

# Engaging families in literacy and learning



The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development sets ambitious targets that can only be met through integrated approaches to the persistent challenges of disadvantage, inequality and exclusion. Among the innovative strategies to emerge in past decades, family learning stands out as a transformative approach that works across generations and between institutions, breaking down barriers between home, school and community. Research evidence supports a ‘whole family’ approach to tackling literacy and other educational challenges that disadvantaged families and communities face. Creating environments that encourage reading and writing, promoting a culture of cooperation among institutions, and embedding literacy and learning in other services for disadvantaged families enable intergenerational learning programmes to succeed.

## The power of learning families

Learning together as a family is a tradition rooted in all cultures, across all world regions. While family learning activities usually have a focus on broader life skills, they often also include the development of literacy, numeracy and language skills. Every child should have the right to be part of a family that learns together and the right to literate parents, grandparents and caregivers. The aim of policy is to help break the intergenerational cycle of low education and literacy skills, and support teachers and parents in preventing school failure and drop-out. Developing well-planned, purposeful learning opportunities that support progression must be a key aspect of family learning policy. When services for adults and children work together to create inclusive and accessible learning opportunities for all age groups, they can contribute to the development of a ‘learning family’. This concept describes a family that has at its heart a readiness to learn and an interest in developing knowledge and skills to transform the lives of individual family members, the family as a

whole and the wider community (NIACE, 2009). Every member of a learning family is a lifelong learner in their own right. However, the added value of an intergenerational approach is that it ensures that family members are involved in one another’s learning activities. This creates an environment of mutual encouragement and aspiration that can have a long-term positive impact on the culture, habits, motivation, attitudes and pattern of learning. Family learning presents adults and children with opportunities to become independent, proactive lifelong learners.

## Why implement family learning programmes?

The case for an intergenerational approach to learning and literacy is supported by the principle that learning should be lifelong and the fact that the development of literacy, numeracy and language skills is an age-independent activity. It is never too early or too late to start literacy learning. Disadvantaged parents who lack strong literacy skills need targeted support

## How intergenerational learning contributes to SDG 4

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 of the 2030 Agenda requires countries to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all'. Family learning has a critical role in supporting this overall goal, as well as in contributing to the achievement of the following SDG 4 targets:

- Ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (SDG 4.1).
- Ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education (SDG 4.2).

- Eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations (SDG 4.5).
- Ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy (SDG 4.6).

Family learning can contribute to the achievement of other SDG 4 targets as well as to SDGs addressing issues of poverty, nutrition, health and well-being, gender equality, water and sanitation, decent work and sustainable communities.

to translate their ambitions for their children into reality. In multilingual and multicultural contexts, they may also need help in learning the language of the school. Programmes that provide literacy and general parenting support often emphasize a 'whole family' approach to literacy and learning whereby parents (re)discover literacy alongside their (pre)school-aged children.

Early intervention is critical to prepare children for school and to prevent them from dropping out. It can also have a longer-term impact in persuading young people to remain engaged in education, training or employment. It is unrealistic to rely on schools as the only solution: families and communities need to become integrated elements of a more holistic strategy. Forging bonds across communities and institutions encourages greater recognition of the value of informal adult and community learning and promotes a culture of lifelong learning.

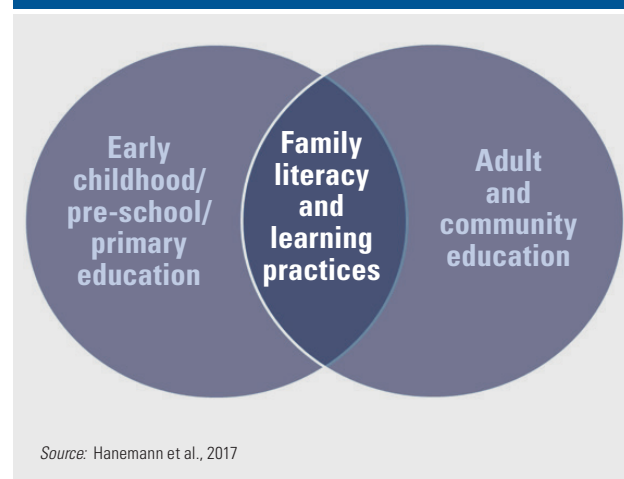
### The family learning programme structure

Different contexts, target groups, learning needs and institutional settings and capacities have resulted in the development of many different types of family learning programme (UIL, 2015). A common model has three components: adults' sessions, children's sessions, and joint sessions where adults and children develop activities together. Programmes typically operate from local pre-schools and primary schools, community- and faith-based institutions, neighbourhood organizations, and adult education providers.

Promoting partnerships and cooperation among these institutions can strengthen connections between schools, families and communities. By building on

literacy practices and strengths already present in families, successful family literacy programmes can ultimately lead to more social cohesion and community development.

### Family literacy and learning practices



### What evidence supports intergenerational approaches to learning?

Supporting children's early cognitive, linguistic and pre-literacy development can be challenging for parents and caregivers who lack literacy skills. Research indicates a strong association between parents' education levels and their children's level of literacy acquisition. Studies therefore stress the importance of intergenerational approaches to literacy learning (Brooks et al., 2008; Carpentieri et al., 2011). Very often, the desire to help their children with school readiness and schoolwork motivates parents to (re)engage in learning themselves (European Commission, 2012).

## Family literacy and family learning

**Family literacy** refers to the development of the literacy, numeracy and language skills of both children and adults. It enables caregivers whose own education has been limited for various reasons to help their children with learning through intergenerational interactions and relationships. Family literacy programmes address the learning needs of an entire family rather than individuals in isolation. Family literacy should be a core element of all intergenerational learning.

**Family learning** implies broader learning activities including, but not limited to, literacy. It encompasses any learning activity that involves both children and adult family members where learning outcomes are intended for both, and

which contributes to the development of a positive learning culture in the family (NIACE, 2013). It recognizes the vital role that parents, grandparents and other caregivers play in children's education. It values and supports all forms of learning in homes and communities, and seeks to break down artificial barriers between learning in formal, non-formal and informal settings.

The wider community plays a critical role in sharing informal skills and expertise between generations, and can help families that have encountered negative experiences of learning or have been excluded from formal education opportunities.

Research on the results of family literacy programmes reveals immediate benefits as well as a longer-term impact on children and adults alike (Brooks et al., 2008; Carpentieri et al., 2011; European Commission, 2012; NIACE, 2013). Such programmes can have long-term benefits lasting well into adulthood (Leseman, 2001). Family literacy programmes provide parents with the strongest possible motivation for participation: improving their children's chances in life (Carpentieri et al., 2011). There is also evidence that these programmes attract adults who would not otherwise take part in education (Brooks et al., 2008). They are also a highly cost-effective way of creating richer literate environments (Carpentieri et al., 2011).

The benefits are not confined to educational outcomes, however. High-quality programmes prepare caregivers to succeed as parents and employees, enhance bonds between parents and children, strengthen connections between families, schools and other institutions, and revitalize neighbourhood networks, leading to stronger communities (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007). Evidence also suggests that children of families who participate in literacy programmes improve their reading skills and test scores and are less likely to drop out of school.

The benefits for adults are also clear: parents who engage in family literacy programmes are more likely to complete their programme than those who enrol in adult-only education programmes and therefore have a greater chance to make improvements to their family and personal circumstances by acquiring academic and job-related skills (ibid.).

## Policy recommendations

Family learning has a critical role to play in supporting a range of important targets, across the full spectrum of SDGs. Unfortunately, this potential is often overlooked by policy-makers (Carpentieri et al., 2011) and a significant opportunity to effect social change is squandered. The following recommendations are based on an analysis of successful family learning programmes.

### 1. Use a 'whole family' approach to address literacy challenges

Literacy policies and strategies should address all stages of life and involve a range of relevant individuals and organizations. They should not just focus on children's development, nor should they deal exclusively with adult education. Parents and caregivers should be encouraged to embark on a journey of (re)discovering literacy and numeracy alongside their school-aged children.

### 2. Focus on the creation of literate environments

Tackling limited or poor literate environments is a major challenge, especially in rural and multilingual contexts. Family literacy programmes should develop a reading culture that permeates families' daily lives. This can be done by helping parents and caregivers to improve their skills and confidence to engage and motivate their children to both develop their language and read for pleasure. Developing rich literate environments means not only making easy-to-read, attractive books (also in local languages), ICT tools and media resources available, but also

encouraging families to take every opportunity to use and develop their new skills. Public campaigns that offer resources, support and reading volunteers to disadvantaged families in the context of family literacy programmes can help make this happen.

### 3. Promote cooperation using flexible funding streams and reporting approaches

Collaboration between different sub-sectors (i.e. pre-school, primary school and adult education), institutions and stakeholders enables successful family literacy and learning programmes. However, due to differing mandates, responsibilities and ways of operating between governmental departments, ministries or providers, such cooperation and related funding sometimes fails to materialize. More flexible funding streams and reporting approaches could help overcome possible hurdles to inter-institutional cooperation and encourage sustainable partnerships. In such well-coordinated family literacy and learning initiatives, one institution should be in charge of family literacy policy.

### 4. Link literacy and learning to other services for disadvantaged families

Motivating disadvantaged families to participate and remain in family literacy and learning programmes can be challenging, particularly in cases of extreme poverty or negative school experiences. Responding to the needs and interests of participating families, demonstrating cultural and linguistic sensitivity, and developing a sense of ownership within communities and target groups can be helpful in this regard. However, seeking out the co-operation of community leaders and committees, NGOs, government extension programmes (e.g. livelihood

and food-support programmes) and family support services (e.g. health and counselling services) has proven to be even more conducive to engaging vulnerable families. Those responsible for family support services in communities and neighbourhoods should therefore receive training in how to assist disadvantaged families to take part in literacy learning. Likewise, literacy, numeracy and language development can be embedded in other family support programmes.

### 5. Use family literacy and learning to break the intergenerational cycle of low education levels

Among disadvantaged families and communities, in particular, a family learning approach is more likely to break the intergenerational cycle of low education and literacy skills levels and nurture a culture of learning than fragmented and isolated measures. However, to make such an approach successful, it is necessary to provide sustained teacher training, develop a culture of collaboration among institutions, teachers and parents, and secure sustainable funding through longer-term policy support and by making it part of the Education 2030 architecture.



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