

An Assessment of the Impact of Family Learning  
Programmes on Parents' Learning through their  
Involvement in their Children's Learning

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An Assessment of the Impact of Family  
Learning Programmes on Parents' Learning  
through their Involvement in their Children's  
Learning.

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## Declaration

This thesis is my own work except where explicit references to the work of others are made. It has not been submitted for another qualification to this or any other institute.

\_\_\_\_\_ date \_\_\_\_\_

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## Abstract

### **The Impact of Family Learning Programmes on Parents' Learning Through Their Involvement in Their Children's Learning.**

By Janet Webb

This study investigates the learning of parents attending family learning programmes in Co. Clare. The programmes encourage parents to support their children's learning by understanding how the role of parents, the home environment and ordinary everyday interactions play an important part in the development of children's learning. As family learning programmes in Ireland are funded through adult education it is also hoped that parents' own learning will develop as a result. Internationally studies agree that 'family learning works', but little has been done to determine whether these findings are replicated in Ireland and what and how parents learn from the family learning programmes.

Literature was examined from both children's and adults' learning perspectives. The recognition of the role of parents in children's learning through emergent literacy, the work of Deforges, the social practice view of adult learning and the impact of this on social capital, as well as recent research into family learning in the UK, formed the theoretical base.

The study took place in two areas of Co. Clare with twenty-two parents from two family learning programmes. The data was collected through questionnaires, three focus group discussions, six semi-structured interviews, evaluations and a follow up on progression a year later. The findings were analysed in the light of the concepts identified in the literature review.

The results indicate that family learning programmes in Co. Clare did make an impact. It showed that parents developed a better understanding of their 's learning and became more confident in themselves and in people around them. This encouraged greater curiosity and interest in further learning, employment and integration within the community.

This has implications for policy and for the provision of funds to build on the number of family learning programmes already being delivered.

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Background and Rationale to Research

Irish family literacy programmes originate within adult education and aim primarily to work with parents from hard-to-engage families. The concentration is on intergenerational activities that are of benefit to both parent and children. In Clare, where this research is based, the family learning project has been delivering programmes for over ten years. The underlying themes of all programmes are that parents are the most important educators, that the home is a valuable learning place and that interaction is the basis of learning.

What initiated this study was research from the UK that highlights the importance of parental involvement in children's education. This noted that parent-child interactions (discussions) in the primary age range have more influence on children's behaviour and achievement than other factors such as socio-economic status and family size (Deforges, 2003). In that case family learning programmes, in promoting and supporting greater interaction and understanding with parents of their role in their children's learning, plays an important part in increasing parental involvement in their child's education. As the focus of family learning in Clare is parents' involvement in their children's learning this study examines what learning parents gain from attending those family learning programmes.

The recognition that the focus of family learning is primarily on parents' involvement in children's literacy development prompted Vivian Gadsden to suggest that more attention needed to be given to the impact of family learning programmes on the adults involved, and the position of family literacy work in adult education (Gadsden 2002).

This research is being undertaken to examine the impact of family learning programmes on the adults involved.

## **1.2 The Research Objective**

Both research and anecdotal evidence show that participation in family learning results in a number of benefits. The aim of this research is an examination of the effectiveness of family learning programmes on parents' learning through their involvement in their children's learning.

The primary objectives are to examine:

- the impact that family learning programmes have on the type of ordinary day-to-day activities parents are involved in with their children and the frequencies of such involvement; and
- the learning that parents gain through the recognition of their involvement in their children's learning through family learning programmes.

The secondary objective is:

- To consider whether one part of the programme impacts more than another on parents' learning.

This will be undertaken through a three-month detailed study of two family learning programmes that took place in two different towns in Co. Clare in 2005 - 2006 and a subsequent follow-up one year later.

### **1.3 Overview of Methodology**

The methods used in pursuit of the above objectives were:

- A questionnaire used at the beginning and the end of the courses with the research group and a control group.
- Focus group discussions.
- End of course evaluations.
- Photographic evidence.
- Semi-structured interviews with a sample from each group.

### **1.4 Context**

The context of this research will be provided through an historical account of family learning in County Clare and an overview of the demography and the socio-economic structure of the county and the towns, from which the sample groups were drawn.

Family learning programmes in Co. Clare were developed in response to a need identified by adult basic skills tutors working with a group of women in an area of social disadvantage in the south west of the county. These parents with poor literacy and numeracy skills wanted to support their children with schoolwork, but they felt their abilities were limited because of their own educational background and their lack of knowledge of the school curriculum.

In 1994 a six-week course took place focusing on parent/child interaction, which was repeated with similar groups around the county. The success of these courses attracted funding from the European Union which led to an official family learning programme being set up, based on the *Kenan Trust Model* from The National Centre for Family Literacy and a UK demonstration programme *Learning Together* based in Norwich. In consultation with Peter Hannon in Sheffield and Andrea Mearing, Project Director in Norwich, the project adopted the ORIM strategy as the core framework with the added area of numeracy (Hannon 1995).

An encouraging evaluation of the project prompted the publishing of the Clare Family Learning Resource Pack in 2000 (King et al 1998). This work on family learning in Clare provided background knowledge and experience that has influenced the development of family literacy programmes in Ireland and the further work of the National Adult Learning Agency in this area (NALA 2004).

Family learning throughout the county has continued to develop with an ever-evolving programme of courses meeting the needs of different groups. In 2005, there were twenty-six courses taking place in nineteen venues, involving around three hundred participants (Clare Family Learning Project 2005).

### **Co. Clare**

Co. Clare lies within the province of Munster within the Mid West Region. Galway Bay and the counties of Galway and North Tipperary bound it to the north and the River Shannon and the Shannon Estuary to the south and east. The county is on the West Atlantic seaboard, naturally isolated in all but its narrow land corridors to the north and southeast. This isolation had led to two distinct communities in the county.

Nationally the south east of the county is identified in the National Spatial Strategy as being part of an economic hub focussed on the linked gateway of Limerick and Shannon and the hub of Ennis (DoELG, 2002). This is reflected in the Mid-West Regional Economic Strategy and Regional Planning Guidelines 2004. The development strategy of the Regional Planning Guidelines is to develop a strong core area in the Limerick/Ennis/Shannon corridor complemented by other regional towns with encouragement of development in other centres and in the rural areas of the region. (MWRPA 2004)

At a county level the Clare County Development Plan 2005 seeks to encourage and facilitate the balanced growth and sustainable development of the county that allows for the benefits accruing to the economic hub being dispersed across the county (Clare County Council 2003).

The population of Co. Clare has been growing at above the national rate for some years, but this growth is not proportionate across the county. The population change between 2002 and 2006 measured in the 2006 census identified growth rates of 7.3% across the county as a whole but in the west of the county population growth was at 4% following negative growth in the period 1991 - 2002. In the north of the county population growth was at 4%, in the east at 2% and in the economic hub around 10%. Net immigration increased during this period by 9.4%, higher than the provincial growth rate of 8.8% but less than the national average of 11.4% (CSO 2006).

These demographic changes reflect a county that is prospering around its county town and in the corridor through Shannon to Limerick but is still struggling to provide the same economic opportunities throughout the rural areas.

The effect of the development plan strategy is to bring opportunities for economic activity and population settlement together. For those not economically active, changes in population and the socio-economic make up of their environment can disproportionately highlight differences and disadvantages.

## **Ennis**

Ennis is the county town of County Clare. Unlike most county towns in Ireland it lies almost centrally within the county and is equally accessible to all residents (within the county). The economic growth of Ennis is eschewed by the presence of Shannon to the south east of the county which is the major employment base of the county.

The growth of the population of Ennis in the last twenty years has been phenomenal with a population increase rising from 15,333 in 1996 to 20,234 in 2006 which when allowing for the growth of the Ennis environs equates to 25% of the population of the county.

Within this growth there has been a significant increase in the population of non-nationals as well as an existing dependant population where there are significant numbers of lone parent families with children under 15 yrs (almost 1:5) and levels of unemployment for both genders higher than the rest of the county. In addition Ennis Town contains a large quantity of social housing in its urban centre and the larger part of the county's traveller population of 715 persons.

## **Ennistymon**

Ennistymon lies to the northwest and is remote from the rest of the county. It is the major town for the Burren and North Clare area with a population of 2,093 that provides services and facilities for a large rural



catchment area with a population of 17,300. Whilst the town has a population of 2,093 only a 1.8% increase over the 2002 Census findings this should be seen as an improvement following several years of population decline in North Clare.

In the area 20% of the workforce is employed in Agriculture with 4% working on farms of less than 20 hectares. The town has 13% of one parent families with children less than 15 years. After Ennis, Ennistymon has the largest community of Travellers in the county and also has a small non-national population. The popularity of the area for second homes and holiday accommodation distorts the housing market, making housing unaffordable for persons on low income, increasing dependency on social housing and rented accommodation and leading to a number of extended families living in single housing units.

## **1.5 The Researcher**

The researcher is a qualified teacher with over 20 years teaching experience. She has a particular interest in assessing the effectiveness of family learning programmes on adults learning as she has co-ordinated the project in Co. Clare for five years. She has been involved in the national consultation 'Working Together: Approaches to Family Literacy' and a Gruntvig European project on Family Learning. She also teaches the Family Literacy modules on programmes for the Literacy Development Centre at the Waterford Institute of Technology.

## **1.6 Structure of the Study**

**Chapter 2** provides a context for the study by reviewing the literature related to the topic. The chapter examines definitions of family learning before considering the research underlying the literacy development of adults and children from which family learning emerged. This leads to a discussion of the 'skills' versus the 'social practice' models of literacy in relation to different family learning programmes.

The influence of the theories of constructivism, social constructivism and social capital are analysed in the context of the methods of delivery of family learning programmes. Finally, recent literature is examined including that which looks specifically at the outcomes of adults attending family learning programmes.

**Chapter 3** describes the two sample groups studied in the research, taking into account ethical considerations. It also describes the overarching principles and the different methods that have been used to collect evidence to test whether family learning courses impact on parents' learning through their involvement in their children's learning. Finally, the different research tools used will be examined.

**Chapter 4** presents the findings of the data collected from the questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, end of course

evaluations, photographic evidence and assessment of the progression of parents in their future learning.

**Chapter 5** discusses the outcomes in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and explores how these fit into the existing body of knowledge, whether they are consistent with it, or give new insight into it. This is undertaken through focusing firstly on how family learning affected parents' involvement in their children's learning and secondly on the role of parents in their children's learning. Thirdly, the link between children's learning and parents' learning is discussed. Finally, consideration is given to whether a specific part of the family learning programme impacted more than any other.

**Chapter 6** concludes by summing up the overall findings, acknowledges the limitations of the study and looks at the implications for educational policy and practice. Finally, recommendations for further research are considered.

## Chapter 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Principles

The focus of this research is on an assessment of the impact of family learning programmes on parents' learning through their involvement in their children's learning.

The selection of appropriate literature for this review was determined through up-to-date knowledge of the subject gained through practical experience, discussion with other professionals, attendance at conferences, extensive reading of both books and journals, and searches on the web. Apart from the work of renowned theorists, the intention was to consider only recent literature of the last five years and because of the historical and cultural context to predominately search literature from Ireland and the UK. These principles defined the parameters of the research and outlined the objectives of the review.

The objectives of the review of literature are:

- To examine definitions of family learning and consider the research underlying the literacy development of adults and children from which family learning emerged:
- To lead a discussion on the 'skills' versus the 'social practice' models of literacy in relation to different family learning programmes:
- To analyse the theories of constructivism and social constructivism in relation to the methods of delivery of the programmes :

- To consider the link between learning and social capital to parents' learning and finally:
- To examine recent literature which looks specifically at the outcomes for adults attending family learning programmes.

## **2.2 Definitions of Family Learning**

Definitions of family learning are in some cases broad-reaching considering the family group and the whole community. Buffton defines family learning as that which supports efforts to raise children's achievement levels, raises expectations and aspirations of both children and adults, promotes active citizenship and as the family group is the microcosm of the community, is community capacity- building at its best (Buffton, 1999 p.12).

Lochrie suggests that family learning should be supporting the whole child's development, while encouraging the family unit to take an active part in the community. She is of the opinion that Family Learning programmes are those designed to enable adults and children to learn together. They should enable parent/carers to learn how to support their children's intellectual, physical and emotional development or sustain families as discrete units and encourage their connectivity to others in the community (Lochrie 2004).

These selected definitions give a flavour of the diversity of the term 'family learning' and the expectations that are encompassed. They provide an interesting reference point for this research.

'Family' has many connotations but in this study it will follow an established meaning which will encompass any adult who has a relationship with a child (Horne et al 2004), and the term 'parent' will be used to mean the adults who are in long term caring relationships with children and responsible for their well-being and development (NALA 2004).

In Ireland 'Family Literacy' is the term used by the National Adult Literacy Agency and many of the adult education centres. In this document the programmes, unless otherwise indicated, will be called 'Family Learning Programmes'. This is because the Clare Family Learning Project, based in Co. Clare, has always used the term 'family learning', stating that programmes are ultimately to help adults improve their learning skills, through focusing on supporting their children's learning and through this process acquiring literacy skills.

### **2.3 Development of Family Learning / Family Literacy**

Family learning emerged in the 1980s. Researchers who addressed questions of the family influence on children's language and literacy provided a theoretical shift towards the idea that children's literacy developed from an early age and therefore the home must have an influence.

Taylor introduced the term 'family literacy' as a way of describing the range of literacy activities of children, parents and others within the family. Her work coincided with developments in research into the education of children, which increasingly recognised the role of the home

in children's learning development (Taylor 1983). This was reinforced by research on the awareness of storytelling (Wells, 1987), knowledge of letters (Tizard et al, 1988) and phonological awareness (Bryant & Bradely, 1985). During the 1980s the emphasis moved away from parents being used solely to support school learning, to recognising and supporting the role of parents as children's first educators (Hannon, 1995, 25).

### **2.3.1 Emergent Literacy**

At this time the development of the idea of 'emergent literacy' evolved and was explored by Nigel Hall in his book *The Emergence of Literacy* (Hall 1987). This recognised that literacy does not have to be taught systematically at around the age of five when children 'are ready'. As Yetta Goodman discovered, in her many years of studying reading and writing skills of young children, literacy is a process which builds on a range of informal language, reading, writing and numeracy experiences, that occur in the home and community from the time children are born, (Goodman 1980). She claims that literacy development has to be considered in both the culture of a larger society, and within the specific culture in which a child grows up. A child's literacy emerges through its experience of the real purpose and function of people and environments that are rich in language and writing.

Interest in the home as a learning environment focused attention on the parents' role in supporting their children's learning. Family learning programmes evolved in the US, in the UK and subsequently in Ireland in Co

Clare in 1994 (Clare Family Learning Project 2000). During this period, the late 90s, and into the new millennium, research focused on the impact on children and parents' involvement in children's education.

### **2.3.2 The Influence of Parents' Involvement on Children's Learning**

The research literature in this area was comprehensively studied by Deforges and Abouchaar (Deforges and Abouchaar 2003). This review of parental involvement in children's education noted that parent-child interactions (discussions) in the primary age range have more influence on children's behaviour and achievement than other factors such as socio-economic status and family size.

...it's what parents do rather than who they are that counts..... its what they do at home not how much contact they have with a child's teacher or help they give in the classroom or attendance at PTA meetings (Deforges, C. {Family Learning Network Conference, Cornwall UK} 2006) .

This is further backed up by Feinstein and Symons who found that the effect of parental involvement in a child's learning is eight times greater than the impact of other elements such as social class or parents' occupations on children's achievement ( Cited in Tuckett, 2004).

Saker demonstrates in figures what this effect can be (Table 1):



*Table 1 Effects of Parents and School on Children's Achievement*

	Parents effect	School effect
age 7	0.29	0.05
age 11	0.27	0.21
age 16	0.14	0.51

This emphasises how much effect parents can have on children's achievement especially at an early age and this is also highlighted by a report commissioned in the UK by Skills for Families that states that research on pre-school education concludes that the quality of the home learning is more important than social class and levels of [parents'] education (The Basic Skills Agency, 2003).

The question that arises is whether parents could be supported to acknowledge the important role they and their home environments play in their children's learning. If schools find it difficult to provide this support then family learning programmes could be part of that process.

Hannon, in his book *Literacy' Home and School*, suggests a theoretical framework for parental involvement in literacy (Hannon 1995). He says that parents need support to identify what is important about their role in their children's learning and what experiences are likely to help children's literacy development. He argues that not only should schools be working with parents but also there should be help about how it can be done.

Hannon's ORIM framework sets out to provide simple pointers as to the parents' role in providing: **opportunities** for learning, **recognition** of

achievements, **interaction** around literacy activities and as a **model** for literacy.

This not only demonstrates the focus of research on children's achievements, but also reinforces the importance of the power of parents and the home environment, and builds on Hall's emergent literacy research, noted earlier (Hall 1987, Goodman 1990). Family learning, in encouraging parents to recognise their role in the learning process of their children, could be said to be a tool to enhance this recognition.

This suggestion was made in Ireland by the Educational Research Centre in Dublin, in a government initiative, *Addressing Disadvantage*, where it was recognised that there is now a multifaceted approach to tackling disadvantage and that an approach should include high levels of parental involvement in the educational process both at home and at school (Archer and Weir 2004)

This report suggested that one of the ways of tackling this between generations would be through promoting family literacy programmes. This suggestion was followed a year later by a further government initiative, *Delivering Equal Opportunity to Schools* (DEIS 05, DES 05, 36). Here the report recognises the vital role that parents and family have in their children's education. It proposes initiating 'a new family literacy project' which will be implemented on a phased basis, taking in past experience. It is to be based on a partnership approach involving the Vocational Education Committees, adult literacy services and Home School Community Liaison co-ordinators working with homes, communities and schools.

At a national policy level in Ireland therefore family learning is being recognised and this could ultimately influence schools' understanding of and support for programmes.

### **2.3.3 Deficit Model**

Promotion of parental involvement on the one hand could be said to support family learning, in that it is providing more information to parents on how they can support their children's learning. On the other hand it could be said that it arises from a 'deficit' model of educational disadvantage. Auerbach takes the view that parent programmes focussing on school-like academic activities are a form of blame (Auerbach 1989). They make the assumption that families cannot be relied on to provide learning opportunities and that parents with little positive experience of education need to be taught how to help their children learn, thus devaluing their home literacy practices (Taylor 1997).

Both DEIS's proposed project in Ireland discussed above and some of the reports from the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) in the UK could be seen to arise from the 'deficit' approach to families as can be seen from the following comment.

Family learning programmes are very effective in building links between those parents and their children's schools and are successfully encouraging parents to take a greater interest in their children's education (Ofsted, 2003).

The line is very thin between building two-way links between home and school, both mutually valuing each others' role as partners in developing and

supporting children's literacy development and in schools seeking parents' support in school based learning to achieve their targets.

Hannon reflects that whilst very few, if any families could be said to totally lack literacy or concerns for their children's development and education, some programmes seem to be premised on this view. If this is the case, and it is assumed that family learning will break the cycle of poverty or compensate for problems facing the educational system, it will only reinforce the ideology that blames poor people for their problems and leaves social inequalities intact (Auerbach, 1995, Hannon, 2000).

Taylor argues that an emphasis of family learning programmes on 'eradicating illiteracy within poor families' has been misdirected with not enough emphasis being put on how a family's culture influences their promotion of literacy (Taylor 1997).

The research at the heart of this study does not come out of the 'deficit' model of education, but from focussing on 'a strengths model approach'. It focuses on family learning programmes that see the family and the home environment as a source of literacy learning, valuing the family and its cultural background in children's education.

Programmes should not be governed by content but rather by encouraging parents to determine what they want to be able to do and the skills they need to carry out these objectives (Potts, 2004).

The forgoing review of the history of the development of family learning demonstrates the potential of family learning programmes as a valuable part of intergenerational learning.

Lochrie suggests that a lack of systematic measurement, recording and evaluation of outcomes for programmes has not provided enough verifiable proof for policy makers even though it was generally agreed internationally that 'family learning works' (Lochrie 2004).

One explanation for the lack of concrete evidence is that the outcomes of family learning are focused on children's and adults' learning with a balance towards parents' involvement in children's literacy development. Vivian Gadsden who looked at current areas of interest in family literacy in the *Annual Review of Adult Literacy and Learning* in the US in 2002, suggested that more attention needed to be given to the impact of family learning programmes on the adults involved, and the position of family literacy work in adult education (Gadsden 2002).

In the next section it is interesting to note that the improvement of adult's literacy and numeracy skills are an important focus of family learning programmes. In 2002 there was little research into this particular aspect, which was one of the reasons for conducting this research.

## 2.4 Definitions of Family Learning Programmes

In the UK the Learning Skills Council (LSC) defines Family Literacy, Language and Numeracy programmes as follows:

All family literacy programmes encourage family members to learn together. They promote learning together as a family, but also learning within the family and should allow adults and children to pursue further learning. (LSC

Intergenerational learning is the heart of family learning programmes. On the one hand there is debate around the low literacy levels in adults and how best to support adult learning and on the other hand there is the on-going emphasis on improving the literacy standards of children. The common factor is 'family' and the role of parents and the home in this process.

Programmes under this heading internationally, are diverse and fit into several broad categories. Jeanne Paratore describes three types of family literacy programmes:

1. Those that provide comprehensive services to parents and children,
2. Those that provide services to parents... with the intent of influencing the literacy achievement of both parents and children
3. Those focusing on affecting the literacy achievement of the child alone, with the parent as the instrument of change

(Paratore, 2003. P.13).

This study will be focusing on the second type of programme above, which is the type that is commonly used in Ireland. In Ireland the National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) sums up family literacy in the following way:

- the uses of literacy within a family or wider community, especially activities which involve two or more generations.
- education programmes that help to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context.
- supports the learning that happens in the home and in communities
- breaks down barriers between learning in different contexts
- gives vital support to parents whose own education has been

The focus is on adults learning, the effect this has on their children's learning and the families' educational aspirations. Funding comes through the Department of Education to the Adult and Community Education centres. Within this category of programmes are those that provide services to parents with the intent of influencing the literacy achievement of both parents and children. There are similar programmes in the UK defined by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) as aiming to get adults and children learning as or within a family, or to help parents/carers learn how to support their children's learning. Their aims are to develop the skills or knowledge of the adult and child and to help parents/carers to be able to support their children's learning (LSC 2004).

In Ireland, NALA interprets these types of Family Learning Programmes as those which support and encourage the family and community as places where people can learn together, acting as both teacher and learner, and those which connect adults back into education (NALA 2004).

Here the initial focus is not necessarily literacy. It could, for example be on health, community art or parenting.

From the intergenerational learning that is encouraged on these courses further learning can take place, for example, adults can improve their literacy skills. In Co. Clare these types of programmes are an initial way of encouraging parents back into learning. Literacy would be highlighted within the subject context and parents showing an interest in building up their literacy skills would be encouraged to attend focused literacy programmes (CFLP information pack. 2006).

## **2.5 Aims of Family Learning Programmes**

The LSC in the UK defines the aim of Family Literacy Programmes in the following way:

- To improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of parents/carers,
- To improve the ability of parents/carers to help their children,
- To help children acquire literacy, language and numeracy skills.

(LSC 2004)

In the United States (US) where family literacy was established by the National Centre for Family Literacy in 1989, the current focus of programmes is on children developing language and literacy skills with the support of their parents who also have the opportunity to develop their own skills ([www.famlit.org](http://www.famlit.org) accessed 13/09/06).



In Co. Clare 85% of the programmes involve adults and the rest involve adults and children working together (CFL 2006). In other countries including the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, some family learning programmes directly involve adults and children, and others work with adults only.

These definitions and aims above show that parents' own learning through their involvement in their children's learning is part of family learning programmes. This study is looking specifically at parents' learning from this process, and in order to find out more, criteria need to be established that can measure 'effectiveness'. To do this the research literature around adult literacy learning is reviewed.

## **2.6 Literacy and Family Learning - Skills versus Social Practice**

In the UK the Basic Skills Agency website defines literacy as the ability to read, write and speak in English / Welsh and to use mathematics at a level necessary to function and progress at work and in society in general ([www.basic-skills.co.uk](http://www.basic-skills.co.uk) 08.08.06).

The 'skills' model of literacy arose from the idea that people are literate when they have acquired essential knowledge and skills that enable them to function and participate in a community. Through the economic and the political climates of society this model predetermines the vocational literacy and numeracy skills required.

The social practice view of literacy has its basis in Paulo Freire's ideas that adult's 'reading the word' is also about 'reading the world' (Freire and Macedo 1987). Literacy becomes political and no longer neutral. If literacy involves learners' critical reflections on their social environment, and they understand the position they take within it, then this is part of learning. Lyn Tett broadens this view by arguing that by 'learning to be literate' learners can 'understand the way power is distributed so that the practices of some are not privileged at the expense of others.' (Tett 2003). This links with earlier discussions of the 'deficit model' and blaming parents, rather than putting value on the home culture as shown by the emergent literacy research (Hall 1987, Goodman 1990).

In Ireland, NALA's definition of literacy is broader and reflects some of the ideas above.

Literacy includes more than the confident and varied application of skills in speaking and listening, reading, writing, numeracy and basic information and communication technology. It has social and economic elements that increase opportunities for individuals and communities to reflect on experience, explore new possibilities and bring about change (NALA 2004).

Similarly in Scotland, adult literacy is defined as follows.

Literacy is the ability to read and write and use numeracy, to handle information, to express ideas and opinions, to make decisions and solve problems, as family members, workers, citizens and lifelong learners. (Communities Scotland.gov.uk, accessed 26 August 2006)

Literacy is not a clear concept and much debate surrounds it (Papen 2005). The two models of literacy presented below are the 'skills based' model and the 'social practice' model.

The skills-based model focuses on what skills are needed to function and progress at work and in society. Crowther says that this model fails to recognise people's existing uses of literacy, the skills they possess or the meanings literacy has for them (Crowther et al 2001). This model invariably results in focusing on what people can't do rather than what they do already. This in turn predetermines what skills are valuable to literacy rather than building on an individual's existing literacy.

Uta Papen agrees that literacy is not just about skills but that it involves people communicating and interacting, it is part of what forms relationships. It is embedded in a broader social practice and is bound to structures and institutions. Literacy is culturally part of the values, ideas, conventions, identities and world views that shape events (Papen, 2005).

Randal Holme in his book *Literacy - An Introduction* discusses how literacy development cognitively is scaffolded by social practice. He says that whilst to be fully literate is to engage in literacy practices, to become literate is not simply to acquire a predetermined set of skills. It is the acquisition of the desire to participate in certain socio-cultural practices and an understanding of the skills that these require (Holme 2004).

There are critics of this view who comment that the promotion of vernacular literacies will mean that learners will continue to be excluded

from dominant middle-class literacies. Supporters of 'social practice' say that it does not deny people access to the powerful literacies of workplace and public institutions but implies all practices need to be examined.

Similarly family learning and the social practice approach can build bridges from the vernacular to the dominant literacy practices by talking about home and school language and links, as well as visiting the library. Literacy and language practices are constantly changing. The debate is about who decides what really useful literacy is and whether policy makers know about the highly useful and relevant literacy skills that people acquire through their own self-controlled literacy practices.

An example of two differing approaches to family learning programmes in the UK highlights the point being made above. The two types of Family Learning programmes are Family Language, Literacy and Numeracy (FLLN) whose aim is to improve the literacy, language and numeracy skills of parents, their ability to help their children and improve children's own acquisition of basic skills, and Widening Family Learning (WFL) courses which are linked to widening participation, community capacity building. The FLLN courses presuppose the needs of the groups they are working with and therefore come under the 'skills based' literacy model whilst the WFL courses fall into the 'social practice' literacy model.

Both programmes are funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), one of the government departments involved in the Skills for Life strategy focussing on improving adult literacy and numeracy skills. The value given to

the two types of courses is highlighted below by the amount of funding they each received in the year 2004-05.

WFL can have literacy and numeracy embedded £11 million  
FLLN literacy and numeracy is the primary purpose £25 million

(Lochrie. 2005)

Several research projects have looked at the outcomes to learners from the two models. In 2003 an evaluation of LSC funded WFL and FLLN programmes, conducted by the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), found no consensus on the influence of FLLN on participation and achievement targets. They found that few FLLN programmes advertised explicitly that they would help participants improve their own literacy and numeracy skills; rather participants were encouraged to gain an understanding of their children's learning. A study of the impact of family learning courses on adults' learning found no major differences between the outcomes of the two programmes (Horne and Haggart 2004).

The presumption is that with more funding going into FLLN courses where literacy, language and numeracy is the main focus, literacy outcomes would be different from those of the WFL courses where literacy is embedded in topics that parents are interested in. The results from the research above imply that the literacy being promoted in the more specific family literacy, language and numeracy courses is meeting the needs of the policy makers rather than the learners, a skills model approach. The implication could be drawn that, if more funding was spent on embedding literacy into

parents' specific interests and needs, a social practice approach, the outcomes would be greater.

In Ireland, family learning programmes reflect the WFL courses of the UK. NALA's handbook on Family Literacy indicates that family learning programmes are based on a strengths or 'wealth' model that reflect the literacy learning that already happens in the home and aims to validate, support and develop the work that parents already do (Auerbach 1997, 71-81, Tett 2000, 123-127, Mashishi and Cook, 2003, in NALA 2004, 229-231).

Literacy is not conducted in isolation, learners are part of families and communities, the home and the culture are valued, and to benefit all, an integrated approach with other agencies occurs (NALA 2004). This fits into the 'social practice' model of literacy, 'emergent literacy', and in opposition to the deficit approach that are discussed above. This is the foundation of family learning in Co. Clare on which this thesis focuses.

## **2.7 Family Learning and Learning Theories**

The learning theory behind the delivery of family learning is important in the context of the focus of this research, as it underpins the concept of family learning.

### 2.7.1 Constructivism

The constructivist approach considers that thinking and learning is affected by the context and the beliefs and attitudes of the learner. Learners in a group talk to each other discussing and evaluating ideas. If a learner is able to participate in this type of discussion, they will learn a new way of looking at a particular idea because there has been new interpretation of existing ideas. This is referred to as a construction. Constructivism is the theory behind that process and is about creating personal interpretations of other people's ideas and experiences. This is achieved through discussion and learning how these ideas relate to each other and to the pre-existing knowledge of the individual. (Thanasoulas 2001, [www.eltnewsletter.com](http://www.eltnewsletter.com), accessed 12 September 2007)

Until the late 1980s and early 1990s the constructivist approach was more apparent in children's education as problem solving became an integral part of the curriculum. This is especially interesting considering the intergenerational approach of family learning. Teachers of adults acknowledged that through group discussions new ideas and experience are marked against existing knowledge and constructs are formed that measure and validate current experience and predict new experiences. Constructs help the learner to discover meaning and understanding rather than accumulating information. (Potts 2004)

Lochrie notes that family learning is a doorway for non-traditional learners who want to help and support their own children's learning. They are involved in it on a daily basis and they find it easy to share experiences. This, linked with the stories of their own formal education, motivates parents to participate for the sake of their children, and is quickly followed by the development of new personal constructs for themselves (Lochrie 2004). The social practice model values people and their home environments. Through this approach family learning gives parents the confidence to think about themselves as people who can and are doing things that before they were not aware of as important. This changed perspective provides parents with a new dimension, or construct, to build learning on.

Family Learning in Co. Clare works with the needs of the groups, using and explaining different learning strategies, such as the different learning styles based on the VARK model (Visual, Auditory, Reading, Kinaesthetic) (Flemming and Mills 1992) and Harold Gardner's multiple intelligences (Gardner 1993). Clare Family Learning Programme emphasises the role of parents as the first and most important teacher and focuses on the oral skills of literacy, communication, rhymes songs and poems, and storytelling.

In the programmes reading skills are promoted through sharing books and the importance of environmental print. The focus on writing is through the development of mark-making, into early writing and the purpose of it. Maths is part of literacy and the use of mathematical concepts in everyday



life is highlighted along with the learning that takes place from playing games, imaginative and creative play.

Information in family learning courses is familiar in that the context is ordinary everyday activities that will link with previous knowledge and experience of the parents or with what they recognise in their home environments and in their children. What is hoped is that parents will acknowledge the importance of this knowledge and understanding, and build on it. Values can then either be accepted or confirmed, or challenged (Clare Family Learning 2000).

### **2.7.2 Social Constructivism**

The success of family learning programmes is often measured by the support the participants give each other and by the learning that takes place in these situations (Eldred and Haggart, 2002). Insights into the social aspects of learning have emerged and this, coupled with the importance of culture in learning, has led to the evolution of the social constructivist theory of learning (Carlile and Jordan, 2005).

A prominent theorist of social constructivism is Vygotsky, who suggests that there are mediators in learning. He believes that only a certain amount can be learnt individually and after that it is in interacting with others who offer support and encouragement that a person moves on to the next level of learning (Vygotsky 1934). Vygotsky calls this the Zone of Proximal Development'(ZPD) which he related to children's learning.

Here adults by being aware of, and recognising their children's level of competence, can provide prompts and encouragement for children to move beyond their current level of functioning but not beyond their capacity. This can be done through demonstration, modelling, prompting by asking leading questions or introducing the initial element of a solution. By using the help of others the child or learner can organise their thought processes to develop the conceptual means to gain increasing understanding and control of knowledge.

For Vygotsky, central to the process of the development of learning was the idea of consciousness. He argued that consciousness (as with learning to speak and then finding out the meaning), comes late in the development of a function and it is only when it has been used and practised unconsciously and spontaneously that it is fully understood (Thought and Language, 1961 - quoted by Bruner, 1983). Bruner uses the term 'scaffolding' to describe this process. (Cairns 2001)

In the more structured situation of a school or adult education programme, a teacher offers support to a learner and may complete parts of the overall task that the learner cannot yet manage. The learner gradually takes on more of the task as they are more confident and eventually can do the task independently and understand how it relates to other tasks or is transferable. Other group members can provide 'scaffolding' or support to help learners to a greater depth of understanding, in other words working collaboratively, learners are helped 'to internalise existing knowledge and make it their own' (Carlile and Jordan 2004).

Bruner (1996) states that all learning is a shared culture. Different cultures have different views and purposes for learning and education. In the case of many participants on family learning programmes formal education has not served them well.

## **2.8 Family Learning and Social Capital**

One of the findings of Eldred and Haggart, in their review of family and intergenerational learning projects, was that family learning increased social relationships between generations and local communities (Eldred et al 2002).

This is linked to the social capital theory, (Coleman 1994, Putnam 1993, 2001) which maintains that improved relationships based on trust and friendship will help further learning and develop a stronger commitment to communities (Putnam 2000). Buffton notes that family learning by its very nature of having the family at its centre will promote active citizenship (Buffton 1999).

The theory of social capital explored by John Field and Lyn Tett, sees a link between the trust built into relationships and the quality of learning (Field 2005) (Tett 2006). Both of these writers show that trust and learning are interlinked and mutually beneficial to each other.

Field reflects upon the idea that people who build relationships in their community develop greater trust and understanding. This allows them to

develop confidence in themselves and with this a desire to extend their knowledge and understanding and to continue to learn.

Field focused on studies of adult learning and social capital in Northern Ireland and examined data from the Northern Ireland Life and Time Survey (NILTS 2001, 2002). Among other things, this found that people who socialise more are likely to be more involved in community and lifelong learning (Field 2005).

Tett looked at how taking on new learning can affect confidence and self-esteem and this affects how people relate to one another. Her research looked at data derived from a study of adult literacy and numeracy learners in Scotland, (Tett et al 2006). She looks at the impact of learning on social capital, how learning effects change in individuals, families and communities. She starts from the premise that extensive research literature demonstrates the link between low literacy and economic and social status. Therefore any participation in learning will contribute to widening social capital and bring social and economic benefits. Her research showed that learners were more likely to increase their contact with local people and go out regularly, indicating an increase in trust and more interest in local communities.

The 'dark side' of the theory is that it is particularly difficult for an individual who lives in a community that lacks aspirations to education to behave differently to their peers (Tett and Maclachlan 2006). People

learn to be who they are through family and community. By doing things that don't fit they can become alienated, which is the 'dark side'.

Field and Tett both agree that learning in adult education and community settings seems to increase confidence so that the 'dark side' can be overcome and a range of possibilities are opened up which in turn increase social and economic capital.

Increased confidence can be a crucial aspect of overcoming what McGivney called the 'dispositional' obstacles to undertaking further learning, linked to learners' attitudes, perceptions and motivations (McGivney 1993). In other words, learning appears to affect not only decisions about whether or not to participate but also gives access to information concerning the opportunities and likely results of participation.

Field suggests that gain in social capital equips learners with the skills and understanding associated with citizenship (Field 2005). He does not say however, which skills he associates with citizenship nor the length of time learners would have to attend courses in order for them to become involved in the community.

In relation to family learning, Schuller et al in their research into *Learning Continuity, and Change in Adult Life* note that family learning involves more than generating parental involvement in their children's education, though this is a central element. Many different sets of relationships are potentially affected within and across generations and in every case,

learning can play a significant role in sustaining and strengthening relationships, notably by improving communication skills and mutual respect (Schuller et al 2002).

This theoretical framework has considered the different sorts of learning underlying family learning and how the constructivist, social construction, social capital approaches to learning are reflected in the ways family learning affects adults' learning through their children's learning. We now look at the influence of family learning on the acquisition of new skills and knowledge.

## **2.9 The Influence of Family Learning On the Acquisition of New Skills and Knowledge**

A good starting point for examining the literature on the influence of family learning on the acquisition of new skills and knowledge in adults is to look at the gain in confidence experienced through participation in family learning programmes.

### **2.9.1 Self Confidence**

Lancashire County Council, the LSC, DfES and NIACE conducted research within Lancashire on *The Impact of Adults Participation in Family Learning* to ascertain what positive outcomes evolved from participation in family learning programmes. Findings showed an increase in confidence and self-esteem. Some people also felt that their overall emotional well-being

improved. An increase in confidence enabled some parents to communicate better and improve their social skills at all levels, with peers, children and teachers. The authors felt that this increased confidence could be seen in the way learners met more people or took on further learning (Horne, J and Haggart, J. 2004).

A study by Hammond on the impacts of adults' learning on well-being, mental health and effective coping, further supports the importance of learning on the social meta-competences, such as confidence and self-efficacy, and demonstrates how learning could negate the low self-esteem caused by poor schooling. (Hammond 2004, pp42-46). This seems particularly relevant to family learning participants, for many of whom their negative experience of school is affecting their children's education.

### **2.9.2 Understanding of Being a Better Parent**

Learning affects other areas of learners' lives such as family and community. Bynner and Hammond (2004) found this when looking at the impact of formal learning on adults' lives.

In Tett's and Maclachan's research many parents reported how their own learning helped them 'to do a better job as a parent'. Their confidence in their ability as a parent was raised as they communicated more with their children, showed greater understanding and patience and developed more practical skills like using the computer (Tett and Maclachan 2006).

Other research shows how families as a whole can benefit from one member taking part in an FL course. This happens through an increase in the number of activities a family share together. This can lead to families spending more time together experiencing a wider range of activities such as 'reading together, visiting the library and visiting new places of interest' (Schuller et al, 2002).

### **2.9.3 Understanding of How Children Learn**

The PEEP Birth to School Study (2004) entitled *Enabling Parents Study*, looked at the effects on parents as adult learners of attending family learning programmes in Oxford, UK. Results found that parents had greater awareness of their child's literacy development and of ways to foster it, they felt supported and encouraged by the project, they made significant improvement in their socio-economic status in the form of employment and the uptake of significantly more courses.

### **2.9.4 Understanding how Adults Learn**

Banbury carried out a study into whether the intergenerational learning that takes place in family learning programmes is any different from other types of learning (Banbury 2005). Her findings suggest that intergenerational learning, aids recognition of the learning skills for both the adult and child, highlighting links and opening up different perspectives on learning. This in turn gives individuals the confidence and enthusiasm to engage fully in tasks.



When helped by others who are in similar situations, participants begin to understand that learning is not just confined to classes but takes place in everyday life, in different contexts and that people learn in different ways. Learning is making links between old and new, reflecting critically on what has been or is being learnt. This relates to the formation of constructs discussed earlier in the chapter.

Banbury notes that effective collaborative learning, linking two generations, seems to increase concentration and commitment, and fosters confidence and self esteem. This combination ensures that learning will continue long after the planned programme (Banbury 2005). These findings are supportive of the learning theory of scaffolding and collaborative learning discussed above (Vygotsky 1934) (Bruner 1994)

## **2.10 Increased Contact between Parents and Schools**

Greater contact between parents and school was another benefit that was found from family learning. The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education study in Lancashire apart from noting a widening circle of friends and a feeling of well-being, of having a purpose to 'get out of the house more', also found that learners became more involved in their children's schools and had increased confidence in dealing with institutions and official bodies (NIACE 2003). This is reinforced by research by Schuller that notes that parents who have attended family learning programmes have improved communication with teachers and therefore have better relations with schools. (Schuller et al 2002).

## 2.11 Becoming more Reflective

Research by Basset-Grundy, '*Parental Perspectives on Family Learning*' (2002) obtained the views of the families themselves on what they perceived as the benefits of family learning. These included the realisation that there were lots of opportunities to teach their children, they gained from meeting people in a similar situation and they gained practical knowledge around helping their children.

A participant in that study commented:

"I already know my brain is starting to wake up and I feel a better person for it..... "  
"...making me feel ready and capable enough of branching off into doing other courses"  
(Basset-Grundy 2002)

## 2.12 Progression to further learning

Another benefit that has been recognised from participation in family learning has been that Family Learning provides 'progression opportunities' for parents on to further learning or training, often leading to qualifications and better employment opportunities. (Brooks et al,1997 and OFSTED 2000).

## 2.13 Conclusion

The study focuses on an assessment of the impact of family learning programmes on parents' learning through their involvement in their children's learning.

The review of literature has considered definitions of family learning in which the overall theme is of 'intergenerational learning' either parents or children together in programmes or groups of adults on their own. It noted the research underlying the literacy development of adults and children from which family learning evolved: emergent literacy; the work of Deforges on the impact of parents on children's learning; the social practice model in relation to adults' education; and the way constructs, social constructivism and social capital theories give a theoretical framework to the adults' learning within family learning programmes. The evidence from the review raises the question

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe the sample group who participated in the research. The methodology will then be discussed before looking at the methods or tools used to collect evidence to answer the research question: What impact do family learning programmes have on adults' learning through their involvement in their children's learning?

### 3.2 Overarching principles

In the previous chapter the research by Deforges and Abouchaar on parental involvement in children's education noted that parent/child interaction has greater influence on children's behaviour and achievement than other factors such as social economic status and family size (Deforges and Abouchaar 2003).

Family Learning programmes could be seen as a vehicle for raising parents' awareness through focussing on the benefit of parent/child interaction. Encouraging parents to value interactions with their children is at the heart of standard family learning programmes delivered in Co Clare.

If this is the focus for influencing children's achievement the question arises as to how much this greater involvement with children's learning effects the parents' learning.

Vivien Gadsden suggests that the focus of research into family learning has been on children's achievement and that exploring the influence on parent's learning was an area that had been little investigated (Gadsden 2002). While acknowledging that an increase in parent/child interaction does influence children's educational achievement, this research in assessing the impact of family learning programmes on parents' ability to learn through their involvement in their child's learning and focuses on the following questions.

- What impact do family learning programmes have in terms of the type of ordinary day-to-day activities parents are involved in with their children?
- How frequent is such involvement?
- What learning do parents gain through the recognition of their involvement in their children's learning through family learning programmes?
- Does any one part of the programme impacts more than another on parents' learning?

### **3.3 The Profile of the Two Groups**

The summary of the demography and the socio-economic structure of County Clare in the introduction to this research provides the background for the two groups on which the research is based, one situated in Ennis and the other in Ennistymon.

In designing this research the researcher was aiming to gain data from a sample of twenty-five parents, in the end the research sample consisted of twenty-two parents. This small sample puts into question whether the results would have any generality or relevance to other family learning programmes. The twenty-two parents make up two different programmes and as groups are comparable in terms of diversity, through age, gender, education, socio-economic background, Traveller and lone-parent family status.

**Group 1** lived in Ennis and attended a Lone Parent programme five mornings a week for which they received a small benefit payment and a separate allowance for childcare. The parents attend the programme for a year and can enter and exit it at different times throughout that year. Many of the courses that make up the programme are nationally accredited to encourage parents back into education or employment, which is an aim of the programme.

Family learning although not accredited had formed part of the programme for the previous four years and is recognised as a worthwhile course to include because of the positive feedback it has received from both parents and managers. The programme has places for fifteen learners but at the time of the research only twelve were registered.

The parents were all female from both Traveller and settled backgrounds and aged between seventeen and fifty-four, with the majority in their twenties. All learners had young children or grandchildren between the ages of one and nine years. They were all lone parents or grandparents, many of whom had left school early. Some had attended formal education spasmodically for a few years. Several of them had low literacy levels and several were suffering from minor mental health problems.

**Group 2** lived in the Ennistymon area of North Clare and were registered on a Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) during 2005 - 2006. This involved attending a programme four mornings a week for which they received a small allowance for childcare.

Most of the courses that made up this programme were nationally accredited. Half of the twelve attendees had in the previous three years attended different family learning programmes in the town and were keen to do another programme. The group consisted of ten females and one male and were from both Traveller and settled backgrounds. The age of the group ranged from twenty-one to forty-five with the majority between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. All had children between the ages of one and sixteen. Many of the group had left school early and others had attended spasmodically for a number of years, consequently several had low literacy levels.

The tutor for both courses was the researcher who in both locations had the assistance of another member of staff who supported those learners with the greatest literacy needs. Course One was a standard family

learning course, which took place for two hours a week over twelve weeks (See Appendix 1). Course Two was a family learning 'story sack' course, which took place for two hours a week for nine weeks (See Appendix 2).

The courses were attended by an average of seven parents per session. The personal circumstances of the parents made attendance difficult which resulted in less than full participation by each individual in the sample and this is reflected in the analysis.

### **3.4 Validity and Reliability**

These groups are a good representation of the 'hard-t- engage', directly relevant to the target group for family learning programmes. The diversity of the groups and the comparability of the two groups make the study relevant to other family learning programmes.

The use of small groups is considered valid as it uses participants who form the core of those target groups.

The reliability of evidence obtained from these groups can be questioned as it is taken from small groups in a specific geographic area. However, the target group for family learning programmes both within County Clare and throughout Ireland is made up of learners who predominantly come from the sort of groups from which the sample was taken.



### **3.5 Methodology**

The methodology for this research was designed to focus on discovering 'how' parents' involvement in their children's learning affected their own learning. Exploration of this relationship between parents' and children's learning focused the methodology mainly towards a qualitative research approach. This type of research is concerned with the understanding of behaviour and allows exploration and expansion.

In contrast, the hard data obtained through quantitative research would seem to be inappropriate as the only paradigm to use in this particular research project. The project is concerned with parents' ideas and behaviours that need to be understood. A mix of the two with a greater emphasis on qualitative data seems appropriate to allow exploration of the parent child relationship as well as some measurable quantitative data.

### **3.6 Methods**

Different forms of research tools were used to consider the research questions:

What impact do family learning programmes have in terms of the type of ordinary day-to-day activities parents are involved in with their children?

How frequent is such involvement?

What learning do parents gain through the recognition of their involvement in their children's learning through family learning programmes?

Does one part of the programme impact more than another on parents' learning? (see Table 2 below).

Acts of preparation	- Preparatory interviews
Main research methods	- Questionnaires - Focus groups - Semi-structured interviews
Subsidiary Evidence	- Photographic evidence - End of course evaluations - Progression routes one year on

The use of several research methods has the advantage of producing data gathered from a variety of perspectives both individually and privately with photographs, questionnaires and evaluations, shared group discussion and two-way conversations about thoughts, feelings and beliefs. It also allows triangulation with comparisons between different results and findings and provides a rich range of evidence upon which to consider the research questions.

### **3.7 Ethical Considerations**

The methods used to obtain information require interpersonal discussions to take place, requiring consideration of the ethics surrounding issues of

privacy and anonymity. The researcher has at every stage of the research sought informed consent, making it clear to the parents when, where and how their involvement in the research will be used. This has been achieved by the signing of a consent form at the onset of the research and again by those that provided photographic evidence and those who took part in the semi-structured interviews.

### **3.6 An Examination of the Research Methods**

An examination of the research methods will look at why the different tools were used, how the methods were delivered, what considerations were taken into account and what the limitations of the methods were.

### **3.9 Preparatory Interviews**

Preparatory interviews took place after short introductory sessions with the two groups. These initial sessions involved an explanation of each course taking place and the research that was to be undertaken during the delivery of that course. In the researcher's experience of family learning it is at this stage that learners confronted with information about a new course feel most vulnerable.

The preparatory interviews were therefore short and informal with the main aim to breakdown initial barriers between researcher and parent and

allow any concerns or queries to be dealt with on a personal basis. They allowed individuals to voice particular needs and expectations privately and gave the researcher time to consider how these needs might be met within the programme being delivered. They gave the researcher the opportunity to get consent forms signed and to discover whether there were friends or family members who would be suitable and willing to be part of a control group. Finally they provided an opportunity for information about the parents to be clarified by the researcher so that this information could be used later for analysis.

### **3.8 Questionnaires**

The aim of the questionnaire was to find out more about the parents' interactions with their children, the types of activities and particular circumstances that evoked interaction and the frequency of particular interactions. A questionnaire was used as it was adaptable in collecting different sorts of information in a relatively simple and straightforward way and would provide information that could be compared and summarised (Robson 2002).

The questionnaire was made up of mainly standardised questions about learning in general, learning with children and different scenarios of parent child interaction in the home. Parents indicated on a sliding scale importance/frequency of statements and wrote or dictated short responses to three open-ended questions (See Appendix 3).

The questionnaire was administered to both groups within the second session. Support was given to those who needed it. At the same time the questionnaires were sent to a control group to verify the data. The group was made up of non-attending friends and relations of the learners who were of similar age, circumstance and socio-economic background.

This whole process was repeated on the last session of each course. This was done to assess whether there was any change in the understanding of learning, and pattern and frequency of parent/child interaction that could be attributed to attendance on the programme.

The data gathered from both cohorts independently demonstrates the range of interactive activities the learners participate in with their children and the frequency of doing those activities. However the data gathered from a comparison of the questionnaires from the beginning and ending of the courses, on the surface show little evidence of change. This could be because there had been no change, or that initially the participants did not fully understand the significance of the questions. It was only at the end that full understanding of the questions became clear. Initially with the first questionnaire there could have been concerns by the participants as to how the researcher and their peers perceived their answers, which with familiarity and increased confidence did not influence the final questionnaire.

One of the difficulties discovered was that even though the questionnaires had been piloted and consequently adapted it did not eradicate the problem of questions meaning different things to different people.

Another problem in using this method was obtaining the questionnaires back from the control group. This occurred even with a good deal of nagging and a free book. Consequently it was decided that the control group would only be used to validate that the sample groups' 'beginning questionnaires' were representative of a wider population and that no other data would be used from the control group. The study would just consider the 'beginning' and 'end' questionnaires from the sample groups. These discoveries prompted the researcher to include in the research evidence a routine end of course evaluation.

### **3.11 Photographic Evidence**

The decision by the researcher to use photographic evidence from disposable cameras that learners took home was justified on the grounds that it provided photographic evidence for the research project that otherwise would be difficult to obtain without being more intrusive. It also focused parents' attention on interactions that took place in the home between themselves and their children and the actual process of identifying the interaction for the photo added value to the activity and its impact on the child's and parents' learning.

In the sixth week of the courses learners were given the option to take a disposable camera. Those who opted to had clear verbal and written instructions and signed a consent form signifying this understanding (see Appendix 8). The instructions stressed that the purpose of the photographs were to record evidence through taking two photographs of the learner or another adult with a child or children doing activities together. The instructions also made learners aware that if there was not another adult around then taking photos of their children doing activities would be fine. It was made clear that the parent could retain the photos but the researcher had the right to any copies that would provide evidence for the research being carried out and that the photos would only be used within the bounds of the research project.

Eighteen parents took cameras and twelve were returned. Three problems that arose from this were that some parents lacked expertise in using the instrument, some had difficulty in remembering to use it and it proved difficult arranging for the return of the cameras so that the photos could be developed. Because of personal circumstances some had been unable to take interactive scenes but never the less photographed their children in learning situations. The photos provided excellent evidence of diverse interactions taking place in the home (see Appendix 9). The actual process of identifying the interaction for the photo seemed to reinforce that learning was taking place during lots of 'mundane' activities and participants were proud of the photos when returned.

### 3.12 Focus Groups

Focus groups used to encourage participants to express their views through open-ended discussions in specific areas guided by the researcher (Kruegar and Casey 1998). Focus groups were chosen as an option in this study because group discussion can stimulate people and help them explore and clarify their own thinking by aiding memory and reaffirming social experiences. The researcher can then compare and contrast data collected from several discussions (focus groups) and derive deeper understanding of behaviour in the particular area of interest (Loxley 2005).

The disadvantages of focus groups are that the less articulate may not share their views because of more dominant voices. Personality conflicts and confidentiality can also cause problems.

Focus groups took place for half an hour in two sessions of each of the courses. These focus groups provided an arena for learners to share their experiences of interacting with their children when doing different activities and to reflect on the learning their children and themselves had gained from the experience (See Appendix 7).

The researcher took into account that focus groups are considering the collective views and reveal a range of views rather than strength of views (Sim 1998).

The output was transcribed tapes of the sessions that were analysed for the frequency and similarity of comments. This built up a picture of the



type of interactions that were taking place and the identified learning by the adults of their own learning and that of their children.

### **3.13 Semi-Structured Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were used with a sample of the parents as a method to gain more in-depth knowledge of individual's personal and subjective experiences. Measor and Skes talk about this being achieved through the interviewer being 'critically aware' and 'listening beyond' to not only 'get at' the meanings of what is being said but also being alert for data which fit the themes of the research, or which suggest new themes and further areas of exploration (Measor and Skes 1992).

In this research the focus of the interviews was in the first instance to discover the components of family learning programmes that parents' considered increased interaction between themselves and their children in the home. Secondly to find out what the parents felt they learned from greater communication with their children and from the family learning course.

Towards the end of the course the parents from both courses were consulted as to whether they would be willing at a later date to be interviewed. Since nobody objected a sample was chosen, taking into consideration age, social economic status and general situation. Three comparable parents were interviewed three weeks after the end of each course (see Appendix 11).

The limitations of interviews are that the interviewer and the interviewee have personal characteristics that influence what is said and the consequent understanding and interpretations. Therefore there has to be an awareness of the impact of social positioning and power on the interview itself and on the results (Loxley 2005).

The output was tapes of the dialogue, which were then transcribed and analysed by examining the interview transcripts, question by question, noting similarities and dissimilarities. From this, common themes emerged which could then be identified and tracked.

### **3.14 Individual Evaluation**

A parents' evaluation on the completion of the course is an integral part of any family learning course and can be either an individual or a group evaluation. It provides evidence and feedback about whether the course targets have been achieved and is useful when planning further courses (see Appendix 10).

In this case the concluding individual evaluations were only carried out by one group who specifically looked at the component parts of the course, linked to the interactive activities. The evaluation encouraged the learners to consider how useful the course had been and the learning they got from it. There was also a group evaluation carried out with each programme

The output from these evaluations links learning to specifics of the course and acts as another form of data from which to test the research hypothesis that family learning programmes impact on parents' learning through their involvement in their children's learning.

### **3.15 Progression One Year On**

One year on, after the end of the courses on which the research was focused, the managers of both the programmes were contacted and asked to provide known information on the learners' progression. This information was used to reflect upon the motivation of the learners to continue their learning.

## **Chapter 4 – Research Findings**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the findings of the data collected from the questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, end of course evaluations, photographic evidence and assessment of the progression of parents in their future learning.

### **4.2 Questionnaire**

Data derived from the questionnaires with the sample group was brought together into two sets, those completed at the start of the course the 'Before' set and the results completed by the same group after the course, the 'After' set.

The questionnaire established what sort of activities parents were involved in with their children and the frequency of such involvements. It also established whether attending family learning courses had resulted in any changes to the type of activities parents were involved in and the frequency of those involvements.

The questionnaire was divided into nine sections, eight with closed questions and one with open questions. Six of the nine sections consisted of different areas of literacy interactions between adults and children that might happen in the home.

These were, speaking and listening, reading and writing, creative play and games, numeracy and visits to places outside the home. The responses were divided into six points along a continuum of frequency 'never', 'yearly', 'monthly', 'weekly', 'some days' and 'daily'.

The two other sections consisted of questions associated with values. One was the importance of certain statements relating to parents' involvement in their children's learning and the other was to do with the amount parents' felt they had learned from involvement with their children's learning. These were divided into five sections along a continuum of importance: from 'non-important' to 'important' and from 'a little' to 'a lot' (see sample questionnaire in Appendix 3).

The open question section focused on parents' and children's enjoyment of doing activities together. The first question focused on which sort of activity the parent perceived the child as enjoying the most, the second question focused on which activity the parent enjoyed doing most and finally what it was that was good about doing activities together.

The data derived from the questionnaires was in the form of a selection from a number of set criteria on the frequency of particular activities taking place. The number of responses to each question was aggregated from the sample group's questionnaires at the beginning of the course (the Before group) and recorded on a summary sheet to give a base line from which to work.

An example of one section of the questionnaire that forms the baseline of the sample groups aggregate scores before the family learning course started is presented in Figure 2 below in a table format.

*Table 3 Aggregate Responses of the Before Sample to Q3*

Does your child look at any of these at home with you?	Never	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly	Some Days	Daily
Magazines/ Catalogues/ Newspapers/ TV guide/comics	2			1	7	6
Labels on food and other packets, signs and symbols around	6			3	5	2
Books			3	1	4	8
Photo albums	2		6	2	2	4

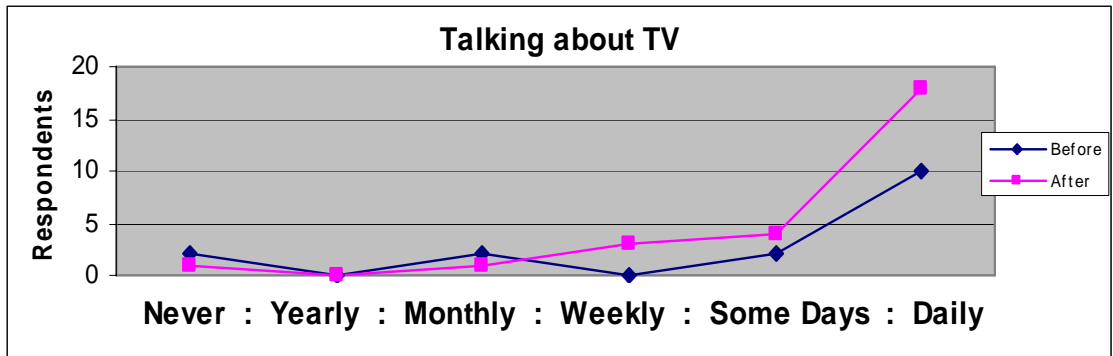
### 4.3 Questionnaire Findings

Below are summaries of the findings from each section of the questionnaire with one question from each section graphically presented. The full results appear in Appendix 5.

#### Speaking and Listening

In the section on speaking and listening there was a definite increase in the frequency of interactions overall and specifically in the areas of sitting down to family meals and talking about TV (see Fig 1 below).

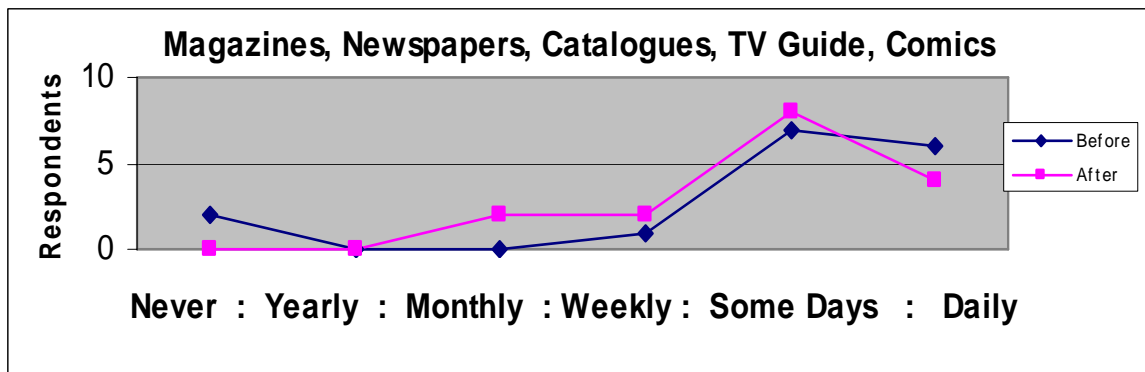
Figure 1 Speaking and Listening



Reading

There was no overall increase on a day to day basis except in sharing books elsewhere frequencies went down at the daily level but were up in twice a week, weekly and monthly. This can be seen in the question on sharing magazines, catalogues etc. represented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 Reading

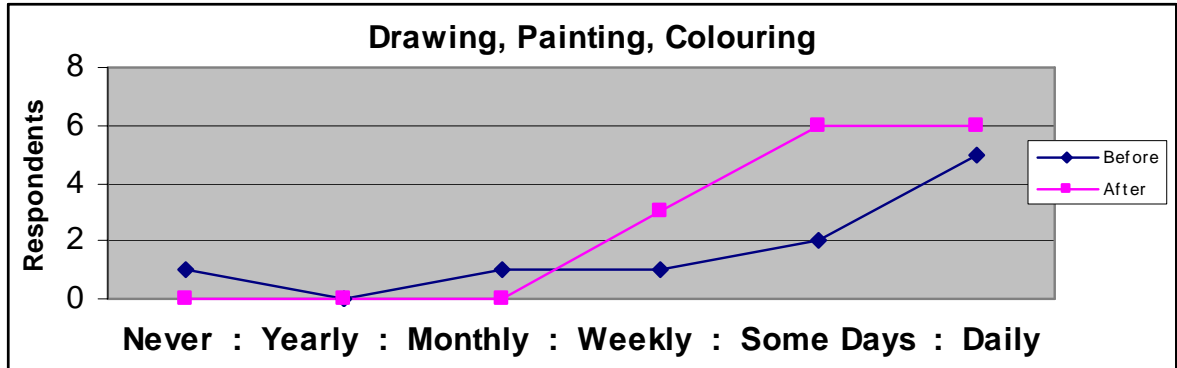


Writing, Mark-Making and Numeracy

In these areas the frequent level had slightly decreased or stayed the same on a daily basis, however at the weekly interval these went up. A similar pattern was apparent with numeracy activities with the exception

of laying the table where there was an increase at the daily level. See Figure 3 below.

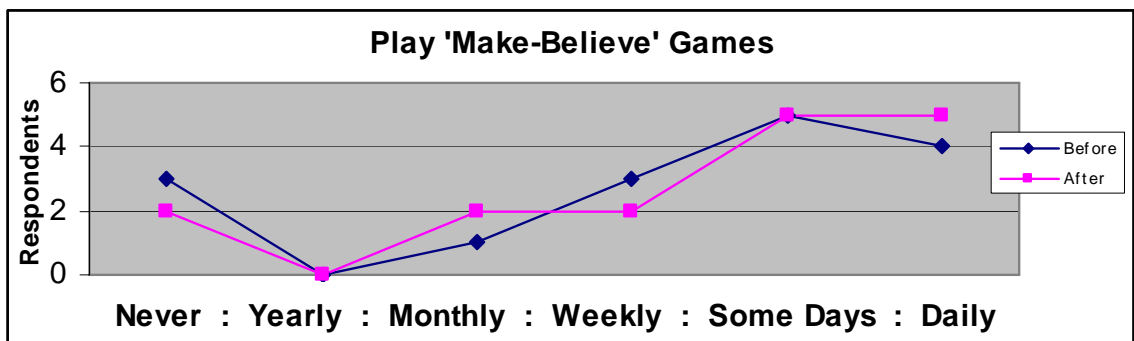
Figure 3 Writing, Mark making, Numeracy



### Creative Play and Games

The frequency of parents' involvement with their children in creative games and play overall showed a similar pattern except in playing make believe games where as can be seen below their was an increase on a daily basis.

Figure 4 Creative Play and Games

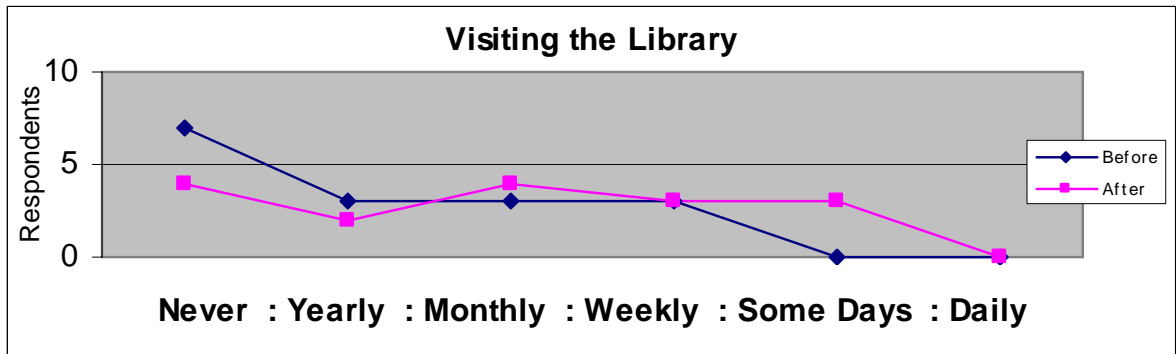


### Visiting Local Places

The frequency of visiting local places including the library overall showed an increase in the middle frequencies. The table below is a good example of other questions in this section.



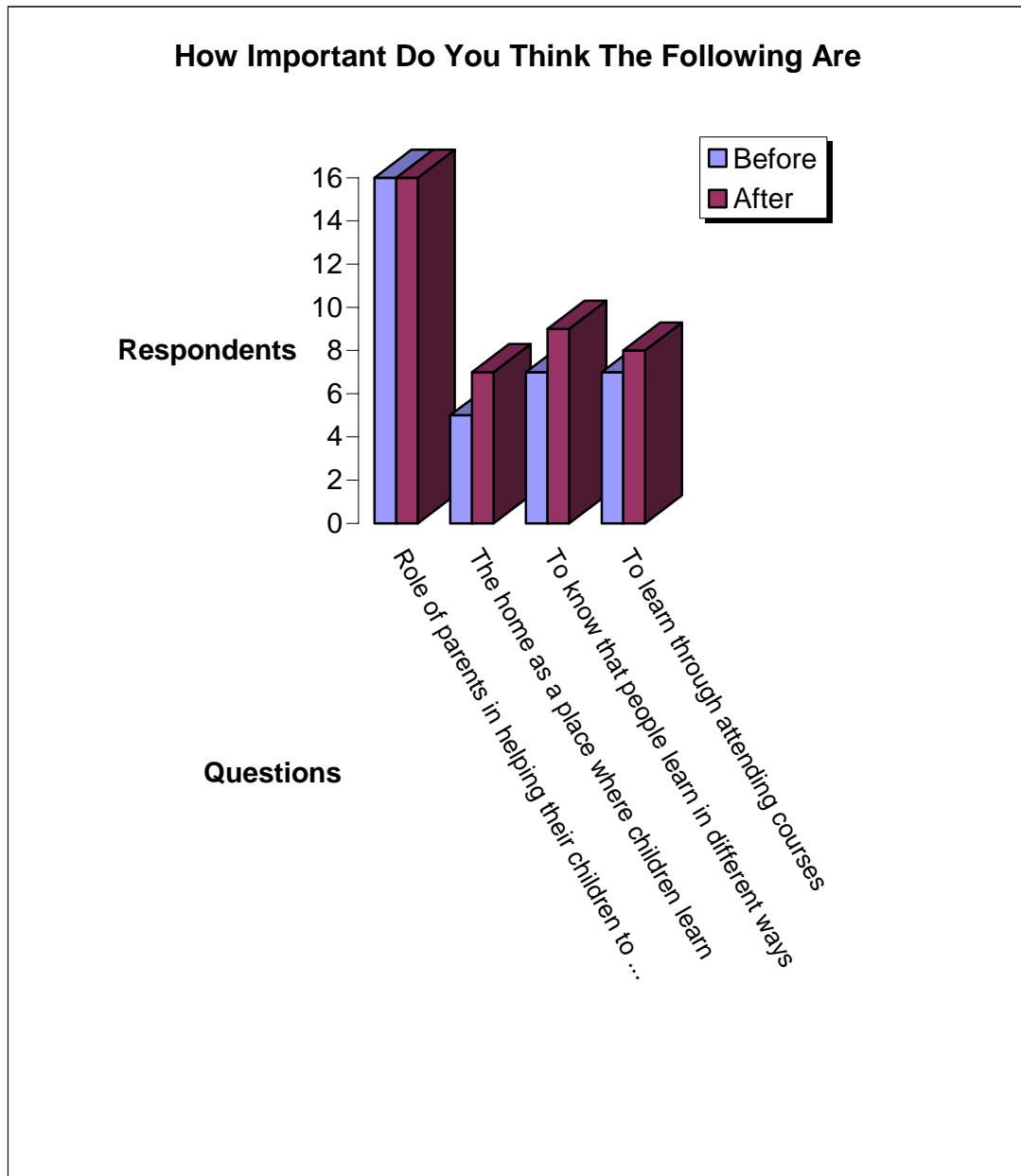
Figure 5 Visiting Local Places



The questionnaire in Sections 1 and 11 looked at the values parents perceived as important at the beginning and end of the courses. In Section 1 all the parents perceived their role in helping their child learn as very important both at the beginning and end of the course.

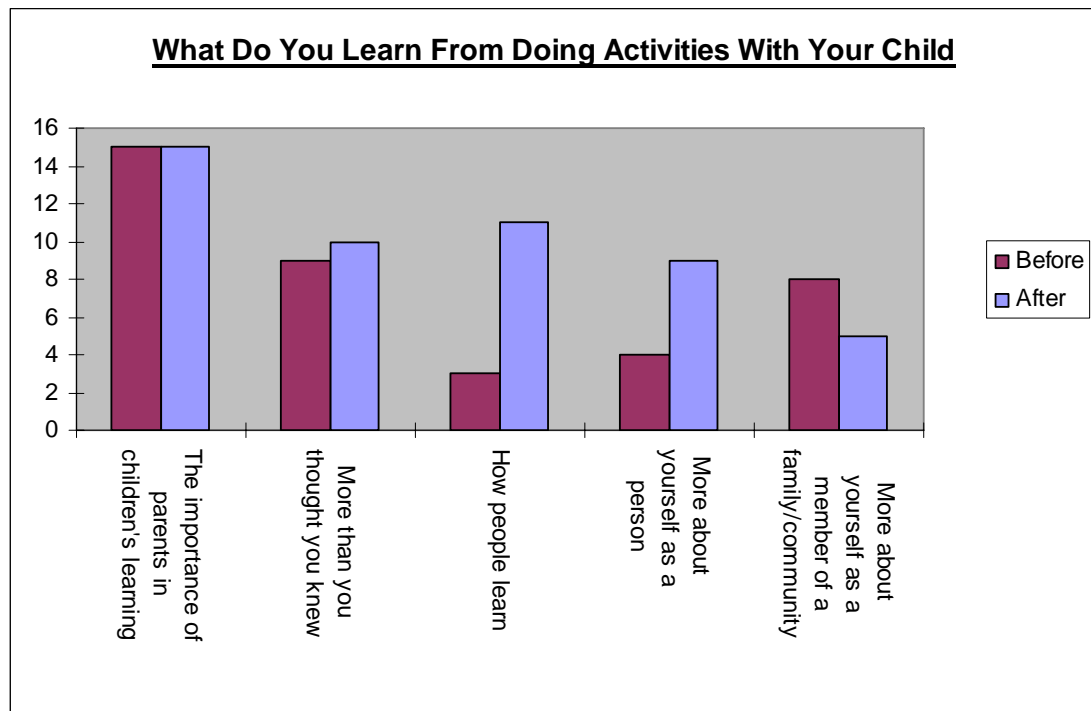
In the other three areas, the home as a place where children learn, learning that people learn in different ways and an increase in learning through attending courses there was an increase in the perception of importance from the beginning to the end of the course as shown in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6 The role of parents



Section 11 looked at what adults thought they learnt from doing activities with their children and whether this had changed from the start to the completion of the course.

Figure 7 Perception of Importance



These results confirmed the findings from Section 1 above, that parents were very confident that they had an important part to play in their children's learning at the beginning of the course and this did not change similarly in the amount they knew. However there was a big increase in their understanding of how people learn and their understanding about themselves as people.

Where they were not so confident from the beginning to the end was in understanding themselves as a member of a family or community (see

figure 7). A summary of the open ended questions 8, 9, and 10 show that parents and children enjoyed similar activities but by the end of the course the range of activities was greater. Parents almost unanimously agreed that the most important thing about doing things together was the bonding that took place see Table 3 below.

*Table 4 Summary of Open Ended Questions*

Parents perception of which activities children enjoyed doing most with their parents		Which activities parents enjoyed doing most with their children		What parents thought was so important about doing activities with children	
Q. 8 Beginning	Q. 8 End	Q. 9 Beginning	Q. 9 End	Q.10 Beginning	Q. 10 End
3 jigsaws	2 jigsaws	3 jigsaws	4 jigsaws	14 bonding	14 bonding
1 games	2 games	2 games		1 fun	1 cooking
2 cooking		1 cooking		1 counting	1 fun
3 sharing books	4 sharing books	3 sharing books	3 sharing books		
5 outings	3 outings	7 outings	4 outings		
1 cutting and sticking			1 cutting and sticking		
1 using the computer			1 scribbling		
	1 telling stories		1 telling stories		
	2 singing		1 singing		
	1 library		1 library		

#### 4.4 The Focus Groups

Each focus group session was taped and then transcribed. Main themes were extracted under each heading discussed and summarised below.

The main themes that emerged from the discussions were a greater understanding of how children learn and how important the parent is as a model:

- Encouraging practice

'I learnt that I needed to show her so that she had some ideas'

'I learnt that by showing, teaching, he can pick it up.'

- The need to be patient

'I learnt that if I gave time he could do it. Sometimes we do things for them, you know, we don't give them time we just want it done.'

- Understanding of how children learn

'But what I learnt was that her own little character came through and before I was writing down words and she was copying them. Now she's just asking me for the spelling and she can write the note herself now.'

- That activities at home relate to more formal learning

'My youngest likes jigsaws counting, he can change the channel from 3 to 4. Better at his numbers. I see how he is learning'

- That children take on responsibilities

'Planned it, a real organiser'

- Children behave differently in different circumstances

'You saw her in relation to other children. Her personality that kind of way outside the home.'

- Adults learn from children

'Now the children taught me you shouldn't throw out the stale bread, keep it, you should put it in a bag and give it to the ducks. I know now not to throw it out but keep it for the ducks.'

Out of the above, the most frequent response from parents was around noticing how their children were learning and at what stage they were at in that process also the importance of their role in their children's learning.

#### 4.5 Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interviews were taped and transcribed. The transcripts were analysed by themes, which are summarised below with salient quotes.

For all the interviewees the main enjoyment of attending the courses was:  
Getting out of the house and meeting new people.

'I used to be cranky and down, out, depressed. I had nothing to do and nothing to look forward to. I'd get up and I'd clean and I'd do the basic housework as they call it but I wasn't happy in myself.'

'It keeps me sane, it gets me out of the house in the morning; and it does that thee truth like.....I am learning something as well.'

'getting to know new people'

The subjects through widening their social contacts developed a greater understanding of people.

'That everybody is open to each other..... Everyone is equal up here'

'I am really happy in it I have met so many people and as I said all standards of life and I discovered that another thing in coming to those courses was everyone has their own problems, everyone has their own crosses to carry.'

The question around what activities do you enjoy doing with your children were specific to the individuals and their children and covered a range of activities, all of which had been discussed within the programmes, none stood out as more popular than others.

The question 'what makes you spend time with your children?' evoked a number of responses in relation to the subjects' own upbringing.

'...I suppose, I never had that my father died when I was a child, I didn't really know him and my mother was trying to bring up seven of us on her own so she was trying to give as much love to one as she was to another and sometimes you feel a bit left out. It wasn't her fault but that's the way I felt and I suppose what I didn't get I enjoy spending time with them to give them the love that I didn't have.'

'I enjoy being a mother I spent more time with Lily than my mother ever spent with me. She never had the time she had twelve children and she had no education herself and she doesn't know how to write her name but she was there cooking, washing, cleaning, making sure we had what we needed. Valuable time as I call it now, she never had that with us.'

'... what you're missed out you want to make sure your own child gets it.'

The importance of bonding was also raised.

'Develops a good bond between you like, they can have that feeling they are ignored and not loved if you don't spend time. Really important to show that you are there for them.'

One of the themes arising from the question about what ideas for activities had been most useful from family learning programmes, was the realisation that doing things with children at home helps their learning at school.

'You're learning from doing the activities and it does help them in school as well doing things at home. '

'You learn from kids, things like we do we would have done when we were younger, we do differently we learn their way now. It's helpful for me.'

'She loves it and making things loves it like even if its wrong the whole lot. She likes the thought that she is doing it and making it like and I would never have thought.'

'You are learning from activities with the children, learnt something else. I realised what we do at home influences the child at school as well.'

'Last year he was a loner like but he works with the kids now in a group. That is doing things with him at home he has to learn he has to share like so if we do things at home he shares, he has to take turns like he wasn't very good at that before like.'

'Yes, suddenly realised that if I hadn't gone to the family learning courses a lot of what you realised now you wouldn't have learnt unless you had gone to the courses.'

'that parents are the first teachers and that always stuck after that..... That's the sentence that really clicks out to me all the time to it.'

Making story sacks seemed to impact on children's reading. The Story Sack course is based on the concept of 'story sacks' introduced by Neil Griffith (Griffith 1997). The course supports parents in the making of a story sack. Parents choose a good quality picture book and make or collect materials to bring the story to life. This whole process highlights the different aspects of literacy involved in sharing books.

'Story sacks, they've helped her to learn to read now.'

I wouldn't as I said reads stories out to them, .....I did it I played it out and did it for them, they started doing it themselves which would be a story , they took it on board.



Looking at the development of children's writing also seemed to raise awareness of the importance of valuing children's work and interacting with them to find out more about what their marks are about.

'I look more into them, then I would ever before. I would have gone that's nice or do you know but when I look at her pictures now its amazing because you look deeper into it..... I wouldn't have known that only learning it from the course'

'she'll be drawing and painting. It's up in my sitting room I got it laminated. I would never have done that for the course like, I got it laminated and it just scribbles like, all big blobs of green and she has used all the different colours around and you can see where she used her imagination she got to every corner with different colours.'

Spending time and being involved in children's learning affected the way the adults think about their own learning by raising their own desire to learn.

'I want to learn more to help my grandchildren and for myself.'

'I think I need to broaden my learning skills a bit more so I'm thinking about my own education like'

It made parents aware of how they were learning and had developed a curiosity.

'.....before I came to those classes I wouldn't interested in it, okay I would sit down and read a book but I wouldn't mean anything. Today, I would definitely spend the time thinking about it, I would read it and then I'd think about it, I would go back and try find out what it really meant .....'

'.....different outlook before I would go through for the gossip I'd say I wouldn't be interested in anything madly serious along the politics but now it first thing would be the politics and health issues and something like that it wouldn't be gossip or it wouldn't be just the stars I would have just bought the paper to get the stars. It gives you a different outlook, life and education.'

The general feeling was that family learning had made a difference in that participants felt more able to support the homework and had better relationships with the teachers and because of this their children were behaving better in school.

'I get less calls from school, more settled there now. I'm spending more time with him.'

'I thought when she went school, the nuns would do that, they had to, what she had to do with her that wasn't part of my dealing.'

'I wasn't involved in that then, we started getting those classes gave me a focus around what I should be doing I wasn't doing that up to then. Since I done those I have been involved in everything that she is doing in the line of school wise.'

Two participants joined the board of management of the Family Resource Centre in the Town and another the gym, thus becoming more involved in the community. There was a general feeling of valuing each other and the community as a whole.

'I joined the board of management at the Resource Centre in ..... that came out through family learning.'

'I recognise travellers and settled are two different. They really ain't, just a wall people put up between them I think the best way of making down that wall is to get the travellers more involved in the community get the kids more involved in the community then there would be no walls between then.'

All the interviewees had aspirations for their children

he wants to be a fireman, he long as he has been talking he wants to be a fireman.'

'I'd love Patrick to go to school to continue all his education and go to college if that's what the parents want for him like.'

'I want them to do well at school like'

I dropped out of school so I don't want her to have the same pressures I had.'

'I hope to put her through secondary and college if I can at all. I never got that chance. I would love her to have it.'

'I had no education, I had no job so there was nothing there, out there for traveller women only get married. I prefer she was thirty before she gets married and have a good qualification and job and be well settled in herself before marrying and having the responsibility and kids I want her to grow up and be an adult herself before she has to think about taking on somebody else.'

'I like that she won't be left behind when she goes to secondary school because that's what happened to me.'

Aspirations for the interviewees varied from being able to read better to specific areas in which they would like to work.

'I'd like to be in around the counselling for children I'd like something like that so I might do a counselling course around children.'

'We have a load of prayer books down at home and mothers big bible as well. Even if I could read just one line out of there it would mean an awful lot to me. It takes time when you get older you know what I mean.'

'hopefully I will be able to get a job with computers or something in a office with computers.'

'I am hoping to go to further education and get a proper job. I'm hoping after I get this FETAC cert. I'll go ahead to a level 2 as I have the basic one done.'

'I'd like to do something in the hotel'

Their view of the world had widened through being with lots of different people, experiencing different ways of learning and the understanding of how much information is out there and available.

'I hear a lot of different things up here so, different people's points of view, lots of opinions.'

'Since I came here I'm more open to people. Seeing other people and being able to communicate sit down and talk and have a laugh.'

'I can see there is a whole level for adult education out there, its great not only for young school leavers but people in their 80s are coming back and doing computer courses, its great. It doesn't matter you can just do something whenever you want. '

'There is so much going on in the world today and its all information. Anything you pick up you can get three pages of information in the space of three seconds internet. Click a button and get the whole world in front of you.'

#### **4.6 Photographic Evidence**

The images below are two of examples presented in Appendix 9 that provide evidence of subjects interacting with their children doing different activities.



#### 4.7 End of Course evaluation

The end of course evaluation specifically looked at the content of the course and aimed to find out what the main learning was for the adults and if certain subject areas had more impact than others.

Table 5 End of Course Evaluation

SESSION	How useful did you find the session	I showed my child what I had done	I made one with my child and played with it	I noticed what my child was doing more in that area	I understood more about how my child was learning	Learning how children learn helped me in my own learning	points total	Attendance	Total
How do we learn (Styles) Name Board	0	5	0	10	0	0	15	8	1.88
Talking and Listening, Oral games	9	0	2	4	0	0	15	8	1.88
Rhymes, songs and poems, Own poem for child	0	8	3	3	1	0	15	9	1.67
Storytelling, what makes a good story	0	7	0	4	7	0	18	9	2.00
Sharing books, Picture story, Christmas decorations	4	5	0	2	0	0	11	8	1.38
Visit the Library	2	0	0	7	2	0	11	10	1.10
Environmental print, Kitchen cupboard Bingo game	10	8	0	2	3	0	23	10	2.30
Maths. Height chart	3	3	0	0	10	0	16	8	2.00
Writing, the development of children	1	0	0	6	8	0	15	9	1.67

\* Numbers refer to respondents

This showed that the sessions that were the most useful were the significance of environmental print, stories and maths. All of these sessions included a high proportion of group interactive activities. In the rhymes, songs and poem session parents worked jointly on individual poems for their children. This session, and the environmental session where a game was made and stories made up, were popular because they stimulated interaction. The evaluation also shows that it was the 'how we learn' session, the visit to the library and the writing session that made parents most aware of their children's learning development. What is significant here is that parents did not relate this growing understanding of children's learning to their own learning.

#### **4.8 Progression**

One year on, the twenty-two subjects were tracked to see what had happened to them since the family learning courses took place. This information was obtained by contacting the managers of the programmes they were attending. The results showed that nine are attending education programmes and seven of these should gain a full Level 3 Fetac (Further Education and Training Awards Council) Certificate in June. One is working towards an Applied Leaving Cert and another is doing a Level 5 Childcare course. Six have gained employment, four are working on Level 3 FAS (Training and Employment Authority) employment schemes and three are homemakers. One of these continues to have literacy tuition.

## **4.9 Conclusion**

This chapter has presented an overall picture from the research findings of the data collected from the questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, end of course evaluations, photographic evidence and on the progression of the subjects. The next chapter will analyse these findings.

## Chapter 5 - Discussion of Results

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the data collected from the questionnaires, focus groups, semi-structured interviews, end of course evaluations, photographic evidence and assessment of the progression of parents in their future learning.

The aim of the research is to assess the impact of family learning programmes on parents', learning through their involvement in their children's learning, in Co. Clare.

To remind ourselves of the objectives of this thesis the primary objectives are firstly, to look at the impact that family learning programmes have in terms of the type of ordinary day to day activities parents are involved in with their children and the frequencies of such involvement. Secondly, to look at the learning that parents gain through the recognition of their involvement in their children's learning through family learning programmes. A secondary objective here is to consider whether one part of the programme impacts more than another on the primary objectives.



The findings of this study show that family learning programmes in Clare did make an impact. It has been shown that parents developed a better understanding of their children's learning and became more confident in themselves and in people around them. This encouraged a greater curiosity and interest in further learning, employment and integration within the community.

This discussion of results will consider the outcomes in the context of the literature reviewed in Chapter two. The first is how family learning affected parents' involvement in their children's learning which links to social constructivism. Secondly the role of parents in their children's learning will be considered in the light of the theory of emergent literacy and the work of Charles Deforges. The third outcome is the link between children's learning and parents' learning. Here the learning the parents gained from their involvement in their children's learning that family learning could have impacted on will be considered. This will be looked at as a process of parents' learning how children learn, the social practice model and parents' own learning and increase in social capital. The fourth outcome is whether there is a specific part of the programme that impacted more than another.

The discussion will explore how the identified outcomes fit into the existing body of knowledge and whether they are consistent with it, or give new insight into it.

## 5.2 The Effect of Family Learning Programmes on Parents' Involvement in Their Children's Learning

Family learning programmes in Clare impacted on parents' involvement with their children through increased interaction. The literacy content of the programmes looks at how learning takes place in the areas of; speaking and listening, rhymes and songs, storytelling, reading, writing and numeracy.



The underlying theme throughout the programme is that learning is implicit in ordinary day-to-day activities that prompt communication. The data from this research especially from the focus groups and photographs taken by parents demonstrate that learning takes place through interactions. This is evidenced by the statements made by parents in the group evaluation of what was felt to be valuable about the course.

Listening to other people talk about their children

Learning from everybody

(Webb 2006)

These are examples of individuals who when supported and encouraged by other learners, gain a greater understanding. In other words people on the family learning programmes 'scaffold and support' each other to internalise knowledge and make it their own. Parents in the process of sharing experiences within focus groups recognise the learning developments of their children that are taking place. Other parents in the group, support this learning and relate it to their own situation and learn themselves.

By acquiring deeper understanding of learning processes they know the main elements that are needed to support learning for their children and themselves. This is evidence of the social constructionist approach that Vygotsky calls the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Bruner's concept of 'scaffolding' (Carlie and Jordan 2004).

Further evidence of this is shown in the increased diversity of activities that parents became involved in with their children (shown in Table 3, page 66). Here a summary of the open questions on the questionnaire shows an increase in the activities of storytelling, singing and visiting the library during the course.

This is consistent with the findings of Schuller (2002) whose research into change in adults lives notes that if one member of a family attends a family learning course there is an increase in the number of activities a family share together. This also highlights the social practice approach of valuing marginal as well as dominant literacies. (Papen 2005).

Family learning values home literacy practices as well as encouraging dominant literacy practices. Evidence of an increase in visiting the library is seen above and further commented on in the questionnaires, interviews and the evaluation. Visiting the library is a dominant literacy practice and this evidence refutes the critique of the social practice approach by showing that it can encourage dominant literacy practices.

### **5.3 The Role of Parents in Helping Their Children Learn**

that parents are the first teachers..... and that always stuck after that..... That's the sentence that really clicks out to me...

(Webb 2006)

The above quotation from one of the interviews demonstrates the significance of first realising that parents are important. Nigel Hall gives credence to the role of parents in children's learning with the recognition that literacy emerges in children as they experience it in everyday happenings from a very young age (Hall 1987). Fifteen years later Deforge's research confirms the important role parents play in influencing their children's achievements (Deforges and Abouchaar 2003).

In the initial questionnaire all the subjects recognised the role of parents as being 'very important' and this remained constant when again questioned at the end of the course. Likewise in one of the open questions within the questionnaire, fifteen out of the sixteen parents cited that being involved in activities with children improved bonding or the 'quality time' they had with their children.

This is substantiated by the following statement from a parent.

Develops a good bond between you like ....they can have that feeling they are ignored and not loved if you don't spend time.... Really important to show that you are there for them.

(Webb 2006)

Some parents justified the importance of this 'quality time' by reflecting on their own upbringing and how their mothers for various reasons had not spent time with them, as with the following comment made in one of the interviews.

.... I suppose, I never had that, my father died when I was a child, I didn't really know him and my mother was trying to bring up seven of us on her own so she was trying to give as much love to one as she was to another and sometimes you feel a bit left out. It wasn't her fault but that's the way I felt and I suppose what I didn't get I enjoy spending time with them to give them, the love that I didn't have.

(Webb 2006)

This shows a heightened awareness due to own childhood experiences of the importance of family members spending time with children. Other data from this study shows that parents are 'aware' of the importance of their role in their children's learning. This finding contradicts the 'deficit' theory which assumes parents need help to understand the importance of their role. What parents seem unsure about is 'how' this impacts on children's learning and on their own learning. Hannon recognised this acknowledging that parents need support to identify what is important about their role in their children's learning and what experiences are likely to help children's literacy development (Hannon 1995).

Evidence from the focus groups and interviews shows that family learning helps develop this understanding.

Its kind of an eye opener like its something you would be doing like counting at home, you forget about things like that. Do you know? When you use the kitchen things like a weighing scale even like we were talking about the last time. I remember that now. Well, I went home and I started even just doing ordinary day to day things. Come and help me like. How many do think there are questions.

(Webb 2005)

Evidence from Co Clare seems to be consistent with the findings of Margaret Lochrie who notes that parents want to help and support their own children's learning (Lochrie 2004). They are involved in it and they find it easy to share experiences and initially participate for the sake of the children. In developing an understanding of how they can support their children's learning parents gain confidence to think about themselves as people who can do things they weren't aware of as important before. This changed perspective provides parents with a new dimension or construct to learn.

The discussion so far has focused on the effect of parents' involvement in their children's learning and their role in helping their children's learning. What has been shown is that family learning is validating the literacy and numeracy practices of the home, making them visible to the parents and extending them, thereby giving parents' confidence. This is supporting the 'scaffolding' concept of Bruner and Vygotsky's ZPD. It is also consistent with emergent literacy and the social practice approach of adults' learning.

In considering the data from this research on parents' learning, a three-part process seems to take place for parents. Firstly this happens

through learning how children learn. Secondly it moves on to reflect on the links between their own learning and their children's learning, before progressing finally on to focusing on themselves and their own learning. It is these three areas of interest that the impact of family learning on parents' learning through involvement in their children's learning emerges and will be studied in more detail below.

### 5.3.1 Learning How Children Learn

Part of the social practice view of literacy is that learning is about critically reflecting on the social environment (Freire and Macedo 1987). Randal Holme in his book *Literacy - An Introduction* says that it is the acquisition of the desire to participate in certain socio-cultural practices and an understanding of the skills that these require (Holme 2004)

As Peter Hannon notes most parents want to become involved in their children's education but need support to identify what is important about their role in their children's learning and what experiences are likely to help children's literacy development.

In an attempt to provide the framework to help parents who want to become involved in their children's learning Hannon sets out pointers to the parents' role in providing: **opportunities** for learning, **recognition** of achievements, **interaction** around literacy activities and as a **model** for literacy, the ORIM framework (Hannon 1995). Further evidence in this

section demonstrates a correlation between these pointers and the emphasis in the Co Clare programmes.

Two points are highlighted in the value section of the questionnaire that demonstrates a distinct increase in value from the beginning to the end of the course. One is how people learn and the second is that there are different ways of learning. Through gaining some understanding in these areas parents can see how their children learn. This is substantiated by data from the evaluation (page 74) and comments from the interviews.

I learnt that I needed to show her so that she had some ideas

I learnt that if I gave time he could do it. Sometimes we do things for them, you know, we don't give them time we just want it done (Webb 2005)

This study has shown that after attending the programme parents had greater awareness of their child's literacy development and of ways to foster it. They also felt supported and encouraged by the programme. This is similar to the conclusion of the PEEP Birth to School Study entitled *Enabling Parents Study*, which looked at the effects on parents as adult learners of attending programmes in Oxford, UK (Evangelon 2004).

The evaluation at the end of the course asked parents to rank usefulness of sections of the course as far as their children's learning was concerned. The session that focused on learning and ways of learning, was estimated by most to cause them to notice what their child was doing and it was the maths and writing that stimulated more understanding of how children learned in specific areas.



A possible explanation for why these areas may have been singled out is that of the visual impact of parents seeing the developmental sequence of early marks, pictures and early writing: similarly with matching, counting, recognition of numbers, all part of early numeracy skills. Parents increased their understanding and could recognise the sequence of development in their own children. This connection between understanding and putting it into practise in a familiar context is consistent with the social constructivism approach.

### **5.3.2 The Link between Parents' Learning and Their Children's Learning**

One of the aims of family learning programmes is to focus on supporting children's learning. It is not surprising that parents gain a better understanding of the support their children require. What is more interesting is how this is transferred to their own learning.

This study showed that if parents feel that their role in supporting their children's learning is validated through a greater understanding of how that process occurs then they can begin to reflect on their own learning.

'.....before I came to those classes I wouldn't interested in it, okay I would sit down and read a book but I wouldn't mean anything. Today, I would definitely spend the time thinking about it, I would read it and then I'd think about it, I would go back and try find out what it really meant .....

(Webb 2006)

This is confirmed by the social practice approach of Lambe in *The Resource Guide for Adult Learners*, here the issues of adult literacy and equality in Irish society are explored. In this study it is noted that if people feel valued they can then critically reflect (Lambe et al 2006).

Results from the questionnaire showed an increase in understanding from the beginning to the end of the course and several comments in the interviews reinforced this point.

You're learning from doing the activities and it does help them in school as well doing things at home.

(Webb 2006)

This suggests that parents realise that normal everyday activities done in the home can relate to how and when children learn in school. It also highlighted that parents can play an important role even when children are in school.

I thought when she went to school, the nuns would do that, they had to, what she had to do with her that wasn't part of my dealing.

I wasn't involved in that then, we started getting those classes (family learning) gave me a focus around what I should be doing I wasn't doing that up to then. Since I done those

General discussions that took place in the focus groups showed that parents seemed more confident to go in and talk to teachers about their children's learning. Understanding firstly how children learn and secondly, that the parents' part in their children's learning is still important when they are in the formal education system, seems to give parents confidence to liaise more with the school and work with staff to support their

children's learning. Being valued by formal education establishments gives credence to their own learning. Again this seems to validate the social practice approach.

I want to learn more to help my grandchildren and for myself.

I think I need to broaden my learning skills a bit more so I'm thinking about my own education like. (Webb 2005)

All the interviewees, having gained confidence through participation in family learning programmes, had aspirations not only for their children but for themselves. Most of the aspirations for their children again referred back to their own education and how they would like it to be different for their own children. Five out of six interviewees mentioned staying on at school.

It appears that gaining a greater understanding in one area such as learning how children learn, gives confidence in connected areas. Part of that is an ability to reflect on your own upbringing in relation to your children's upbringing and their aspirations. The findings above suggest that there could be a transfer from focusing on children's learning to focusing on adults' learning. This could be said to come about by the development of new constructs.

This is reinforced by Banbury in her report *Special relationships: How families learn* who suggests it is the intergenerational learning that aids recognition of the learning skills for both adult and child by highlighting links and opening up different perspectives on learning (Banbury 2005).

Both Banbury and Lambe's views reflect the social practice approach to learning.

### **5.3.3 Parents' Own Learning**

The theory of social capital explored by John Field (2005) and Lyn Tett (2006) is a good framework for looking at the learning that adults acquire through family learning programmes in Clare. A heightened awareness of others in the community experienced by the attendees of the family learning programmes was openly illustrated in the quotes from the interviews. Out of twenty two parents attending family learning programmes, two became involved on the committee of the Local Family Resource Centre.

I can see there is a whole level for adult education out there, its great not only for young school leavers but people in their 80s are coming back and doing computer courses, it's great. It doesn't matter you can just do something whenever you want.  
(Webb 2006)

Field sees a link between the trust built into relationships and the quality of learning. He reflects the idea that people who build relationships in their community develop greater trust and understanding which then allows them to develop confidence in themselves and with this a desire to extend their knowledge and understanding and to want to continue to learn.  
(Field 2005)

Tett focuses on how initially taking on new learning can affect confidence and self-esteem and this effects how people relate to one another. Both

these writers show trust and learning as interlinked and mutually benefiting each other (Tett 2006).

I hear a lot of different things up here so, different people's points of view, lots of opinions.

Since I came here I'm more open to people. Seeing other people and being able to communicate sit down and talk and have a laugh. (Webb 2006)

The comments from parents interviewed after they had participated on the programme suggest that it is the learning that has taken place that has increased their confidence to be more interested in others and to meet more people. These findings are inconsistent with John Field's view of social capital that proposes that it is through greater socialising that people gain confidence to join courses and continue learning (Field 2005 ). Here it is the commitment to attending the course and the taking on of new learning that then affects confidence rather than the other way around as Field suggests.

In this study parents' reasons for attending the courses initially are varied. What stands out is the gain in emotional well-being, evidenced by two of the interviewees below whose comments reflect many who attended the courses.

It keeps me sane, it gets me out of the house in the morning; and it does that, the truth like.....I am learning something as well.

used to be cranky and down out depressed. I had nothing to do and nothing to look forward to. I'd get up and I'd clean and I'd do the basics housework as they call it but I wasn't happy in myself used to be cranky and down, out, depressed. I had nothing to do and nothing to look forward to. I'd get up and I'd clean and I'd do the basics housework as they call it but I wasn't happy in myself

(Webb 2006)

This is supported by Horne and Haggert in their study of *The Impact of Adults Participation in Family Learning* in Lancashire who found that an increase in confidence and self esteem helped parents overall emotional well being (Horne and Haggert 2004). This increased confidence in parents enables them to reflect on their own schooling and want it to be better for their own children.

I dropped out of school so I don't want her to have the same pressures I had.

I hope to put her through secondary and college if I can at all. I never got that chance. I would love her to have it.

I had no education; I had no job so there was nothing there, out there for traveller women only get married.

I like that she won't be left behind when she goes to secondary school because that's what happened to me.

(Webb 2006)

This is consistent with Hammond's (2004) findings where a study on adults' learning and the effects on mental health found learning negated low self-esteem caused by poor schooling. Wanting a better education for ones own children may not cancel out the effects of ones own poor schooling. But it does demonstrate a more positive approach to the benefits of education and the value that is put on it.

Evidence of how learning can develop critical reflection is seen in the comment below from one of the interviewees.

I recognise travellers and settled are two different. They really ain't, just a wall people put up between them I think the best way of making down that wall is to get the travellers more involved in the community get the kids more involved in the community then there would be no walls between then.

(Webb 2006)

Here reflection has moved from the personal, child orientated view to critically thinking about the social environment and the community. This is reinforced by the social practice view that suggests that reflecting on the environment shows an understanding of the position taken by individuals within it (Tett 2003). This is further confirmed by Schuller who found that family learning has the potential to affect many different relationships by improving communication skills and mutual respect (Schuller 2002).

Likewise by reflecting on experience a curiosity is developed and a realisation that learning is not just confined to classes but that learning takes place in everyday life in different contexts.

.....different outlook before I would go through for the gossip I'd say I wouldn't be interested in anything madly serious along the politics but now it first thing would be the politics and health issues and something like that it wouldn't be gossip or it wouldn't be just the stars I would have just bought the paper to get the stars. It gives you a different outlook, life and education. (Webb 2006)

This is paralleled by Banbury who records that parents who attended family learning courses developed a greater curiosity (Banbury 2005).

Learning is about critically reflecting and this study shows that family learning can be an important part of this process. In this research all the interviewees had aspirations for themselves either to further their education or to gain employment (see Chapter 5). The research into progression from the courses a year on, show that 41% of the parents continued in education and 27% progressed in to employment.

This is consistent with the findings of UK school inspectorate OFSTED (2000) who noted that parents from family learning courses in schools often progressed to further learning, training or took up employment opportunities.

#### **5.4 Those parts of family learning programmes that have the greatest impact**

In looking at the impact of the family learning programmes on parents learning through their involvement in their children's learning, it seems important to consider whether this research has shown that there are any parts of the programme that have a greater impact on increasing interaction and learning generally than other parts. If this were so there would be an implication for the design of future programmes.

The component parts of the Clare Family Learning Project are:

- The role of parents as the first and most important teacher, the home as a learning environment and the skills involved in learning
- Speaking and listening, communication, rhymes, songs and poems, and storytelling
- Reading, sharing of books and the significance of environmental print
- Writing, the development of mark making, into early writing and its function
- Maths, the use of mathematical concepts in everyday life and playing games, imaginative and creative play.

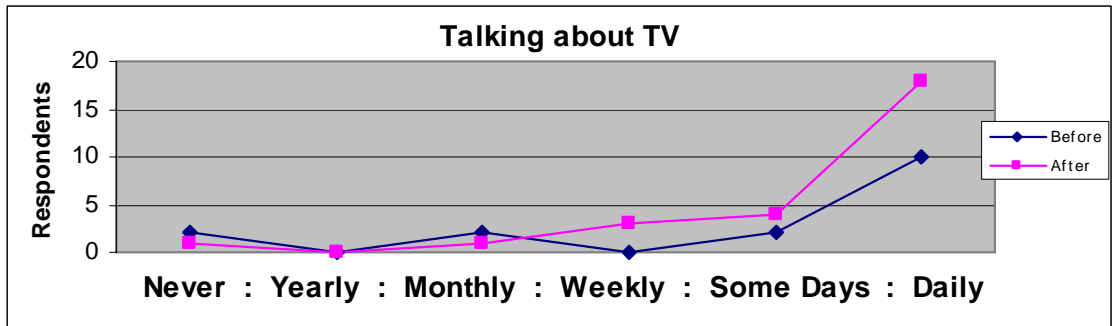
(Clare Family Learning Project 2000)

It was these that were examined when conducting the research.



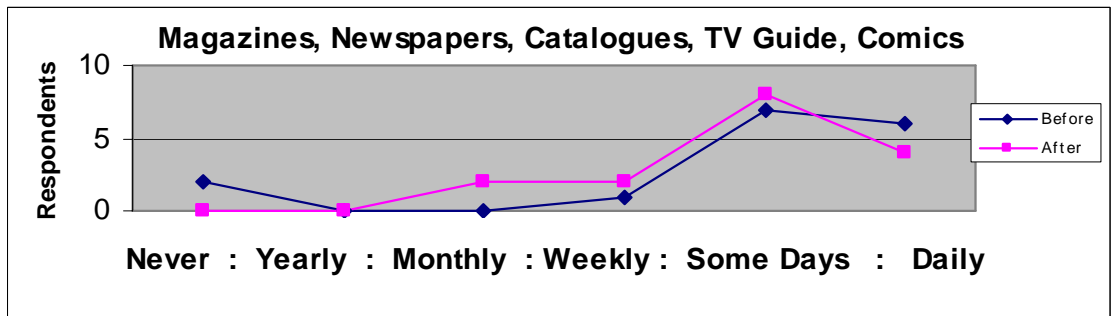
Data from the questionnaires and the end of course evaluation were used to find out whether any part of the programme had a greater impact than another. One of the indicators looked for was an increase in the frequency of interaction parents had with their children from the beginning to the end of the programme in the different areas of literacy highlighted in the programme explanation above. Frequencies showed there was change in the amount of time spent in doing activities in the speaking and listening section and this can be seen in the table below on talking about TV where there was 35% increase .

Figure 1 Speaking and Listening



But in the other areas there was a slight decrease in the daily rate but it was seen that people had moved from never, to monthly, weekly and some days this is shown in the table below from the reading section.

Figure 2 Reading



These examples of data from two different sections of the programme give an example of a mixed picture from the questionnaires. One of the reasons might have been that in some cases the activities presented were thought to be too age specific by the parents especially at the start of the course where some questions were mis-interpreted.

The end of course evaluation focused on parents identifying parts of the course that they saw as being particularly useful as far as learning and interacting with their children were concerned and understanding how their child was learning. This is illustrated in the Table 4 at page 74 above.

The speaking and listening session was considered useful as was the session on environmental print. It is interesting to note the lack of correlation between the usefulness of the session, and noticing and understanding more about children's learning.

A possible explanation for this might be that the most useful were the sessions the parents enjoyed the most, in that there was a high level of interaction. Also the visual impact and practical and creative aspect of making and playing games in these sessions were the ones they repeated at home and therefore had a greater impact.

By contrast in the interviews when the question was asked about which session the parents found most useful all interviewees mentioned reading in the form of sharing books or story sacks, rhymes, songs and poems and maths.

Story sacks, They've helped her to learn to read

This would suggest that the impact of family learning programme on parents learning through their involvement in their children's learning is not made by any particular part. One explanation of this result is that it is participation on the programme as a whole and the reinforcement of underlying themes that could be said to make an impact. Another explanation is that by taking the social practice approach, the Clare family learning programme is a framework. This highlights the debate between the skills based model and social practice model discussed in the literature review.

Who decides what the relevant literacy skills that people need are? The participants with various life experiences connected and learnt from different parts according to their individual circumstances. This showed that no part of the programme impacted more than another.

The research evidence contained in this document does however show that the overall aims of the programmes were achieved.

## **5.5 Conclusion**

The findings of this research show that family learning as well as validating parents' own literacy practices also introduces parents to dominant literacy practices such as visiting the library. It demonstrates that family learning can build bridges between home and school. Findings from this research for the most part fit into the existing body of knowledge gathered from

mainly UK sources. Family learning programmes do make an impact, in that parents develop a better understanding of their children's learning and became more confident in themselves and in people around them. With this trust and support a greater interest in further learning is nurtured.

## Chapter 6 - Conclusion

### 6.1 Summary of Findings

Family learning impacted on parents' involvement in their children's learning by the whole process of focusing on interactions, demonstrating that ordinary 'day to day' activities could prompt communication. Individual parents sharing interactions they experienced with their children and identifying the learning that took place highlighted the importance of such interactions to the rest of the group. This sharing of information in combination with the content and overall aims of the courses increased the diversity of activities that the parents became involved in with their children.

Family learning through focusing on parents' involvement in children's learning impacted on the parents learning in three ways.

The first was an increase of knowledge and understanding of how children learn and develop both cognitively, socially and emotionally. This was through a greater awareness of what an important model parents provide for their children and that by making time and doing things together creates stronger bonds and an increase in seeing children's interactions in a wider context. It was also parents being able to reflect on their own upbringing and what they desired for their children.

The second was the acknowledgement of the link between the understanding of their children's learning and the impact of this on their own learning and the realisation that activities at home impacted on how children achieved in school. This heightened awareness of the link between home and school increased feelings of responsibility and confidence in linking with school to support their child's learning. In thinking about children's learning, there is an increased interest in the adults' desire to learn and aspirations for the adult and child are increased.

The final was the impact on parents' own mental health in that they had a purpose for getting out of the house and by mixing with others in similar situations, they made more friends and they learnt more about themselves as people. Consequently, greater value was put on individuals and the community and there was a widening view of the world, people and learning. By developing an understanding of how people learn they became more interested in the world around them and developed aspirations and a desire to progress into new areas such as further learning or employment.

In assessing the impact of family learning programmes on parents' learning through their involvement in their children's learning it was shown that no specific area of the programme impacted more than another. The general underlying themes/threads of the importance of parents and the home environment and gaining a better understanding of the whole process of learning in children impacted in a diffuse way.

The findings were supported by the social practice model of learning through programmes taking familiar contexts of the parents' role, the home environment and parent child interactions and building on them. Parents' gained knowledge and understanding through peer support, a model they could repeat with their children, the social constructivist approach. In terms of community capacity building increasing friends and understanding of communities as well as participation in them, family learning contributed towards social capital.

## **6.2 Limitations**

The limitations of this study were that its sample of twenty-two parents attending a twelve or nine week programme was small. As with any group being studied impacts from one programme cannot be isolated from other impacts that parents are experiencing in their lives.

The limitations of using the questionnaire as a research tool were recognised. The purpose of it was to monitor change in parents' involvement in their children's learning from the beginning to the end of the course through looking at everyday interactions parents might be involved in with their children. At the beginning of the course the participants who might not know each other or the tutor were asked to answer questions that they might not have fully understood and because of the context did not ask for explanations.

By the end of the twelve weeks there was not only a feeling of trust amongst the participants but a greater understanding of the questions. The answers are much more honest than at the beginning when nobody wanted to be seen 'as in this case' spending little time with their children so little change is recorded. Focus group discussions, interviews, photographic evidence and the end of course evaluations were more valuable research tools.

### **6.3 The Implication and Recommendations**

#### **Implications**

Ireland recently, in recognising family literacy as a way to promote greater parental involvement in children's learning, could recognise the intergenerational benefits to both children and parents. Greater funding of programmes could raise the profile of family learning as a way to raise standards of learning not only for children but adults as well. To do this there needs to be further analysis and research of family learning in different communities in Ireland.

#### **Recommendations**

1. Results from this study show a high percentage of parents continuing in education or gaining employment. More detailed tracking of family learning participants could produce evidence of the importance of



such programmes as a first step back into learning thus encouraging the promotion of a higher profile and more funding for programmes.

2. This research took place in Co Clare, which may be considered unrepresentative of family learning in other parts of Ireland especially in the bigger cities. Further research on impact of family learning courses on parents' learning in different geographical areas would extend the social and cultural implications of the adults' learning.

3. To raise the profile in schools of the value of family learning programmes being incorporated into their future plans and achievement targets. Here research would look at family learning projects that are working in schools to gather evidence of best practice and successful programmes that demonstrate a correlation between children's learning and adults' learning.

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# Appendices

# **Appendix 1**

## **Clare Family Learning Project**

### **Family Learning Course**

#### **Rationale**

Parents want to do the best for their children and gain recognition for their existing skills and develop new skills, which will enable them to work with their children to improve their learning skills.

#### **Philosophical framework**

The course is-

- a partnership between parents and facilitators
- learner centred
- flexible
- practical
- culturally empowering
- convening in a friendly, supportive environment empowering participants to take part fully and gain confidence and independence in an atmosphere of peer and tutor support.

#### **Target Group**

Parents/carers of children 0 -7 years, who, in the main, have few or no formal qualification, may have basic skills needs and wish to return to education.

#### **Aims**

- To motivate parents to recognise the unique role they play in their children's education.
- To encourage parents to develop awareness of children's learning and developmental needs.
- To provide parents with practical skills and ideas of how to stimulate and support children's learning within the home environment and everyday life.
- To enhance parent's self confidence and esteem as individuals, parents and partners of schools.
- To motivate parents to take an interest in not only their families education but their own.

## Learning Outcomes

- Understand that as primary models for children there is a need to develop a positive attitude towards learning.
- Implement a range of techniques and strategies to encourage and stimulate children's language, reading, writing and maths skills.
- Provide evidence from the home environment of practical activities that develop children's learning.
- Explain ways in which the course has enhanced confidence.
- Identify ways in which communication with school has changed
- List personal objectives and future learning opportunities.

## Content

### Learning

- The identification of learning opportunities in the home, increasing knowledge of different learning styles and looking at the key elements of successful learning.
- The development of a positive attitude to learning.
- The importance of play and games.

### **Oral Language**

- The significance of developing talking and listening skills with children and how these skills can be enhanced through role play, discussion, non verbal communication and recordings.

### **Spelling, Reading and Writing**

- The importance to the development of reading, writing and spelling skills in the teaching of rhymes, songs and poems.
- The value to language skills of looking at the underlying patterns of stories and storytelling.
- The literacy skills that are developed through the general interest of reading and talking about books and their features.
- The exploration of how interacting with print in the environment encourages the development of reading and writing skills.
- The familiarisation of the development of children's handwriting and the identification of tasks that support it.
- The intermingling of different learning strands in the making of books.

## **Maths**

- The exploration of the language of maths and the development of mathematical concepts through everyday activities and games.
- The recent changes in mathematical teaching.

## ***Communication***

- The exploration of community resources available to families.
- The communication with schools and other professionals.
- The investigation into further learning opportunities.

## **Methods**

The course will utilise a range of learning strategies including:

- Presentation
- Discussion
- Group/pair-work
- Demonstration
- Role play
- Discovery

## **Activities**

Group discussion

Group and paired tasks

Questionnaires

Practical workshops

Guest speaker

Outing

Project

Learning log

## **Materials**

Can be gathered at home or purchased inexpensively.

Crates or boxes to store the collected materials

### Resources

Facilitator  
Bright comfortable room  
Tea and coffee making facilities  
Family Learning Resource Guide  
Photopak  
Parents booklets  
Flip chart

### Links

Existing groups in adult education, EASOL, BTEI, workplace literacy. Lone parent initiatives, traveller programmes.  
FETAC modules at foundation level such as communications, personal effectiveness, childcare.

### Evaluation

Evaluation carried out on two levels, informal and formal.  
**Informal - ongoing, regular feedback, checking relevance to needs.**  
Formal - written and oral questionnaires at the end of the course



## Appendix 2

### Clare Family Learning Project

#### Story Sack Course

Participants of the course create their own 'Story Sack' made up of props related to a specific book. This is developed week by week as a different part of a book is focused on and the appropriate items are made and collected together in the sack. The process gives participants an opportunity to think about what elements there are to a book, the value of sharing books with children as well as being fun and creative.

#### **Aims for Parents**

To encourage parents to:

- Discuss books with their children
- Share practical tasks with their children
- Gain confidence and stimulate an interest in books and stories
- Identify what makes a good book
- Choose suitable books for their children
- Be aware of use of voice and tone when sharing /reading stories
- Realise that there are opportunities to extend talk and vocabulary when sharing books
- Realise that books have component parts
- Understand there are different sorts of books
- Create games that compliment the stories

#### **Aims for children**

To encourage children to:

- Share ideas about books with their parents
- Suggest ideas around practical activities
- Take an interest in books
- Offer opinions on books and be able to justify these
- Respond to books being read out loud
- Realise books have different parts
- Understand the difference between fiction and non-fiction

## **Programme**

### **Learning outcomes for each session**

#### **Session 1**

Realise the importance of sharing books with children from an early age.  
Relate this to children learning to read later

#### **Session 2**

Make a calculated choice of book to have for their children  
Decide on items to include in their story sacks  
Decide what is going to be made and what is going to be found  
Think what sort non fiction book might be appropriate

#### **Session 3**

Acknowledge the importance of settings of stories.  
Realise there are different genres of books and that different children like different genres  
Can identify a theme from the story and link it to a non fiction book

#### **Session 4**

Realise the importance of settings to the story plot.  
Calculate the advantages / disadvantages of taping stories for children

#### **Session 5**

Identify the learning that children gain from playing games  
See that different types of games have different learning objectives  
Identify that different sorts of materials are needed for different games  
Realise that some types of games are more suitable than others for different age children  
Plan game

#### **Session 6**

Using plan of game

Make game

Trial

Write instructions/rules

**Session 7**

See how a sack can be made

Think about how the title can be put on the sack and what would be appropriate illustrations

Think about other items that are important to be included in the sacks

**Session 8**

Complete sacks by writing title on the sacks and checking contents, props, games, etc.

Look at some Parent Prompt Cards and think of some specific questions

Write own prompts

**Session 9**

Demonstrate sack to the rest of the group

Evaluate the programme

**Celebrate achievements**

## Appendix 3



### Family Learning Questionnaire

Child's Age

	←-----→				
1. How important do you think the following are?	Unimportant			Very Important	
	1	2	3	4	5
The role of parents in helping their children to learn					
The home as a place where children learn					
To know that people learn in different ways					
To learn more through attending courses					

	Never	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly	Some Days	Daily
2. Does your child do any of these <u>with you</u> ?						
Talk about TV						
Talk about what they have done						
Sit down to family meals						
Sing songs and rhymes						
Listen to stories you tell						
Make up stories for you						
3. Does your child look at any of these at home <u>with you</u> ?						
Magazines/ Catalogues/ Newspapers/ TV guide/comics						
Labels on food and other packets, signs and symbols around						
Books						
Photo albums						

	Never	Yearly	Monthly	Weekly	Some Days	Daily
<b>4. Does your child do any of these activities <u>with you</u>?</b>						
Write a shopping list, sign a card						
Drawing /painting/colouring						
Use a computer/play station						
<b>5. Does your child do any of these <u>with you</u>?</b>						
Play 'make believe' games						
Jigsaws, board games, card games						
Cutting and sticking						
<b>6. Does your child <u>help you</u>?</b>						
Sort clothes/washing/tools						
Lay the table						
Make food/bake/make something						
Count things						
<b>7. Does your child visit any of these places <u>with you</u>?</b>						
Library						
Cinema, Leisure Centre or Museum,						
Seaside or countryside						

<p>8. Which of these activities do you think your child enjoys doing most with you?</p>	
<p>9. Which of these activities do you enjoy doing most with your child?</p>	
<p>10. Why do you think you and your child enjoy doing activities together?</p>	

<p>11. What do you learn from doing activities <u>with your child</u>?</p>	<p>A little <span style="float: right;">A lot</span></p> <p style="text-align: center;">1                      2                      3                      4                      5</p>				
<p>The importance of parents in children's learning.</p>					
<p>More than you thought you knew.</p>					
<p>How people learn.</p>					
<p>More about yourself as a person.</p>					
<p>More about yourself as a member of a family/community</p>					

## Appendix 4



### Family Learning Questionnaire

Sample group at the conclusion of the course

1. How important do you think the following are?	←-----→									
	Unimportant								Very Important	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
The role of parents in helping their children to learn									16	16
The home as a place where children learn			5	2	6	7	5	7		
To know that people learn in different ways		1	0	3	2	5	5	7	9	
To learn more through attending courses			5	4	4	4	7	8		

2. Does your child do any of these with you?	Never		Once twice a year		Once twice a month		Once a week		Two, three times a week		Every day	
Talk about TV	2	1			2	1	0	3	2	4	10	18
Talk about what they have done	2	2			1	0	2	1	2	4	9	9
Sit down to family meals	1	0						1	5	3	10	12
Sing songs and rhymes	1	0			1	0	2	1	7	9	5	6
Listen to stories you tell	1	1			2	2	1	3	6	6	6	4
Make up stories for you	3	2			0	1	2	4	4	3	7	6

3. Does your child look at any of these at home with you?	Never		Once twice a year		Once twice a month		Once a week		Two, three times a week		Every day	
Magazines/ Catalogues/ Newspapers/ TV guide/comics	2	0			0	2	1	2	7	8	6	4
Labels on food and other packets, signs and symbols around	6	7			0	3	3	3	5	1	2	2
Books					3	1	1	2	4	4	8	9
Photo albums	2	2	0	1	6	3	2	6	2	3	4	1

<b>4. Does your child do any of these activities <u>with you</u>?</b>												
Write a shopping list, sign a card	7	3	2	1	3	4	3	2	0	4	1	2
Drawing /painting/colouring	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	10	6	6	6
Use a computer/play station	11	8	1	2	0	2	0	0	4	4	2	0
<b>5. Does your child do any of these <u>with you</u>?</b>	<b>Never</b>		<b>Once twice a year</b>		<b>Once twice a month</b>		<b>Once a week</b>		<b>Two, three times a week</b>		<b>Every day</b>	
Play 'make believe' games	3	2	0	0	1	2	3	2	5	5	4	5
Jigsaws, board games, card games	4	3	1	0	0	0		3	7	3	2	4
Cutting and sticking	6	6		1		1		3	3	3	0	2
<b>6. Does your child <u>help you</u>?</b>												
Sort clothes/washing/tools	3	4	0	0	0	1	2	5	5	3	6	3
Lay the table	7	5	0	0	1	1	2	3	4	3	2	4
Make food/bake/make something	8	5	0	0	0	0	3	2	3	4	0	1
Count things	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	5	6	9	8
<b>7. Does your child visit any of these places <u>with you</u>?</b>												
Library	7	4	3	2	3	4	3	3	0	3	0	0
Cinema, Leisure Centre or Museum,	4	4	0	2	7	2	5	5	1	3	0	0
Seaside or countryside	1	1	4	5	8	6	1	2	1	2	1	0



11. What do you learn from doing activities <u>with your child</u> ?	A little ←————→ A lot									
	1		2		3		4		5	
The importance of parents in children's learning.	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	15	15
More than you thought you knew.	0	0	0	0	3	0	5	5	9	10
How people learn.	I	0	0	0	4	2	8	3	3	11
More about yourself as a person.	1	0	0	0	3	2	6	5	4	9
More about yourself as a member of a family/community	1	0	0	0	3	3	4	8	8	5



	Never	Once twice a year	Once twice a month	Once a week	Two, three times a week	Every day
<b>2. Does your child do any of these <u>with you</u>?</b>						
Talk about TV	1			4	3	2
Talk about what they have done	2				1	7
Sit down to family meals	1			1	1	7
Sing songs and rhymes			2		4	4
Listen to stories you tell				4	4	6
Make up stories for you	2		1	1	3	3

<b>3. Does your child look at any of these at home <u>with you</u>?</b>						
Magazines/ Catalogues/ Newspapers/ TV guide/comics			1	2	3	4
Labels on food and other packets, signs and symbols around		1	4	2	1	2
Books			1		4	5
Photo albums		2	5		3	

<b>4. Does your child do any of these activities <u>with you</u>?</b>						
Write a shopping list, sign a card	3	1	1	4	2	
Drawing /painting/colouring	1		1	1	2	5
Use a computer/play station	3		1	2	2	2

	Never	Once twice a year	Once twice a month	Once a week	Two, three times a week	Every day
<b>5. Does your child do any of these <u>with you</u>?</b>						
Play 'make believe' games	1	3	1	3	2	
Jigsaws, board games, card games	2		1	2	1	4
Cutting and sticking	2		1	3	3	1

<b>6. Does your child <u>help you</u>?</b>						
Sort clothes/washing/tools	1		3	2	1	3
Lay the table			2	1	2	5
Make food/bake/make something	2	1	3	1	2	1
Count things			2	1	2	5

<b>7. Does your child visit any of these places <u>with you</u>?</b>						
--	--	--	--	--	--	--

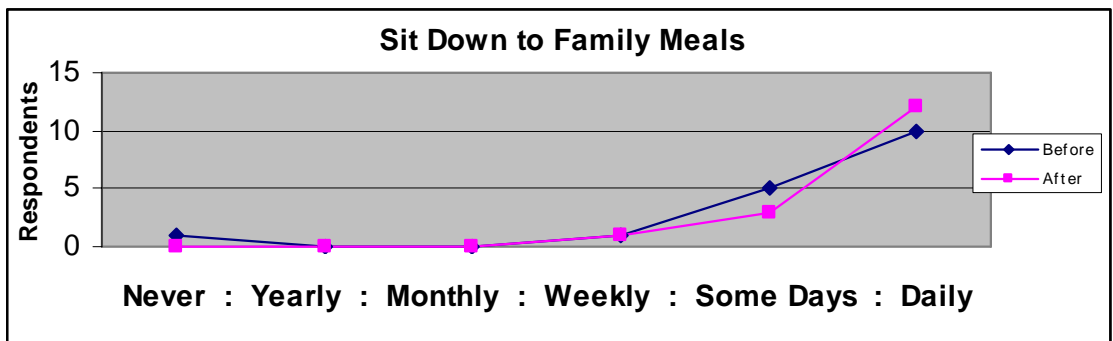
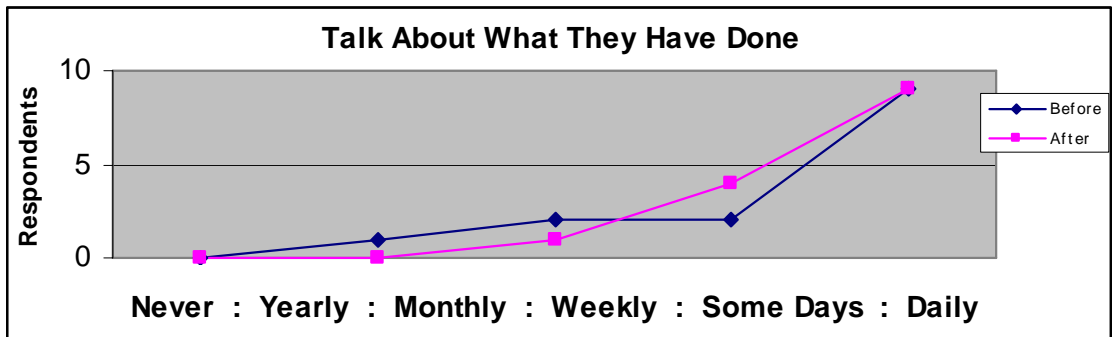
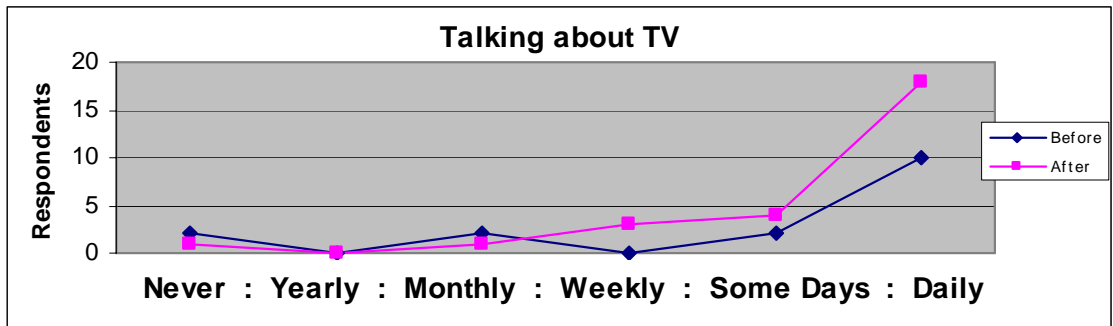
<b>11.</b> What do you learn from doing activities <u>with your child</u> ?					
The importance of parents in children's learning.				1	9
More than you thought you knew.	1			4	5
How people learn.		1	1	2	6
More about yourself as a person.	1		2	1	6
More about yourself as a member of a family/community	1			5	4

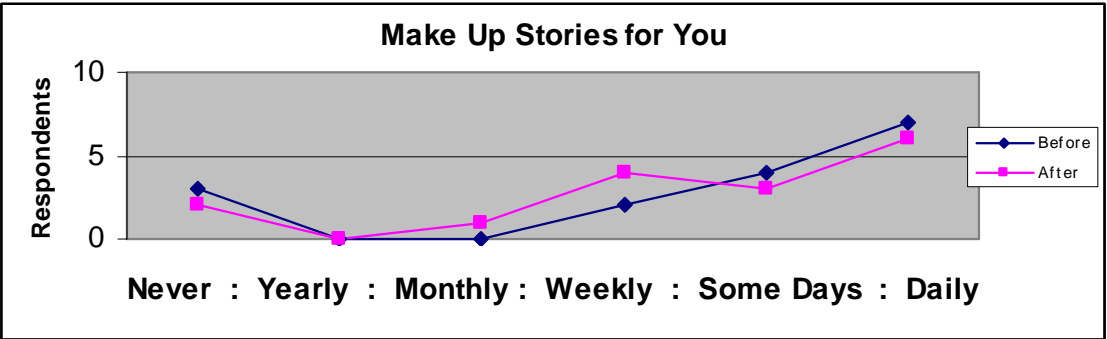
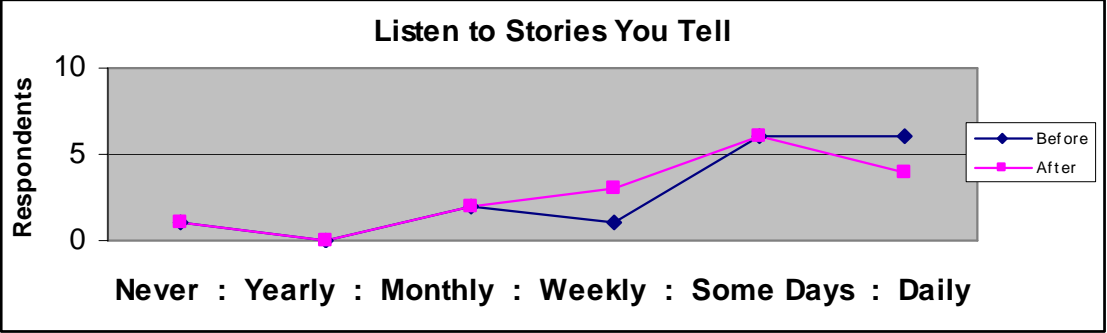
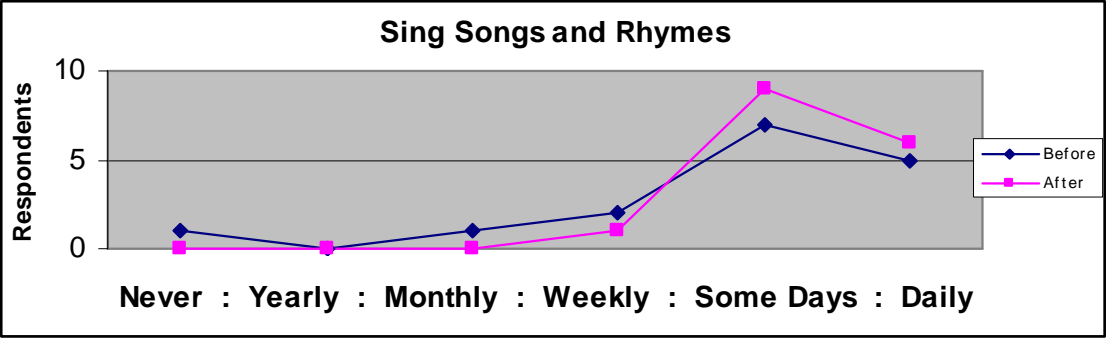
# Appendix 6

## Family Learning Questionnaire Outcomes - Before and After

### Question 2

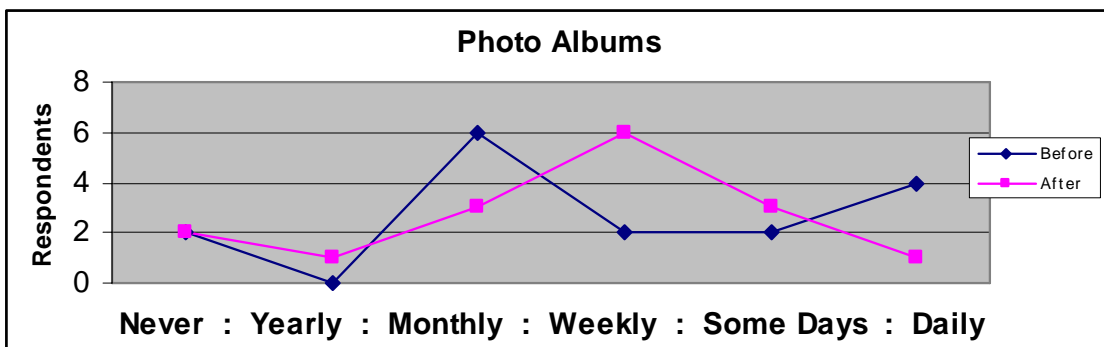
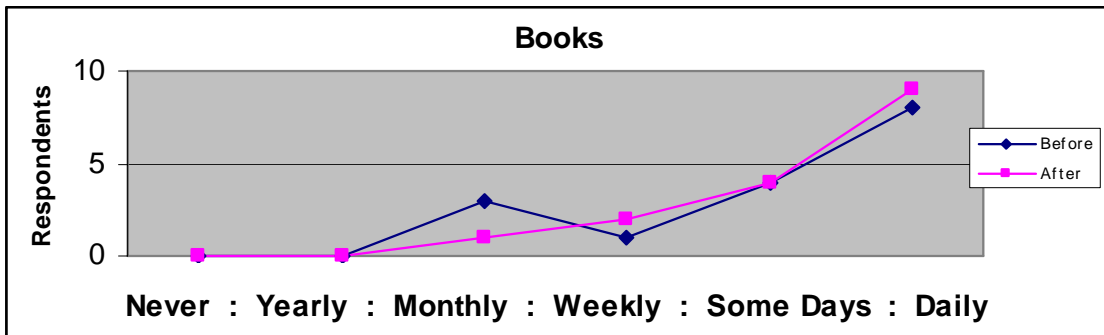
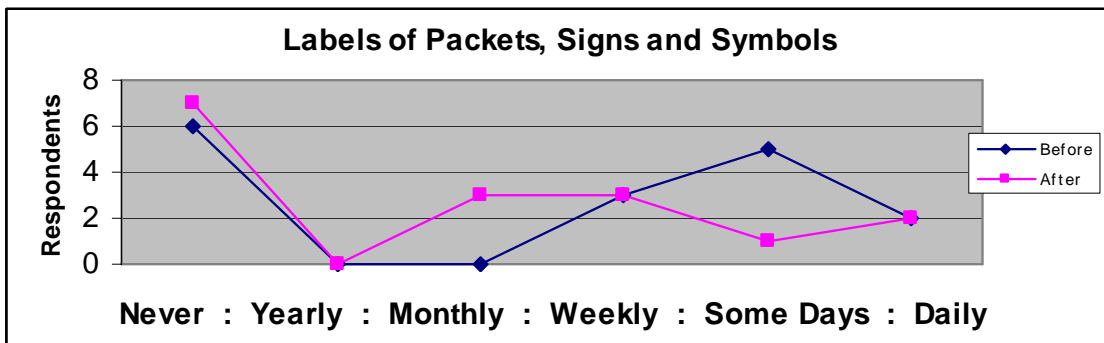
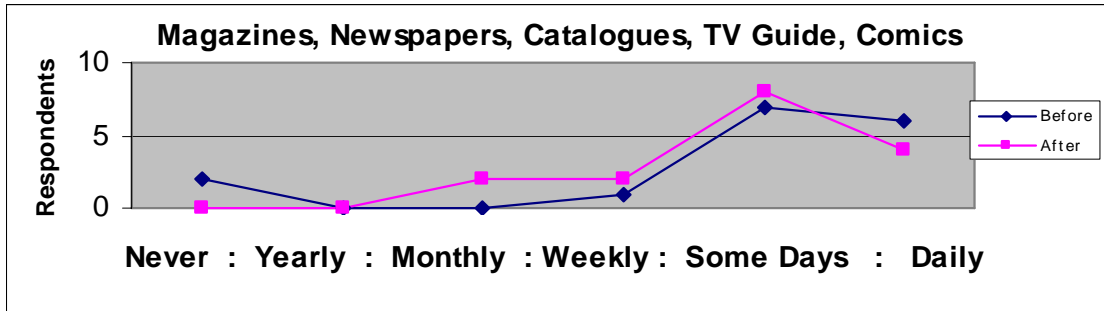
Does Your Child Do Any Of These With You?





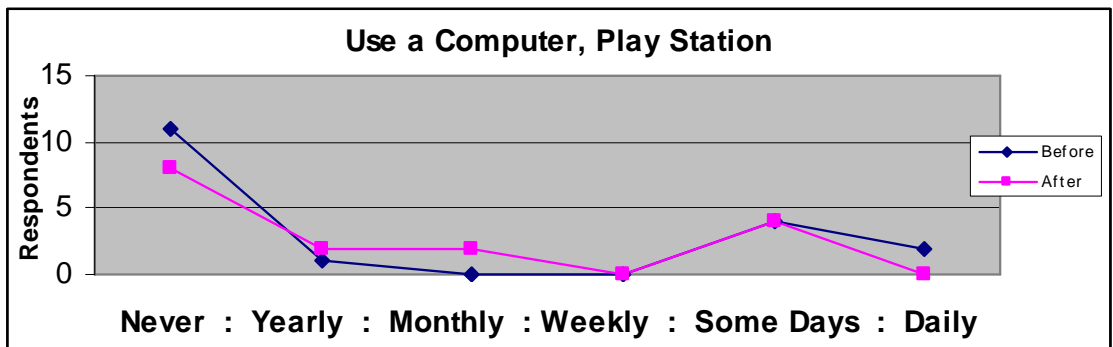
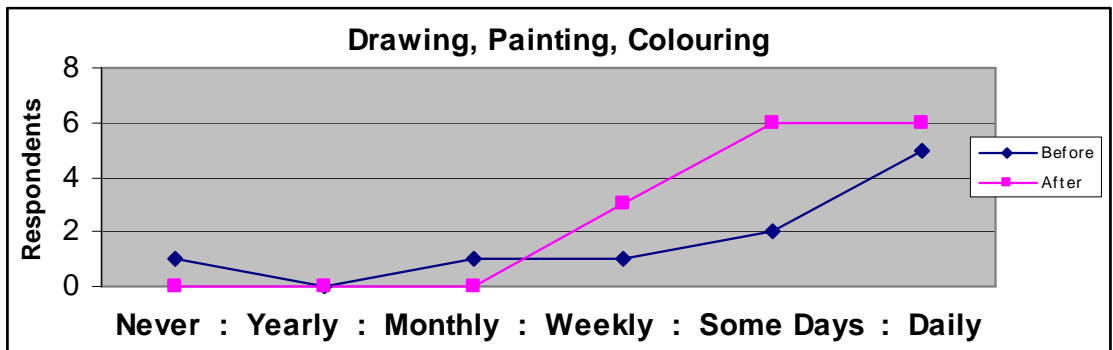
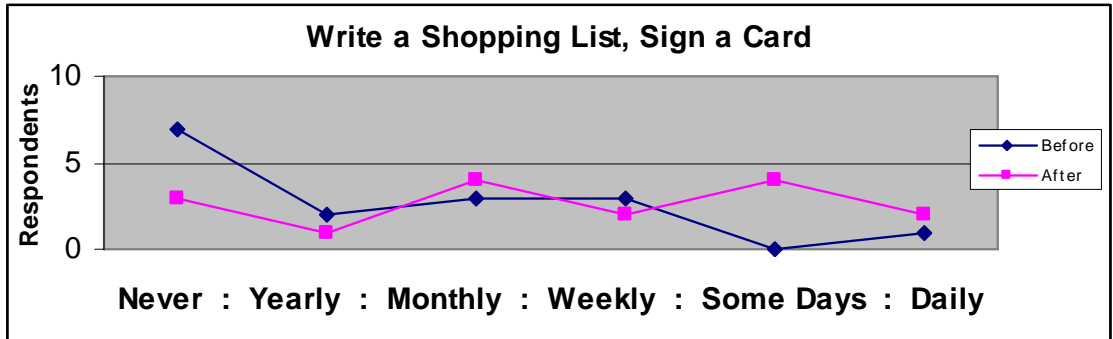
Question 3

Does Your Child Look at Any of These at Home With You?



Question 4

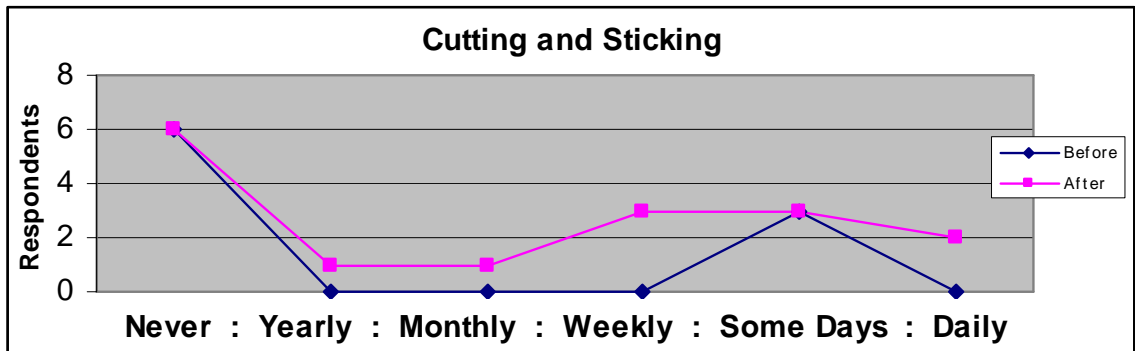
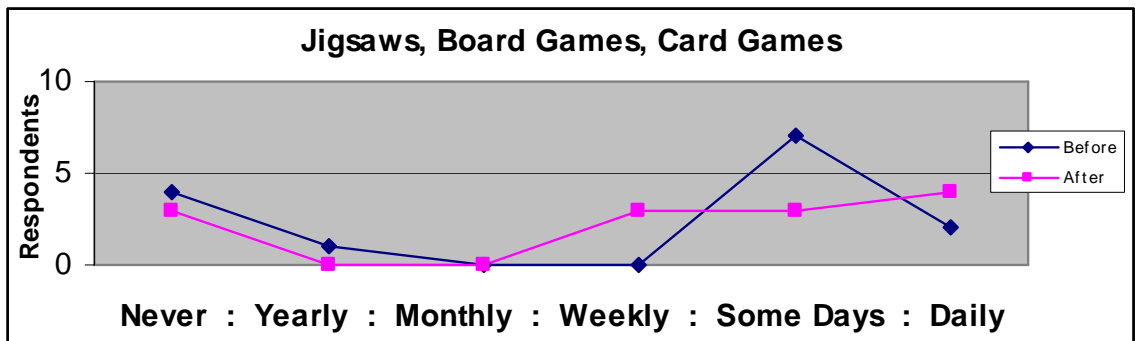
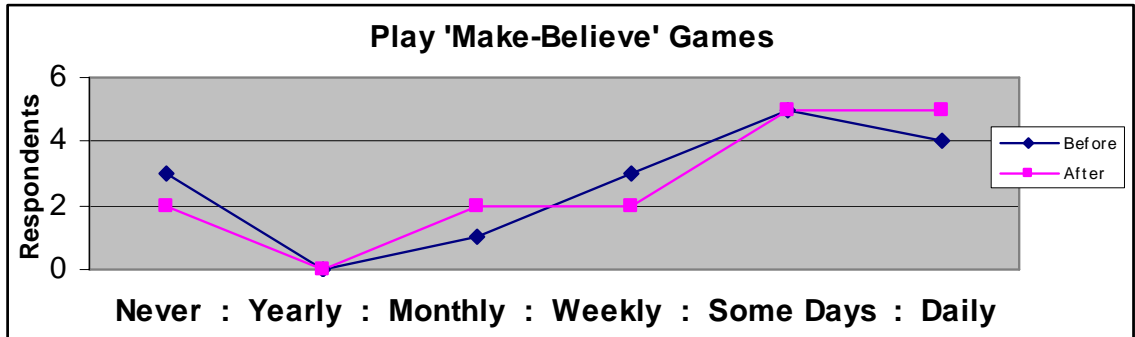
Does Your Child Do Any of These Activities With You?





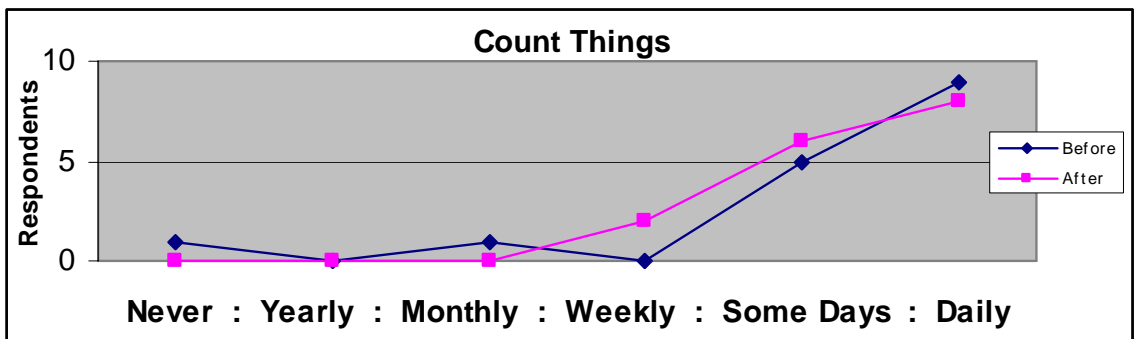
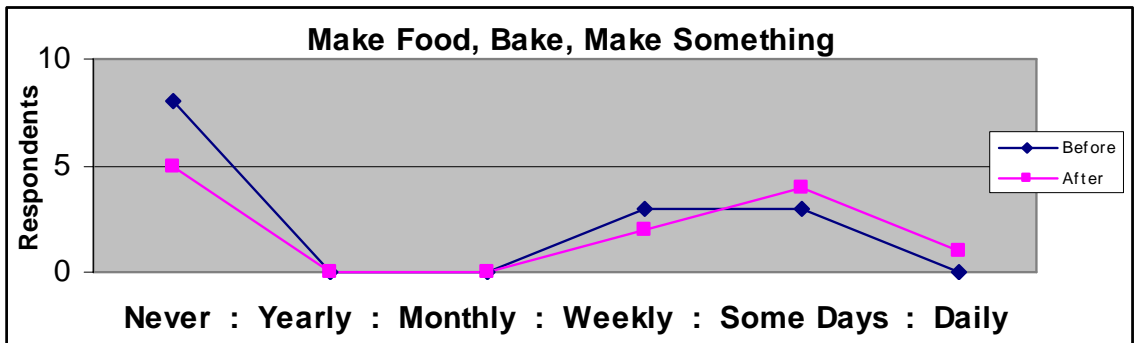
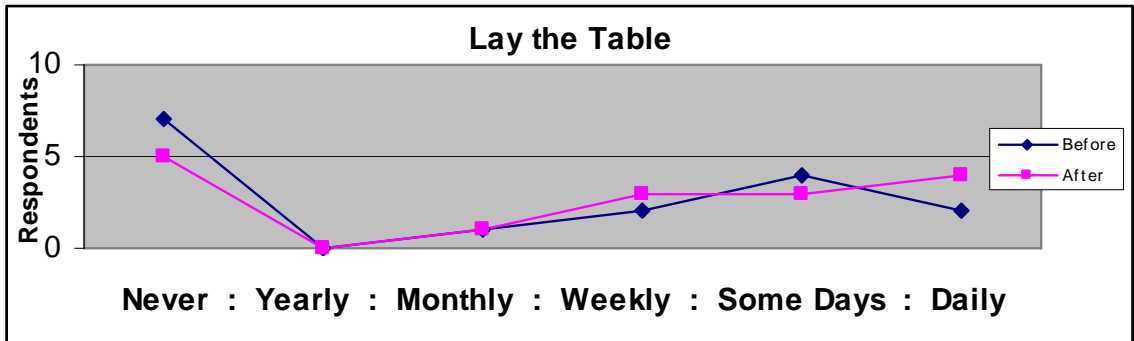
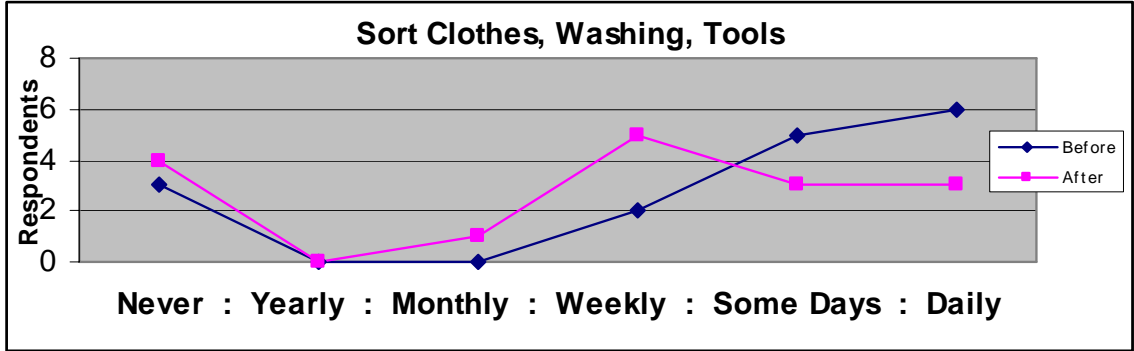
### Question 5

Does Your Child Do Any of These With You?



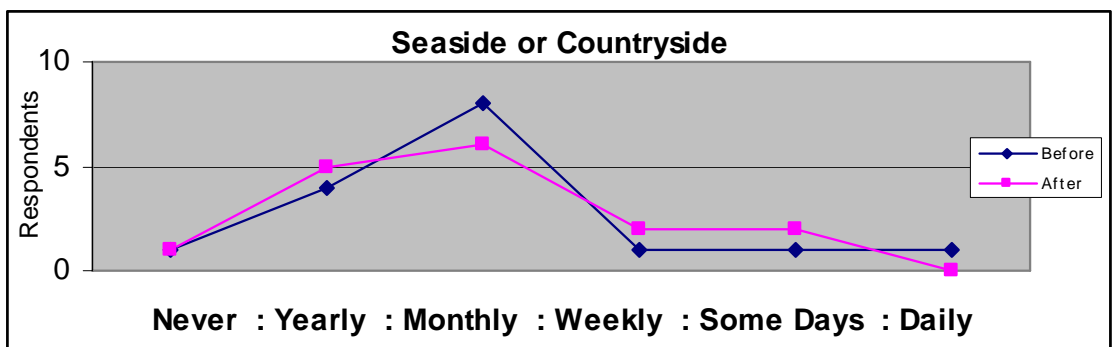
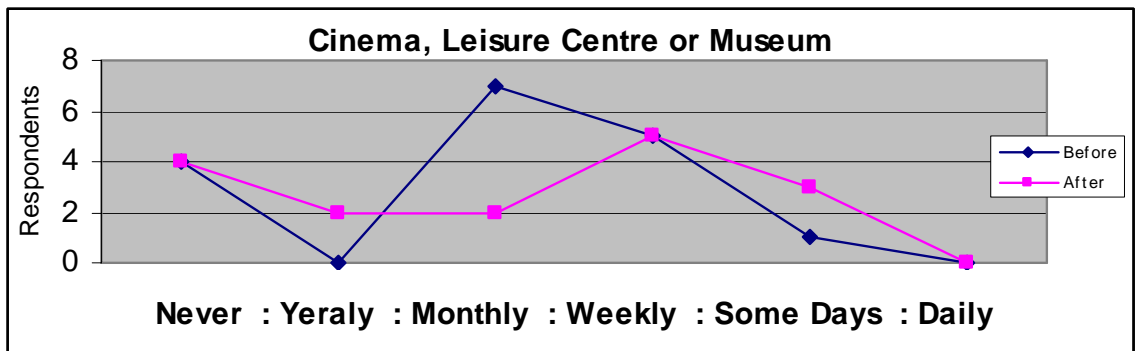
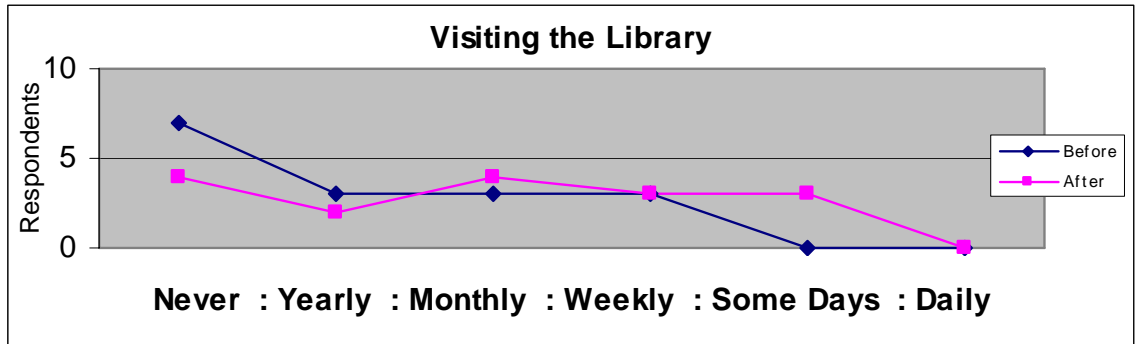
Question 6

Does Your Child Help You?



Question 7

Does Your Child Visit Any of These Places With You?



## Appendix 7

### Focus groups

**The purpose:** To understand how participants feel about the learning for their children and themselves that takes place through doing an activity together.

**The group consists of:** 8-12 people and facilitator

**Intent:** is to promote ease among participants to say what they really think and feel about activities they do with their children and the learning that is taking place for their children and themselves.

**Goal:** is to collect data that are of interest to the researcher. The researcher compares and contrasts data collected from at least 5 focus groups.

**Questions:** are preconceived, phrased and sequenced so they are easy to understand, open ended and logical to the participants. The set of questions - known as the questioning route, means starting with more general and going to more specific questions. Attention is placed on understanding the feelings, comments and thought processes of participants as they discuss the issues.

- What did you spend time doing with your child this week?
- Do you think your child learnt something from doing it?
- Did you learn anything from spending time with your child?

*Analysis: The analysis is a deliberate, purposeful process, which is systematic, uses verifiable procedures, is done in sequential manner, and is a continuing process. This will rely upon listening to a tape recording and then developing an abridged transcript using the relevant and useful portions of the discussion.*

## Appendix 8

### Disposable Cameras

Justification of the use of disposable cameras for research evidence of parent child interaction in the home

- Focuses parents' attention on interactions that are taking place in the home between themselves and their children.
- The actual process of identifying the interaction for the photo adds value to the activity and its impact on the child's and parents' learning.
- Provides photographic evidence for the research project that otherwise would be difficult to obtain without being more intrusive.

Explanation of use of disposable cameras to participants

- No obligation to take a camera if you do not want to
- Will have to sign to say that you will try and use it for the purpose explained.
- That you will retain the photos but the researcher has the right to any copies that will enhance the research being carried out.
- That if photos are used it will be within the bounds of the research project. i.e.
  1. In the report on the research
  2. In the research document itself
  3. In presentations about the research

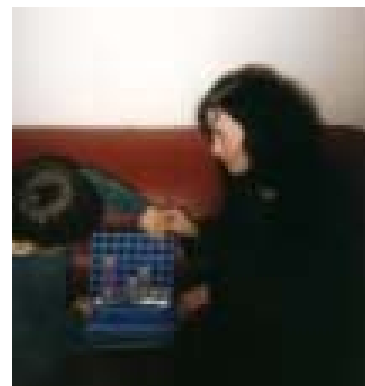
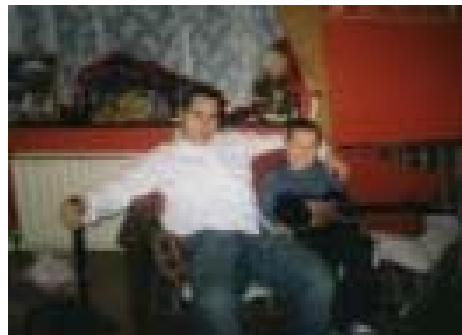
Purpose for which the cameras are used

To record evidence through taking 2 photographs of you or another adult and your child or children doing activities together. It would be good if somebody else could take the 2 photos but if this is not possible you take 2 picture of your child or children doing an activity and then they take 2 picture of you or another adult doing the same activity. Any activity where there is some interaction or talk is fine. These do not need to be planned or set up just photos taken, focusing in as close as can be done on the people and the activity and taking 2 of each shot.

Examples might be:

- Sharing a book
- Playing with toys
- Playing games (inside or outside)
- Doing chores around the house
- Helping with homework
- Shopping together
- Putting the shopping away
- Choosing things
- Sorting things
- Cooking
- Making things (perhaps for Christmas)
- Eating a meal together
- Using a computer together
- Talking together

## Appendix 9



## Appendix 10

### Family Learning Programme End of Course Evaluation

How useful did you find the sessions?

1 most useful - 5 least useful

Session	5	4	3	2	1	Why
Introduction, Making a box interesting						
How do we learn? (learning styles) Name board						
Talking and Listening, Oral games						
Rhymes, songs and poems, Own poem for child						
Storytelling, what makes a good story?						
Sharing books, Picture story, Christmas decorations						
Visit to the library						
Environmental print, Kitchen cupboard Bingo game						
Maths, Height chart						
Writing, the development of children'						
WHY						



a	I showed my child what I had done
b	I made one with my child and played with it
c	I noticed what my child was doing more in that area
d	I understood more about how my child was learning
e	Learning how children learn helped me in my own learning

# **Appendix 11**

## **Interview Format and Questions**

### **Purpose of the research**

1. Is to establish the components of family learning programmes that increase interaction between parents and children in the home.
2. Is to establish whether increased interaction between parents and children effects the adults learning

## **Introduction at the interview**

The interviewer will explain

- that they are doing some research for Waterford Institute on the impact of FL courses on parents involvement with their children and the effects of the courses on their own learning.
- that there have been questionnaires and focus groups but it would good to get some in depth ideas from just a few people.
- reassure that the participants will remain anonymous in any written reports that come out of the study, and responses will be treated in strictest confidence.
- that there are no right or wrong answers to the questions the interest is in opinions and personal experiences.
- that there is freedom to interrupt, ask for clarification or criticize a line of questioning.
- about their background in the area.
- ask permission to tape record the interview and explain why.

Based on ideas from Robson, C., (2005) p.281

### Semi- Structured Interview

1. What have you enjoyed about the course?
2. What activities do you enjoy doing most with your children?
3. What makes you spend time with your children?
4. Family learning courses cover a lot of different activities that you can do with your children. Which ideas for activities have been the most useful to you and why?
5. What is it about the ideas that are useful?  
Because they give you a focus  
or  
Realise that what you do at home makes a difference to children's learning in school  
or  
That you are learning from doing activities with the children  
Or  
Have learnt something else (other learning or comments)
6. How does spending more time with your children effect the way you think about your own learning. Why do you think that is?
7. Has family learning made any difference to your
  - involvement in your children's school
  - involvement in the community
  - your aspirations for your children
  - your aspirations for yourself
  - your view of the world
8. Thank you for taking part is there anything else you would like to say in relation to family learning, spending time with your children or your own learning.