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Enhancing parents' ways of supporting their children's early learning through participation in an early-intervention project in the UK: The Early Learning Partnership Project

Stärkung der elterlichen Unterstützungsmöglichkeiten des frühen Lernens ihrer Kinder durch Teilnahme an einem Frühinterventionsprojekt in Großbritannien: The Early Learning Partnership Project

Abstract:

This paper describes the effects of a complex intervention programme entitled the 'Early Learning Partnership Project' (ELPP) which was rolled out across nine voluntary and community sector (VCS) agencies within the United Kingdom during a period of Government reform. It focused on parents of children aged between 1-3 who were at risk of learning delay, and aimed to increase parental involvement within children's learning as a precursor to reducing the later effects of disadvantage.

A mixed methods evaluation examined the influence of ELPP. This paper reports specifically on a sample of parents from twenty 'exemplar' sites participating in the programme. Parents took part in a selection of structured observations (HOME and Book-sharing Observation) and structured questionnaires (Home Learning Environment, Parental Feelings Questionnaire and Father Involvement Questionnaire) across two time points. This paper shows that a short intervention with parents can influence parenting practices, personal beliefs and affective relationships with children. The findings suggest that through ELPP, a UK-based intervention, it is possible to improve levels of parental involvement and broaden the quality of the home learning environment via an early intervention project in a minimum of three months.

Zusammenfassung:

In diesem Beitrag werden die Auswirkungen eines aufwändigen Frühinterventionsprogramms namens *Early Learning Partnership Project* (ELPP), das während einer Reformperiode der Regierung bei neun Institutionen der Freiwilligen- und Gemeinwesenarbeit im Vereinigten Königreich eingeführt wurde, beschrieben. Im Mittelpunkt des Programmes standen die Eltern von Kindern im Alter von ein bis drei Jahren, die dem Risiko von Lernverzögerungen ausgesetzt waren. Es zielte darauf ab, die elterliche Beteiligung am Lernen ihrer Kinder zu erhöhen, um so einer Verringerung späterer Benachteiligungseffekte den Weg zu bereiten.

Der Einfluss des ELPP wurde mithilfe einer Mixed-Methods-Evaluation untersucht. Im vorliegenden Beitrag wird über eine Elternstichprobe an 20 „exemplarischen“ Standorten berichtet. Dabei nahmen die Eltern zu zwei Messzeitpunkten an einer Auswahl strukturierter Beobachtungen (HOME und Booksharing Observation) und strukturierten Fragebogeninterviews (Home Learning Environment, Parental Feelings Questionnaire und Father Involvement Questionnaire) teil. Es zeigte sich, dass kurze Interventionen gegenüber den Eltern deren Erziehungsverhalten, persönlichen Überzeugungen und die affektive Beziehung zu Kindern beeinflussen konnten. Die Ergebnisse legen nahe, dass es mit dem britischen Interventionsprogramm ELPP möglich ist, innerhalb von mindestens drei Monaten das Niveau der elterlichen Beteiligung zu erhöhen und die Qualität des



häuslichen Lernumfeldes auf eine breitere Grundlage zu stellen.

Key words: Parental involvement, support child's learning, early intervention, early years, evaluation

Schlagwörter: Elterliche Beteiligung, Unterstützung kindlichen Lernens, frühe Intervention, frühe Kindheit, Evaluation

1. Introduction

Social disadvantage has been linked to subsequent achievement at primary education, despite any earlier indications of potential (Feinstein 2003, 2004). Preventative methods have been put forward as curtailing the negative effect caused by initial disadvantage, including enhancing child-adult relationships; accentuating parental interest, involvement and high expectation for child educational achievement; providing positive adult role models; encouraging a child's active involvement in family, school and community life; and enabling the child to feel regular recognition, praise and value. Discussions in this area of remediation progressed towards delineating different ways to foster positive parenting approaches, and introducing strategies such as parent training, parent support, parent education and family education (Desforges with Abouchaar 2003; Harris/Goodall 2007; Moran/Ghate/Van der Merwe 2004; Shinman 2005).

The involvement of parents in the early years has long been recognised by policy-makers as a key approach to improving children's educational trajectories. This is due to its strong link with a child's later life achievement, and in particular, an association with educational attainment measured at age ten: *Parental involvement in education seems to be a more important influence than poverty, school environment and the influence of peers* (DfES Green Paper 2003a).

In this paper family involvement is defined as a *core component of a complementary learning system* in which family and educational facilities work in tandem to *support learning and development from birth to young adulthood* (Westmoreland/Bouffard/O'Carroll/Rosenberg 2009: 2). Parental involvement (particularly in terms of providing stimulation and *teaching* in the home) leads to higher scores on child development measures, regardless of maternal education and economical background (Feinstein 2003, 2004).

In an overview of the literature, Desforges with Abouchaar (2003) discussed three major factors for consideration when fostering parental involvement in child learning. Firstly, parental involvement has an association with the parent's social class, poverty, health, perception of role, self-confidence in role and professionals' respect for their role. Therefore any promotion of parental involvement in child learning should work to transform parental beliefs and self confidence over and above the feelings of low-self esteem brought about through their circumstances. Secondly, parental involvement is stronger when the child attains highly. This reciprocal relationship should be considered carefully, as encouragement into early learning practices might be beneficial both for raising child attainment and instigating further parent involvement. Thirdly, and most importantly, Desforges with Abouchaar (2003) argue that *at home good parenting* has the most sig-

nificant effect on children's achievement: defined as provision of a secure and stable environment; intellectual stimulation within the home; active parent-child discussion; and high aspirations for learning. *At home good parenting* as a concept was brought more prominently to the fore in England by the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study which highlighted the importance of parental involvement over and above initial social disadvantage. Whilst parents' social class and levels of education were related to child outcomes, the quality of the Home Learning Environment (for example joint play activities focused on language, numeracy and literacy) was found to be the most important, promoting both the intellectual and social development of children (Sylva/Melhuish/Sammons/Siraj-Blatchford/Taggart 2004: 57). A number of key elements of the *Home Learning Environment* have significant associations to child development, such as *cognitive and language development and emergent literacy competence* (Foster/Lambert/Abbot-Shim/McCarty/Franze 2005: 14-15). In particular reading aloud; provision of print materials in the home; encouragement of children to communicate their feelings and use language to direct behaviours; and provision of social support and mastery of the parent are cited as important factors to maintaining a healthy home learning environment.

The concept of *at home good parenting* follows the *parents as educators* model, stressed by Evangelou, Sylva, Edwards and Smith (2008) in their overview of parental involvement. Evangelou *et al.* (ibid: 5) note that *parents are or can learn to be in control of the learning environment for their young children, and are (or can be) treated as equal players in creating or choosing that environment, whether at home or in the school or early years setting*. This nuance echoes historical research showing that the learning environment is strongly related to later educational achievement in children (Dave's Index 1963, cited in Gordon 1970: 15). This can be influenced at an early stage through parents' own actions: parents' aspirations for themselves and their child; educational guidance; extent and content of indoor and outdoor activities; intellectual climate of the home - nature and quality of toys; the opportunity for thinking and challenge embedded in daily activities; and the family's work habits (Evangelou/Sylva/Edwards/Smith 2008).

For children born into social backgrounds posing a possible concern for learning delay, interventions can be a helpful form of prevention (Feinstein 2003, 2004). Interventions aim amongst other things to promote school readiness by diminishing *the socio-economic status (SES) disparities in the preschool years so that poor children enter school on a more equal footing to their more affluent peers* (Brooks-Gunn 2000: 9). The extensive literature on the positive effects of *parents as educators* in the home suggest that interventions working to improve child outcomes and bridge the gap between initial disadvantage and later achievement should consider the effects of parental involvement. Early attempts to intervene whilst families present the first signs of vulnerability for disadvantage (for example, in poorer workless families; those that do not speak English as a first language; those that are suffering from illness) are more successful than later attempts (Durlak 1995; Snow/Burns/Griffin 1998).

This paper discusses data collected with families during an early intervention project entitled *The Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP)*. As a project based in the United Kingdom, the policy focus of this paper is based within a UK context during the lead up to this research. The ELP Project aimed to increase parental involvement within children's learning, in order to specifically reduce the later effects of disadvantage. The pro-

ject was launched amongst almost a decade of reform within Labour Government policy in England. At the time of the project (2006-2008), recognition of the impact of parental support on child outcomes and extended focus on early intervention and prevention began to emerge as prevalent themes within Government policy. An increase in initiatives to reduce child poverty had been on the agenda since 1998 when the National Childcare Strategy was announced, followed by the introduction of the Children's Fund (2000) to tackle disadvantage among children and young people, and identify those at risk of social exclusion. Also during this period, the introduction of a number of family initiatives highlighted the importance of parenting support for early years education. Examples of such initiatives included literacy focused (Bookstart) and community focused interventions (Sure Start programmes). In addition, the Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative (NNI, launched in 2000) focused added importance on family support and childcare places within disadvantaged areas. The instigation of the Birth to Three Matters framework (DfES 2003b) encouraged an initially more general preventative approach to child development. Since then, The Every Child Matters: Change for Children agenda (DfES 2004), Early Years Foundation Stage framework (EYFS: DCSF 2007a) and the Every Parent Matters document (DfES 2007) have all recognised the involvement of parents, carers and families in children's early educational experience as crucial to improving child outcomes. The Children's Plan (DCSF 2007b) set out plans for the next decade to strengthen support for the neediest families and to implement a range of measures designed to improve the life chances of all children and eradicate child poverty by 2020. This pledge to end child poverty in the UK has been followed through more recently by the newly appointed UK coalition government, who announced in 2010 that *strong and stable families of all kinds are the bedrock of a strong and stable society* (Conservatives 2012). Following this near-decade of policy development, the ELP Project was one of a number of early-intervention projects being commissioned (e.g. alongside projects such as Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL): DCSF 2007c) to work towards heightening awareness on preventative measures and increasing the importance of parental support in early years development.

1.1 The Early Learning Partnership Project

The Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP) was a very ambitious early intervention project commissioned by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) to run between October 2006 and March 2008. ELPP was designed to work with families of children aged between one and three, who were categorised as the *most excluded; hard to reach* or *vulnerable*. In their evaluation of the programme, Evangelou, Sylva, Edwards and Smith (2008) describe typical target groups for the project as *isolated families in rural areas; families on low incomes; parents with mental health problems or learning disabilities or literacy problems; children with disabilities or behavioural difficulties or conduct disorders or special educational needs; very young parents; lone parents; ethnic minority parents with little or no English spoken in the home; asylum seekers or refugee families; traveller families; and families making little or no use of mainstream services for young children* (2008: 34).

The aim of this intervention was to support and develop the parents' ability to increase involvement in and understanding of their children's learning. The Family and Parenting Institute (FPI) were responsible for the roll-out of the project across nine Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations: Home-Start, National Children's Home (NCH), the Family Welfare Association (FWA), Coram, Barnardo's, the Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA), and ContinYou, (which submitted a consortium bid including Thurrock Community Mothers: TCM and Pen Green).

The nine organisations were required to use the ELPP funding on new work with families, and to deliver resources and/or training from a selection of twelve different intervention approaches: Bookstart; Campaign for Learning; Listening to Children; I CAN; Newpin's Family Play Programme; One Plus One's Brief Encounters; Parents as First Teachers (PAFT); Parents Early Years and Learning (PEAL); Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP); Parents' Involvement in their Children's Learning (PICL); SHARE; and Thurrock Community Mothers (for a detailed discussion of the approaches and reasons behind why particular programmes were chosen by each organisation, see Evangelou *et al* 2008).

The University of Oxford were funded to carry out a small-scale study on the National Evaluation of ELPP (Evangelou *et al* 2008). The design of the intervention was complex owing to the large variety and amalgamation of intervention programmes being followed, and the varied nature of each agency's history and experience. The research team thus aimed to gauge the effects of the ELPP programme as an overall *parenting intervention strategy*, for parents with children who were considered by the voluntary sector agencies as being at a general risk of developing a learning delay. The programmes sometimes overlapped in their aims, training, methods and targeted populations, thus making it extremely challenging to evaluate the effects of a particular programme. Instead, the aim of ELPP overall as an intervention was for the individual programmes to work together cohesively and share successes whilst working towards a common goal of increasing parental involvement in child learning.

2. Method

2.1 Overview

The National Evaluation of the Early Learning Partnership Project studied the roll-out of the ELPP funding across 20 *exemplar* sites within England, between April 2007 and March 2008. A mixed methods evaluation was required to understand and examine the influence of ELPP on (a) a study of the nine organisations where it was implemented; (b) the workforce; and (c) a study of 104 parents who experienced the programme. For further information on the study of the nine agencies and the examination of the rollout within exemplar sites, please consult the National Evaluation report (Evangelou *et al* 2008). This paper reports specifically on findings related to the study of parents, as discussion of the full complex evaluation is beyond the scope of this paper.

The study of parents aimed to investigate whether parents attending ELPP would show any changes over time in terms of how they support their children's learning. Parenting change was analysed using carefully chosen research tools tapping into the key pa-

rental involvement foci within the ELPP project. In order to assess whether any improvement could be seen to *at home good parenting*, the *Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME)*: Caldwell/Bradley 2002) and *The Home Learning Environment (HLE)*: Sylva/Melhuish/Sammons/Siraj-Blatchford/Taggart 2004) were used as quantitative assessments. Similarly to investigate whether any improvement of parenting skill was observable within families attending ELPP, particular instruments were chosen to assess improvement in parent attitude and involvement, such as *The Parental Feelings Questionnaire (PFQ)*: Deater-Deckard 2000), the *Father Involvement Scale* (Belsky/Barnes/Melhuish 2007) and *The Book-sharing Observation Scale* (ELPP Evaluation Team 2007).

2.2 Sample of families

Twenty sites exemplifying the rollout of ELPP across the different agencies were recommended by the managers of each lead organisation. Setting managers from each of these sites were then requested to provide the names of ten families who were being specifically targeted by ELPP funding and were relatively new within the programme (i.e. within the first few weeks of attending) to talk with the researchers for the evaluation.

Families were selected for interview on the basis of prerequisite criteria: they must have been attending the ELPP programme for only a few weeks; be ideally available for a follow-up interview (i.e. with no future plans to move from the neighbourhood); must have a child aged between 12 and 36 months; their child must have been considered at risk of a learning delay by the programme provider; they must have been in the position to give informed consent for interview (i.e. with basic literacy skills and English comprehension, and without serious mental illness); they must have been able to carry out an interview in English with support from a translator if necessary and finally, they must have exhibited no known or suspected physical or verbal aggressive behaviour. As such, the families accessed within the ELPP parent sample were likely to represent the upper end of disadvantage within the ELPP population.

The recommended families were invited to take part in an interview in the parents' home to allow observation of the natural interactions between parents, children and the home environment. Where this was not possible or practical, the interview was carried out within the ELPP setting using a slightly shortened interview procedure. In the majority of cases (91%) the mother was the respondent interviewed for the study.

A total of 104 families participated in the study, 55 of which were able to contribute to the research both early and late into their participation in the programme. Thirty two families were interviewed only once near the beginning of participation (classified as early families) and 17 families were interviewed only once after becoming established within the programme for several months (classified as late families). This 'early' versus 'late' design has been followed in similar studies that have found measurable change in parenting after twelve week interventions (Webster-Stratton/Hancock, 1998 for example; Evangelou et al 2008: 85). The average gap between early and late visits for the families was five months, the second interview occurring between three and seven months from the time of the initial interview. Parents interviewed only once were classified as either an early or a late interviewee according to the length of time that they had been attending the ELP Project. Table 1 describes the sample of parents in further detail.

Table 1: Sample of Parents within ELPP Evaluation

ELPP Evaluation Parent Sample	
Early interviews	87
Late interviews (follow-up of same families)	55
Late interviews only	17
Total of families visited	104
Total of visits	159

The sampling prerequisites imposed required the evaluation team to look more in depth at the representativeness of the parent sample, due to inevitable filtering of families. It was of prime importance that the researchers could compare this relatively small sample of parents to other studies drawn from socially disadvantaged families, in order to assess where the sample of families were placed in terms of typical levels of disadvantage.

Learning delay in preschoolers has been found ...to be linked to factors such as minority ethnic status, worklessness or low level jobs, instability of family units and low parental education (Evangelou et al 2008: 86) and thus these demographics were particularly monitored. Parents described themselves as a range of ethnicities (67.3% White UK heritage, 6.9% Black African heritage, 5.9% mixed heritage, 5.9% Asian heritage, 4.0% Indian heritage, 4.0% Black Caribbean heritage, 3.0% Pakistani heritage, 1.0% Bangladeshi heritage, 2.0% other heritage). Twenty-two per cent of the parents spoke English as an additional language.

The sample of ELPP parents were then compared to a national sample of families from disadvantaged communities taken from the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS; Belsky/Barnes/Melhuish 2007). ELPP appeared to reach a slightly larger proportion of ethnic minority families than recorded in NESS (Table 2).

Table 2: Comparing the ELPP parent sample to NESS: ethnicity

Ethnicity	ELPP Evaluation (England, raw numbers in brackets)	National Evaluation of Sure Start (Disadvantaged area sample)
Sample Size	101	14084
<i>White</i>	67.3 (68)	72.2
<i>Mixed race</i>	5.9 (6)	5.2
<i>Indian</i>	4.0 (4)	1.6
<i>Pakistani</i>	3.0 (3)	7.5
<i>Bangladeshi</i>	1.0 (1)	3.4
<i>Asian</i>	5.9 (6)	N/A
<i>Black Caribbean</i>	4.0 (4)	1.5
<i>Black African</i>	6.9 (7)	N/A
<i>Black Other</i>	0	4.7
<i>Chinese</i>	0	N/A
<i>Other</i>	2.0 (2)	3.9
Total from non-white ethnic group	32.7 (33)	27.8 (3911)

Note. In percentages of the sample population targeted. The achieved ELPP sample is much smaller than the NESS sample, and therefore data should be used as a guide.

ELPP parents were also just as likely as the parents in NESS to have obtained a general vocational qualification or below. Perhaps surprisingly however, a larger percentage of families had achieved a degree or higher when compared to the NESS population (Table 3). This might in part be explained by degrees obtained overseas with no equivalence to the English qualification system; or prevalence of well-qualified but poorly paid families.

Table 3: Comparing the ELPP parent sample to NESS: highest educational qualification

Highest Educational Qualification	ELPP Evaluation Parent Sample (% , raw numbers in brackets)	National Evaluation of Sure Start (%)
Sample Size	102	14084
<i>Degree, higher education or equivalent</i>	25.5 (26)	16.6
<i>A level or equivalent</i>	12.7 (13)	22.0
<i>Undifferentiated vocational qualification</i>	8.8 (9)	23.1
<i>GCSE or equivalent</i>	33.3 (34)	7.5
<i>No formal qualification</i>	13.8 (14)	29.7
<i>Did not answer question</i>	5.9 (6)	1.1
Percentage of vocational qualifications and below	55.9 (57)	60.3 (8495)

Note. Options for 'other' qualification have been removed to allow comparisons with other data sets. The achieved ELPP sample is much smaller than the NESS sample, and therefore data should be used as a guide.

Thirty-one per cent of mothers and 56% of fathers were described as being in employment at the time of the first interview. According to postcode information collected from the parent sample, only half of the sample were living in the lowest 30% of areas classified according to disadvantage, in comparison to the 75% of ELPP families as a whole living in such disadvantaged areas. This suggests that some of the families were living in neighbourhoods that were slightly more advantaged than the ELPP population as a whole.

2.3 Instruments

The overarching aim of this parent study was to describe parenting practices and quality of the home environment; to describe current parenting skills; to document parental views of their ELPP participation; and to measure the effects of the intervention over the course of ELPP participation in terms of changes in parenting skill and home environment. A mixed methods design was implemented using structured measures (observational scales and questionnaires) and qualitative questionnaires. All questionnaires were administered orally to reduce difficulties for English as an Additional Language speakers, or those who struggled to read.

2.3.1 Quality of home environment

The first standardised observation scale used to assess the quality of the home environment was the *Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME)* (Caldwell/Bradley 2002). The *HOME* is interrogated through a semi-structured interview with the respon-

dent and an observation of the home environment in order to assess the quality of support for learning in the home. The instrument is broken down into six subscales of 'quality': *Responsivity*, *Acceptance*, *Organisation*, *Learning Materials*, *Involvement*, and *Variety*. The authors have defined boundaries of *Poor*, *Satisfactory*, and *Good* parenting in the home environment, with higher subscale scores emphasising higher quality in the home. For those interviews carried out in the setting, three non-observable subscales were interrogated, as most crucial for children's learning: *Organisation*, *Involvement* and *Variety*.

A further structured questionnaire was used to measure parental involvement at home. *The Home Learning Environment* (HLE; Sylva/Melhuish/Sammons/Siraj-Blatchford/Taggart 2004) required the respondent to rate the frequency of seven activities commonly carried out at home (including reading to the child; playing with letters and numbers; teaching songs and poems; and taking the child out to the library). The HLE has been shown to relate to the social and behavioural development of children at primary school age (Sylva *et al* 2004) and was only administered to parents with children aged over 2 years, due to the inappropriateness of questions for younger children.

2.3.2 Parenting skills

In order to assess parenting skills two structured questionnaires and one structured observation were applied. *The Parental Feelings Questionnaire* (PFQ; Deater-Deckard 2000) is a structured questionnaire which asks parents to rate their agreement with a set of feelings that they have about their relationship with their child, resulting in a total *Positivity* and *Negativity* score. Administration of the statements was aided by coloured scales to enable the respondent to visually point to their chosen rating. The *Father Involvement Scale* (Belsky/Barnes/ Melhuish 2007) is a structured questionnaire to assess the mother's perception of how involved the father is with the life of their child. The measure was only administered to mothers who lived with their partner at the time of interview.

In addition, an observation scale was created by the ELPP evaluation team and administered to assess how parents would introduce a new age-appropriate book to their child. *The Book-sharing Observation Scale* (ELPP Evaluation Team 2007) measured parent-child interaction during a book reading task on the strength of seven characteristics (e.g. *helps child hold book*, *turns pages or touch book*; *discusses detail of story or pictures*; *emphasises specific words*). Books provided for this activity were carefully chosen to contain limited vocabulary and extensive pictures, thus allowing the parents to personalise and further explore the concept of the story.

2.3.3 Parental views of ELPP participation

A qualitative instrument was created by the ELPP evaluation team to learn about the parents' views of their ELPP experiences, and what may have been learnt during the course of their participation. The results from this qualitative element of the parent sub-study are beyond the scope of this short paper, which will now focus on the structured observation and questionnaire data collected through the ELPP evaluation. Further information on the qualitative study of families can be found in the National Evaluation report (Evangelou *et al.* 2008).

2.4 Procedures

2.4.1 Analysis

Data collected at a single time point (i.e. during the *early* wave of field-visits) were explored descriptively and tested for normality and variance. Parametric methods (including ANOVA) were used to explore whether parent or child characteristics had any impact on the scores achieved from the different measures, and to detect changes in scores (concerning the quality of the home environment and parent skills). Particular demographics such as parental education, child age and child gender were controlled for in all following analyses to eliminate variance through naturally occurring variations in these key variables. Missing values were computed by calculating the average score for each subscale and then replaced. Significance is reported as $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$ throughout, with results rounded to the nearest decimal point.

3. Results

Figures collected by the Family and Parenting Institute up until March 2008 indicated that over 3000 parents had taken part in the ELPP parental involvement programmes over the course of the evaluation, with more than 6000 children benefiting (Evangelou et al. 2008). Data collected on the postcodes of users accessing the ELPP services, and a comparative sample of non-ELPP users (data available from five ELPP sites), was linked to the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2007 (Noble/McLennan/Wilkinson/Whitworth/Barnes 2008). This showed that ELPP users generally came from highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods (more so than non-ELPP users), with more than three quarters of ELPP users living in the top 30% of most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country on the child low income measure, thus confirming the ELPP aim of reaching those families in disadvantaged areas.

3.1 Effect of maternal education

The primary respondent's highest educational qualification, child age and child gender were analysed separately for effects on each of the structured questionnaires and observations using parametric tests (wherever normality assumptions were met). Maternal education was related to most measures of parenting, showing a positive relationship to the cognitively challenging *Home Learning Environment* ($r = 0.381$, $N = 65$, $p < 0.05$: using Pearson's correlation) and the *HOME* ($r_2 = 0.433$, $N = 56$, $p < 0.01$: using Spearman's Rho due to violation of normality assumptions); specifically with the more cognitively stretching elements of the *HOME* such as *Learning Materials*, *Involvement in Learning* and *Variety* ($r_2 = 0.318$, $N = 56$, $p < 0.05$: via Spearman's Rho). The parents' high qualification levels may explain in part why levels of parenting in the *HLE* and *HOME* were already quite high (Section 3.2). The age of the target child was also significantly correlated with parenting scores on the *HOME* ($r = -0.293$, $N = 67$, $p < 0.05$: using Pearson's correla-

tion), in particular with regards to their experiences and interactions with their parents. Parental qualifications, child's age and child's gender were thus controlled for in all analyses that investigated the effect of ELPP participation on parenting skills and feelings.

3.2 Quality of the home learning environment at early interviews

Parenting scores on the *HOME* instrument at *early* interviews were mainly *Satisfactory* or *Good*, falling into the higher end of average according to the published norms (Caldwell/Bradley 2002). Less than one tenth of the ELPP sample scored within the *Poor* parenting range: the lowest of these scores were associated with the *Involvement in Learning* and *Variety* subscales (Table 4).

Table 4: Scores of the parent sub-sample on the HOME observation schedule

<i>HOME</i> Subscales	Mean score	SD	Mean classification	"Poor Parenting" (%)	"Satisfactory Parenting" (%)	"Good Parenting" (%)
<i>Responsivity</i>	9.2	2.507	Average	11	26	63
<i>Acceptance</i>	6.5	1.564	Average	11	32	57
<i>Organisation</i>	5.5	0.818	Average	3	36	61
<i>Learning materials</i>	7.5	2.022	Average	7	29	64
<i>Involvement in Learning</i>	4.5	1.958	Average	22	11	67
<i>Variety</i>	3.8	1.206	Average	18	37	61
<i>Full HOME Instrument</i>	33.2	10.69	Average	8	30	62

Mean average scores on the *Home Learning Environment* (HLE) at early interviews were typically just above half of the available score ($M = 28.2$ out of a total of 42; $SD = 6.126$) and related to educational qualification. Comparisons to parents taken from the national EPPE study (Sylva *et al* 2004), showed that ELPP parents portrayed a higher HLE score at every educational level (Table 5).

Table 5: Mean scores on the Home Learning Environment: comparing ELPP to EPPE

Mother's Highest Educational Qualification	Mean HLE score for Early Learning Partnership Project sample 2007-2008	SD	Mean HLE score for The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project 1997-1999
Degree, higher degree or equivalent	32.4	3.435	27.4
A level	28.2	4.207	25.2
GCSE	27.6	4.388	22.5
No qualification	25	9.899	18.54

Note. The achieved ELPP sample is much smaller than the nationally representative sample, and therefore data should be used as a guide.

3.3 Parenting skills at *early* interviews

At the *early* interview stage, scores from the *Book-sharing Observation Scale* fell at just over half of the overall score available for each item. The item scoring most highly was the only item not requiring verbal interaction from the parent – *help child hold book, turn pages or touch book*. The lowest scoring item was *links book to children's experiences*.

Scores on the *Parental Feelings Questionnaire (PFQ)* can be grouped into two subscales: *positivity* and *negativity*. At the early interview stage, parents were scoring very highly for the *Positivity* subscale ($M = 42.7$ out of a maximum of 45; $SD = 2.849$). Comparatively, scores on the *Negativity* subscale were just above half of the maximum score ($M = 12.2$ out of 20; $SD = 4.865$). The *Father Involvement* questionnaire was administered only to those mothers who suggested that they lived with their partners at the time of interview. However whilst 75 per cent of the mothers completed this questionnaire during the interview, the demographic data collected at the beginning of the interview suggested that only 66 per cent were living with their partners at the time of interview. Thus if the demographic data is most accurate, *Father Involvement* scores might be artificially lowered due to the father not living with the child. Scores for father involvement were two-thirds of those available ($M = 24$ out of a maximum of 34; $SD = 5.6$).

3.4 Changes in parenting skill and home environment over time

Scores obtained at the *early* visits were compared to those obtained at the *late* visits, controlling for associated factors including maternal education, child age and child gender. This investigation showed improvements in three of the measurements tested. Significant changes were not reported for the *HLE* or *Father Involvement*, and were not observed for the *Book-sharing Scale*.

The *HOME* observation was analysed via ANOVA for any significant changes over the course of ELPP participation in terms of the full measure (all six subscales) and each of the subscales in turn. Only one of these tests returned a significant result across the two time-points: the parent sample achieved a significantly higher score on the *Organisation* subscale when visited *late* into their participation of the ELPP project, showing a main effect of $F(1) = 4.345$, $n=54$, $p<0.05$ after controlling for the child's age, child's gender, and the parental qualification level. A significant interaction effect is found between the change over time and gender of the child; $F(1) = 5.282$, $n=54$, $p<0.05$. Items associated with this subscale include taking children regularly to the doctors; to the grocery store once a week; out of the house at least four times a week; providing regular childcare; providing a safe play environment, and providing a special place for toys. Significant improvements in these areas of the home environment are in line with ELPP work targeted towards parents who need support to provide more varied experiences for their children. This element of the ELPP work was extremely important for those families who were house-bound due to disability or mental illness. There was no significant change in scores for any of the other five subscales.

The Home Learning Environment was not considered due to only being given to parents with children aged 24 months and above; as such only 24 families completed this measure at both time periods.

There was a significant improvement in scores obtained on the *Parental Feelings Questionnaire* (PFQ). The *Positivity* subscale of the PFQ consists of nine positive statements for which parents are asked to label their level of agreement. Parents showed a significant positive main effect via ANOVA on the *Positivity subscale*, when controlling for education, gender and age in spite of the highly positive scores achieved at *early* interviews: $F(1) = 4.388$, $n=53$, $p<0.05$. Comparatively, the *Negativity* subscale of the PFQ contains 4 negatively-phrased items and parents showed an almost significant negative main effect via ANOVA over the two time-points; $F(1) = 3.767$, $n=53$, $p=0.058$, when controlling for education, gender and age, with a reduction of an average of 1.2 marks. Table 6 illustrates significance of change throughout the measures over the two time periods.

Table 6: Changes in scores between early and late interviews

Scale/ subscale	F	n	Significance
Total HOME	0.015	49	0.903
HOME – Responsivity	0.119	49	0.731
HOME – Acceptance	0.860	49	0.358
HOME – Learning Materials	1.163	54	0.287
HOME – Organisation	4.345	54	0.42*
HOME – Involvement	0.390	54	0.622
HOME – Variety	1.331	54	0.121
Book-sharing Observation Scale	2.035	47	0.161
PFQ – Positivity	4.388	53	0.42*
PFQ – Negativity	3.767	53	0.58**

* Shows significance to the $p<0.05$ level.

** Shows near significance to the $p<0.05$ level.

Note. The Father Involvement Questionnaire was not measured for change as the majority of ELPP projects targeted mothers and paternal influence was not predicted to change significantly over the course of a few months.

3.5 Which types of parents showed an improvement over time?

Comparisons of the demographics of parents who showed changes in their parenting skill or home environment highlighted a number of interesting characteristics. A higher percentage of parents who showed an improvement in *Positivity* were living with their partners (75%), had a lower socio-economic status (10%) and were in work (48%) than those not showing an improvement in *Positivity* (68%; 28% and 31% respectively). This pattern was echoed in those parents showing a reduction in *Negativity*. In comparison, those parents who improved in *Organisation* of their home environment portrayed different demographic characteristics. These parents were less likely to live with their partners (67%), less likely to own their own homes (37%), and more likely to receive Working Tax Credit (63%) than those who showed no improvement (71%; 40% and 36% respectively).

4. Discussion

This paper described a small-scale study examining the effects of an early intervention project entitled the Early Learning Partnership Project (ELPP). This paper focused on data collected from a sample of parents attending the ELPP programme. Data was collected through structured observations and questionnaires across two time points: either *early* into participation (i.e. a few weeks into the ELPP programme) or *late* into participation (nearing the end of the ELPP project).

It is important to remain aware of the current capabilities of parents prior to the implementation of an intervention, as their previous experiences and knowledge vary tremendously, and affect the way that the intervention would work. Being aware of each family's starting points would allow more tailored support, and strengthen family capacities to enable children's learning. Initial data collection at the *early* stages of participation suggested that parents were already *Satisfactory* or *Good* in terms of their *HOME* scores, and were scored systematically higher in terms of their *Home Learning Environment* scores when compared to similarly qualified parents from another national sample. Parents were also very positive in terms of the *Parental Feelings Questionnaire* scores. Comparatively, early scores on the *Book-Sharing Observation Scale* suggested that the ELPP parent sample were poor on their ability to introduce a new book to their child, particularly with respect to verbal communication skills. *Father Involvement* was also poor at the time of the early interviews. Services for parents therefore need to aim at more than awareness to bring about positive change in parenting behaviours.

The ELPP programme aimed to support and develop the parent's ability to get involved in their children's learning. Early interviews suggested that the greatest gap in the parenting skills of the sample was the ability to take an active role as a stimulator of their child's learning, particularly through providing cognitively challenging experiences for children. ELPP families were less likely to encourage and challenge their children to learn, in terms of providing a 'stimulating environment' for their child. Analysis of parent scores near the end of ELPP participation revealed important changes in parenting practices: the parent sample showed a significant improvement in terms of *Organisation* in the home, and *Positivity* of feeling towards their child. There was no significant change in the scores for the other five *HOME* subscales (*Responsivity*, *Acceptance*, *Learning Materials*, *Involvement* and *Variety*), or book-sharing skills. The lack of change in terms of book-sharing was to be somewhat expected given the high percentage of parents from ethnic minority groups (one third of the sample) and the potential lack of confidence that this might cause when introducing an English-written book to their child (even if the text is limited). Overall it was unlikely that improvements would be shown in their English speaking skill, given that this was not a focus of the intervention and that the parents had only been attending the ELPP course for a few months. Similarly, it would be unlikely that the ELPP programme would influence the status of father involvement, as mothers were primarily the caregiver benefiting from attending the ELPP programme.

High scores on the *HOME* and *HLE* at first interview showed that families clearly already had in place a knowledge of how to maintain a rich learning environment at home for their children, but lacked the capacity to bring this environment to life through adding challenge and stimulation. Families would have further benefited if the programme had concen-

trated more specifically on the importance of enhancing materials already provided within the home; for example bringing books to life through verbal elaboration, and reference to real-life experience for the child; facilitation of the learning activities through engagement.

The significant improvement of *organisation* in the home represents a somewhat developed *Home Learning Environment*. Improvement in this domain suggests that children are given more of an opportunity to access indoor and outdoor activities, to learn from the family's work habits, and are provided with a greater opportunity to experience challenge amongst routine daily activities (Gordon *ibid*). In a study led by Bradley, Caldwell and Rock (1988), the organisation scores of two year olds on the *HOME* were significantly related to *School Adjustment* and *Consideration* as a classroom practice at age ten (Bradley *et al* 1988): thus a significant improvement to the organisation of the home environment can greatly affect the longer-term outcomes at age ten.

Overall, parents presented a more positive opinion towards their relationship with their child and a reduction in negative affect. Therefore, it may be plausible to acknowledge that engagement with the ELPP programme also led to more concentrated parental involvement, and (in the parent's eyes) an improved parent-child bond. Studies have shown that positive feelings and attachment in the Early Years can impact upon personal and interpersonal competence at age 3.5 years (Waters/Wippman/Sroufe 1979) and early conscience development (Laible/Thompson 2000): thus an improvement in the positivity of parental feelings for this study might impact longer-term upon the child's development.

The findings of this study suggest that it is possible to improve levels of parental involvement and broaden the quality of the home learning environment via an early intervention project in a minimum of three months. The study also showed that it is possible to influence parental involvement over and above parents' already fairly strong awareness of the importance of providing a strong home learning environment. The challenge for future work is to respond to a range of parental needs by offering concrete examples to parents as to how to support their children's development, including intellectual challenge for the children.

Improvements in the *HOME* structured observation addressed the arguably most important consideration raised by Desforges with Abouchaar (2003) as a challenge to parental involvement. An improvement was seen in *at home good parenting* in terms of parents using consistent childcare; taking the child out to the grocery store; taking the child to a health clinic; ensuring that the child gets out of the house at least four times a week; providing a special place for the child's personal toys; and ensuring that the child's play environment is safe. These indicators of quality are particularly related to providing adequate stimulation for the child outside of the home, and ensuring that the child can experience a variety of settings.

One limitation to this study is the small-scale nature of the sample and the transitioning time between revisiting parents. The parenting sampling strategy resulted in limited access to parents who were suffering from housing problems, or had mental health problems or suspected violence issues. Selection bias in the criteria for recruitment also meant that some of the most disadvantaged families were not being monitored for impact of ELPP. A further study would ideally follow those families who were even more vulnerable, as these would arguably be the families most in need of such early intervention. Whilst attempts to compare the sample to other studies of similarly disadvantaged fami-

lies (for example National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS): Belsky/Barnes/Melhuish 2007) did highlight a broadly similar demographic, a further study would benefit from a matched sample to NESS and a closer understanding of the target groups for the ELPP work. Furthermore, the parents accessed as part of the study may not be new to parenting programmes on the whole, and may have been chosen by the sites as the most accessible at the time of the research; therefore it is likely that the sample form part of the 'higher end' of the ELPP population as a whole. This may go some way to explaining the higher scores displayed within their early interviews on the provision of a high quality home learning environment.

The short period between interviews also did not allow for any in-depth long-term change to be recorded, and the design of the study did not allow for child outcomes to be consistently measured, nor for a control group of parents to be drawn. Further investment should be contributed to researching the differing effects of particular forms of early intervention programmes, across more substantial periods of time. Where possible, control groups of parents not benefiting from the early intervention should be allocated as part of the design to ensure that improvements over time cannot be attributed to chance or to other mediating factors including use of other early years services.

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