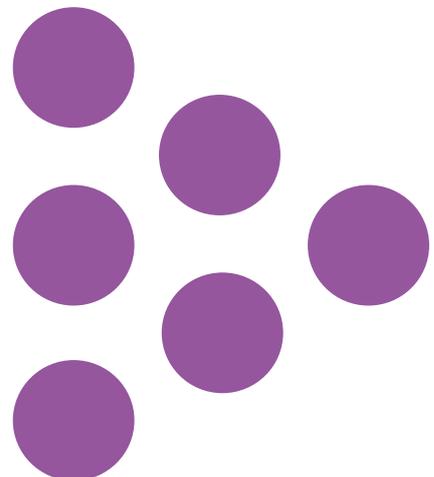

Executive Summary

Randomised Controlled Trial Evaluation of Families Connect

**National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)
with Queen's University Belfast and Save the Children (UK)**



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Nuffield Foundation

The project has been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

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1 Executive Summary

1.1 Overview

An evaluation of Save the Children’s parental engagement programme Families Connect was conducted to establish whether the programme had a positive impact on the children and parents involved, as identified by the theory of change, and to highlight the conditions that supported implementation within the schools involved. The evaluation was designed to generate evidence to support the improvement of the programme, contribute to wider evidence generation on supporting parental engagement and the home learning environment on children’s outcomes, and provide direction for future evaluation work. A randomised efficacy trial exploring a range of parent and child outcomes and an implementation analysis provided the methodological framework for the evaluation.

The evaluation did not demonstrate influence of the programme on the primary outcome of children’s receptive language or on numeracy outcomes immediately or six-months after programme delivery. Additionally, no difference in impact was evident in children’s receptive vocabulary between children based on their socio-economic background or the extent of parental engagement with the programme (assessed through attendance rates¹). However, the findings indicate that the programme supports parents to strengthen the home learning environment (a secondary outcome investigated in the trial), through developing parental skills and confidence to engage in their child’s learning at school and in activities undertaken at home. The evaluation also indicates that the programme supports longer term improvements in children’s social and emotional behaviour – demonstrated by teacher reports of pro- social attitudes and behaviours towards others and towards learning at school six months after the programme delivery.

The key recommendations from the trial, for improvement of the programme, relate to sustaining the immediate impact the programme has on improvements to the home learning environment and parental confidence, to increase the likelihood of impact on children’s learning outcomes. Furthermore, they suggest building on the results related to children’s social and emotional outcomes to develop a better understanding of how these can be sustained to support children in their future learning. The key recommendation from the trial for wider early years programmatic research is to develop a better understanding of how to sustain changes within the home learning environment that will lead to measurable attainment outcomes for children, particular those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

1.2 Research and policy context

This study was funded by the Nuffield Foundation to generate evidence on supporting children’s development in the early years of their learning. Save the Children delivered the Families Connect programme and the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) conducted the trial and managed the process evaluation, with colleagues from Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) supporting with school visits and interviews.

¹ Based on a Complier Average Causal Effect (CACE) analysis.

This study's main focus was on pupil learning outcomes (as a key area of the theory of change for Families Connect). A further focus was on evaluating the impact and implementation of the Families Connect programme as a process by which schools can support parental engagement (both in their child's learning and with the school), and on how parents' can develop the home learning environment. The importance of the quality of the home learning environment (HLE) and parental engagement for children's learning and other outcomes has been demonstrated through longitudinal studies. However, to date, there is surprisingly little robust evidence about the effectiveness of approaches designed to improve learning through increased parental engagement.²

Sylva *et al.* found that a high quality HLE where parents are actively engaged in activities with their children, promoted intellectual and social development in all preschool children (2004). Kiernan & Mensah (2011) found engagement of parents in children's learning contributes to readiness to learn and has a positive impact on children's educational outcomes. The impact of the HLE and parental engagement in learning has been demonstrated to moderate the negative impact of socio-economic status on children's outcomes (Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; Sylva *et al.*, 2004).

1.3 About Families Connect

Families Connect is a parental engagement programme designed by Save the Children UK (SCUK) to develop the skills and confidence of families in disadvantaged areas, and provide them with the resources to actively engage their children in learning in the home. The programme is built on evidence about the importance of the home learning environment, which has been shown to have a significant impact on children's early learning, readiness to learn, and future development (Sylva *et al.*, 2004 and 2008; Dearden *et al.*, 2011; Kiernan and Mensah, 2011).

The programme has the following elements:

- **Who:** The programme is for families with children aged four to six, in schools in disadvantaged areas across all four countries in the UK.
- **Aims:** Families Connect works with families in school settings to develop both parent skills and the school culture for engaging with parents. It aims to develop: **parents'** skills and confidence to support their child's learning in the home environment; **children's** social and emotional skills, communication skills, and their interest in and understanding of literacy and numeracy; and **schools'** approaches to parental engagement.
- **How:** The programme involves eight two-hour sessions in school. In each session, the first hour is for parents only; the second hour is for parents and children together. The programme encourages schools to keep the parental engagement strategies going after the eight-week programme.
- **Focus:** The sessions cover three key areas: social and emotional development; literacy and language development; and numeracy.

² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/parental-engagement/>

- **Delivery:** SCUK provides training for two Community Practitioners in each school, to deliver the programme. These practitioners are usually members of school staff, although other delivery models involving other practitioners from the community are also implemented.

The programme was designed with input from the National Literacy Trust, Edge Hill University and the SEAL programme (Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning), using evidence around parent-child conversations, play, storytelling and number games (Whitehurst and Lonigan, 1998; Nord *et al.*, 1999; Wade and Moore, 2000). It was also informed by evidence from the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme (Lord *et al.*, 2018). Evaluation of Families Connect has previously been conducted in-house by SCUK, showing promising pre- and post- evidence of an impact on children’s vocabulary (using the British Picture Vocabulary Scale), and perceptions of positive impacts on how parents and children interact at home (Bradley *et al.*, 2016). This independent evaluation sought to build on this previous evidence, through a randomised controlled trial (RCT) to provide evidence of the programme’s impact in order to feed into SCUK’s further development of the programme and wider parental engagement work in the early years.

1.4 Evaluation aims and methods

The evaluation aimed to explore the following research questions:

- Is Families Connect achieving its intended outcomes, in terms of:
 - children’s vocabulary and numeracy development?
 - children’s social and emotional development, and other softer skills?
 - parents’ involvement in their child’s learning?
- What are the key features of the programme? What conditions in schools and other factors support the implementation of Families Connect? And what barriers are there?
- How might the programme be developed, sustained and scaled up?

The evaluation involved:

An efficacy RCT: using in-school randomisation at the family level, with two groups – intervention and a waitlist control. The RCT involved:

- schools from disadvantaged areas in all five geographical regions in which SCUK deliver the programme (the North of England, South of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland)
- families with children aged four to six in Reception and Y1 in England and Wales, Y1 and Y2 in Northern Ireland, and P1 and P2 in Scotland
- a baseline and two follow-up assessments of children’s receptive vocabulary (using the BPVS33), numeracy (PUMA4) and children’s social/emotional outcomes (SDQ and CSS5)

³ British Picture Vocabulary Scale version 3 (Dunn *et al.*, 2009)

⁴ Progress in Understanding Maths Assessment (McCarty and Cooke, 2015)

⁵ To explore social and emotional outcomes, we used three measures from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), namely the prosocial behaviour score, the total difficulties score and the impact score. We also used the Child Softer Skills (CSS) scale (Bradley *et al.*, 2016).

- a baseline and one follow-up of parent reported outcomes on parental role construct (PRS), self-efficacy (PES) and home learning environment (HLE)⁶.

Thirty-one schools and a total of 499 children from 483 families took part.

Qualitative process evaluation: exploring the programme model; implementation and fidelity; conditions and factors affecting the implementation in schools; and parents' views/home learning environment. This was informed by Humphrey *et al.*'s (2016) guidance for implementation and process evaluation and the EEF guidance 'Putting Evidence to Work – A School's Guide to Implementation' by Sharples *et al.* (2018).

Costs evaluation: to establish the costs of the intervention to schools, and the cost per pupil per year.

The [protocol](#)⁷ and [statistical analysis plan](#)⁸ are available on the [project website](#). Data was processed in accordance with GDPR (2016/679); a [Privacy Notice](#) was available for parents⁹.

1.5 Summary of key findings: impact

- As shown in Table 1, this evaluation found no evidence that Families Connect had an impact on children's receptive vocabulary¹⁰ (as measured by the BPVS3), either immediately after the programme or six months later (the latter being the primary outcome for the trial).
- Similarly, our evaluation found no evidence that Families Connect had an impact on children's numeracy skills (as measured by the PUMA), either immediately after the programme or six months later.
- There was also no evidence of an effect for disadvantaged children (according to household income) or for those with SEN in terms of the primary outcome – receptive vocabulary.
- We found no evidence of an impact on children's total difficulties score or their impact score (as measured by the SDQ, which provides an overall assessment of children's difficulties and the impact of these difficulties on children's social and emotional health).
- We found evidence of a positive impact on children's prosocial behaviour scores six months after taking part in Families Connect (as measured by the SDQ) (effect size 0.2, $p = 0.05$).
- We found evidence of a positive impact on children's softer skills (CSS¹¹) six months after the programme (effect size 0.17, $p=0.06$).
- We found evidence of a positive impact on the home learning environment (HLE) (effect size 0.36, $p < 0.001$). Immediately following the intervention, parents who had taken part in

⁶ Parent Role Construction (PRC) and Perceptions of Parent Efficacy (PES) scales (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2005); and the Home Learning Environment KS1 (HLE) scale (Sylva *et al.* 2008)

⁷ https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3430/fcon_protocol_update.pdf

⁸ https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3856/fcon_rct_statistical_analysis_plan.pdf

⁹ https://www.nfer.ac.uk/media/3107/fcon_parent_privacy_notice.pdf

¹⁰ Receptive vocabulary refers to all the words that a person understands, including spoken, written, or manually signed words. The BPVS3 is a one-to-one test that assesses a child's receptive vocabulary. For each question, the test administrator says a word and the pupil responds by selecting a picture from four options that best illustrates the word's meaning. No reading is required. No spoken response is required.

¹¹ For example, the child deals well with mistakes, the child gets on well with their peers, the child is adaptive to new tasks and challenges

Families Connect reported engaging in more learning related activities with their children at home, than the parents of families who had not yet taken part.

- We found evidence of a positive impact on parents' self-efficacy (PES) immediately after the programme (effect size 0.21, $p = 0.01$). Parents who had taken part in Families Connect reported feeling more confident and skilled with regards to supporting their children's learning, than parents who had not yet taken part.
- We found no evidence of an impact on parents' role construction immediately after the programme (PRC, i.e. what parents feel they should be doing as a parent to support their child's learning) compared with those who had not taken part in Families Connect.

Table 1: Summary of all outcomes

Outcome	N in Model (Control, Intervention)	Follow up time point ¹²	Effect Size (95% Cis)	P Value
Receptive Vocabulary (BPVS3)	823 (418,405)	1	-0.04 (-0.16,0.08)	0.52
		2	0.06 (-0.06,0.19)	0.34
Numeracy (PUMA)	804 (416,388)	1	-0.02 (-0.19,0.14)	0.78
		2	0.08 (-0.08,0.25)	0.33
Total Difficulties Score	828 (432,396)	1	0.01 (-0.15,0.17)	0.92
		2	0 (-0.17,0.16)	0.97
Impact Score (Log odds)	920 (420,400)	Treatment Coefficient	0.01 (-1.87,1.81)	0.99
		Treatment*Time Coefficient	-0.98 (-2.62,0.59)	0.23
Prosocial Score	845 (437,408)	1	0.08 (-0.11,0.26)	0.43
		2	0.2 (0.01,0.39)	0.05
Child Softer Skills	823 (418,405)	1	0.1 (-0.06,0.27)	0.22
		2	0.17 (-0.01,0.34)	0.06
Home Learning Environment	376 (194,182)	1	0.36 (0.22,0.51)	<.0001
Parent Efficacy Scale	368 (189,179)	1	0.21 (0.05,0.38)	0.01
Parent Role Construction	370 (192,178)	1	-0.02 (-0.19,0.15)	0.85

Source: NFER RCT of Families Connect (2018-2020)

1.6 Summary of key findings: implementation

- **Perceptions and experiences** of delivering and taking part in the programme were overwhelmingly positive. Facilitators of the programme particularly praised the quality of the training and delivery manual, and felt that the facilitative and reflective approach to delivery was effective. Parent participants enjoyed all of the sessions – especially those on social and emotional development – and they valued the parent time when they shared experiences with peers and the dedicated child and parent time which afforded quality one-to-one time with their child.
- **Perceived impact of the programme reported by parents** supported the RCT findings on the impact on parental efficacy and home learning environments:
 - parents described how their confidence, motivation and ways in which their parenting could support their child’s development had all improved

¹² Follow up time point one was immediately after the programme and follow up time point two was six months after the programme.

- parents reported playing games and using activities from the programme at home with their children, establishing homework schedules and supporting bedtime routines.
- Senior leaders and practitioners within the schools gave **positive ratings** across all areas in the implementation feedback they provided to SCUK (for example, the programme was manageable to deliver, the strategies for recruiting and engaging parents were appropriate, and there was adequate time for planning and preparation).
- **Attendance** at the eight-week programme was generally high; two-thirds (66 percent) of children in the intervention group attended with their parent/carer at least one session from each themed area and at least five sessions in total (the parameters analysed in this trial). Almost two-fifths (38 percent) attended all eight sessions. However, a substantial minority did not attend any sessions at all (16 percent) (these children and their families were spread across schools, and there were no schools where no families attended at all).
- The **key features identified by participants and facilitators** that supported successful delivery of the programme appeared to be the range and balance of topics (social and emotional, language/literacy and numeracy); the structured elements within each session; the facilitative delivery style; the reflective nature of the programme, and the high quality training, delivery manual and ongoing support from SCUK.
- The **key conditions in schools** that supported successful implementation included: school leadership committed to the values of the programme; a school ethos that is welcoming and inclusive of all parents and families; alignment with school policies on parental engagement; a whole-school approach to implementing the programme; the practitioners knowing the families and school community; responding to school context; and school commitment to space, time and resources.
- This efficacy trial set out to explore the impacts of a particular **model of Families Connect** – namely to be run by two school-based Community Practitioners (CPs) so that they knew the school context and families well, and in schools that were either new to Families Connect or had only run it once previously (thus avoiding schools where Families Connect activities and parental engagement strategies might be more widely embedded). It is of note then, that a proportion of schools (seven of the 30 who implemented Families Connect) delivered the programme with an external practitioner alongside one member of school staff (rather than with two members of school staff). Given the positive feedback from all schools, this change in delivery model does not appear to have influenced experiences of the programme.
- Any **delivery challenges** were minor and schools mainly addressed them in the planning and preparation stages of the programme. Common challenges related to the length of the programme and sessions, timing of sessions to suit all parents in the group, the logistics of space and crèche facilities, releasing staff, language barriers and engaging parents who may not be comfortable in a school environment.
- Schools also delivered **other parental engagement support** during the course of the trial as part of their usual practice. Examples included numeracy and literacy sessions (for example explaining phonics to parents), meetings/coffee mornings, and group activities such as cooking and ‘parent gym’. A small number of schools (two of 27 for whom information was collected), provided additional support to control-group families during the trial period, including specific classes on wellbeing, first aid and craft activities.

- The average cost to schools was £155 per school to deliver one cycle of Families Connect; **about £20 per family per cycle**. Schools incurred costs for snacks, craft materials, photocopying and crèche facilities. Staff also spent time training (usually two members of staff for two days), preparing (between 30 minutes and an hour each per session) and delivering the programme (two hours each per week for eight weeks). Schools managed to release staff for this using internal cover.

1.7 Summary of implications and conclusion

Implications for the programme

Both the quantitative and qualitative findings from our study indicate that Families Connect increases parental engagement in children’s learning, improves parental skills, and improves children’s pro-social behaviour – all of which are valued in school settings and may have longer term benefits (Asmussen *et al.*, 2016). However we found no impact on vocabulary or numeracy. Furthermore, there was no link between higher levels of attendance and vocabulary outcomes. The theory of change might be further developed by exploring for example how children’s communication development is embedded throughout the programme (including in the sessions on social and emotional development which parents found particularly engaging), how it might be strengthened further in parent-child interactions, and/or whether a longer programme might be beneficial.

Programme developments

In light of continual developments towards sustainable delivery across SCUK programmes, SCUK were focusing on exploring **sustainable models for developing the programme**, rather than scale up *per se*. Training for trainer models of programme delivery are being developed and local communities of practice are being built to enable schools to support each other around parental engagement, and to work in more targeted areas (based on disadvantage and geography). Across their programme developments, SCUK were keen that robust plans for maintaining and monitoring quality would need to be developed.

A revised version of the programme is also currently in development which is inclusive of nursery age children (3-6 years) due to be delivered from 2021. As a result of the inclusion of younger children and feedback, more focus is placed on adapting the activities on children’s interests and abilities. Facilitators are also encouraged to emphasise how parents can support children’s speech and language development within every session by introducing new vocabulary, listening to their child, singing songs and rhymes, extending conversations and engaging in positive interaction. More effort has also been made within the programme to scaffold and support parental engagement and adaptation of activities within the home during and after the programme.

Implications for parental engagement in the early years

The findings from this study reflect the positive impact of supporting parents’ engagement in their child’s learning, in terms of improving parents’ confidence and skills, the home learning environment, and children’s social and emotional development, also highlighted in other research evidence (OECD 2020; Melhuish and Gardiner, 2020; Sylva *et al.*, 2007). The study also has wider implications for supporting parental engagement in the early years, particularly around the

importance of ‘relationship-based engagement’ i.e. knowing the families and local context well, and a whole school, sustained approach to parental involvement. However, programmes in the early years may need a greater focus on and provide more support to parents around children’s vocabulary and numeracy development, particularly where this is an intended goal of the programme.

Considerations in light of Covid-19

In light of the current situation around Covid-19, further research into how our trial schools and other Families Connect schools are supporting families and children with learning at home and with returning to school could be very informative to understanding parental engagement, and children’s wellbeing more widely. Given the positive engagement and pro-social outcomes achieved and families’ overwhelmingly positive experience of the programme, prioritising parental engagement in schools may be particularly important at a time when there is a heightened need to support children and families’ wellbeing. Specific programmes (such as Families Connect) might play a part, as might specific or new staff roles in schools (with responsibility for family wellbeing for example). Not doing so may have longer term ramifications for pupils’ education outcomes (given the links between wellbeing and education outcomes, NAHT, 2014). It could be valuable to find out from Families Connect schools how they and their school community have approached parental engagement during the pandemic, particularly where parental engagement and strong relationships between schools and families have been developed.

Areas for further research

Given the positive immediate impacts on home learning environment, it might be important to determine if and how these sustain, and whether any impacts in the areas of literacy and numeracy occur later and take time to develop. Further research into the mechanisms of change is needed, to understand more about how parents help their children with literacy and numeracy at home in view of ultimately improving attainment. The critical features of the programme and key conditions in schools identified in this study warrant further exploration, to understand which are core and which might be further adaptable. In addition, exploration of the revised model of Families Connect could be carried out.

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