



Parents as partners in children's early learning and development

The Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) project was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) for two years April 05-April 07 with the task of gathering and assessing existing knowledge and best practice in working with parents to involve them in young children's learning. A training programme was then designed to support and inspire practitioners working in children's centres to increase parent partnership work. Sixteen large scale regional PEAL training events were successfully held last year and the overall feedback has been very positive with 87% of participants saying they feel more motivated to involve parents in their children's learning, and 79% feeling an increased confidence in their own ability to work in partnership with parents. PEAL training has now been extended until April 2008 through the Workforce Development strand of the Early Learning Partnerships Programme, funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). This year's events will cascade PEAL training beyond children's centres to a wider range of early years settings and practitioners, including childminders.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (2007) requires all those working with young children to engage in learning partnerships with parents. It includes commitment 2.2: *'Parents are children's first and most enduring educators. When parents and practitioners work together in early years settings, the results have a positive impact on children's learning and development.'*

PEAL training introduces the conclusive research evidence that now exists in support of this commitment. It is known that what parents do at home with young children has the greatest impact on a child's social, emotional and intellectual development. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) (2004) report concludes, **'What parents do is more important than who parents are.'** Social class, income, living conditions and parents own education levels are clearly related to child outcomes, but the quality of the 'home learning environment' is even more important. Parents may live in disadvantaged circumstances and may not have achieved well educationally, but if they regularly engage in activities which help to 'stretch a child's mind' as part of every day life at home, they can enhance their child's progress and development. Children with strong home learning environments are already ahead in both social and intellectual development at the age of three. This advantage continues through to age 7, and the latest report concludes that the effect is maintained through to age 10. (Sylva et al 2004; Sammons et al 2007)

These findings are confirmed by many other research studies. The impact is evident across all social classes and ethnic groups, and different levels of parental involvement have a greater impact on achievement in the primary age range than the variation in school quality. Children receive not just skills, knowledge and intellectual stimulation at home; they also absorb a positive attitude towards learning and a strong self-image as a successful learner. (Desforges 2003) The advantage of learning at home is clearly evident. Parents, carers and older siblings



can provide more one-to-one attention; they can really listen to what a child is saying and focus a reply to extend thought. They can tap into a child's immediate concerns, knowledge and experience, follow-up individual interests and enthusiasms, and help a child make connections from one idea to another.

As home has such a powerful effect on children's learning it should come as no surprise that the most effective early years settings - those that achieve the best social and intellectual outcomes for their children - work closely with parents. These settings share their educational aims clearly and encourage high levels of engagement. They work to build parent confidence in what they do already at home and they offer ideas to support and enhance this. Most significantly, they *exchange information about children regularly on a weekly or monthly basis* with parents. They listen to what parents have to say about their own child's capabilities and interests, and make use of these observations for future planning, encouraging parents to be active in this planning process. They also support children's learning at home directly with suggested activities and the loan of materials that complement what happens in the setting. (Siraj-Blatchford et al 2003; Sylva et al 2004; Desforges 2003)

How can more early years settings work towards this level of parent partnership? The PEAL training helps practitioners reflect on this question and plan future action. A regular exchange of information and ideas between parents and practitioners involves more than termly parents' meetings, regular letters and displays, more than curriculum workshops and invitations to parents to help in the setting. These are all valuable strategies of course, but something extra is needed if as many parents as possible are to be reached and encouraged to engage in regular two-way communication.

All the evidence suggests, from both formal research studies and experience on the ground, that this level of partnership is best achieved when settings and practitioners work very hard at establishing respectful relationships with their families. They think through the quality of these relationships and avoid making assumptions about parents or assigning 'group characteristics' to any particular community. They listen to parents as individuals and spend time getting to know families well, showing interest in different perspectives, and building on a family's strengths. Knowing quite a lot about their families enables them to offer a good range of ways to get involved in learning, well matched to attract engagement and attendance. Provision is adapted to suit parents' needs. Timing of events will be carefully thought through to meet working or study patterns and childcare needs will be taken into account. If parents are asked to provide observations from home, a range of options will be offered to help achieve this. Some parents will be encouraged to write but others will report back verbally or via camera or tape recorder. Interpretation and translation needs will be known and provided for. Some families will receive more home visits in order to encourage engagement. Most importantly, *all* parents will be made to feel that their efforts are welcomed and valued. (Whalley, 2001; Draper and Duffy 2007)



Working in this way needs strategic planning. Successful settings tend to have a key person system and a member of the senior management team who leads on parental involvement, offering clear supervisory support to practitioners in their work with parents. Attempts are made to develop staff confidence in talking with parents and extra training is sought where appropriate. Settling in procedures combined with home visits, are well thought through and time is structured into the day to allow more time to talk to parents; the latter is made a high priority.

The importance of relationships and communication is highlighted on the PEAL training day through a series of participative exercises. Participants are also introduced to a variety of inspiring practice examples contributed by settings and services nationally. These include many ideas to help encourage good relationship building and knowledge of families. Others give ideas for sharing regular observations, record keeping and planning with parents, for working with parents at home, including parents on local visits, and for equipment home loan schemes.

A few examples of these include:

A 'treasure basket loan scheme for babies' in Calderdale

Families borrow baskets filled with natural materials and everyday objects for their babies to explore at home. They are encouraged to observe their children and report on the baby's response, verbally or through note form. Some parents have been inspired to make their own baskets; and more discussion between parents and key workers has opened up about the value of playing and talking with young babies and children.

'Story home visits' have had a major impact in a setting in Ealing

Children choose a favourite story and accompanying 3D props, and their key person walks with the child from the setting to their home to read the story at a time convenient to their parents. The family share the story together and digital photographs are taken of the visit and journey. These are used to make a picture story book or display with the child the next day.

'Stop, Look and Listen' is a project run in a number of settings in Camden

It encourages parents to make regular, short observations called listening stories of their children, and exchange these with practitioners. They are encouraged to stop everything, spend a short time observing their child when involved in play and actively listen to what their child has to say. Parents report back with notes, verbal feedback or a photograph.

Some of these practice examples are brought to life in a DVD on the PEAL training day; others are presented on easy-to-access cards, and included in a PEAL pack, which participants take away from the training. These can then be read in more depth and shared with colleagues. Sharing and celebrating experience in this way helps to build effective parental partnership work into mainstream practice. If you



have successful ideas to contribute to the PEAL project, please approach a member of the PEAL team at an event, contact us via the website www.peal.org.uk or email us at pealinfo@ncb.org.uk. We would like to hear from you.

It is hoped that practitioners leave the training feeling enthused and determined to do more to include parents in their children's early learning and development. A few quotes from recent evaluation forms help to illustrate the potential impact of the training day:

'It gave me lots to think about and lots of practical ideas to take back to my settings'

'It has inspired me to go back and stop making excuses. Involve parents at their convenience, not ours'.

'It's helped us think and identify all sorts of ways in which we should make ourselves and our environment more approachable and offer more learning opportunities to parents'

'This training day has made me stop and think about our parents, especially on how they must feel at times, and yes, it must be quite daunting and at times, frightening.'

There are free PEAL training events taking place nationally September 2007-March 2008. The training involves an initial preparatory day in which participants take the equivalent of a day in time to work through an Activities book in their own settings. There is then a follow-up training day in a regional location.

Peal training can now be undertaken as part of an accredited unit - *Work to engage parents in their children's early learning* - through City and Guilds and can be combined with other units to achieve an award in *Working with parents* (Level 3). More details on how to achieve accreditation can be found at:

PEAL - www.peal.org.uk

City and Guilds - www.cityandguilds.com

Parenting UK - www.parentinuk.org

Full details and booking instructions for children's centre training events can be found at www.peal.org.uk

There are additional events organised in partnership with the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), Pre-school Learning Alliance (PLA) and the National Childminding Association (NCMA).

A list of these events and contact details can be found at:

NDNA - www.ndna.org.uk

PLA - www.pre-school.org.uk/peal



NCMA - www.ncma.org.uk

For more information about PEAL visit www.peal.org.uk, email pealinfo@ncb.org.uk or call 020 7843 6444.

References

- Desforges, C (2003) *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievements and Adjustment: A Literature Review*, Research Report 433 London: DfES
- Draper, L and Duffy, B (2006) *Working With Parents* in Pugh, G (ed) *Contemporary Issues in the Early Years* Fourth Edition, London, Sage Publications p 151-162
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. and others (2003) EPPE case studies Technical Paper 10. London: University of London, Institute of Education, DfES
- Sylva, K. and others (2004) *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report* London: DfES and Institute of Education, University of London
- Sammons, P and others (2007) *Summary Report, Influences on Children's Attainment and Progress in Key Stage 2: Cognitive Outcomes in Year 5: Effective Pre-school and Primary Education 3-11 Project (EPPE 3-11)*, DfES Research Report RR828
- Whalley, M and the Pen Green Team (2001) *Involving Parents in their Children's Learning*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.