“HOW ARE YOU MEANT TO HELP?”

PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVES ON SUPPORTING THEIR CHILDREN’S LEARNING

Save the Children
CHANGE THE FUTURE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The team was supported in producing this report by Alice Faulkner and Katy Sparrow-Robins.

We would like to thank all the parents, along with the staff at children's centres and schools, who generously gave their time to talk to us about their experiences of supporting their children's early learning.

All names have been changed to protect identities; quotes and case studies are recorded in the parents' own words.

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FOREWORD

We know that being a parent[1] is one of the most rewarding experiences imaginable. It is also incredibly hard work. For many parents, the experience of raising a family is made even more challenging by circumstances outside of their control. High housing and childcare costs compete against low wages and limited opportunities for flexible employment, increasing parental stress and reducing opportunities for positive interactions with their children.

When looking at the impact of poverty, it is this combination of factors that makes it challenging for a child to reach their full potential and creates a gap in early years outcomes between children living in poverty and their peers.

We know that parents want the best for their children, but sometimes lack the confidence needed to fully engage in their early learning. Children have a right to develop to their full potential, and we have a collective responsibility in supporting them to achieve this.

Evidence shows that parental engagement in children's learning is associated with improved academic outcomes for children; there is also evidence to support the benefits of providing a positive learning environment on children's cognitive, social, and physical development[i]. However, the evidence is weaker around how to effectively encourage parents to be more involved in their children's learning. We asked parents what they thought.

This report shines a light on the experiences of lower income parents in supporting their children's learning before they start school and during their early education in London. It also includes their recommendations around who and what could help them do more to support their children's learning. Most importantly, it celebrates the impact that parents have on their children's early years and the role they play in helping them to achieve their potential.

Recommendations from parents:

1. Use a variety of communication
2. Offer a range of support
3. Make learning resources available
4. Boost signposting between local services
5. Facilitate peer-to-peer support
6. Understand the barriers
7. Invest in parent-school partnerships

On reading this report, we hope that you will recognise the role you can play in supporting parents and children across London and beyond; whether that is through raising awareness of the challenges they face, providing quality services to engage the whole family, or reducing the barriers created by poverty.

Alice Faulkner
Head of England
Save the Children UK

[1]For the purposes of this report, the term 'parent(s)' is used to refer to the primary caregiver(s) of a child.

1. INTRODUCTION

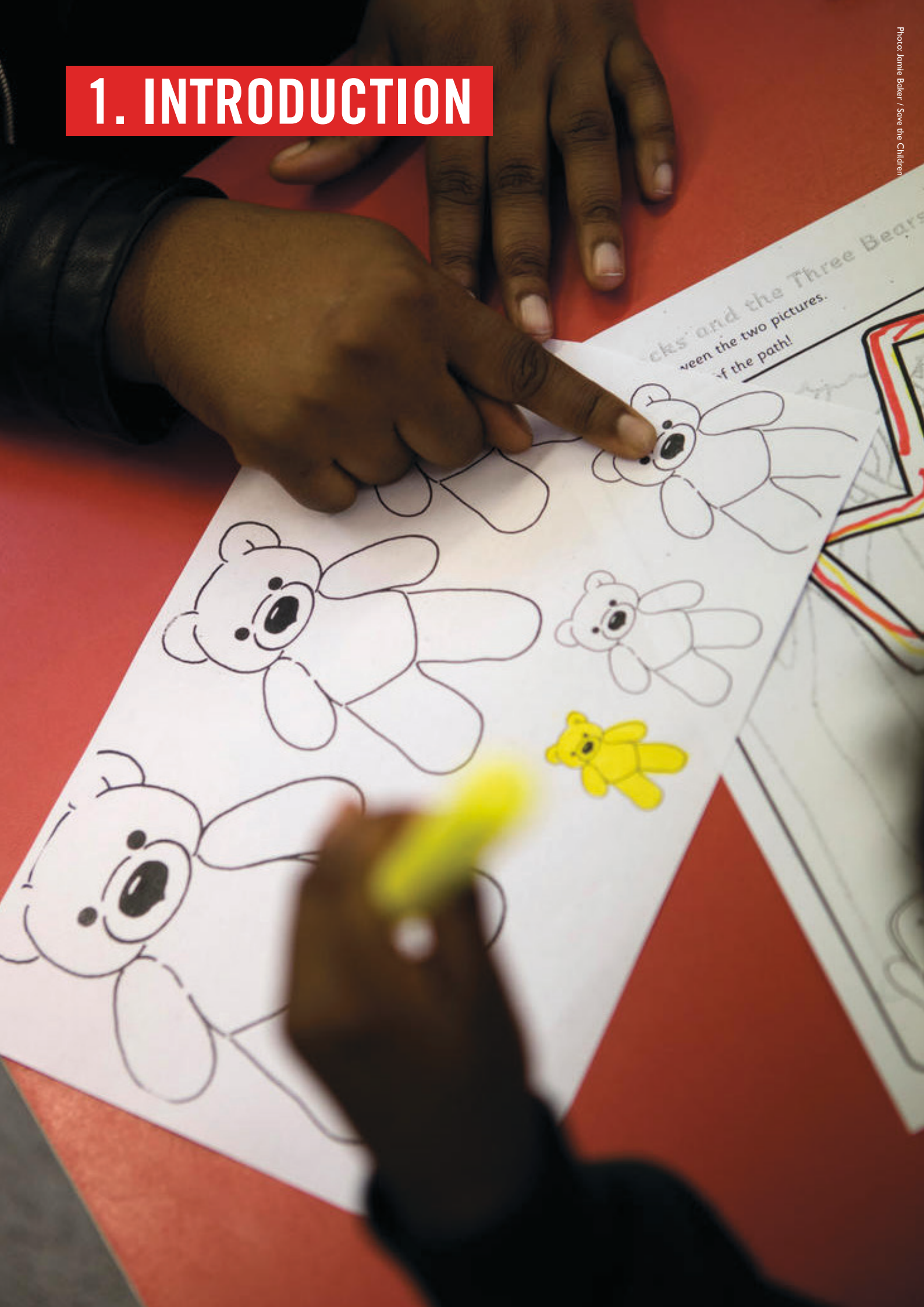


Photo: Jamie Baker / Save the Children

INTRODUCTION

Every child in the UK should get the support they need from the very start – when it matters most and when it can make the biggest difference. But too many young children are missing out on the opportunities they deserve. This means that those who do not have a lot continue to fall behind in this critical period.

Save the Children's work in the UK focuses on children's earliest years, as the roots of some of the deepest educational and social divides lie in these critical first few years. We focus on tackling the root causes of poverty and closing the early early learning gap between children living in poverty and their peers.

The early years are a critical period in a child's life; it is when they learn how to walk, talk and form the relationships that are central to their early development and later lives. All children can experience difficulties in early development, but poverty dramatically increases a child's risk. There is a 4.3-month gap at the start of school between disadvantaged[2] children and their classmates in England; this more than doubles by the end of primary school.[ii] Experiencing poverty for even a few years can have a negative impact on a child's development, especially for under-fives.[iii] Supporting and promoting positive parental engagement in children's learning is critical in mitigating the impact of poverty on children's life chances.

Parents have a huge role to play in their child's development. Poverty increases family stress and reduces the opportunities for parenting that supports children's early learning. It reduces access to material resources and activities which support learning, and to services and information.

Parents who have themselves grown up in poverty are less likely to have experienced a nurturing parenting style themselves, or to have had positive experiences of school. Together these factors can leave parents less ready and less confident about supporting children's early learning. Supporting and promoting positive parental engagement in children's learning is critical in mitigating the impact of poverty on children's life chances.

London has the greatest number of children living in poverty in the UK.[iv] Despite a wide range of cultural, social and open spaces, and huge levels of investment, there is significant and entrenched inequality between London's richest and poorest residents. This disparity is particularly striking when looking at ward-level poverty statistics, after housing costs. Nine out of 33 boroughs see average child poverty levels increase by over 20 percentage points; in Camden, ward-level poverty ranges from 21 per cent in Hampstead Town to 56 per cent in St Pancras and Somers Town; and in Tower Hamlets, Canary Warf – one of the UK's main financial centres – provides the backdrop for average child poverty levels of 57 per cent.[v] The huge trappings of wealth and opportunity in the capital remain out of reach for many children growing up in low income families.

Children have a right to develop to their full potential through living in environments that help them to thrive, accessing high quality education, and enjoying leisure, play and cultural activities.[vi] Save the Children knows that the best way to support children and their families in London is to work alongside others. We aim to leverage change by working in partnership with early years services and families, innovating with local partners, and influencing practice by sharing our learning and applying our expertise.

[2]The Education Endowment Foundation uses the term 'disadvantage' to refer to those children and young people who face particular challenges because of the economic circumstances they face when growing up. See endnote ii.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

We know that parental engagement is important to support children's learning and development in the early years. Evidence shows that parental engagement can help to close the early learning gap between children in low income families and their peers.[vii]

We also know what activities parents can engage in with their children to support their learning. However, there is less evidence around the best approaches that early years services – including health and education – can take to encourage greater parental engagement in learning to boost attainment. We set out to ask parents for their views on what would help.

Our research questions focussed on: parents' experiences of helping their children to learn before they started school; the parent-school partnership and how this enables parents to support children's learning outside of school hours; and recommendations around what would help to support and encourage engagement in children's learning. We conducted interviews with 11 parents and a focus group with five parents on school premises; school staff were present to provide additional support where needed. All participating families had at least one child aged between four and six years old.

Section two of this report presents an overview of parental engagement, including why it is important and what works. The third and fourth sections present parents' experiences and wider evidence within common themes and individual case studies. These insights feed into the recommendations in section five, which are presented in the parents' own words. We hope their ideas will prompt services working with families to identify and implement practical approaches to strengthen parental engagement in children's early learning.

Photo: Claudia Janke / Save The Children

2. PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT

Photo: Clare Hewitt / Save the Children

WHAT IS PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT?

Parental engagement: this means engagement in children's learning, in its broadest sense, not just formal education. It includes playing an active and meaningful role in their children's learning, and providing emotional support, encouragement and praise. Save the Children recognises parental engagement as a key part of a high-quality home learning environment.

Home learning environment: this term encompasses the parent-child interactions that take place in the home and outside, and the material resources that are available in the home to support these interactions. Save the Children takes a broad definition of the home learning environment that includes parental engagement along with the following elements:

- **behaviours:** talking, singing, imaginative play, creative play, storytelling, looking at books, and nurturing parent-child interactions;
- **learning resources:** e.g. toys, books, tech-based resources, books;
- **routines like bedtime and mealtimes;**
- **the conditions that make up a space;** where play and learning can happen, e.g. somewhere warm, comfortable and safe;
- **furniture, storage and essential household equipment;** such as cookers, fridges, and washing machines.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Parents are their child's first teachers. They are the most important influence on their child's early learning and development. First words, first steps, and first experiences of the world all require a helping hand and a responsive adult audience. The exploration and discovery that takes place in a child's earliest years are supported by nurturing and stimulating environments, and parental engagement is key.

Research has found that "parental involvement in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups".[viii]

The most rapid period of brain growth in a person's life occurs in their first two years: by age one, the size of a child's brain is already 72 per cent of adult volume on average; by age two it has grown to 83 per cent.[ix] During this time, children develop from entirely dependent new-borns to imaginative individuals who can communicate and interact with people around them.[x] This rate of development and learning is never repeated. The nature and quality of the support they receive, therefore, is absolutely critical for their early learning and development.

Positive parent-child interactions contribute to secure attachment, "the key mechanism by which young children manage stress and learn to regulate themselves".[xi] Secure attachment is the bond formed between parent and child, stemming from sensitive and responsive interactions in the earliest years. It is important for cognitive and social-emotional development and is associated

with early language development and better learning outcomes.[xii] There is an increased risk of insecure attachment within families living in poverty due to the heightened levels of stress experienced by parents and children; this in turn presents barriers to education including literacy, and behavioural problems.[xiii] Early language and cognitive delays are most strongly correlated with income inequality in young children, and this can have a devastating impact on their future learning.[xiv]

WHAT WORKS?

Children need safe and nurturing environments, and loving, responsive relationships to help them learn and develop. Experiences that are rich in "serve and return",[xv] or back-and-forth, interactions between parent and child help to build areas of the brain that support the development of communication and social skills.

Evidence shows the home learning environment is more important than parents' socio-economic status and income in terms of child outcomes:[xvi] parents' engagement in their children's early learning is associated with improved academic outcomes, including literacy and maths, and related learning outcomes such as attendance.[xvii] In short, what parents do is more important than who they are.[xviii]

Activities associated with higher intellectual and social/behavioural scores that parents can engage in with their preschool children at home include:

- reading to a child;
- teachings songs and nursery rhymes;
- painting and drawing;
- teaching/playing with letters and numbers;
- visiting the library;
- talking children on visits;
- creating opportunities for children to play with their friends at home.[xix]

While these activities are simple and straightforward in nature, it is important to acknowledge there are multiple barriers that can prevent parents from being able to easily undertake them. It is important for parents to understand the impact of these activities, and to recognise steps they can take to support early learning, identify what they're already doing, and build on these activities with their children.

Photo: Bethany Clarke / Save the Children

3. WHAT WE HEARD FROM PARENTS: EMERGING THEMES

Photo: Bethany Clarke / Save The Children

EMERGING THEMES

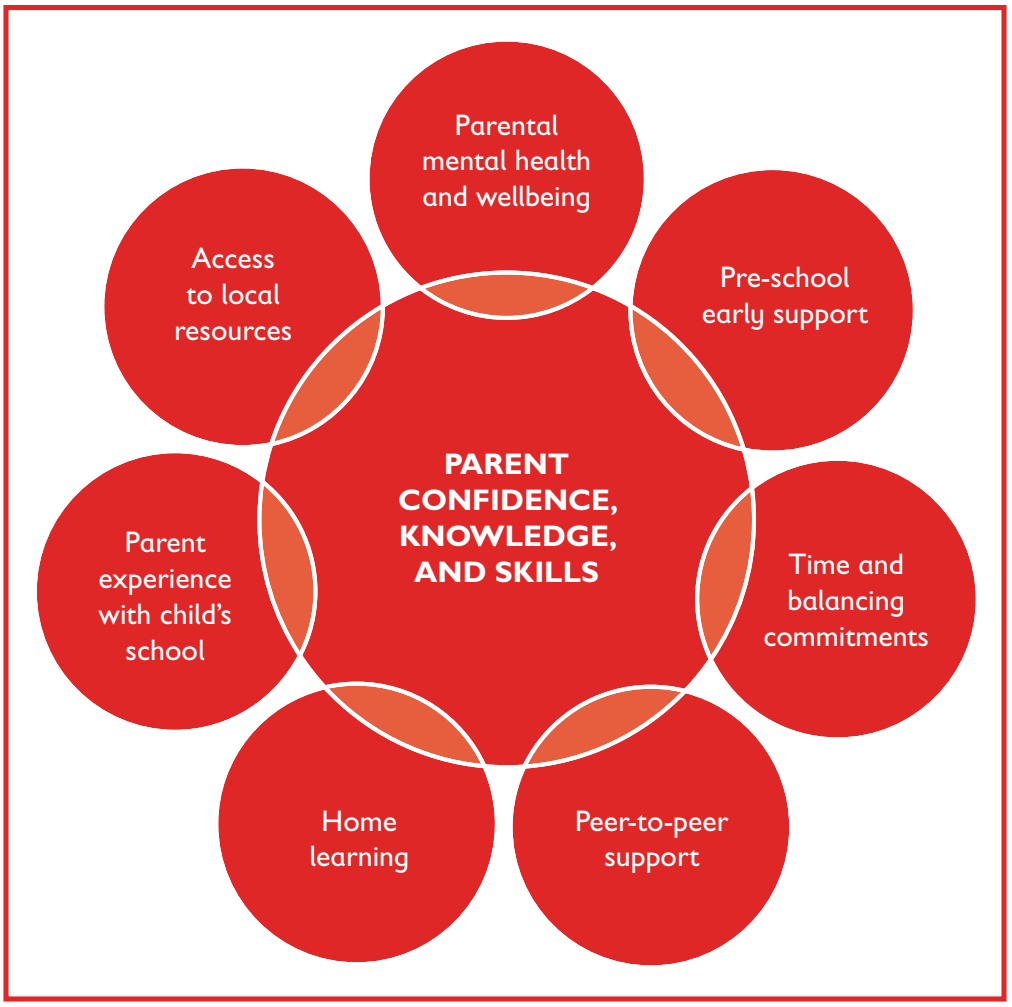
The themes outlined below emerged from the interviews and focus group with parents. While we've discussed these separately, it is important to note that they are interlinked and can be both a cause and effect of other themes.

We wanted to draw attention to the themes for three reasons:

1. They highlight the fact that, while each family dynamic is unique, there are shared experiences between parents.
2. They reinforce the fact that issues facing all families, regardless of socio-economic status, are numerous, complex and multifaceted.
3. By naming the themes, it provides a way to talk about specific areas and will help readers to identify them in the case studies (section four).

It is interesting to note that these themes strongly echo key elements proposed by researchers Melhuish and van der Merwe for nurseries and schools to improve children's learning at home. The practical recommendations from parents in section five also complement these elements, which are as follows:

- designated staff with responsibility for supporting parents;
- good knowledge of the local community and its strengths;
- building trustworthy relationships and parents' confidence;
- reaching out to families with flexible times and a range of ways to engage (for example, home visits and evening or weekend sessions);
- book, toy and equipment libraries to offer resources to parents;
- regularly sharing educational knowledge and observations about children's progress;
- listening to what parents say about their child's development and sharing decision making.[xx]



PARENT CONFIDENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND SKILLS

The level of confidence that parents possess in feeling equipped to support their children's learning impacts all of the emerging themes. Lack of confidence was felt to be a barrier to achieving this.

An understanding of how to help their children be ready to learn at school, knowing what to do, and the skills to undertake activities in the home, were also challenges faced by parents. This issue of parent confidence is recognised by Melhuish and van der Merwe, who highlight that "all parents are interested in their children doing well, but they often lack confidence and knowledge about how to help".[xxi]

The parents we spoke to relied on different sources to get ideas, support, and information about helping their children to learn. Access to information sources varied: some used technology – YouTube, Google, etc. – and TV programmes like CBeebies, while others had a go-to family member, such as a parent or relative with experience of raising or teaching children.

"I think asking for help is always a good thing to do".

Katie, mum of three, north-east London.

"[The school], they made me feel like I can do everything, telling [me] always, 'You can do this, Zara'".

Zara, mum of two, west London.

One parent was worried about how well her children would learn at school, as they spoke different languages at home. Her concerns, thankfully, have not materialised, as her daughter picked up English quickly and is thriving in the classroom. Research has found that while children who have English as an additional language may reach school with different language skills, "prior experiences with language and literacy in another language will also confer benefits".[xxii] Those working with families have a role to play in ensuring that parents – especially those with English as an additional language – are aware that learning in any language is valuable in supporting cognitive development and literacy.

Another parent described a lack of knowledge around parent initiatives in school, such as coffee mornings; others noted that knowing – and being known to – members of staff was an important way to staying informed of opportunities. Parents' sessions were generally felt to be beneficial and helped parents to use their initiative through knowing how to engage in their children's learning. Workshops around app- or web-based initiatives were welcomed, especially by parents who were less familiar with using technology.

"Going to children's centres really helped to build confidence because I was a quite young parent. It was daunting getting out there and making new friends, but I knew I wanted my children to be exposed to as much as they could to help them thrive in their development".

Caterina, mum of two, north-east London.

PARENTAL MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Several parents told us about having experienced feelings of isolation. The causes varied between parents and included: staying at home as a single parent; managing with their first child; coping during the winter; and not speaking English as their first or home language.

The knock-on effect of isolation on parent wellbeing can negatively impact their capacity to support their child(ren): one parent described how her depression had affected the way she was able to interact with her son, and resulted in a role-reversal in support; another parent talked about her partners' cycles of depression being triggered by not being able to find work and the subsequent impact on the family's finances.

A review carried out to inform the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Anti-Poverty Strategy explains that "poverty increases the risk of mental health problems, and can be both a causal factor and a consequence of mental ill health".[xxiii] The same review referenced evidence that in the UK, "both men and women in the poorest fifth of the population are twice as likely to be at risk of developing mental health problems as those on average incomes".[xxiv] Research shows that maternal mental health is particularly important during a child's prenatal and early years because of its influence on the cognitive, social, emotional, and behavioural development of the child, all of which are related to school readiness.[xxv]

"I think there's this illusion that once you have a baby it's all amazing and fantastic, and there are so many parents who don't have it easy"

Katie, mum of three, north-east London.

"When you're on benefits, it's the worst thing to be because it's somebody else playing with your life".

Amina, mum of two, east London.

"You could go to the foodbank and get £30 worth of shopping, which we're really grateful for, but now that £30's gone. The kids aren't getting as many treats as they were […]. Yes, they did get treats, but we could afford it a bit more. That £30 we were saving was something for them".".

David and Sarah, dad and mum of five, East London.

We heard how having two or more children under the age having of five can also impact on parents' wellbeing due to lack of sleep. Parents supporting children on their own, either in a single-parent household or due to a partners' working hours, also found it much more difficult to juggle the demands and logistics that come with having more than one child. Worryingly, one parent told us that there was a fear of asking for help amongst some parents, as this could be viewed as a failure and lead to social services getting involved. Conversely, others told us that asking for help was absolutely the right thing to do and they had personally benefitted from the support they received.

Parents also faced anxiety around the separation of leaving their child at school for the first time. This was described as an extremely emotional experience for parents as well as their children, and it was felt more could be done by schools to support them in preparing for this.

"The beginning, as a single parent, it was very, very difficult".

Yasmine, mum of three, north London.

"We're getting a lot more help now from the school than we used to. So much help".

David, dad of five, east London.

PRE-SCHOOL EARLY SUPPORT

Experiencing parenthood for the first time is naturally a steep learning curve for both parent and child. However, during the focus group, parents revealed the gap in information provided during the early years made the experience even more challenging.

We also heard how support from services ended once parents stopped seeing the midwife. The biggest barrier faced as a result of this was not knowing about the services provided by children's centres, or that they even existed. Once they had discovered their local children's centre, parents spoke warmly about how positive and supportive the relationships were between parents and staff. This highlighted for us the crucial link between early support and parent confidence and wellbeing. This link is even more pertinent when viewed in the context of children's centres closures, which could stand at more than 1,000 since 2009.[xxvi]

"I moved in London only three years ago and then when I arrive, I was kind of lost because my kids used to go to nursery in France, I didn't want to keep them at home. I started looking for way to take them and I found the children centre first, and when I got there, from there, I had a lot of addresses, where to take them and then we were never at home, Monday to Friday, I had an activity to them!".

Evi, mum of two, north London.

"Sometimes the council gets in touch with you with a letter saying that your children might be entitled to pre-school, just way I found my children, otherwise before then I had no idea. Even when I had to register them for nursery, I was actually late because I had no idea […] but once your child starts coming to nursery and school, you get much more information. Prior to that, you don't. Unless you go out researching yourself. There's not much pre-information that you get for your toddler or your baby to take them to children centres. Midwives do sometimes give you a chart that you can take your child to a baby centre but that's it really".

Sara, mum of three, north London.

Parents spoke about the difficulty of knowing what to do as first-time parents, and the difference it made when they had their second or third child. Some parents were able to turn to their families for support and role modelling; others found it challenging to know what information to follow if they were relying on the internet for parenting advice. Doctors, early years practitioners, and settings – such as children's centres and schools – were viewed as trusted sources of information, emphasising the role that these services can play in supporting parents.

"I started going to children's centres and that's where the staff would introduce me to their programmes and then they would get to know me, and I felt really comfortable. Any courses that were available and that appealed to me, I'd sign up to them. Going to children's centres really helped to build confidence because I was quite a young parent. It was quite daunting getting out there and making new friends, but I knew I wanted my children to be exposed to as much as they could [be] to help them thrive in their development".

Sara, mum of three, north London.

Health services are often the main source of interaction and support for families with young children, carrying out the earliest assessments of children's learning and development; the universal reach of health visitors means they are uniquely placed to identify and signpost families whose children are at risk of poor outcomes.[xxvii] Integrating early education messages into health services will enable anyone in contact with families from pre-birth to age three to convey the importance of the home learning environment.[xxviii]

"I think midwives should have more information for you on things like Children's Centres and the library and playgroups or even just handouts just to give you".

Yasmine, mum of three, north London.

TIME AND BALANCING COMMITMENTS

Time – or lack of it – emerged as a theme which centred around two different aspects of family life: finding time to support their children and trying to balance work commitments with school engagement.

Parents described how having very young children placed extra demands on their time. Other parents spoke about the challenge of finding time to support their children, and the added difficulty of supporting children of different ages; activities suitable for their oldest are not always appropriate for their youngest, and vice versa. One parent explained that she prepared the evening meal during the day while her children were at school, so that she can maximise the time she spends with them when they get home.

The question of how to support and engage working parents was raised by one staff member as well as parents. Getting time off work for school commitments is tough for parents working full-time; for the Family Support Worker we interviewed, this meant parents missed out on workshops held at school. She reported full-time work being a barrier to parents being actively involved in parent networks. Limited opportunities to get know other parents can also lead to working parents missing out on the support that stems from that social capital of peer support.

"I think when you talk about barriers and you see parents who want to access the Hub stuff, and the stuff we do, working is a massive barrier because if you work full-time, nothing will be around… You won't get any of those activity choices, you won't get to do the school trips, you won't get to Coffee and Craft, you won't get to do anything".

Family Support Worker, west London.

"I'm exhausted by the end of the day. If I don't get my studying in during the day and I've got to sit down of an evening and do it, it is very hard to keep my eyes open. I do it. You have to if you're a mum. You've just got to push yourself through".

Jessica, mum of two, west London.

"I know some mums that I barely see because every day they're working so their children get dropped off at breakfast club and then probably after school they're in clubs".

Caterina, mum of two, north-east London.

The challenge in balancing work and family commitments led to more barriers to achieving a good level of interaction between parent and school. Moreover, despite the need of many parents to be in work, the high costs of living in London means that having an adult in employment does not guarantee a good or secure income: 69 per cent of children living in poverty in London are in a working family, more than double the rates in 1996-7.[xxix]

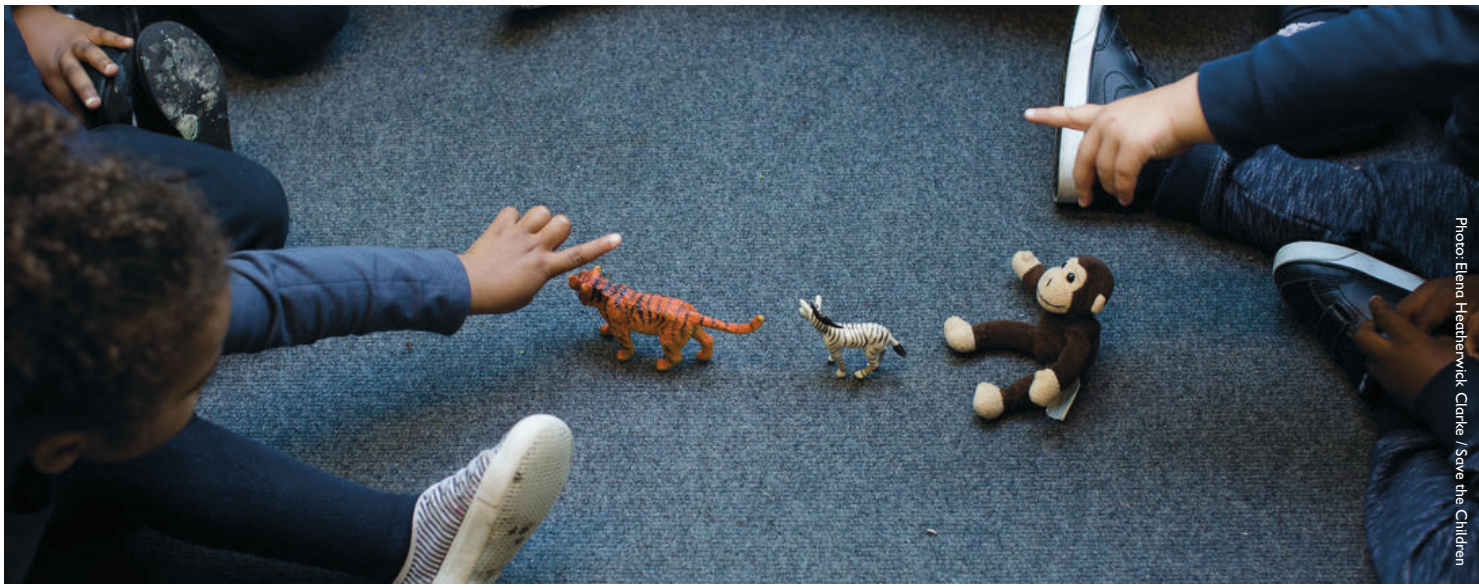


Photo: Elena Heatherwick Clarke / Save the Children

PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

The value of parent relationships cannot be underestimated. Parents spoke of the importance that they place on having opportunities for sharing ideas, providing and receiving support, and being able to relate to and empathise with each other.

The bonds that are forged through shared experience strengthen social capital and provide a valuable source of support for parents.

We heard how parent networks are facilitated through 'coffee and craft' sessions to encourage parent engagement with school, parenting workshops to support children's learning, and WhatsApp groups. Parents whose friends have children or those who had made friends through attending groups at school also shared and received information with their peers.

"Most parents go to each other and we all talk in the playground and someone will say, 'Oh, my son or my daughter's been like this today', and I'll be like, 'Oh yes, I've had the same thing', and then she'll say, 'Oh, I tried this', and then you all try it and I think, number one, yes, it's always parents. I think parents get information from other parents more than anyone else, always".

Steph, mum of two, west London.

"I started coming to the children's centre and then I met people and made friends, and then when I heard like their own experiences, sometimes I could relate. Sometimes I picked up their ideas and used them on [my children]".

Sara, mum of three, north-east London.

The benefits of peer support on maternal mental health, breastfeeding, and child nutrition, have been evidenced through a range of interventions.[xxx] Less well-known is the role of social media in sharing information and promoting peer support,[xxxi] however we did hear how parents used apps and YouTube as information sources and WhatsApp groups to share information and communicate with one another.

SPOTLIGHT ON THE ROLE OF 'COFFEE AND CRAFT' AT A WEST LONDON ALL-THROUGH FREE SCHOOL IN FACILITATING PARENT NETWORKS:

"['Coffee and craft'] started off as like a coffee morning and it wasn't really working, it was quite an intimidating group. If people joined there was this expectation that you'd chat. For some parents that's really, especially if English isn't your first language, quite intimidating. So, we came up together with this idea of crafting at the same time, so that if parents didn't want to talk, they could just do the craft and when you're busy there's less pressure isn't it to talk? And so Coffee and Craft was born, and then me and Zara have basically worked on it together and come up with [new ideas]: we started learning to crochet, we did origami and trying different things. And the thing is now we've got a more established group it's easy to bring people in, start conversations, we have got other tools […] Like, I deliver Family Links, so we've got 'Tell It' cards, we started playing board games by the end of the summer, we were playing board games, dominoes […] I presumed everyone knew how to play dominoes but none of the group had ever played dominoes before. There's no pressure to talk about your life, because some people are open, some people are more private".

Family Support Worker, west London all-through free school.

HOME LEARNING

We asked parents specifically about what they do with their children to support their learning outside of school. One of the elements that came through strongly was the importance of play in the home learning environment.

Parents described finding fun learning opportunities in everyday activities, such as the school run. They also explained how they incorporated ideas from children's centres and parenting courses, including creating opportunities for messy play and adapting activities to suit the age of the child.

"Nature is my thing. We have snakes indoors and they play with them, tarantula indoors, they play with that. We've got a dog, cat, which they play with as well, but outside, the squirrels. I love feeding squirrels and I'll show them how to do it, how to feed the ducks because [...] later on in life they'll want to do it with their kids".

David, dad of five, east London.

"I think kids should just be messy. If they're scared to make a mess, then they're scared to explore. I make sure there's paper everywhere".

Amina, mum of two, east London.

"Because they're still quite young, they definitely still really enjoy learning through play, and, of course, it's more fun so they don't realise, 'Oh, I'm actually learning so much here!'".

Caterina, mum of two, north-east London.

Open communication between parent and child was also valued by parents. This was seen to help with their children's learning through talking about their day and creating space and opportunity to voice concerns about school.

"Both of them, they love getting up in the morning, coming to school. [Our youngest] will come home, he'll relay what he's done at school and he seems quite knowledgeable. He'll talk about things and I think, 'Wow'. His vocabulary it's like, 'Whoa.' He sounds quite grown up, 'Oh they look beautiful, those flowers'".

Claire, mum of five, east London.

"I think it doesn't matter what school a child goes to...because even if they're in the best school in the world if they don't want to learn, they won't learn. I feel like you have to support that. Even if you don't think they want to, you still need to try and support as much as you can".

Katie, mum of three, north-east London.

One parent shared her experience of living in a one-bed flat with her partner and two young children. The lack of space means they cannot fit a desk in the lounge. However, rather than describing this as a restriction, the parent explained how the space is multipurpose, with the floor being used for colouring one minute and eating the next.

Parents emphasised the importance of understanding how subjects are taught at school so that methods can be replicated at home. Tools to support learning, either received through parenting courses or directly from the school, were useful in helping parents to know what and how their children learn in the classroom. One school provides information on their website for each year group, including recommended apps for use at home.

PARENT EXPERIENCE WITH CHILD'S SCHOOL

Overall, the parents we spoke to had positive relationships with their children's schools. This wasn't surprising, as most – but not all – were generally engaged with wider school activities and opportunities.

However, parents' experiences with their child(ren)'s school were slightly more varied. Access to and openness of teachers was appreciated by parents, including their responsiveness to questions and concerns. One parent described how much she enjoyed seeing inside her child's classroom and parents also valued positive child-teacher relationships as this reflected their child's happiness at school. A school in north London has a designated staff member, or 'face leader', for each year group. Having designated point of contact for parents to meet with at any time has relieved pressure on classroom teachers and reassured parents that there is someone to hear their concerns: while parents recognise that teachers are busy, having the option to speak to someone if and when they need to was seen as being important.

"It's really nice to sit in their classroom and have the children show me all the exciting things in their classroom and see the interaction between the teacher and the child, which, to me, was really, really important".

Caterina, mum of two, north-east London.

"In the mornings you can't walk into the building. So, if there's something I want to say to [my son's] teacher in the morning I can't because we're not allowed in. I can catch them at the end of the day but there's sometimes I want to say something first thing. So, I'd say that's a barrier, for sure, definitely".

Steph, mum of two, west London.

School workshops and coffee mornings were reported to be important and trusted sources of information. Many parents received information in a variety of ways from their child's school – letters, text, email, and in person through workshops or in the playground – which helps to keep them informed and engaged. However, the quantity and quality of information parents receive is varied, with some experiencing more regular, sustained communication and support than others.

Feedback from parents who had attended school workshops was overwhelmingly positive. The elements that they found particularly useful included: covering a variety of topics; changing perceptions of learning at home, for instance that reading can be fun; understanding what is being taught and how; seeing the teaching methods used by teachers for maths and phonics; receiving learning resources from the school; and exploring alternative ways to learning. One parent had previously worked as a teaching assistant and was able to apply her own experience to support her children's learning.

Home visits were found to be important for parents as well as the child. They helped to create a sense of familiarity for children, and reassurance for parents. One school carried out home visits for the first child, but not for subsequent children as they already knew the family. The parent felt that this put her second child at a disadvantage as he hadn't had chance to get to know his new teacher before starting school. While every child is different, she felt he would have benefitted from a visit.

"We had a welcome meeting when our kids started school. They gave us lots of information: what they are going to do in school; what you will be expecting; what were the school expectation from kids; what home resources we need to use; websites. In the welcome meeting they gave out lots of information for the whole year. They plan it to the topic. The first one of this year is the Great Plague, Fire of London, you can go and visit Museum of London. The best part is whatever they're learning, they do practical. [...] they get more ideas, looking in the computer screen how the London Eye looks, and then they go personally there".

Asma, mum of one, north London.

ACCESS TO LOCAL RESOURCES

Easily accessible outdoor spaces are important resources for families with young children. The parents we spoke to used their local parks and museums on a regular basis and saw these as key opportunities for learning.

Getting out-and-about was also a way for children to use up excess energy and a way to entertain them outside of the home.

"I've taken him out to the RAF Museum, he loves going to the museum. He just likes the aeroplane because he's a boy and he likes his cars. They've got a little children's park in there as well where, it's just like a small imitational aeroplanes, helicopters and stuff like that, yes, he enjoys that".

Nicole, mum of one, north London.

"In summer holiday, I used to take my daughter to Kingsbury Library every Tuesday, they had an art and craft session, she loved that. Painting, drawing, cutting and all that, make a robot, or a spaceship and all that. Like colouring, because her concentration is not good, she's with specialist autism disorder, but these whole things is really helping her to sit down and do something".

Asma, mum of one, north London.

One family felt that the cost of swimming and other leisure activities was a barrier to them being able to enjoy these as a family. Another parent raised the issue of accessing the library because of the time it took to travel there. We have heard from local partners in London how the infrastructure in outer boroughs can present a barrier to families easily accessing local resources. This is reflected in the Indices of Deprivation data for barriers to housing and services in the capital, which shows particularly high concentrations across outer boroughs in west, north, east, and south-east London.[xxxii]

Information around summer holiday activities was welcomed, especially when they are free. Parental knowledge of free, local services for children could be increased through relevant and consistent signposting by all services working with families.

"The good thing is all the information that are on the leaflet are free activities also, because when it comes to paying [for an] activity, I think we know how to choose!".

Evi, mum of two, north London.

"Especially in holidays times, a lot of parents didn't know where they go with their children exactly, but when we give them a leaflet, at least they know where, for example, if they have babies, and they're five or something like this, it's very helpful".

Maryam, mum of two, north London.

Photo: Magda Rakita / Save the Children

SPOTLIGHT ON THE ROLE OF A PARENT CHAMPION SCHEME AT A NORTH LONDON PRIMARY SCHOOL IN INFORMATION SHARING AND SIGNPOSTING PARENTS TO LOCAL OPPORTUNITIES:

"Parents are invited, a few parents who are interested, they are invited, and they're given training. Then every term, the parents will stand outside on different gates and will give out leaflets about information [for children] from about two years old. The Parent Champion [scheme] is a really good thing that we have started: parents themselves get involved, they get information, they work together, they have a meeting every Wednesday, they meet over here and [a teacher] is in charge. They themselves find out about what other things are opening up in the area, or also in the borough. Then they give information to the parents who are lost. Also we have a stall over here, at the end of the year and before the children actually start school, we give them out the leaflets to say that, you know, if you need any help, 'Come to us and we can help you'". EAL Assistant, north London primary school.

"When I had my first child I had, I was clueless, I didn't know what to do. [The Parent Champions] give out help, there's new systems in place, we have an overcoat, a high-vis coat with parent's champion… Anyone that needs support or help, they can actually just approach us and we'll give out all the information that they need. You know, you're being part of the school so you're doing your own bit as well for the school and trying to be useful. [And] your children felt so proud […] my son came home and said, 'Mummy, are you going to be working in school?'. I was like, 'Yeah, just volunteering', and he goes, 'Oh wow, my mum's going to help!'. I didn't think that it would actually make any difference, but it actually does. You can see how proud they are that mum's actually doing something, you know? So, it's kind of a big deal for them, in that sense".

Sara, mum of three, north London.

Photo: Magda Rakita / Save the Children

4. IN THEIR OWN WORDS: PARENTS' STORIES

The following case studies present a snapshot of parents' experiences of supporting their children's early learning in London. Interviews took place in London primary schools during September 2019. The names of all parents and school staff who participated have been changed to protect identities. We have presented the case studies in their own words.

Photo: Claudia Janke / Save The Children

KATIE LIVES IN NORTH-EAST LONDON WITH HER TWO SONS, AGED SEVEN AND THREE, AND HER DAUGHTER AGED ONE. SHE AND HER SEVEN-YEAR-OLD HAVE PARTICIPATED IN FAMILIES CONNECT.

"I wish I would have come to the children's centre with my oldest and I think if I'd have done that I would have been, or he would have been, more ready for school. So, I think making use of resources in the area in the community would definitely have helped me for the first-time round. I think not being afraid to ask for help as well, because again, my first was fine but [my second], he was a completely different child, you know?

"With [my three-year-old's] school, because the Children's Centre is attached to the school, he's already familiar with the playground and with some of the staff members. Even if he hasn't seen his actual teacher before, they have said to me, 'We've seen [him] around, we've seen him outside, we've seen him in the centre'. I think he's definitely ready for school and I'm hoping that when he does start, there won't be much upset about leaving him the first day. I had the home visit today and that went really well, so I'm feeling very positive about it.

"When my oldest started school I was working weekdays then and I couldn't get the time off to take him on his first day, so his dad took him, and his dad sounded very upset when I called at lunchtime. He was like, 'I dropped him off,' and he burst into tears and he was like - he couldn't even speak to me over the phone because he was so upset that our son was upset.

"I try and make sure that I have resources at home. So at the moment, [my three-year-old] loves Numberblocks and he loves counting, so we have the DVDs of them and if we know that if he's really in a bad mood, he can sit and watch it, which I don't mind, because although it's him staring at a screen he's still picking it up and taking it all in. If we are out, [he's] is always looking at letters and numbers and he's always saying, 'What letter is that? What number is that?'".

"I think it's about making sure you find the time to help".

"I always try and help [my oldest] with his homework and I've always been quite lucky because he's always loved school and he's loved learning. So, if I'm out and I see a workbook that he'll like I'll pick it up. I think I'm quite lucky because I understand the work that they're bringing home. I think as they get older and their work gets harder, it will either be a case of me having to read up on it myself before I'm able to help them or finding someone else who can help them.

"We try and do things when we're out as well, like during the holidays we try and go to at least one museum or somewhere where they can learn about something. My oldest son had a project to do on the London Eye and he didn't want to go on it, but we still went, and we took pictures around it and let him see it.

"I would say one of the biggest challenges is because I work the weekends, that's when there's a lot of stuff for the kids to do. So, birthday parties, meet up with friends and things, so that is quite a challenge, because obviously I can't always get the time off and their dad finds it quite hard to take all three of them out".

"I think there's this illusion that once you have a baby it's all amazing and fantastic, and there are so many parents who don't have it easy".

"I'd say since having more children I've had to change the way things are done, because if you try and sit down with one, then you've got the others that are trying to get involved or getting in the way. I remember when I just had my eldest, when he was little, I used to sit and read to him every night, one story every night, a different story every night and again, I went through a phase with both boys and I would read them a story. Obviously now having [another baby], it just makes it difficult because there's three of them.

"I think it's about making sure you find the time to help and I think - yes, going back to Families Connect*, the way I praise them for the things that they do, that has changed a lot as well. So being a bit more specific and trying not to put a sting on the tail as well!".

YASMINE LIVES IN NORTH LONDON WITH HER THREE DAUGHTERS, THE OLDEST AGED FIVE AND FOUR-YEAR-OLD TWINS.

"When I came to this country in 1999, […] I work with kids as a childminder in school. I was doing volunteer there, one of the ladies, after six months she had to leave, they took me permanent. I was doing it after that for two years and I was really happy to have got this. So that gave me opportunity to understand more about nursery, how it does look like. After this, I went to schools and I did teaching assistant […] I have some knowledge about it. That gave me a lot of strength, to know more what's going on, not to be afraid when my kids going to school […] because now I know what's going inside, because I've seen it, so I am fine.

"I was very worried, how my kids will learn English, because I speak Kurdish first language, and I speak Arabic. My kids they speak these language[s], they never know a word about English. I was always, my concern, how they going to learn [at] the English school? When [my oldest] came to school, I was so amazed, in one month she was correcting my English and I was so happy, really. I say I don't know how I pronounce umbrella for example, she says, 'It's not "umbrella", this like, umbrella', and I am almost, 'Oh my God, it's a time that she makes fun of my accent!' So, she is very good now and I am happy about that".

"I forgot myself".

"I've got a degree in physics, BSC. So, I taught a lot back home, physics and maths. Because I studied a lot in my life, and I didn't want to open a book, I said 'No, I don't want to read again'. When my child was telling, 'Mum we have homework, you have to read the story for me', so I said, 'Okay, I will read it for you'. So, when I started really to read, I liked it. I used to change my voice as it is, from the picture sometimes I say, 'So what do you think is going to happen?' It gave [my oldest] and my twins a chance to hint it out in the story, and I saw them, they are excited, then I started to […] buy books and read it at home for them.

"I went to Poundland, and I found lovely stories, one pound. Then when I bring it home, they love it. I realise they [are] telling me what's going on, without even me reading. For example, The Ugly Duck, she was looking, 'Oh this is what happened'. I said, 'How did you know?' 'From the picture'. So, then I started to read story, I see that's help a lot. This is what I learn a lot from school to be honest, a lot reading, reading stories.

"The biggest challenge was the twins. There was a little gap between, nine month[s] between [my] first child and between them. I was really alone and with my mum, my mum she is a bit old, and my sister she was pregnant at that moment. So I was doing all this, and I stayed at home, I remember for nearly two years, I didn't know how to go even out, I took them to park, I remember, yes, see my family, but that's it, about me, I forgot myself".

Photo: Magda Rakita/Save the Children

Photo: Magda Rakita/Save the Children

GEMMA LIVES IN EAST LONDON WITH HER TWO CHILDREN; A DAUGHTER WHO'S NEARLY EIGHT AND A SIX-YEAR-OLD SON. SHE'S EXPECTING HER THIRD CHILD SOON.

"I did get quite a lot of support with him [in Reception]. He's not lazy. He just would rather do other things than sit there and learn. His teacher last year was really good, and she was the one that like made up all these different games with sight-word cards […] so it was a bit more fun. He'll like spot one out as well when we're reading a story. He knows that, 'that's the sight word, mum. That's one of my sight words'. Like now he's gone up a stage in the reading books, so he has improved, so now we're reading the story but he's making his story out of it after. I'll read it to him, then he reads it to me, and he'll change it to him being the character".

"If you give him a book about Spiderman or something, he'll sit there and read that all day".

"[At home] we're always drawing. We're always doing drawings. There're paper and pens everywhere over my house. My daughter's always writing and reading. I'm dyslexic myself, so [she] does teach me quite a lot, to be honest, because she's such a good reader and writer. She wants to be a teacher when she's older. She tries to play schools, but her brother will listen maybe for about 10 minutes until he's told to do something that he doesn't want to do and then he gives up. If you give him a book about Spiderman or something, he'll sit there and read that all day.

"A normal [weekend] day would be a trip to the park, maybe a walk along the canal, and it might end with maybe a picnic in the park, or we'll stop off and get some food. My daughter, in the evening time she'll read a book to wind down, where my son will maybe sit there and play with a bit of Lego. He's still quite a bit of an active one, where my daughter knows bedtime is wind-down time, but, yes, that's a normal day for us really".

Photo: Magda Rakita/Save the Children

SALLY LIVES IN NORTH-EAST LONDON WITH HER PARTNER AND THEIR TWO BOYS, AGED SEVEN AND FOUR-AND-A-HALF.

"With my eldest, it was quite tough. Everything was new to me from childbirth to - literally everything. I had no idea. Seriously, I'm not joking, [...] every little step I had to google it, [...] and read books. Every child is different and everything I was reading like page to page was different, so I really don't know what to follow. Then again, once I started coming to the children's centre and then I met people and made friends, and then when I heard like their own experience, sometimes I could relate. Sometimes I picked up their ideas and used them on mine, and that's how I got on.

"I went to all the coffee mornings, so that helped both of us because we were learning about phonics and things like how we can help him at home. On different weeks they'll have different topics, so that helped with the school setting. I think with the assistant head, she was running, so, through her, we'll know like exactly what's going on in the nursery setting so we can help our child, so that helped a lot, yes.

"The teachers will say like, 'If you have any questions, you can ask', so we'd ask, and, as I was saying to you before, my son was quite shy so I asked them to like keep an eye out for him as he wouldn't talk much. They observed him. They said he's fine. It was all good".

"Last year I put an area in the house – I painted a chalkboard. They use that for scribbling, writing, whatever they want to do".

"There's a website. They have this thing called Maths on Toast. Basically, through play, you're learning about maths but not realising you're doing maths, so you're building bridges with straw pipes, things like that, and seeing how heavy or light that is. Making tubes, so different types of shapes.

"They have to be out because like the physical exercise, [...] but sometimes you are tired, so I'll ask dad to help, so he helps out. We both try to give that, and actually that really helps with their sleeping. So, if dad's with me, it's really good. We have one-one, so one with dad and one with me, it's easy, but if I have two it's quite hard.

"If you want to do something different it's quite hard if you're a single parent, or dad's at work. It's really tough. Winter also can be tricky. I think, how do you take them out because you know it's pouring down, it's freezing, and once the coldness starts, like one is ill, the next one is ill.

"We have puzzles as well, little puzzles, they like doing. Lego, for example. We do counting, sorting by colours, little plastic balls, so again we do that by colour. Going to the children's centre also helps, so we do the tidy-up song. The song would help, like, 'It's time to tidy up', and they're like, 'Oh, it's the song from the centre', and that's when they would tidy up, so they would help to tidy up".

Photo: Elena Heatherwick / Save the Children

Photo: Claudia Janke / Save The Children

CATERINA LIVES IN NORTH-EAST LONDON WITH HER PARTNER AND THEIR TWO CHILDREN, A DAUGHTER AGED SEVEN AND A SON AGED FIVE. SHE IS EXPECTING ANOTHER BABY BOY IN A FEW WEEKS' TIME.

"I know that they're both happy to go to school and learn. They come home from school telling me about what they've learned throughout the day and it's just really, really nice. I pick them up and naturally [ask] the question, 'How was your day?' and then they tell me about their day, and then they'll ask me how was mine, which is really sweet.

"The children's centre, they're amazing. They always go to the playground seeking the parents and inform us of what's happening there. They send text messages as well to remind parents about clubs, from the children's centre. We get text messages if there's a club starting and if there're spaces available. [Another parent] has a group on WhatsApp, and she has lots of parents in it and she updates on any programmes".

"I wanted my children to be exposed to as much as they could [be] to help them thrive in their development".

"This year, my daughter, she has a completely new teacher, so I made sure on the first day to introduce myself. My son, he has a teacher who was my daughter's teacher a few years ago, so we already knew each other really well, and I feel like that really helped because she's seen my son from when he was a lot smaller and she knows him personally as well. The good thing about the schools now, they do the home visits, so before they actually start reception, the teachers come to the home and visit and introduce themselves and we get to know them a bit and be familiar. They will generally ask their interests, their fears, their hobbies, check their ability, if they're able to write their name, just small things like that. I think that really helped because the children were able to come into school knowing, 'I've seen you before'.

"The school, sometimes they carry out workshops. They would show us their style of teaching children, things like phonics and number bonds. I think it was the headteacher who ran it, she explained to the parents how it's done, so we were able to support the children at home with that. They had a lot of leaflets and handouts. They had information on the websites we could use as well and make it more interactive and more fun.

"Parents' evening, they have it I think three times a year, which is really good because that's something I've always attended with my children. It's really nice to sit in their classroom and have the children show me all the exciting things in their classroom and see the interaction between the teacher and the child, which, to me, was really, really important.

"They're so friendly here. I feel like they've made it known to all parents, 'Welcome. Come in. If you want information, we are here, and we will support you if you need help to apply for something'. It's all here, so I haven't personally found any barriers. I found that a lot of the times they'd do it the same time every week, and these times, if the parents are working, even if they wanted, they just missed it. I think definitely increasing the amount of workshops again would be great and also taking into consideration different days. Varying it so that those parents that can't make a certain day, they have a chance. And maybe more coffee mornings to actually see what the parents want support on and their suggestions".

"I'm a big believer that it takes a village to raise a child".

"They still have a lot of energy after school, so they play about in the playground for about an hour or so, then we'd go home. Now, my daughter, she's picked a novel so we've agreed to reading a chapter every day, and so I'll do half the reading and she will as well. It's a book that's based on pets, which she's really into, and it's about two girls who get a puppy and a kitten and, of course, she's like, 'Mummy, mummy, I really wish we could have a puppy or a kitten…'.

"She's really enjoying [reading], which is something when she was younger […] we had difficulty when it came to reading. It was a chore and it just wasn't pleasant, and then it was quite sad because she was capable, but I think she'd sometimes feel intimidated by struggling with some words. Then we'd go back and then we'd break the word down, and because I've done a teaching-assistant course as well, through this children's centre, I learned like

the different methods teaching and really adapting it to each child.

"They love to make noise and at home it's not really ideal, but when they're in like the children's centre with a music session, they can make all the noise that they like. They learn these lovely songs and it's really repetitive. It's really nice when you're out and about or at home and you just randomly hear that song and you're going, 'Oh, you know that song so well because you enjoyed it so much'.

"Because they're still quite young, they definitely still really enjoy learning through play, and, of course, it's more fun so they don't really realise, 'Oh, I'm actually learning so much here!'. Things like making playdough, but now they're at the age they understand measurements. Now that they're older, I give them the responsibility of actually pouring it out and measuring it and chucking it on a scale, things like that, whereas a couple of years ago I would have just done it all and got them to mix it. It's just adjusting these activities to suit them".

STEPH LIVES IN WEST LONDON WITH HER TWO SONS AGED SIX AND FOUR.

So, with my youngest, he's four, and […] I'm really worried about his speech. I asked the school for help lots of times last year […] and it got towards the end of the year and then they were like, 'Yes, he might struggle in Reception'. So that really bothered me, and I thought, it's too late for you to tell me now, we're about to have six weeks holidays and I've been asking you for ages. So, I went and bought flashcards, number flashcards, letter flashcards, shapes. I had to go home and every day I do that with him. […] he has a whiteboard which I try to practice writing his name and then, when I see he's bored, and he's gone I'm, like, 'Okay, we're done now, until tomorrow'.

"I remember, with my eldest, they did a home visit, I didn't get that with my second. […] I wanted to him to have a home visit because I was worried about the speech thing and I wanted to discuss it before he started nursery. I rung into Reception, they were, like, 'Oh no, he doesn't get one because your eldest is already at [school] and so because the school know your family, we only do home visits with new families'. So I was, like, 'Oh, but [my youngest] doesn't know you guys'. I mean, he comes to the school, but he doesn't come into the classroom so that, definitely, would have been a benefit to me".

"I want to teach my son the way he's taught at school, otherwise it's going to be confusing".

"I went to a workshop yesterday; it was called a Google workshop. They're going to be uploading the ways that the teachers are teaching our children; [it's] different to how I was taught at school. […] we'll all get login details and we'll watch clips or videos of my eldest's teacher, and she'll show us, 'Right, this is how we teach them this'. So, I think that's really good, I think that's amazing. Especially with maths, I feel like maths can be taught a thousand different ways and I want to teach my son the way he's taught at school, otherwise it's going to be confusing.

"I'm conscious of spending time with them [at home]. That's why I like to cook dinner before they come home, because I think if I wait until after school or if I have been out […] then I feel like I've almost ignored them, because I'm in the kitchen making food.

"I always read before bed, but now I'm trying to get my eldest to read. Now he really wants to read before bed, so […] we'll go to bed a bit earlier so that he can read and then they'll still expect me to read which I like doing then that's it, hug, kiss, goodnight".

JESSICA LIVES IN WEST LONDON WITH HER SIX-YEAR-OLD SON AND TWO-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER.

"It's really daunting at first, because you don't know no one. You're standing in the playground and you don't know anybody, your child doesn't know anybody and you're so nervous anyway about your child starting school for the first day.

"They do coffee mornings. Coffee mornings for parents that kids have just started at nursery. They do it in the Hub, so you can go in, you can chat with the other parents and have a coffee or a tea and a couple of biscuits. They also do walks as well. Exercise walks. So, you walk around the park and then afterwards you go to a coffee shop and have a cup of coffee with some of the other mums. That's a really good idea actually, because I know how nervous you can be with your child first starting".

"You're standing in the playground and you don't know anybody, your child doesn't know anybody, and you're so nervous about your child starting school for the first day".

"I would say my main challenges are my son is very emotional. He finds it hard to handle his emotions. With having a little sister, at first, he was brilliant with [her], he absolutely adored her, but now she's all in his toys he tends to argue with her, and he doesn't want to share his toys.

"If you're a parent that literally doesn't have no time at all, because you're so busy, YouTube does really help a lot. Every time after school, before I started my studying [...] we had a rule, he had to do his homework, then he had to eat all his dinner, then he was allowed to go on his PlayStation to play games for 40 minutes [...] or he was allowed to watch YouTube videos, obviously with the parental lock on. He was watching a video; it was teaching young children about colours and numbers and stuff. I thought that is a really good learning tool. [My daughter] can do her whole alphabet because of YouTube. It is amazing.

"They have jars at home, which is their pocket money jars. They save up their money and once they've got a certain amount in there, they're allowed to go and spend it on whatever they want. We went to Tesco and my son wanted some walkie-talkies and my daughter come across this activity box. When I looked, it had over 30 activities in there. It's things like colours, building blocks, putting cubes on a bit of string. Just sort of teaching children all these different things. That's what she wanted, so she got it. Ever since then, she's absolutely loved it".

"I would just say, take everything in your stride and don't panic too much about everything".

"We do a lot of messy play, as well, at home. The rug comes up, the aprons go on, I have a special sheet that I put on my floor. We either have sand, so we make patterns in sand. We have paint. That's my son's favourite, is the paint. We have pens, we have crayons, we have glitter, we have Play-Doh, we have tissue paper, we have everything.

"When we're out and about, that's how we learn the colours, is when we're out and about I teach them look, there's the colour red or look, there's the colour green. Just things like that really. When we're out shopping, as well, and we put things in the basket, we'll be counting how many things are in the basket. That was just before he started nursery.

"Another challenge is trying to fit everything in. I'm doing a law degree. I'm on my second level. I'm exhausted by the end of the day. If I don't get my studying in during the day and I've got to sit down of an evening and do it, it is very hard to keep my eyes open. I do it. You have to if you're a mum. You've just got to push yourself through".

ZARA LIVES IN WEST LONDON WITH HER TWO SONS, AGED 16 AND FIVE.

"I wake up early! Because we pray five times a day, our first prayer starting early in the morning before sunrise so I wake at five o'clock in the morning […] then I turn the lights on so [my youngest] can wake up himself.

"I speak three languages at home. Punjabi, Urdu and English. They understand everything, but a reply's [in] English. [T]hey learn so much stuff, they learn from home. Before they're going to school, they learn everything, like today, I was saying, 'Who taught you how to speak?' He said, 'God!'.

"I look forward to coming to school actually. I really look forward to it. The teachers are very friendly over here, they're all friendly, I've never seen that in another school. I find in this school everybody knows, teachers know everybody all the parents and everything".

"Why, what's your problem with the lunch?". "They're asking me to eat jelly!".

"I did no[t] support [my oldest] that much, because I was in so much depression, but he did support me then. He's supporting me all the time, he goes, 'Mum, don't worry about that, don't worry about that, we can do this, we can do this'. He was there for me all the time and that made me think, oh no, I have to change. It took me so long but I'm happy.

"All parents want to see their children happy. [My youngest] was so happy in nursery. Today he was crying. I said, 'Why are you crying?' [He said] 'Because I don't like the lunch'. I said, 'Why, what's your problem with the lunch?'. 'They're asking me to eat jelly!'".

AMINA LIVES IN EAST LONDON WITH HER PARTNER AND TWO CHILDREN AGED FIVE AND THREE.

"I never knew there was coffee mornings. Even though I'd get the text on my phone, I thought it was just a text from school. Now that I get the coffee mornings and I come I make sure I drum it into the other parents who look lost. It's really easy to tell the parents who look lost. When they're running and they're dropping things and they're rushing, then that's how you know she reminds me of myself. I'm going to go tell her, 'Stop'.

"When my siblings were attending this school, which was probably a few years [ago], it wasn't a good place, but since then new staff has moved in, the way they interact with the community I wouldn't know how to improve it. It's already improved so much. They changed the whole atmosphere and the culture."

"Sometimes parenting isn't just the parents themselves, it's the whole community".

"[At home] the first thing I do is colouring. I think kids should just be messy. If they're scared to make a mess, then they're scared to explore. I make sure there's paper everywhere.

"The main thing is, I have two kids in a one-bedroom flat. It's just the space. Even if I wanted to do get them a desk, it's not possible. Right now, if I get the desk, it will crowd the space. If I leave it empty, that floor can be utilised. One minute that floor will be all the colouring; then I tidy it up and move it to the side. Then I would lay a mat and they would eat there.

"The hardest time of a parent, it doesn't mean they're failing, is when their kids are at that age of say new-born to five and when they have more than one because that's sleepless nights. When you don't have sleep, your life is - you're not eating properly, you're not doing anything properly, that's when you're in another place. Now that my daughter has grown, I feel as though I have myself back".

SARA LIVES IN NORTH LONDON WITH HER THREE CHILDREN AGED SEVEN, SIX AND TWO.

"It's actually easier when you've got one child, but when you've got [three], like me, I can't take them to mixed groups so my kids kind of are left out, because I can't take the baby to the elder ones, and the elder ones can't go to the baby groups.
"I have that barrier at home where [my daughter's] not doing really well, [her] brother kind of gets annoyed about it because I give her so much more attention […] there's that tension at home. I've had that since reception. it's a challenge every day at home, but I do do a lot of activities with them. We just come up with how to do certain things, we write them down in order, draw pictures about it, so that maybe she can understand better. They like swimming; I took them yesterday and we've done a reward chart system now, we've got rules at home and we're getting there, slowly, but we're getting there. [My daughter's] the biggest concern for me. The other two are okay.

"I can't say she's progressing as I would like her to be. I think she's making small progressions. If I sit down and do something with her, like an activity, she'll probably sit there and say, 'Ma, I don't understand what you're saying, at all, completely,' and then she completely shuts down. Or she will try and then halfway she'll just give up, saying, 'I just can't do it'. I speak to her teacher every day after school, just to see how she's getting on, but she knows that she's struggling quite a lot with numbers, letters, she can't read a book independently, I have to read a lot of the time for her".

"I feel for her, but there's nothing more I can do either".

"I would like to highlight that because a lot of children that have certain disabilities or learning problems, I realised well before [my daughter] even went to nursery, but no matter how much you say, there's only certain assessments that can be taken place after a certain age. I thought she was dyslexic […] because she still gets muddled up with her letters. She's falling behind as it is, she's struggling and then she doesn't really express it, she just says, 'Mummy I can't do it'. That's it. She'll withdraw. But she's still keen on coming to school, which is really impressive. She has that eagerness, but she just can't do it, poor thing. You know, I feel for her, but there's nothing more I can do either. I'm just sitting there thinking I'm helpless, […] it's all a waiting game really. [I] try different ways, speak to teachers, Families Connect helped a lot because I got a lot of information of how to approach that in the situation I was dealing with at home. It's always about input as well, if you find a good support network that helps a lot. Being friends with the school is always a good thing so that you can get to understand a lot more and get help when you definitely need it".

Photo: Claudia Janke / Save The Children

ALANA LIVES IN WEST LONDON WITH HER HUSBAND AND TWO CHILDREN, A DAUGHTER AGED SIX AND A SON AGED FOUR.

"[School] started the Walk and Talk […] It's not structured, so we could chat about everything, so that's how I got to know about the Peep* , 'Oh, you'll be good teaching people like me'. 'Are you sure? Why do you see it that way?'. You get engaging […] I get information from the teachers because I go like, 'Anything that could help with my child just let me know, so I'm just open, just tell me. If it's not okay with me, I'll tell you it's not okay'. I try to be involved because if I'm not involved in the school, I don't know what my daughter is doing, and I wouldn't know how to teach her because my learning style, the learning style I had as a child is quite different from hers.

"I work 6:00 until 11:00 Wednesday to Saturday, so I have my Monday/Tuesday free, so I leave it free because on Tuesday we have the Walk and Talk, or anything that comes up in school ideally, so on Monday I take both of them to school in the morning […] sometimes [my husband] works night shifts, some days he works in the morning, so it balances out very well for us.

"So, with my daughter I really didn't know what to do because […] that's the first child, so I didn't know what to do. Now I engage with other parents and I hear what they're doing, okay I could try doing that for my own child, but how do you know what to do with your own child when you have only just the television? […] I didn't really do much with them, but with my son I was taking him to playground, and I've seen how it has helped me, so comparing my daughter and my son, I can see my son has that confidence".

"You judge yourself more when you're a parent".

"My daughter, she's kind of teary […] She doesn't want to make an attempt because in her head she will get it wrong, and okay, let me use an example for mathematics, yes, she doesn't want to try it. I literally just turn on the computer and she sees mathematics she's already crying […]so it kind of tenses me up and I don't know what to do because, at the end of the day, from Families Connect or Family Link* […] from there I've learnt how to stay back and just understand what the child is doing, what the child is going through […]so I'm just 'Okay, what will I do?' I keep avoiding the mathematics because I don't want to her upset.

"Engaging your child, we learnt in Families Connect, yes, I'm like 'We need to do this. It's better we get it wrong, look at mummy'. Okay, there was a time when I was [filling] in an online course and I kind of lost my work on the computer […], and my God, I got so upset I literally cried and they were like, 'It's okay mum', and was rubbing my back, and he made me reflect on like my daughter is me, see how upset I got, so I had to calm down.

In my head, I just want to stay in my corner, but as a parent it's not going to help. With my daughter, knowing she shies away from a lot of things; if I don't help myself, I can't help her […], so when I had her I took her to the playgroup, and she wasn't okay with it. I'm like, 'Please, just stay at home'".

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PARENTS

1. USE A VARIETY OF COMMUNICATION – INCLUDING FACE-TO-FACE

"I think the verbal announcements are missing. I think that would make a difference; there's times where I've just not seen the emails because I've got other emails". Steph, mum of two, west London.

"Leaflets get given out a lot, do you think it's just another leaflet. It's like now, to even make someone aware, you've got to stand out". Amina, mum of two, east London.

"The leaflets I give out, it would be nice to have them in different languages as well, because not everyone speaks English over here. If they're printed out by the borough in different languages, it'll really help the parents [for whom] English is a second language and, in our school, it's 85 per cent. If the leaflets are in the language spoken by the people who are living around, it will be more beneficial". EAL Assistant, north London primary school.

2. OFFER A RANGE OF SUPPORT

"Parenting courses […] really help, because that is all about empowering the parents to help their children with their learning. I think doing it in nursery you're really catching them when they're just starting to pick things up and for some children that is their first time to interact with letters and numbers". Katie, mum of three, north-east London.

"I think maybe there needs to be a little bit more support with behaviour, yes". Steph, mum of two, west London.

"Since I came [to the UK], I wanted to go to college to improve my English, but the problem is, I had my son. It was quite difficult. I would have loved the school to have English lessons for parents". Evi, mum of two, north London.

3. MAKE LEARNING RESOURCES AVAILABLE

"I think what the school should do is a little bank where parents give in thing that they don't use and that they don't need, so these parents that can't afford it can go and get the unused [resources]. Yes, I think that would be a great idea". Jessica, mum of two, west London.

"They told us about an app that they use in class, so I download that on my phone for my oldest son to use or when he was in nursery, they did a little session in the classroom one day about numbers and they did another one about letters. So, I think that's helpful". Katie, mum of three, north-east London.

4. BOOST SIGNPOSTING BETWEEN LOCAL SERVICES

"There should be more help with specialist children from borough. I do get help from school as well, there should be something extra. I think more help from the local council should come". Asma, mum of three, north London.

"I don't think there's enough [early support]. I think it's all well and good having them to support you in those first, what is it, like eight weeks? But then after that, it kind of just fades away. I think midwives should have more information for you on things like Children's Centres and the library and playgroups or even just handouts just to give you". Katie, mum of three, north-east London.

"I take my son to football and karate […] if they can have it locally, that would be lifesaving, amazing. I think we have two community centres [nearby]. If they can use them properly for little ones, that'd be great. We have one, but I think it only gets used for voting and like birthday parties". Sally, mum of two, north-east London.

5. FACILITATE PEER-TO-PEER SUPPORT

"Maybe have like a group of parents maybe for each year group and they can have that responsibility of actually reaching out [...] to the parents within their year group". Caterina, mum of two, north-east London.

"When my son started nursery, I guess it could have been the coffee mornings that would've really helped me, because I didn't start making friends with the parents until my son was in year one". Jessica, mum of two, west London.

6. UNDERSTAND THE BARRIERS

"The language is the biggest barrier, so I feel like it starts from there. Even, for example, if they do give a newsletter or things like that now and then, but if you can't read, how are you meant to help? Imagine those who could not talk, who could not express, so I just don't know how – what's going on to those parents' heads and minds?". Sally, mum of two, north-east London.

"Parents that work, that have got to drop their children in and go straight to work, I guess that's a big barrier. They literally just drop their children off, go to work, pick their children up". Jessica, mum of two, west London.

7. INVEST IN PARENT-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

"Sometimes, they have like an autumn fair or summer fair, and that's really nice because [a lot of] the teachers attend and it's nice to see them outside of being a teacher. Then you'd have a little catch up and they would just naturally just update you on the progress of your children". Caterina, mum of two, north-east London.

"Maybe once in a month if they talked to us. Just from then, then they'll know a bit more about the parents. Maybe the teacher can get to know the parents a bit more. Once in a while ask both parents to come. Maybe one parent might know a bit more. Or even grandparents. Basically, someone different, like apart from mum or dad". Sally, mum of two, north-east London.

"You could have an information pack on what to expect when your child starts school; there may be a few tears and the parents may get upset [...], just to prepare you. All we got was a folder and it was just the rules of the school, the school uniform they had to wear, just the basics really. I think what they should include in that is how to prepare and what to expect, different groups that the school run, that you might be interested in. If I was to have a piece of paper that [...] says 'Your child may be upset, but everything is fine, we're here to support you', things like that, it would be a weight off my shoulders knowing they're there to look after you". Jessica, mum of two, west London.

In order to make real and relevant change for children we need to be talking to the people who know them the best: their parents. By placing the experiences of families at the heart of this report, we have ensured that the recommendations for supporting children's learning have come from parents, recognising them as the experts. We hope that this report will lead to a meaningful partnership between key stakeholders, incorporating parent recommendations and practitioner action. The ambition is that these recommendations will enable those working with families to implement practical approaches to strengthen parental engagement in children's early learning and help all children to achieve their full potential.

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