RESEARCH BRIEFING

Save the Children

Barriers to early learning among low income families in the UK

This briefing paper sets out the key findings from research Save the Children commissioned from EdComs, a consultancy specialising in children and young people, in January 2019. The research explored the barriers to the learning of young children from lower income families. Interviews were conducted across the UK to help increase understanding of barriers in three areas: learning in the home; engagement with services; and links to family income.
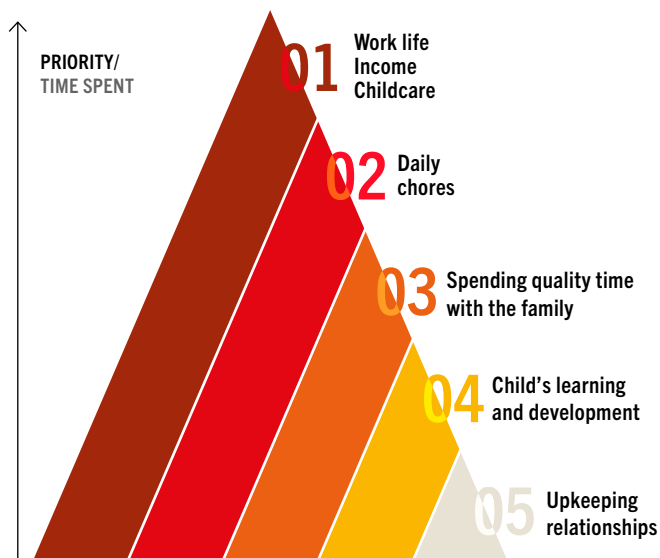
EARLY LEARNING WITHIN FAMILIES' LIVES

Many families struggled to find the time and opportunities to support their children's learning needs

Many of the families interviewed had busy, complex and challenging lives juggling work, childcare, family time, health issues and other factors on a daily basis.

Some of the most common challenges included managing the household income, facilitating childcare and working out how to sustain their household income.

IN-HOME PRIORITIES TYPICALLY CITED BY INTERVIEWED FAMILIES

PRIORITY/ TIME SPENT

01 Work life Income Childcare

02 Daily chores

03 Spending quality time with the family

04 Child's learning and development

05 Upkeeping relationships

Some families highlighted that they often have to prioritise work and income ahead of their child's learning at home so that they can ensure that their family's basic needs are met. These parents generally recognised that they should encourage their child to learn, but their circumstance prevented them from acting on this, creating a sense of guilt and negativity around learning.
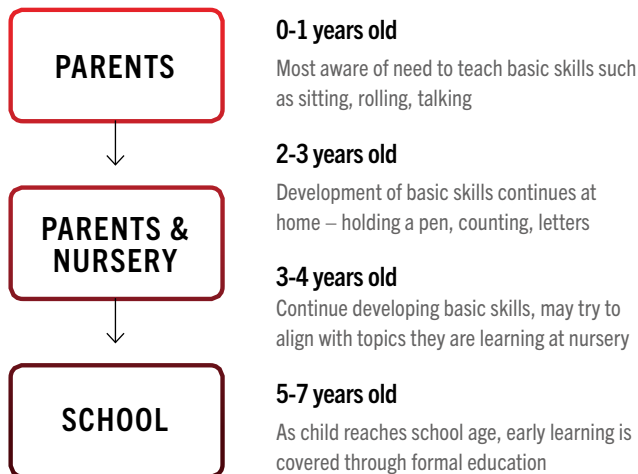
Parents were not always sure what they should be doing to support learning

Some of the parents interviewed were aware of the basic skills that their children, particularly their younger children, needed to develop.

However, most of the parents had little knowledge of which activities contributed to the development of these skills in a home environment, and therefore struggled to acknowledge when learning was happening within the home.

Many of these families focused on teaching soft over hard skills; with soft skills referenced including sharing, being kind and following rules. They saw the development of these skills as necessary to support their children's easy transition into early learning environments such as nursery or playgroups.

This was reinforced by the perception that nursery and schools take over teaching hard skills as a child gets older.

PARENTS

0-1 years old
Most aware of need to teach basic skills such as sitting, rolling, talking

PARENTS & NURSERY

2-3 years old
Development of basic skills continues at home – holding a pen, counting, letters

3-4 years old
Continue developing basic skills, may try to align with topics they are learning at nursery

SCHOOL

5-7 years old
As child reaches school age, early learning is covered through formal education

This suggests that more could be done to support parents by providing them with a better understanding of what learning means, to foster more positive perceptions and reinforce positive behaviours already demonstrated in the home.

BARRIERS TO EARLY LEARNING WITHIN THE HOME

A lack of confidence and understanding of best practice can make supporting children's learning feel difficult and often unattainable

Encouraging learning can feel difficult. Some parents highlighted a lack of confidence in trying to keep up with new teaching methods in school.

In addition, parents with multiple children and children of varied ages highlighted the challenges of dividing their attention across the family.

A fluctuating narrative on children using technology meant some parents were unsure whether they should allow their child to use YouTube or educational apps to facilitate learning.
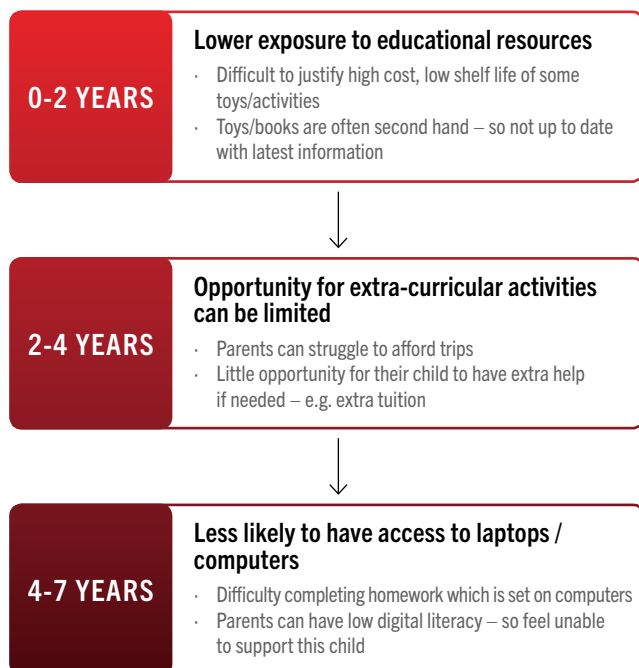
The research suggests greater support is needed for home learning, to encourage parents to take part and to reassure them that any form of early learning is beneficial and positive.

CHALLENGES RELATING TO EARLY LEARNING AS A RESULT OF INCOME

In some families, children were missing out on key opportunities which facilitate learning

Our research found that financial constraints can have an impact on ability to engage with learning across ages.

IMPACT OF FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS ON EDUCATION ACROSS A CHILD'S EARLY YEARS

0-2 YEARS	**Lower exposure to educational resources** · Difficult to justify high cost, low shelf life of some toys/activities · Toys/books are often second hand – so not up to date with latest information

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2-4 YEARS	**Opportunity for extra-curricular activities can be limited** · Parents can struggle to afford trips · Little opportunity for their child to have extra help if needed – e.g. extra tuition

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4-7 YEARS	**Less likely to have access to laptops / computers** · Difficulty completing homework which is set on computers · Parents can have low digital literacy – so feel unable to support this child

These challenges were prevalent for both working and non-working parents.

For some, being a working parent can be isolating, limiting opportunities to reach out and discuss support with others.

Working parents often rely on family for childcare support. This can mean a consistent learning environment is not established, as children can be at different family homes each day. Tasks such as homework can be impacted on because of this.

Some non-working parents felt guilty about having to give up work to look after their child rather than sending them to nursery and were concerned that they couldn't provide the same type of structured learning environment for their child at home.

These experiences contributed to some families feeling under-supported and frustrated that they were unable to provide as many learning opportunities as other parents.

BARRIERS TO ENGAGING WITH SERVICES

Parents saw the benefit and the value of services, but some felt let down by the support that was available to them

Parents interviewed saw the benefits of nursery including giving their child more independence, developing soft skills with other children and providing a formal learning environment.

However, many parents felt that nursery was not accessible to them, due to cost, or at least not until their child was eligible for 15-30 hours of free childcare at 3 years old.

As a result, some parents expressed concern that their child would fall behind on key early years milestones. Outside of nursery, awareness of additional services and/or clubs was low, with many believing that clubs and playgroups are shutting down or are of low quality, inviting concerns around their child's safety in such environments.

Parents felt disconnected from their child's education at school

While many parents see the school as the main provider of their child's learning and development once they reach school-age, they want a relationship with the school and teachers to be able to understand their child's progress.

However, parents' own negative associations and experiences of school can lead to decreased confidence in engaging with teachers. Some did not feel confident or able to admit to teachers that they were unsure of how to support their child's learning

Adding to this, some parents were also acutely aware of their own financial context and challenges and expressed concerns on being judged because of this, amplifying intimidation.

Many parents also highlighted the challenges associated with communicating with schools, as more communication moves to email rather than face-to-face interaction.

They highlighted two forms of barriers:

1. Putting comments or questions into writing felt more formal and lessened parents' opportunity to informally talk to teachers

2. It could also widen the gap between digitally literate and non-digitally literate families and the support they receive

Parents had contrasting and sometimes negative experiences of health services

Finally, some families also found barriers to receiving support from some healthcare services.

Healthcare services, when implemented well by health visitors, were highly valued and deemed to be reassuring, offering actionable tips and tricks and taking on concerns.

However, parents also provided more negative examples when they had felt judged and dismissed by healthcare professionals, leaving them feeling professionals did not trust them to bring up their child appropriately.

These examples contributed to some parents displaying a strong sense of negativity towards their experiences of healthcare and the support they had offered.