In summary

The evaluation shows a family who has been attending for at least 3 terms at Learning Together is more likely to:

- have more positive interactions with their children, rather than missing opportunities, eg responding to non-verbal cues, extending children’s social bids or engaging in sustained two-way turn taking conversational interactions, being responsive to their child and following their child’s lead
- be able to engage in quality verbal exchanges, including now giving their child time to respond and to make their expressions understood
- have interactions with their child including realistic expectations and appropriate responses when children are overwhelmed or distressed and those interactions are of a high or medium level (defined by the Relationships scale in Reflect, Respect, Relate)
- have a good understanding of developmental stages such as when families can start talking with their child and an improved understanding of when they can start reading and singing with their child
- have marked increase in understanding the importance of families taking, reading, singing, playing and comforting their child and their child playing with other children for learning, as well as associated boundaries, routines and talking about feelings
- feel increasingly confident in playing, reading and singing with their child, as well as boundaries, routines, and talking about feelings
- read more to their child, spend time engaged in literacy and numeracy based activities at home and have more books at home
- spend time borrowing books and visiting libraries
- sing songs and listen to music
- have an improved understanding of other areas of parenting, such as supporting children’s emotional and social development
- have improved understandings of when children can follow instructions, when they can control their emotions and when they are aware of the emotions of others
- be accessing other children’s services
- have a positive connection to the school the program is located in
- have higher educational aspirations for their child and a more positive perception of schools.

A child who has been attending for at least 3 terms at Learning Together is more likely to:

- have frequent experiences to support their literacy development
- visit libraries and borrow books
- be read to and look at books by themselves for pleasure
- have a confident parent who understands what children need to be successful learners.

In addition, it was found that the most effective program is one that:

- is co-constructed with families
- builds strong reciprocal relationships with the local school
- has a targeted program to support transitions to school
- builds partnerships with local service providers and agencies
- fosters families’ development and skills to allow some family members to be employed back in the programs.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- Learning Together should continue to be funded to provide early and powerful engagement of parents in their children’s literacy and learning. That principles and practices of Learning Together are maintained at all phases of the program, including the key components of co-constructing activities together with families, building relationships with the local school site, influencing transition to school for families and schools, building partnerships with other agencies and service providers and employing families in the program.
- Learning Together continues to develop the elements of the program that build the capacity and understanding of families to support their children’s learning. The Learning Together approach to working with families is documented, promoted and published.
- Outreach programs should be placed in schools that tender for the program and be supported to understand that Learning Together is an approach which works best when reflected in the broader approach to families of the school.
- The optimum outreach program:
  - consists of a 0.5 FTE experienced and qualified early childhood teacher in each site and has a dedicated or consistent space in which to operate.
  - is embedded as part of the school, including a school leader being involved in activities on a regular basis.
- Where possible Learning Together programs should include a targeted transition to school program.

Additional information

The full report can be accessed at: www.earlyyears.sa.edu.au/pages/Programs
Further information about this research can be obtained from:
Learning Together, DECCD 7th floor, 31 Flinders Street, Adelaide South Australia 5000
Email: jane.hargreaves@sa.gov.au

Learning Together

Executive summary

Introduction

This report summarises the findings from the evaluation of the expansion of Learning Together under the Smarter Schools National Partnership. SSNP data has been collected from the start of the project in 2010 until mid-2012, and indicates the effectiveness of Learning Together as a program and its impact on families, children and schools. Both qualitative and quantitative data are used to demonstrate the outcomes. This report is designed to be read in conjunction with the technical report.

Learning Together is a program for families with children aged birth to four, and has a focus on involving parents in their children’s learning. The aim of this project is to increase children’s early literacy development and engagement with learning. The objective is to achieve this by empowering parents in their parenting role, increasing parent capacity to support their children’s learning and connecting families with early childhood services and schools.

The goal of this evaluation is to measure outcomes for families (adults), children and the program itself. This report focuses on the collection of data relating to outcomes for adults and children who have been attending programs for more than 3 terms. Outcomes relating to the establishment of programs and baseline data have been previously reported in the Implementation Report and Baseline Data Report.

Program goal

To increase children’s early literacy, development and engagement with learning. This is contingent on activities to:

- Empower parents in their parenting role.
- Increase parent capacity to support children’s learning.
- Increase parent involvement in credentialed learning.
- Connect families with early childhood services and schools.

Program evaluation outcomes

The evaluation framework is designed to explore the impact of the Learning Together program on families and their children as well as what has happened for the program itself. The framework is also devised to consider the short, medium and long term outcomes. This evaluation is only intended to consider the short term impact. However the data has been collected and recorded in a way that will allow medium and long term outcomes to be measured if an opportunity becomes available in the future.

The intended short term program outcomes are:

- Adults (families) have increased knowledge, skills and confidence about parenting and their children’s learning.
- Adults (families) have improved relationships and increased involvement with their child/children.
- Children demonstrate enhanced literacy development.
- Children demonstrate increased involvement with learning.
- Children access children’s services.
- New programs are established in new centres and outreaching from existing centres.
- Program design is consolidated.
- The host schools are engaged with the Learning Together program.
Impact data shows:
- Very significant improvements in the quality of interactions between parents and child - from a majority rating of 0-2 (barely appropriate) to a majority rating of 4 (high quality) (p. 37).
- Almost 100% of children received reliable, predictable and consistent responses from their families (up from 68%) (p. 39).
- Almost 100% of children observed now have physical and emotional access to their parent, compared to 79% at the baseline data collection (p. 39).
- More families are taking up opportunities to interact with their children - from 43% of observations being missed opportunities to only 15% now fitting in that category (p. 39).
- Over 90% of families were engaged in interactive play with their child (a 48% increase) (p. 40).
- Almost 100% of families were able to give their child time to respond and time to make their expressions understood, both increasing by more than double the baseline of 45% and 41% respectively (p. 43).
- More than double the number of families initiated conversations based on the child’s interests (from 23% to 56%) (p. 48).
- Almost 100% of families had realistic expectations of what their child could do (a 50% increase) (p. 45).
- 90% of families were engaged in interactive play with their child (a 50% increase) (p. 45).

Families have increased knowledge of child development and behaviours to support learning

Literacy development is now understood to begin from birth and in the home setting. It is dependent on both the relationships in which the child is involved and the range of experiences they have. Literacy can be understood to be a social practice and children are seen to become learners as part of family and community relationships. (Whitman, Speeding, Harlins and Mskin, 2007)

Belonging, Being and Becoming, the Early Years Learning Framework for Australia defines literacy as the ‘capacity, confidence and disposition to use language in all its forms’. (Australian Government, 2009, p. 38)

Impact data shows:
- Significant increases in families’ understandings about when important literacy behaviours including reading and singing with their child should begin (p. 47).
- Families also demonstrated that they now have a significantly better understanding of how important early experiences are to support a child’s learning (p. 48).
- Families are also supporting their child’s literacy development in a wider range of activities, more often. (p. 51–55).
- Almost 100% of children spend time reading together with an adult. There was a 25% increase in the proportion of families who do this daily (p. 51).
- 78% of families are now visiting libraries (previously 50%) and 40% are using library programs and services programs (previously 31%) (p. 53).
- 68% of families are now borrowing books (previously only 39%) (p. 53).
- More realistic understandings of children’s social and emotional development (p. 56-57).

Families have increased confidence in experiences that influence children’s learning

Following on from families’ understandings of child development and the importance of experiences that support learning, are the levels of confidence those families have in those areas. When families understand that they can influence their child’s learning they make more positive and conscious choices about what they do. Research has found that when families believe in their ability to positively affect their child’s development they are able to encourage and support their child. (Sng-Blatchford et al, 2011)

Impact data shows:
- A marked improvement in families’ confidence in a wide range of activities that support children’s learning, social and literacy development (p. 58).
- Increased percentage of families reporting that they are now very confident in a range of experiences that have an influence on children’s learning (p. 58).

Families accessing children’s services

Historically families who have attended Learning Together programs have not accessed other services, including support for children’s developmental delays or other additional needs, prior to their involvement with Learning Together. By working in partnership with other agencies and disciplines Learning Together aims to work to bring them to families, ensuring that children get support they may need.

Impact data shows:
- There has been a 100% increase in the number of parents accessing parent education and/or support groups, other than Learning Together (p. 65).
- Significant increase in families accessing specialist services such as speech, occupational therapy or nutrition services for their children (an increase from 13% to 23%) (p. 20).
- Small but significant increases in families accessing child care (12.5%), and preschool (15%) (p. 60).

Families change their educational aspirations and perceptions of schools

Many families have reported anecdotaly that they did not have positive experiences of school themselves. Previously collected data also shows that approximately half of families have only completed year 11 or lower, and approximately 10% of those families have completed no more than year 9.

Impact data shows:
- Families reported changes in their educational aspirations for their children and their perception of schools and schooling (p. 61).