

Working with families in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods: Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council

URN: 50218

Region: West Midlands

Remit: Further education and skills

Provider background

The adult and community learning (ACL) provision comes under Dudley Borough Council's Adult, Community and Housing Services directorate. The team offers a wide range of family learning programmes through taster workshops and short and longer courses, alongside provision in arts, vocational skills and health. The team has provided family learning in the 42 most deprived schools in Dudley, including those where at least 25% of pupils are eligible for free school meals. The team has worked closely with all 18 children's centres in Dudley to engage parents and carers over the past two years. One of these is [Wren's Nest Primary School and Children's Centre](#), located in a ward that falls within the 10% highest deprivation level for the country. Levels of unemployment are high, with 40% of residents in long-term unemployment.

Brief description

The adult and community learning (ACL) team is very successful at engaging with adults who have had very poor prior experiences of learning, low self-esteem and little aspiration for themselves and their children. Initial courses for families at Wren's Nest School and Children's Centre often lead to more in-depth courses that help parents or carers develop their own skills and confidence to support their children, with the added bonus of the opportunity to achieve valuable qualifications in English and mathematics.

This example is part of a joint project between Ofsted and [The National Institute of Adult Continuing Education](#) (NIACE) showcasing various good practice in family learning.

The good practice in detail for family learning

Dawn Griffiths, from the Dudley ACL Team explains: 'Wren's Nest Primary School and Children's Centre offers an excellent example of how family learning programmes can be developed to engage those learners 'hardest to reach' and encourage them to return to learning, offering them progression routes to qualifications. We offer [initial family learning activities](#) to parents or carers at the children's centre to build their confidence in supporting their child's early development.

'Once the parents have gained an understanding of the children's curriculum, we then guide them onto a range of short courses that eventually lead to mathematics and English courses.

'We are really pleased about the way that the school has integrated the children's centre and ACL facilities into the new school building. The site is an oasis in this very deprived local community.'

Getting the project started

The headteacher at Wren's Nest is strongly committed to parent engagement in the life of their children and the school. She has worked hard to establish a strong culture in the school of empowering parents and carers to work with the school to help their families by breaking down the cycle of inter-generational unemployment and poverty.

The components for the successful family learning provision have been built up over the years:

- In 2006, a children's centre was added to the school, providing extra space to facilitate a crèche and a designated area for adult learning.
- The Lifelong Learning Manager post was created to work between the school and the ACL service by:
 - developing a positive relationship with many of the targeted families
 - recruiting parents to the classes
 - offering classroom support for those who may be lacking in confidence and skills.
- Some of the pupil premium funding is used to subsidise some adult education programmes. This clearly emphasises the value placed on raising parents' skills as part of the school's strategy to support the development of the targeted children.
- Highly skilled tutors plan and deliver courses such as 'Play and language' to parents of children in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) as a first step on their learning route. Parents who lack confidence can access a course and also use the crèche. Family literacy is then offered to those who

want to continue studying and they are given the opportunity to gain a qualification.

- Once in the learning environment of the school, parents are encouraged by the Lifelong Learning Manager, tutors and peers to continue into the well-established programme of adult learning and to improve their skills and gain qualifications, with the ultimate aim of achieving employment.
- The Lifelong Learning Manager liaises very closely with local partners and colleges to establish progression courses in local settings that fit around their children's needs for the parents.
- Courses are offered in mathematics, English and basic computing skills. The school offers work placements in schools to all parents undertaking childcare courses. This often leads to voluntary work experience and jobs in a variety of roles at Wren's Nest or neighbouring schools.
- A job club has been running since September 2012 to help parents' progression into employment.

The keys to success

Family learning is now part of the school culture and it has raised the aspirations for many parents and carers and their children.

The main driver is the high level of commitment and support from the headteacher and governors in building the skills of the parents in their community.

Similarly, strong strategic lead and support for family learning from the local authority continues to provide family learning in areas of high deprivation in Dudley.

Other keys to success include:

- the conducive and welcoming learning environment that encourages parents to get involved in the school life
- a dedicated worker with highly developed interpersonal skills to encourage parents to join in learning
- starting with an initial programme that can be of immediate use to the parents in helping their children
- provision that is locally based and timetabled around school hours
- short, incremental qualifications that help learners develop a portfolio of skills, with the opportunity to gain recognised qualifications
- developing parents to become learning champions/mentors to encourage other parents in learning
- sustained and long-term programmes of learning with on-site childcare/crèche provision

- excellent support for the parents to help them deal promptly with personal issues, including referral to relevant support agencies
- strong partnerships – as noted in the [last inspection](#) – with the local providers of learning, including children’s centres, schools, colleges and universities
- good access to up-to-date information, advice and guidance on careers and progression programmes
- on-site help with looking for jobs and developing employability skills, including an integrated programme of volunteering that helps learners to practice their skills, develop confidence and build up references.

Making a difference through developing the skills of adults and children

Family learning has had a significant impact on the development of the children as well as that of their parents or carers.

Measurable outcomes for the children include:

- higher levels of attendance
- more regular completion of homework to consistently high standards
- greater concentration and improved attention span in classes
- substantial gains in confidence
- much improved behaviour in the classroom and in routine school activities
- rapid progress in school subjects.

Gains for the parents, the school and the local community are equally notable.

- Many parents have built on their skills and learning to incrementally reach full level 2 qualifications and obtain jobs. Some of the parents have also become learning champions and help in recruiting and encouraging others to join in learning and in the life of the school.
- The school has seen an increased attendance at parents’ evenings with a greater degree of parental willingness to support the school in many activities and helping their children.
- A few parents have secured jobs within schools after undertaking several part-time roles. They have learnt the true value of education and some of the earlier graduates of family learning encourage their children and grandchildren to engage more productively in education. As a direct result of the help and encouragement of the school and the ACL team , [one parent has gained a university degree](#) in social work and is now employed as a social worker.

- The ACL team has made creative use of current topics and trends to develop some challenging programmes that have been particularly successful in breaking down gender barriers.

A 'Dads' Bake Off' cooking class engaged nine dads and their sons from Year 4, as an alternative to offering stereotypical 'male' activities such as sport. Dads and their sons spent quality time baking, learning, listening and speaking to each other – thereby developing a strong bond. These boys' attainment and progress have improved considerably.

- Attendance, retention and achievement of those working towards qualifications or personal objectives have been excellent. In excess of 97% have gained at least a unit of a qualification or achieved their learning goals. For example, 16 learners had achieved a qualification at level 2 in English and/or mathematics; two were taking a qualification in 'children and young people's workforce' at level 2 and both learners who had achieved the same qualification at level 3 were employed in school.

Extending the life of the project

Dudley ACL team is very determined to continue to make family learning highly effective in the borough. It has taken, or has well-developed plans in place to take, the steps listed below to extend the benefits of the family learning throughout the borough:

- The 'Looking Glass' project is an inspirational exhibition and training resource centre facilitated by the local authority's EYFS team. It is used primarily to support the professional development of early years practitioners working with children aged 0–5, including children's centres and childminders. The managers plan to extend the use of the centre to learners on family learning programmes and other families. Working in partnership with schools, visits for parents of young children will be organised. Parents can experience a range of opportunities that they could provide easily and cheaply at home, to support their child's learning and development.
- Local councillors hold a strong and positive profile of ACL.
- Discussions are taking place with other headteachers to establish and extend family learning in more schools.
- The impact and promotion of family learning will continue to be a focus through quarterly reports to the borough council directors.
- Further investment is put into appointing an employability worker at the children's centre to help parents secure jobs and volunteering.

- Close working with the local colleges continues, to establish progression courses.
- Continued work is planned with the troubled families on parenting programmes, in partnership with other agencies.

The good practice case studies that Ofsted publishes highlight specific examples of practice that providers of education, learning and children's services have used to achieve successful outcomes.

For education, the case studies do not recommend a single particular approach to teaching and learning. Ofsted has no preferred lesson structure or teaching style. We showcase and share a wide range of approaches that providers have found work well for them in achieving good outcomes for children, young people and learners.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

To view other good practice examples, go to:
www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/goodpractice.

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