make changes, as highlighted below:

'Well it's given me my motivation back, I think with practitioners... who've been doing things for a long time, sometimes motivating you to start something new or to question what you're doing is very difficult. I think with the course that wasn't a problem, I felt very motivated when I left.'
Nursery Manager, NDNA event

'I'd come to a bit of a plateau with parents, so it just give us a bit more of a boost. And I thought, right I'm going to do this, I'm going to give it a go ... a bit of a confidence boost to think that I can change things...'
Childminder, NCMA event

- Practical ideas and strategies on how to engage parents

As highlighted earlier, many of the interviewees gained new ideas for engaging parents in their settings. These ideas and strategies had come from the facilitated training events and PEAL resource pack, and from talking to other practitioners on the day. Eight interviewees in particular reported that these practice ideas and strategies had had a major impact on their practice.

'I picked up some really useful tips and strategies on how I might work with parents differently in the future.' Development Manager, PLA event

Another interviewee felt they came away with a clearer plan for developing an idea to set up a fathers group, something they were really keen to do, but not sure how to get started.

'It [PEAL] really helped I think, it really helped with ideas because we really needed ideas because we didn't know any other nursery that was doing a fathers group.' Nursery Officer, CC event

- Improved skills in engaging and building relationships with parents

PEAL training also seeks to enhance the skills of practitioners in engaging with parents in their settings. Seven interviewees felt that their skills in approaching and communicating with parents had improved since attending a PEAL event. In particular, these interviewees reported feeling more skilled in approaching and sharing information about learning with parents, and reported that they were taking more time to listen to parents. One interviewee felt that one of the most important skills they had developed was the ability to give parents

"...time to talk and for me to listen to them" Head of Nursery, NDNA event

The following interviewee describes how the quality and depth of communication has improved as a result of PEAL:

'I think I've tried involving the parents a lot more. Before the PEAL training I was giving, the parents of the younger children had a diary to take home, that I was writing in to let them know what their child had done. But after the PEAL training I was actually discussing it with the parents as well, rather than just giving them the diary and saying, off you go, see you later...' Childminder, NCMA event

Another interviewee discussed how they were currently developing plans to encourage parents into the setting more often and felt that the training had improved their ability to approach parents:

'I think it gave me an insight into better ways to approach parents. Because I think you can get stale in what you do and you take it for granted that you have got a relationship with the parents...' Nursery Manager, CC event

3.15 Impact on settings

Interviewees who had used the learning from PEAL were able to identify a number of ways in which this was beginning to have a positive impact on their settings. It is important to note that at the time of the interviews, settings were in the early stages of putting plans to develop parental engagement into practice. As a result, it was difficult for some of the practitioners to determine the extent to which the learning from PEAL training had affected their settings' policies and practices. This was particularly the case for those settings where some work to engage with parents had been in place prior to the training and where PEAL was seen to have contributed to an ongoing scheme of work or pre-existing ethos.

- Improvements to practice

As highlighted earlier, many of the settings were inspired by PEAL to develop existing practices or set up new activities to engage with parents. At the time of interviews, 35 settings had started to apply the learning from PEAL, developing their existing practices and activities and in the case of 16 settings, setting up new activities to engage with parents.

Much of this work to date had involved finding opportunities to share information with parents about their child's progress or news from the setting in interesting and informative ways, such as developing newsletters, diaries and visual displays. Other developments have involved attempts to make settings more welcoming to parents, to encourage them to come in and chat to staff. Additional strategies have included open days or evening events and having staff on hand to 'meet and greet' parents when they drop off and pick up their children.

- Better trained staff

Many of the interviewees reported sharing the learning from PEAL with colleagues. In most cases this had been done informally through discussion or reporting on the training and action points in team meetings. Eight interviewees reported that PEAL training had been cascaded to other staff in their settings via more formal use of the PEAL training materials. Those who had used PEAL materials to train other staff in their settings reported that as a result their staff were better informed and confident when dealing with parents and more motivated and focused on the needs of parents.

One interviewee had used PEAL training materials to train around 40 staff and said that as a result they were perceived to be more confident in their role:

'I think the staff are more confident about what they do and ... have a greater understanding of their roles. I think that's helped, it's made them think from both sides of it, which it even did to me really. It made you think about both sides of the fence: what's it like being a practitioner talking to a parent, but what's it like being a parent talking to a practitioner?' Manager, NDNA event

- Improved communications and relationships with parents

Nine interviewees reported that work implemented to date had resulted in improved relationships with their parents. For example, one interviewee reported how -inspired by the PEAL training -their setting had reviewed its relationship with parents and, as a result, decided to put in place strategies to strengthen contact with parents

'...it's taught us to become closer to our parents...and build up a relationship with our parents a lot more thoroughly than just taking the children off them in the mornings and then letting them go in the afternoons. So we have had to build up quite a good relationship with our parents.' Nursery Supervisor, NDNA event

This childminder has reframed the focus of communications with parents as a result of attending a PEAL event:

'I'd probably say that it [PEAL] didn't have very much impact in my policies and the way that I worked because I had already felt that it was important to engage with the parents. But it changed how I've been trying to get the engagement. Whereas I'd probably of thought it was enough just to have the discussions at the beginning of the day and at the end of the day. I'm now trying to get the parent and also myself to see that it's also working together for the development of the child.' Childminder, NCMA event

Another setting thought they had improved the quality of communication with parents, sharing information about the curriculum and the setting more than previously:

'...I think possibly as a result of PEAL we've now become a little bit better at displaying early years curriculum information or showing parents how what we're doing is helping early learning, which maybe in the past we weren't. We were just doing it anyway but we weren't really explicitly telling parents that we were doing it.' Speech and Language Therapist, CC event

Another interviewee described how PEAL had prompted plans to widen parental engagement to include fathers:

'...I feel the practice and policies was already good. The only thing I think I sort of thought about was the father's involvement. We don't have a lot of fathers' involvement in the centre. We do have some fathers that are involved, but not a lot. And it may be to think about what I was offering and ways that we could perhaps involve fathers more.' Adult Services Officer, PLA event

3.16 Impact on parents and families

At the time of interviews, practitioners were just starting to develop or expand their work to engage parents in their children's learning. Consequently, it was difficult for many interviewees to identify and evidence the effects of their work on parents and families. Nonetheless, a number of interviewees thought that activities to help build parental engagement were starting to have a positive impact on parents. For example, some felt that parents appeared to have developed self esteem and confidence, which in turn resulted in their feeling more comfortable in the settings and when talking to practitioners.

One practitioner reported that their work to engage with parents and increase their understanding of the important role that they play in their children's learning was resulting in parents feeling empowered to support their children.

'I think the outcomes are that they tend to see that they can support their children's learning, because there's the self esteem, they're very proud.' Nursery Manager, NDNA event

Another interviewee reported that parents were perceived to be more confident and happy and more were getting involved in the work of the setting via a parents group. As a result, parents at this setting were starting to interact with each other and form friendships, reducing social isolation.

'There's more parents now coming in smiling and laughing than they did at the beginning, which is really nice and there's a lot more parents getting involved in parent groups now than ever before, and before I think when they started they didn't feel like they could ask about things but now they're confident.' Nursery Officer, CC event

'I think they feel a bit more relaxed knowing that their child is basically being looked out for on a personal point of view, rather than, it's a job....and that you are involving the parents with the child's learning. I think that's made a lot of the parents a lot more relaxed, a lot more happy, with them knowing that we are all working towards the same sort of ideas.' Childminder, NCMA event

One interviewee thought that the children were starting to benefit as parents became more involved in the setting, as parents now had a better idea of what their children do at the setting and vice-versa.

'I think the children have actually benefited in the fact that they feel their mums and dads are part of it, it's not something that they're going to and going home to, and I think the parents got a different approach to 'what have you done today'?' Manager, NDNA event

There was also evidence of changes within homes. Interviewees from settings that had introduced treasure boxes and story sacks reported that parents were beginning to use the resources at home with their children. One interviewee reported that parents were starting to record observations about how their child enjoyed the activities and what they learned from the experience. Another interviewee described their success with story sacks, including encouraging fathers to read to their children, to use puppets and to take pictures of the story in action.

The 'travelling teddy bear' described in section 3.10 has been involved in lots of activities including going to the park, having a bath, family holidays and attending the birth of a baby – all of which has been recorded in his diary and his adventures shared with the other children at the setting. The childminder reported that the bear and diary had helped stimulate parents' ideas for things to do with their children. In turn, the childminder was gaining a greater insight into what the children do at home and incorporating this understanding into planning activities in the setting.

4. Interviews with local authority contacts

This section presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with four local authority contacts who had commissioned PEAL training between September and December 2007. The nature and purpose of the local authority training element is outlined below, followed by a discussion of the key points and issues raised and the ways in which the PEAL learning has been disseminated in their localities to date.

4.1 The nature and purpose of PEAL training for local authorities

As part of its commitment to developing the workforce, PEAL training was offered to local authorities that had received funding to run Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) project². Between September and December 2007, 12 local authorities commissioned 13 PEAL training events. The main purpose of the local authority training was to take the PEAL model of working with parents 'closer to home', delivering the training to practitioners and professionals more involved in practice development, training and planning. It was envisaged that attendees would be in positions where they could help to spread the message of working in partnership with parents and help to embed some of the principles and practices suggested by PEAL across a wide range of settings.

Each local authority had the option of commissioning one of three training packages as set out in figure 4. The host organisation in the local authority was responsible for selecting and recruiting attendees to the training event and providing the venue and refreshments on the day. The individual who commissioned/organised the training event usually also attended the training themselves.

² In the summer 2007 £9m funding was made available to 41 local authorities in disadvantaged areas to support their work to connect with and involve parents in their children's learning. Local authorities submitted proposals for specific areas of work, which could involve training and support for early years staff, developing sustainable programmes of work (for example parent involvement networks, parent volunteer and outreach programmes, and expanding on existing programmes). The PPEL projects were funded from September 2007 to March 2008.

Figure 3: PEAL training options offered to local authorities

<p>Option 1 <i>PEAL training package: one day of pre-course preparation and one facilitated training day from PEAL trainer(s)</i></p> <p>Option 2 <i>Two days training and consultancy: Day one allows attendees to explore the PEAL model and the training materials. Day two enables attendees time for strategic planning of how to roll out PEAL training/ideas in their locality</i></p> <p>Option 3 <i>Two days of training for experienced trainers (already in training or development roles) who have already attended PEAL training and wish to deliver PEAL training in a local authority or regional area</i></p>

Source: PEAL website

4.2 PEAL training in the sample of four local authorities

Semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with four contacts from local authorities that had commissioned PEAL training. Two of the contacts represented localities in London, and the other two were from authorities in the East and West Midlands.

Table 9 provides details of the training options commissioned and attendees for the four sample authorities. Local authorities were in charge of targeting and recruiting attendees for their PEAL training event(s).

Table 9: Details of the PEAL training commissioned

Local Authority	Training option	Who attended
A	Option 1	Around 20 practitioners and professionals attended the training. This included nine learning mentors involved in PPEL project. Training also offered to qualified teachers and managers of day nursery and pre-schools in locality.
B	Option 1	Targeted staff at 13 Children's Centres. The training was also offered to practitioners in early years centres and the private and voluntary sector.
C	Option 3	Commissioned training for a team of local authority staff, including advisers, early years development officers, and some staff based in Sure Start centres. Aimed to develop a core training team that could disseminate PEAL across the locality. Around 14 practitioners attended in total.
D	Option 1	Training was targeted at practitioners from children's centres, nursery schools and teams who provide family support. The PPEL co-ordinator also attended the course. Around 40 practitioners were targeted for PEAL training.

Contacts were involved, to varying degrees, in the decisions to commission and organise PEAL training. Contacts reported that there had been enthusiasm for the PEAL training from those involved in the decision-making

processes and this informed their reasons for commissioning the training. For local authorities A and B, supporting staff involved in PPEL projects was a primary reason for commissioning the training, although the training was also targeted at other groups of professionals. For local authority C, the focus was on developing a team of trainers who could deliver PEAL training across the locality:

'We commissioned our training for a team of local authority staff and that included advisers, early years development officers, but also some folks who work out in Sure Starts. And we did that because we wanted to develop a core training team that could potentially disseminate PEAL across the [authority]. So we didn't focus our training on practitioners as such, we focused it on advisory service and local authority staff that could then cascade the training on.' Local Authority C

Local authority D held two option one training events targeting a wide range of practitioners in a variety of local settings. Whilst PPEL project staff did not attend the local authority organised training event, some staff involved in those projects had attended other training events organised by PEAL.

Contacts described how the targeting and recruitment of attendees had worked in practice, reporting few major problems. Any difficulties encountered were seen as the 'usual' issues around people's time commitments. To varying degrees, two contacts reported that they had to widen their recruitment processes to make up the numbers and to ensure more of a balance between practitioners and those involved in practice planning and development. However, despite these minor issues, all contacts were pleased with the training reach and attendance.

4.3 Feedback on the commissioned training

All of the contacts interviewed had attended all or some parts of the PEAL training events held and reported their own first-hand experiences of the training. All were very enthusiastic about the training and the PEAL model of working in partnership with parents. One contact described being "...highly impressed by the content", a view which was broadly shared by the other interviewees.

The quality of the trainers was also cited by two of the contacts as really adding value to the PEAL message. All agreed that the delivery of the training, with its extensive use of discussion and role-play was useful in bringing some of the issues around parental engagement to life and stimulating further debate and learning.

In addition, local authorities had collected a mixture of formal and informal feedback from attendees about the locally-commissioned PEAL training. Contacts reported that this feedback had been very positive and most attendees appeared to have left the training events more informed,

knowledgeable about parental involvement, and ready to take the learning back to their settings and roles.

'Feedback for the commissioned days was very good indeed...the quality of the training that we received as a local authority was very good, we had two very experienced, very capable high quality trainers. And it was a very good experience and it really left people very fired up about the materials.' Local Authority B

'I know by speaking to them [attendees] afterwards they were very impressed with it and they were... able to bring it into their teaching and part of the settings that they're in...' Local Authority A

'...we had evaluation forms from everybody and the feedback was really very positive. It's a good course, it's a well known course and it's known to us in [name of locality] that's really why we went down that road. The feedback was very, very positive about the whole day...' Local Authority D

4.4 Dissemination of PEAL learning

The interviews with local authority contacts took place a few weeks or months following the training. It was reported by interviewees that learning from the PEAL training had been most immediately used by those practitioners and professionals working on PPEL projects to inform that particular area of work. For example, the contact from local authority A reported that a team of practitioners involved in the PPEL had made use of a number of the ideas in the training pack to engage parents in their project, focusing on promoting outdoor play for boys. These ideas -in particular the treasure box -had been adapted for their own project.

Another contact described how some more senior practitioners had started to disseminate the learning from the PEAL training within their settings. It was reported that

'...the roll out so far has been really on the back of the individuals who attended and using elements of the training in work and discussion with peers or in training sessions that they have delivered as part of their job. Those, for instance, who are early years consultants who actually have a role and responsibility for training early years practitioners, have actually used elements of that training to challenge and raise awareness as part of their actual role in the last year.' Local Authority B

The contact felt that the PEAL training had been put to good use in raising the profile of parental engagement and rolling out some of the concepts in settings.

Local authority C specifically selected attendees who would go on to deliver PEAL training in the local area. This authority had commissioned a two-day

course, using the second day to plan how to use PEAL to enhance existing training programmes, and how PEAL could be deployed in the training of Children's Centre workers. Since the training, the local authority had been developing a two-pronged approach: rolling out PEAL training to Children's Centre staff and developing a discrete PEAL training course to be run through their courses and conference programme from summer 2008.

4.5 Perceived successes to date

At the time of interviews, the rollout of PEAL learning across the four local authorities was still at a very early stage, with these local authorities in the process of putting their plans into place. It was therefore difficult for contacts to identify any medium or longer term impacts from their work to embed the learning from PEAL. Contacts did however reflect on what they felt were some of the immediate successes stemming from the commissioned training and subsequent development of plans to roll out PEAL.

It was agreed that the PEAL training and its model of working in partnership with parents to support their children's learning had made a valuable contribution to PPEL projects. One contact felt that PEAL training, along with other initiatives such as local PPEL projects had been really useful in raising the profile of parental partnership and the challenges of developing "real engagement" with parents, particularly among senior policy makers. They felt that as a result of these initiatives there was greater "cultural commitment" locally for parental engagement and noted that whilst there would inevitably be challenges ahead in terms of sustaining the momentum, this was nevertheless a positive development to which PEAL training had clearly contributed.

The contact from local authority C felt that using the second day of training to look at the authority's plans for early years and to think about how PEAL could enhance its agenda had been particularly valuable. This had enabled the local authority to plan how to build on parental engagement in a more "joined up way."

4.6 Barriers to rolling out PEAL

Contacts were asked whether any difficulties had been experienced in the local authorities' subsequent use of the PEAL training. Only one local authority suggested that they had encountered any barriers and had to revise their plans accordingly:

'The barriers are the usual barriers, which are time and money and capacity. So what we've had to do, we started off with a very big plan and we've had to rationalise it in terms of starting off smaller and building.' Local Authority C

4.7 Future plans

In some cases, it had only been a few weeks since PEAL training had been delivered to the local authority, and therefore much of the work to date had involved planning how best to roll out the PEAL model. However all the contacts reported that there was a commitment in their areas to draw on the training already received and to find ways to expand the reach of PEAL and their plans are presented in table 10. These plans involve working in partnership with a wide range of players including early years settings, early years consultants and advisors and local networks. In addition to rolling out the PEAL training, all local authorities had plans to monitor and evaluate the impact of these initiatives on parents' engagement with settings and with their children's learning.

Table 10: Plans to roll out PEAL training

Local Authority	Future plans
A	Planning to deliver more PEAL training to staff in the locality involved in building on the work/learning from the PPEL project work.
B	Local authority planning to roll out PEAL training in two localities, using children's centres as a lead to support networks of practitioners in each area. The local authority plan to target the training to early years co-ordinators. Progress will be monitored via monthly meetings. In addition, the local authority will involve their parent participation forum to monitor the effectiveness of the training on practice and involve their parent mentors in work to support relationships between parents and practitioners.
C	Starting to offer PEAL training courses for practitioners from different settings in the locality. In addition, PEAL training materials are being used in Children's Centres to train staff.
D	Local authority planning to commission more PEAL training and to develop these plans over the coming months. In addition, the local authority is organising a follow up event in autumn 2008 for those who attended the PEAL training last year, to explore their use of the learning to date and to assess the impact of PEAL on their practice.

5. Conclusions

The evaluation of PEAL training examined the following questions:

- How was the training received by participants?
- What was the actual and potential impact of the training on the workforce, early years settings, parents and children?

5.1 How was the training received by participants?

The PEAL training was well-received by the vast majority of attendees. These training experiences were generally felt to be enjoyable and stimulating, and trainees were particularly positive about the participatory elements of the training, the expertise of trainers, the quality of the training materials and resources, and the opportunity to network and learn from other participants.

For many participants the training provided a timely refresher and reminder of the importance of communication with parents and of parental involvement in children's learning. The training provided an opportunity for reflection and re-focus, and presented many participants with specific ideas and strategies for parental engagement.

5.2 What was the actual and potential impact of the training on the workforce, early years settings, parents and children?

There are early indications that the PEAL training has already had some positive impact on practitioners and volunteers, the settings they work in, and on parents and children.

Practitioners described the following range of benefits from the training they received:

- Improved knowledge and understanding of issues relating to parental involvement in children's learning.
- Increased confidence and motivation to communicate with parents.
- Practical ideas and strategies for working with parents.
- Aspiration to further professional or personal development.

In the weeks following their training, many participants had used their learning in a variety of ways to:

- Seek out opportunities to communicate with parents.

- Implement new activities for parents and children.
- Share their learning with staff teams through sharing or cascading training.

The timing of the evaluation meant that there had been little time for participants to have implemented changes. Nevertheless, some practitioners reported that they were beginning to observe an increased confidence among their parents to communicate with staff about their child's progress. This is encouraging in terms of the programme's longer-term impact on children.