



Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP)

Strand 3: Workforce development

Key messages from evaluation

Background

ELPP Strand 3: Workforce development ran between February 2007 and March 2008. The overarching aim of the project was to help create and support an early years workforce with the skills, knowledge and disposition to build respectful relationships with parents of children under 3, and to help parents to support their children's innate readiness to learn. In addition, the project aimed to extend early years practitioners' continued professional development.

Strand 3 of the ELPP was developed by the National Children's Bureau (NCB) and Parenting UK (PUK) and delivered by a consortium of organisations: NCB, the National Childminding Association (NCMA), the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) and the Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA). The programme of work under this strand involved:

- a national roll-out of Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) training
- a complementary programme of training delivered by 15 subcontracted voluntary and community sector (VCS) organisations
- accreditation of training.

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.

PEAL training

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

The aim of the PEAL training programme is to support practitioners in developing work to engage parents in their children's learning. The programme involves preparatory activities for

practitioners to reflect on their current practice followed by a day's training. These activities explore key elements of the PEAL model – authentic relationships, communication and partnership with parents – and examine the links between current research into what works best and why.

PEAL training was offered to practitioners working with young children in a wide range of home-based and group settings through a series of regional events. PEAL training packages were also offered directly to those local authorities in receipt of Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) project funding.



Complementary training delivered by subcontracted VCS organisations

Fifteen VCS organisations were also contracted to deliver training programmes to the early years workforce as part of ELPP Strand 3. In almost every case, these were training packages that were already in use or development by the organisations concerned. These programmes were complementary to the generic training offered by PEAL in that many of them were focused either on engaging with a specific category of parent (for example, young parents, or fathers), or on engagement with a particular focus or purpose (for example, family learning, parenting support, or speech and language issues). Other training programmes focused on facilitation skills for early years workers, to enable them to engage with parents in groups.

The VCS programmes varied considerably in their length and intensity. While many were one- or two-day courses, others were spread over a number of weeks and required additional private study from participants.

Training participants

Altogether around 6,500 practitioners received training within the Strand 3 programme. They came from a wide range of different settings and backgrounds, including children's centres, nurseries, playgroups and, in the case of childminders, homes. Around nine out of ten participants were white and over 95 per cent were female.

About the evaluation

NCB's Research, Evidence and Evaluation Department was commissioned to evaluate Strand 3 of the ELPP. This summary draws upon findings from the following evaluation activities:

- 45 semi-structured telephone interviews with practitioners who attended PEAL training events
- semi-structured telephone interviews with representatives from four local authorities who commissioned PEAL training
- analysis and synthesis of evaluation reports produced by the 15 subcontracted VCS organisations.

Interviews with practitioners and commissioners of PEAL training took place between three and seven months after they had received PEAL training. Similarly, most of the evaluations conducted by VCS organisations focused on immediate feedback from training participants. Therefore the evaluation findings presented here are principally focused on the immediate impacts of the training programme upon participating individuals; this evaluation is not able to capture



longer term changes in settings or subsequent effects on parents and children. Nevertheless, some practitioners reported changes being implemented within their settings and early evidence of impact on parents and children.

Feedback about the training itself

The evaluation suggests that, overall, the training delivered within Strand 3 of the ELPP was very positively received by the vast majority of participants. Feedback from across the programme suggests that the trainers were highly skilled and the programmes well designed to create a varied and stimulating experience. Most participants reported that they had come away from the training with specific ideas and strategies that they could use in their workplace. The PEAL resources in particular were highly praised.

The subject matter of the training was felt to be both relevant and interesting. For some, it provided a timely refresher and reminder of the importance of communication with parents and of parental involvement in their children's learning. Several of these training programmes set out to challenge assumptions and preconceptions about the respective roles of parents and early years practitioners, and participants welcomed the opportunity to reflect on their practice.

Some programmes, including PEAL, involved participatory and interactive elements, such as discussion and role-play. These were enthusiastically received, as were aspects of some programmes which incorporated the 'user perspective', either using DVD or direct presentations by parents.

'The course has been very good. Well run, everyone was included and enabled to join in. Well presented and above all, practical and useful.' **VCS programme trainee**



'This is a new area of work for me and now I feel fully confident and clear. Very excited about the work and motivated as a result of such good training. All my queries and concerns were addressed. A very enjoyable and informative course. A real treat for me that will eventually benefit future generations!'

VCS programme trainee

'A reminder to keep parents' involvement high on the agenda and not forget about getting them [and] 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, PEAL trainee

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

Development manager, PEAL trainee

Implementing the learning

The short timescale of the Strand 3 programme meant that at the time of the evaluation there had been little opportunity for participants to implement changes in their settings. However, we did find evidence of practitioners beginning to make changes at an individual level. Examples of such actions resulting directly from the training included:

- initiating specific activities to help engage parents in their children's learning (for example, using story sacks and treasure boxes with parents and children, sharing observations with parents and home visits)
- drawing on the learning and materials from training to 'refresh' their existing knowledge and practice
- using training materials in staff training and development
- pursuing accreditation for their learning.

In addition, there were numerous examples of practitioners who reported an intention to

implement broader changes within their settings, for example by setting up consultations with parents, rolling out staff training programmes or developing specific activities to engage fathers.

Impact on practitioners

Participants reported a number of ways in which the training they had received within Strand 3 had impacted upon them as individuals.

• Improved knowledge and understanding

While for some the training reinforced their existing understanding and practices, others were presented with new ideas. PEAL and several of the courses delivered within the VCS programme included a theoretical perspective to underpin their practice. This was an approach which many participants found stimulating and valuable.

What comes across most strongly from both interviews with PEAL trainees and the VCS evaluation reports is the way in which the various programmes raised participants' awareness, both about the needs and perspectives of parents, and about their own attitudes and practices. Many mentioned the importance of listening to parents. Programmes focusing specifically on engaging with fathers appear to have been particularly effective as 'eye-openers' to the barriers experienced by men.

'I have learned so much ... [that] how parents feel rather than how we feel as practitioners is the best way forward.'

VCS programme trainee

'Heightened awareness of the needs of others will impact on my presentation of information and engagement with parents.'

VCS programme trainee

'One thing in particular I have become aware of is that I am more engaging with mothers than fathers. This will change!'

VCS programme trainee

• Increased confidence and motivation

Simply providing practitioners with the requisite knowledge, understanding and a range of strategies is not enough on its own to bring about change in the workplace, and hence benefits to children and families. Practitioners need to feel confident and motivated to implement what they have learned and it seems that the Strand 3 programmes were effective in this respect also.

'I've learned a great deal, but the most important thing is my confidence. I now feel I can facilitate a group.'

VCS programme trainee

'I'd come to a bit of a plateau with parents, so it just gave me a bit of a boost ... a bit of a confidence boost to think that I can change things.' **Childminder, PEAL trainee**

'I would probably say that I'm a more confident and probably more competent childminder from having been able to reach out to the parents.' **Childminder, PEAL trainee**

• **The wherewithal to engage with parents**

The evaluation found that many participants came away from their training well-equipped with strategies, ideas and skills to enable them to implement the learning in their everyday practices. Reflection on practice was a central part of the training offered through the Strand 3 programme, and trainees reported that they had been helped to challenge some of their existing practices and to develop new ideas and ways of working with parents.

'I picked up some really useful tips and strategies on how I might work with parents differently in the future.' **Development manager, PEAL trainee**

'I have been giving 'behaviour management' advice for years ... this training has, however, given me a different insight ... I always ask about all the family now, and observe general family life before dishing out solutions that may not work.' **VCS programme trainee**

'When running groups with parents I am much more aware of finding out what they would like from sessions, what are their needs, rather than just my perception of what as a professional I think they need.' **VCS programme trainee**

• **Personal and professional development**

Not all courses were accredited during the lifetime of the Strand 3 programme. However, a significant minority of training participants considered taking up this option, either at the time or subsequently. Others were inspired to undertake further training or seek out new employment opportunities.

'The main outcome for me was when I saw an advert for a family support worker for Sure Start ... I went for an interview and a lot of questions were around running parenting and other groups. I used all the ideas and information from this course, and obviously it did the trick as I got the job.' **VCS programme trainee**

Impact on settings

Even within the few months since the training, signs of change were being reported in some settings. Many settings were inevitably still in the early stages of putting plans to develop parental engagement into practice. Nonetheless,

participants were able to identify the emerging impact of training on their settings, and there appeared to be a clear intention to continue to make changes.

• **Improving communications and relationships with parents**

The evaluation found evidence that ideas from the Strand 3 training programmes about engaging with parents had been taken back and implemented in settings. For example:

- environmental changes, to create a more welcoming atmosphere for parents
- more information being shared with parents
- changes to the ways in which settings communicated with parents in writing through written publicity, displays, newsletters and diaries
- attempts being made to reach and build relationships with more – or different groups of – parents than previously (for example fathers, parents working full-time, and parents not already in contact with Children's Centres).

'It does not take much and only a few minutes to make some changes in a room so as to make parents feel welcomed and nurtured.' **VCS programme trainee**

'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.' **Nursery supervisor, PEAL trainee**



'In our publicity we now are clear in terms of 'Mums and Dads' and not 'parents/carers'. We are planning to run workshops specifically for dads in each calendar quarter. We are starting with the importance of play and the importance of father-child relationship.' **VCS programme trainee**

'We started with displays and handouts to take home, and this is encouraging more parents to be involved in the setting when they can. It has improved the way we communicate together about children.' **VCS programme trainee**

• Better trained staff and consistency of approach

A number of participants who had completed training programmes reported positive effects on the whole of their staff team and the ethos of the workplace, either because team members had trained together, or because learning had subsequently been shared or cascaded. It was reported that this had had positive impacts on staff confidence, motivation and attitude to parents.

'Work together as a 'whole centre team', to include staff, parents, children, governors and the wider community.' **VCS programme trainee**

'Full staff cooperation, more consistency with information and advice given to parents.' **VCS programme trainee**

'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 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, PEAL trainee**

Impact on children and families

The evaluation was taking place when participants were just starting to implement their learning from the training they had received. Consequently, it was difficult for many interviewees, or for VCS organisations in their evaluation reports, to identify and evidence the effects of their work on parents and families. Nonetheless, some examples of emerging impact on children and their families were provided from a small range of settings. While this evidence is anecdotal, it does nevertheless suggest that the training delivered to practitioners in Strand 3 had the potential to, within a relatively short period of time, make a positive difference to children and families.

For example, it was reported by some that, as a result of changed attitudes, practices or

activities, parents had developed self-esteem and confidence, which in turn resulted in their feeling more at ease in the settings, and comfortable talking to practitioners, including about their children's progress. Others observed that parents were becoming more involved in settings and with other parents. Improved communication was, in some instances, encouraging parents to continue with activities or ideas from the setting with their child at home.

'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, PEAL trainee**

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

'It's been lovely to have parents telling me the things that they have tried with their children at home have been successful.' **VCS programme trainee**

Conclusions: Key messages

- There is clearly a huge appetite within the early years workforce for training in engaging parents and many of the courses in the Strand 3 programme were over-subscribed. The introduction of the Early Years Foundation Stage in 2008 means that demand is unlikely to diminish.
- The programmes within Strand 3 have demonstrated that they are equally relevant and applicable to practitioners across the workforce, from newly qualified or inexperienced staff to those in managerial positions. The opportunity for reflection and to challenge assumptions and preconceptions was broadly welcomed.
- For large numbers of participants the training was inspiring; many reported feeling more confident about working in partnership with parents, and motivated to develop their practice and make changes within their settings.
- Although a relatively short time had elapsed between the training and the evaluation, a range of ideas and strategies presented within the training courses had already been implemented by participants. Often these involved fairly minor changes that could be implemented within the workplace at little or no cost.

- It seems that much of the training delivered within Strand 3 has the potential to positively influence practitioner–parent relationships within a short timescale. Even within this fairly limited evaluation, examples of improved communications and parental engagement were reported, which were attributed by informants to changes following on directly from the training.

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Though ELPP Strand 3 ended in March 2008, all the organisations involved are still offering packages of training to help parents to support their children’s innate readiness to learn.

For more information about PEAL, visit:
www.peal.org.uk

For more information about the 15 VCS organisations visit:
www.peal.org.uk/resources/links/elpp_training_providers.aspx

For more information about ELPP Strand 3 visit:
www.familyandparenting.org/ELPPStrand3

For Strand 3 of the ELPP, PEAL was delivered by a consortium of four organisations:

- National Children’s Bureau (NCB)
www.ncb.org.uk
- National Childminding Association (NCMA)
www.ncma.org.uk
- National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)
www.ndna.org.uk
- Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA)
www.pre-school.org.uk

For Strand 3 of the ELPP, the 15 VCS organisations delivering additional training on parental support for young children’s learning were:

- Barnardo’s Babyfather
www.barnardos.org.uk/babyfather
- Barnardo’s N.E. High/Scope
www.barnardos.org.uk/who_we_are/in_your_region/northeast.htm
- ContinYou
www.continyou.org.uk
- Coram Family
www.coram.org.uk

- Family Links
www.familylinks.org.uk
- Fatherhood Institute (previously Fathers Direct)
www.fatherhoodinstitute.org
- Home Start Norfolk
www.home-start.org.uk
- ICAN
www.ican.org.uk
- National Day Nurseries Association
www.ndna.org.uk
- Parenting UK
www.parentinguk.org
- Parents as First Teachers
www.parentsasfirstteachers.org.uk
- PEEP
www.peep.org.uk
- Pen Green Research Base
www.pengreen.org
- Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA)
www.pre-school.org.uk
- Thurrock Community Mothers
www.communitymothers.org.uk



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