Parental Engagement Fund

Laura Barbour, Naomi Eisenstadt, Dr Janet Goodall, Fiona Jelley and Professor Kathy Sylva
– January 2018

Contents

The Sutton Trust was founded in 1997 by Sir Peter Lampl to improve social mobility. The Trust has long recognised the importance of the early years on shaping an individual's life chances and has supported many grassroots organisations, recognising that the early years is often where innovation and good practice is first developed.

For some time there has been strong evidence on the importance of the home learning environment in determining educational and social outcomes. While much is known about behaviours of parents that promote a good home learning environment, much less is known about the efficacy of interventions to change parents' behaviour.

The Parental Engagement Fund (PEF) is a £1million fund, launched in 2014, managed by the Sutton Trust and funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation.

The fund was set up to increase our knowledge of what works to engage parents, improve the home learning environment and support child development. The fund supported existing parental engagement interventions to develop their delivery and increase these interventions understanding of evaluation and impact.

The need for this knowledge of what supports the home learning environment has grown even stronger since the launch of the fund, with commissioners at every level shifting their focus to early interventions and increasingly requiring robust impact evidence when deciding what they will fund or endorse.

1. Rationale for the Parental Engagement Fund

Gaps in children's attainment emerge early and small gaps in early development can go on to predict significant differences in future outcomes.

The Sutton Trust Social Mobility report in 2010 showed that by age five, children growing up in the poorest fifth of families were already nearly a year (11.1 months) behind those children from middle income families in vocabulary tests. There is further evidence that this gap persists so that more than half of the gaps in achievement at age 11 are due to inequality that was already present at age five.[1] Moreover, by the time students receive their GCSE results, around 32 per cent of the variation in performance can be predicted based on indicators observed at or before age five.[2]

The quality of parenting and home learning environments in children's early years has a significant influence on children's level of development when they start at school.

The Sutton Trust Social Mobility report found that it was parenting and the home learning environment that accounted for half of the 11-month development gap at age five between those from the lowest income families and those from middle-income homes.[3]

A supportive home learning environment and effective parenting was found to be more powerful than background, reinforcing the message from the original EPPE study that 'what parents do is more important than who parents are'.[4] The EPPE study found that the home learning environment was a stronger predictor of child outcomes than social economic status or parental qualifications.

The Sutton Trust / Education Endowment Foundation's Teaching and Learning Toolkit finds that parental involvement is consistently associated with pupils' success at school.

While it is important to try to support parents to engage, less is known about which methods are the most effective, or why. As Professor Stephen Gorard reported:

> *"The most promising phase (for parental engagement) is preschool and preparation for primary school…. There is no good quality evidence that parental involvement interventions result in improved educational outcomes."* [5]

This is supported by the Early Intervention Foundation:

> "*The evidence base for programmes available in the UK is not yet mature."*

Commissioners of course want to invest in what works. The Social Mobility Commission's State of the Nation report 2017 again identifies the importance of parenting support and 'ensuring that all parenting support programmes are evidence based.'[6]

Building evidence of effective practice is a difficult process.

---

[1] *Too many children left behind Bradbury, Corak, Waldfogel, and Washbrook, (Russell Sage Foundation, 2015).*
[2] Washbrooke *evidence cited in the recent Social Mobility Commission report Feb 17 Helping parents to parent.*
[3] *Sutton Trust Social Mobility report (Waldfogel and Washbrooke, 2010).*
[4] EPPE Study.
[5] What do rigorous evaluations tell us about the most promising parental involvement interventions.
[6]
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf

2. The challenge of building the evidence

Building evidence of programme impact is challenging and involves several different stages taking place over time.

A vital part of the journey can be learning from evaluation results. These results might initially seem disappointing, but can lead to adapting and strengthening delivery, and ultimately a genuinely positive impact on children and families. Challenging assumptions of what works that can lead to breakthroughs and greater innovation.

Since the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) were established there has been significant investment in building UK evidence, but there is necessarily a high bar for entry into their robust trial programmes. The organisations that we have been working with have developed their interventions based largely on delivery experience and a detailed knowledge of the communities that they are working with. By contrast, many of the programmes with a strong evidence base have been developed by academics with a strong research background and who have had the capacity to build in rigorous evaluation design from the start.

3. The Parental Engagement Fund (PEF)

The fund has been working with six organisations and they have been supported by a team from the Sutton Trust and the University of Oxford, Department of Education. The Oxford team - Prof Kathy Sylva, Fiona Jelley and Naomi Eisenstadt - have acted as a critical friend, expert advisor and arm's length evaluator.

PEF focused on low income families because children from higher income families tend to have better educational outcomes. It is not surprising that poverty and related hardship make it more challenging for parents to engage with their children and provide a positive home learning environment.

The aims of the Parental Engagement Fund are to:

- Address inequality in children's early attainment.
- Develop effective parental engagement practice in the UK.

Intended organisational outcomes across the fund are to:

1. Increase participation of families in parental engagement activities (Page 9)
2. Increase evidence of programme impact on parental behaviour and interaction with their children including the home learning environment (Page 12)
3. Increase evidence of programme impact on child outcomes (Page 13)
4. Develop organisational understandings of evaluation (Page 14)
5. Progress up the evidence scale as identified by the Early Intervention Foundation framework (Page 15)
6. Leverage support for future delivery (Page 18)

Both the Sutton Trust and Esmée Fairbairn Foundation have committed to this project for its potential to improve the capacity of the voluntary sector to design, deliver, and evaluate parenting interventions. In addition to the six organisational outcomes above, it was hoped we would:

- Identify elements of effective parental engagement practice benefiting children and families.
- Trial a new model of support for organisations – connecting evaluation with delivery and developing 'upstream'[7] evaluation - that would enable them to develop delivery and demonstrate impact, with the help of a team from the University of Oxford.

Discussion of what we learnt about the sector is at the end of the report page 26.

---

[7] The studies that comprise PEF might be called 'upstream' evaluations in that they are closer to the intervention source than more rigorous 'downstream' evaluations in which the evaluation team are distant from the intervention team so as not to be influenced.

4. Selected organisations

Six UK based organisations were selected out of an original 285 applications.

Selection criteria included:

- Existing UK 'intervention' already working with parents to engage them in their child's learning with the aim of improving child outcomes
- Medium sized not-for-profit organisation.
- Demonstrating a genuine interest in understanding the impact of their intervention on parents and children, and whether their project achieves what it was set up to do. We called this feature 'persistent curiosity'.
- A willingness to develop their understanding of the evaluation process.

Selected organisations:

Easy Peasy

Early Childhood Unit (ECU) based at the National Children's Bureau NCB **- Making it REAL** (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) programme

Peeple – Peep Learning Together Programme

PEN the Parental Engagement network

The Reader – Stories for You and Yours

Howgill Children's Centre – they unfortunately withdrew from the fund due to organisational pressures.

5. What did the Parental Engagement Fund do?

Provided Funding

The organisations were provided with sufficient funds to deliver their intervention to a target group within the trial period.

Provided a critical friend

A critical friend was provided in the form of the expert evaluation team from the University of Oxford Department of Education who supported the organisations to:

- Identify an existing level of evidence on implementation and impact on families and children.
- Develop/clarify a Theory of Change model to identify and measure the components in a dynamic model showing the hypothesised pathway to effects on children.
- Develop an appropriate evaluation model - for example, pilot, feasibility, small-scale randomised controlled trial (RCT) - depending on their starting point:
  - o Pilot and feasibility trials are often talked about synonymously, or sometimes as a pilot being a subtype of feasibility. Pilot/feasibility trials are generally smaller, and used to assess whether it is *feasible* to conduct a full trial to rigorously evaluate an intervention. This involves examining all the elements and processes of an RCT. These include recruitment, retention, randomisation, deciding on measurement, and intervention protocol. Pilots are sometimes also used to refine the intervention itself. Feasibility studies may or may not have a randomised design. However, in the PEF work, we argued for feasibility studies to be conducted as 'mini RCTs' to maximise the opportunity for the organisations to learn about all that is involved.
  - o Randomised controlled trials (RCTs) are considered the gold standard in intervention research. They involve participants being randomly allocated to the intervention or control group. This is the most scientific way of testing the impact of a programme as it allows us to assume that there are no prior differences between the groups that might affect the outcome.

- Carry out three trials we describe as 'feasibility' (**Making it REAL, The Reader, Peeple**) and two small-scale RCTs (**EasyPeasy, PEN**)
- Choose appropriate measurement tools for assessing process and/or outcome. For the measures used across all the studies within PEF see Appendix A.
- Collect relevant baseline and post-test data
- Carry out data analysis
- Consider the results of the research in light of the organisation's aims, ways of working, and finances

Practical support from the Sutton Trust

Support from the Sutton Trust has included:

- Challenging and supporting practical aspects of delivery through regular monthly catch ups – these included reflecting on and developing delivery using a framework that identified progress in "small feedback loops." See Appendix B.
- Linking individual organisations to each other
- Supporting organisations with publicity and communication
- Connecting organisations with potential future funders and new markets

6. Intended organisational outcomes across the fund

Outcome 1 – Increase participation of families in parental engagement activities

Across the fund, a total of 1,329 families (typically parent-child dyads) were involved in the PEF programmes. For a table summarising the demographic characteristics of the families involved in the trials across the fund. See Appendix C.

A significant challenge with a voluntary intervention is recruitment and retention of families. The target group of PEF are busy parents facing multiple demands on their time and unpredictable life events. The challenge was felt by all the PEF organisations.

In the next section **Making it REAL** and **The Reader Stories for You and Yours** reflect on how they addressed recruitment and retention.

The two organisations had different starting points – **Making it REAL** was operating a train the practitioner model where practitioners who already worked in early years settings were trained to deliver the programme. The practitioners then recruited parents that they were already seeing on a regular basis.

The Reader had the challenge of going into previously unfamiliar early years settings and recruiting parents directly.

Making it REAL – delivered by the NCB Early Childhood Unit - trains practitioners to work with parents and carers to support their children's early literacy development. Practitioners engage with families through a combination of home visits and group events. The programme is underpinned by the ORIM framework.[8]

- Getting families involved

Early Childhood Unit recognised that recruitment would be easier if the staff team in the early years settings were committed to Making it REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy), understood the value of working with parents, and had positive attitudes towards them. To help the process, at least two members of staff from each setting were given two days of training with time to explore feelings, attitudes and their own confidence in working with parents. There was also time to plan the work and think about how the home visits would work with their families.

Families were recruited in a variety of ways, planned by nurseries to suit the community. This included launch events or one-to-one conversations with parents, either at nursery or on a visit to the home.

There were some challenges in recruiting families in settings where home visits are not established practice. This was mostly because practitioners lacked confidence and experience, while some parents expressed concern about why they had been invited, and may have feared that their own literacy skills would be exposed during the visits. Practitioners could engage parents by stressing how the home visits would support their child's education as they make the transition to school, as well as explaining that it was a special opportunity for their family.

---

[8] Developed by Peter Hannon and Cathy Nutbrown, the ORIM framework represents the four ways parents help their children learn. Parents are supported to create more **O**pportunities for learning; to **R**ecognise and value small steps in development; **I**nteract in positive ways and act as a **M**odel of explicit literacy use (e.g. telling children when they are reading a text message or explaining they are reading a notice or the number on a bus).

- Retention - keeping families involved

Making it REAL was successful in keeping children and families engaged. Over the two years in Oldham, only eight out of ninety two families dropped out of the programme and 76% had four home visits (the maximum). The flexibility of the ORIM framework that underpins the project may be appealing to practitioners and families.

However, there are challenges in keeping families committed to a home visit and event programme. The delivery team found that persistence helps, ensuring parents are fully informed and that they appreciate the need for commitment. Agreements and verbal reminders were supported by giving families a choice in timing of visits and personal invitations to events with dates sketched out ahead in a calendar. Inexpensive and free activities were prioritised and, for those struggling with even basic materials, simple packs of resources were provided.

- Participation – getting families to do more at home

The aim of the home visits and literacy events was to share knowledge and improve parents' confidence in supporting their children. Activities were left after a home visit so that parents could complete or repeat them. Parents were also encouraged to think of their own ideas.

Links were made between the home visits and events in settings. Reminders and encouragement were personal – sometimes the child wrote and delivered the invitation to an event. Photographs were taken throughout the programme, printed or sent by email, and put into scrapbooks and displays as a personal record of project activity.

REAL found that this personal approach attracted more members of the family, and practitioners were introduced to siblings, fathers, grandparents, and extended family members. Parents engaged with their nursery more and felt able to ask for more information and support.

Helen Wheeler – Making it REAL

The Reader has pioneered the use of Shared Reading to improve well-being, reduce social isolation and build resilience in diverse communities across the UK and beyond. Stories for You and Yours is a programme to support parents to build their skills and confidence to share stories with their children. An experienced Reader practitioner provides tips and ideas to encourage parents to think about ways they can engage their child with stories.

- Increased participation of parents and children

The Reader came up with a range of measures to boost participation and engagement with Stories for You and Yours, identifying that recruitment and retention would be one of their biggest challenges.

First, they decided to focus on recruiting primary schools with nursery settings. They assumed that if the children taking part were likely to continue education in the same setting after nursery, both staff and parents would have a greater investment in the programme.

The Reader had only done a small amount of work in the Sefton area prior to this project. Recognising that support from existing local networks would be key to getting schools on side, they built a strong relationship with Sefton Council School Readiness Team who helped them to identify the schools and nurseries most in need of support, and broker initial introductions with Headteachers.

Relying on nursery teachers to promote the sessions to parents left The Reader particularly vulnerable to poor recruitment in schools that had already struggled with parental engagement. To address this, they designed a two-week in-person introduction from their trained facilitators who gave out flyers at drop-off and pick-up times, chatted to parents over breakfast pastries and invited them to a no-commitment taster session a week later.

In these tasters, parents had an opportunity to see how their child might enjoy the reading sessions, something which proved particularly powerful for those who did not read with their children at home. By challenging assumptions about whether their child enjoyed reading, the taster sessions helped to break down potential barriers which might have led parents to decline outright.

The Reader continuously adapted their recruitment strategy to boost participant numbers while facing the challenge of recruiting to a control and experimental group. When they found it was difficult to get across to settings the importance of recruiting to a control group, they amended their evaluation sign-up strategy so that parents did not find out whether they were intervention ('Early Starters') or control ('Late Starters') until they'd agreed to take part. In addition, they developed new FAQ sheets which addressed any uncertainties for teachers and ensured that messaging to parents was clear and uncomplicated.

They also experimented with offering incentives to families to take part but found this approach to have very little impact, with only 32 out of a potential 180 families taking up the offer. Term timings also had an impact on recruitment rates, with fewer families recruited during the Summer Term.

Overall, while they found that in-person recruitment by The Reader's own facilitators was the most effective means of recruiting families to take part, they found connecting with parents in schools where staff already struggle with family engagement to be challenging. Considering the resources available, it may be beneficial for The Reader to focus on schools or settings which serve disadvantaged families but are proactive and likely to embrace programmes such as Stories for You and Yours.

Jennifer Jarman – The Reader

Outcome 2 - Increased evidence of impact on parental behaviour and interaction with their children including the home learning environment

Promising findings of a positive impact on the home learning environment were found in both the PEN and Making it REAL trials.

As part of PEF, **PEN** has trained teachers and teaching assistants in 51 schools to work with parents, with a focus on disadvantaged families, to help them support their children's learning and build positive relationships with other parents and school staff.

The Parental Engagement Network supports schools and settings to better engage parents. It provides training for staff and parents, develops a range of creative projects and sustainable resources, and facilitates networks to share good practice.

As part of PEF, **PEN** has trained teachers and teaching assistants in 51 schools to work with parents, with a focus on disadvantaged families, to help them support their children's learning and build positive relationships with other parents and school staff. Schools have been trained in three different projects. In the Transition Project (Mouse Club) practitioners begin working with parents in the summer term before the child starts nursery or reception.

The following is taken from: Engaging parents effectively: Evaluation of the PEN Home Learning Project Fiona Jelley and Professor Kathy Sylva 2017.

The results from the small-scale evaluation indicate promising effects of the **PEN** Home Learning Project (Phase 2) specifically on the supportive home environment. Scores on the parent-reported Home Learning Environment Index significantly increased in the intervention group compared with the control group. In addition, the teacher-rated Family Support subscale from the Brief Early Skills and Support Index (BESSI) also showed an improvement approaching statistical significance in the intervention group. **Taken together, the significant impact on Home Learning Environment scores and the near significant trend on the Family Support subscale suggest that the PEN programme positively influenced parental behaviours at home**.

The two findings are closely linked, with the home learning environment focusing on the type and frequency of cognitive learning activities parents supported their child with at home (e.g. reading, counting, and nursery rhymes), and the Family Support subscale tapping into the more general support offered at home, according to the child's teacher. Items on the Family Support subscale include: 'this child rarely misses a day at school', and 'this child talks about fun, shared activities at home'.
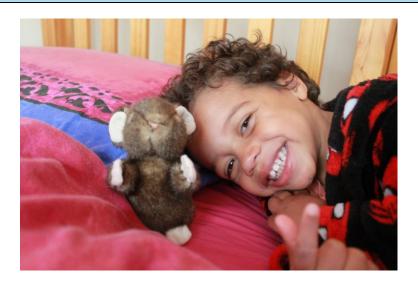
In addition to the promising results from the quantitative trial, a qualitative review indicates that the PEN programme was well received by parents and setting staff which may provide an explanation for the promising results from the trial.

Vicki Lord, head teacher at Irk Valley Community School said, "*The vast majority of parents (90%) said they had found the project useful or very useful*". A parent from Newall Green Primary School commented, "*It has helped my son's confidence and helped him to concentrate (he can't sit down for more than a few minutes). They were all great activities. Our best had to be 'Get Active' (counting star jumps) and 'Shape Hunt'. It helped me to understand how to help my son.*"

Parents from Hollingworth Primary School said, "*The teacher made me see that play and singing songs is the best tool I can use...we can't wait to fish ducks out of the bath, buy a currant bun or go on a bear hunt through the local park. Thank you for introducing us to Play club and all the new adventures we will share*" .... "*It was great to get him away from the screen and do things together – the workshops showed us ways to make learning fun.*"

PEN team reflected that the trial had given them cause to be optimistic about their long-held view of the effectiveness of training existing school staff to improve their engagement with parents and help enrich the home learning environment. Involvement in PEF enabled them to further develop training and sustainable resources that are now available relatively cheaply to other schools (see www.penetwork.co.uk) and could have long term impact on schools' practice and positive experiences of learning at home.

Emma Beresford – CEO PEN

Outcome 3 – Increase evidence of impact on child outcomes

Although some well-designed research studies show effects of parent interventions on children's outcomes, many show an impact on parent's report on home practices but not on their children's outcomes. In this PEF study, only one project, EasyPeasy, identified promising effects on children's outcomes.

As reported in Findings from an efficacy trial on parent engagement and school readiness skills" 2016 Jelley, Sylva and Karemaker, **EasyPeas**y had moderate **positive effects on parenting self-efficacy (perceived competence) related to discipline and boundaries and on children's cognitive self-regulation (as reported by their parents), improvements unlikely to have occurred by chance**.

Parents reported significant improvements in their children's persistence and concentration. 'Cognitive self-regulation' includes persisting to complete difficult tasks (rather than giving in to distractions or giving up), making decisions independently, and working things out for oneself. This is sometimes called 'grit' or 'character'. Cognitive self-regulation is a widely agreed component of school readiness, the capacity to make the most of opportunities to learn. The two significant outcomes suggest a possible relationship between parents' increased consistency with rules and boundaries, and children's corresponding improvements in cognitive self-regulation. There is a research base which suggests links between parenting style and children's developmental outcomes.

Professor Kathy Sylva': "*From this study, it looks like* **EasyPeasy** *really has increased the school readiness of these children. School readiness means ready to be a really active learner who goes out seeking new skills, new ideas, new relationships and new peers, and having the confidence to tackle challenging things, enjoy the challenge, and move on in development.*"

Outcome 4 – Developed understanding of evaluation

Four PEF organisations conducted RCT evaluations in conjunction with the Oxford team, each designed to go beyond their current level of evidence. One carried out feasibility work in preparation for further trial by the EEF.

Through the critical friend model, the Oxford team were able to work very closely with each organisation to design and carry out an evaluation appropriate to the stage of 'evidence building' they were at. It was this working in partnership that enabled the organisations to develop a deeper understanding of evaluation. The Oxford team also learned a great deal from this process about what we call 'upstream evaluation', which will be discussed later in this report.

One of the first issues was that 'evaluation' meant different things to different people. The idea of considering evaluation from the outset, and in particular using a scientifically rigorous approach to test the impact of an intervention, was sometimes quite a large step from what organisations had been expected to do in terms of evaluation in the past. Often in this sector, organisations do not have the resources to consider having a comparison group, for example. The Oxford team were keen for the PEF organisations, where possible, to carry out some form of randomised controlled trial(RCT), even if it had to be small in scale. Our view was that experiencing first hand all the steps and issues involved in such a trial would be one of the best ways to understand the principles of rigorous programme evaluation.

There are many factors to be considered in conducting RCTs, and one of the main things the Oxford team did was to help the organisations understand the importance of some of these issues. First, it's essential to clearly define the programme to be tested, that is, what is the content, who is the target group, how long should it last, and what is it aiming to achieve. Linked to this was understanding that in a rigorous trial, a programme cannot be adapted or changed along the way, because of the need to link measurable effects to a single, coherent intervention and not to a changing medley of parts.

Next, some of the finer detail of designing and executing an RCT was new, for example; the use of control groups and what exactly random assignment entails; the timing of randomisation, especially with regard to collecting baseline data, and the importance of this for the assumption that there are no existing differences between the groups at outset; randomising at the individual family or whole school (cluster) level; and intention-to-treat analysis (in which all participants allocated to the intervention group are analysed regardless of how much they participated) vs. analysing only those who actually participated in the intervention.

We also worked closely in considering when and what to measure, and how to measure it. In order to select appropriate outcome measures, it is vital to have a deep understanding of the intervention to be clear on what exactly it is aiming to improve, and then to put in place a good baseline measurement from which to assess change. Although measurement decisions were generally budget-led, we discussed issues such as objective measurement vs. self-report and encouraged organisations to consider established, standardised measures alongside questionnaires created by the developer. The timing of the post-test is also important as it should be the best estimate of when the intervention might have had the chance to 'bite' – which isn't always immediately after the active intervention period. We also discussed the importance of keeping track of participants and collecting post-test data from as many people as possible from the original randomised group; high levels of dropout compromise the security of the findings.

Finally, the Oxford team attempted to manage the expectations of the organisations in terms of what the results of one small trial can really conclude. We guided the organisations in interpreting and making sense of any findings (or lack of findings), considering the limitations of the study.

Fiona Jelley – University of Oxford

Naomi Eisenstadt (**University of Oxford**):

"It was clear from my discussions with the leaders of the organisations that they had different starting points in terms of their prior understanding of the technicalities of evaluation. It seems highly likely that working with the Oxford team has enhanced all participants' understanding and their confidence to test out new tools for evaluation."

Jen Jarman (**The Reader**):

"Working with the Parental Engagement Fund has given The Reader a valuable opportunity to stretch our in-house evaluation expertise. We've been able to train our staff in the application of new evaluation measures and gained experience in designing research projects with extended follow-up intervals and comparison groups. With advice from Oxford we've learnt more about evaluation design best practice – something we've been able to put into practice in similar projects elsewhere. Conducting a research project on this scale has given us a lot of detailed data to work with, which has challenged us to develop more sophisticated data analysis skills and enabled us to invest time in interrogating the data in greater depth. Sharing learning with other ventures participating in the Fund has helped us to identify common challenges associated with Early Years evaluation and understand more about how other organisations are tackling these issues."

Jen Lexmond (**EasyPeasy**):

"The Parental Engagement Fund came with the incredibly valuable opportunity of working with a research team from the Department of Education at the University of Oxford. The Oxford team have acted as a critical friend to Easy-peasy, helping us design, deliver, and analyse an evaluation to test if our app was genuinely having the impact we hoped it was."

Outcome 5 – Progress up the evidence scale

The Early Intervention Foundation has developed a scale for assessing the scientific 'trustworthiness' or 'validity' of evidence showing that a particular intervention/programme is effective in achieving its objectives, i.e. bringing about the outcomes it promises. The scale goes from the lowest mark, where there is 'no evidence that the programme is effective', to the highest mark, which is given to an intervention which has demonstrated effectiveness through several different randomised control trials (RCTs), on large samples, in real-world contexts, using rigorous techniques for collecting information on outcomes and analysing it in an appropriate way. The EIF framework was shared with the five projects in PEF and they all worked collaboratively with the Oxford Team to locate on the EIF scale the standards of their own evidence according to the standards set by the EIF (see Appendix D).

Within PEF the EIF evidence scale was used to record the evaluation journey of the organisations. One of the intended outcomes was for organisations to make incremental steps of progress 'up the scale', i.e. to demonstrate effectiveness in a more rigorous manner. The goal was for each organisation to improve the rigour of their evidence for effectiveness, with a view to leveraging support for more robust evaluation. In this way, the fund complements the work of the Sutton Trust's sister organisation the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) by feeding into their pipeline. **EasyPeasy** and **the Peep Learning Together** programme both progressed onto rigorous trials with the EEF while the other three organisations are contemplating new, more rigorous evaluation strategies.

Moving up the evidence scale - A Feasibility Trial in preparation for a full-scale Randomised Controlled Trial

Peeple – The Learning Together Programme comprises 74 topics across five strands of learning: Personal, Social and Emotional; Communication and Language; Early Literacy; Early Maths; and Health and Physical Development. The practitioners delivering the Peep Learning Together Programme work with parents and carers to support their children's learning through everyday activities at home. They share with parents how to build on what they are already doing, to improve the home learning environment. It is based on the ORIM framework. [9]

As part of PEF, staff from **Peeple** carried out a feasibility study which helped them prepare for the Learning Together Study (LTS). This is a large-scale RCT of the **Peep** Learning Together Programme which is being supported by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).

Within the feasibility study **Peeple** worked on: selection of topics and duration; setting recruitment; techniques for recruitment and retention of families; piloting and selection of parent & child outcome measures; and development of a mentoring guide for intervention settings.

Learning from the Peeple Study

- Setting recruitment

Peeple used the study as an opportunity to prepare and pilot a range of promotional and explanatory material to explain the evaluation study and the intervention (the Learning Together Programme) for early years settings and parents. These documents formed the basis of those that are now being used in the EEF RCT.

- Recruitment and retention of families

Initially, the Programme was offered only to families with children eligible for a funded two year old place or the Early Years Pupil Premium. Many of these families were contending with complex issues outside of their pre-school experience which, understandably, impacted on the frequency of their participation in the group.

As a result of the feasibility study, **Peeple** decided to target three year olds rather than two-year-olds and, to broaden the setting selection criteria for the LTS beyond those in the 10% and 20% centiles of the Indices of Deprivation. They also decided not to restrict participation within the settings to families eligible for the Early Years Pupil Premium.

- Programme topics and duration

Peeple trialled different combinations of topics over 10 and 20 weeks and discovered:

- The importance of including topics from the Personal, Social and Emotional Development Strand of the Programme (to address behavioural issues about which parents were concerned)
- That the minimum duration of the intervention for the LTS should be 20 weeks plus a home visit (to build relationships, to give time for families to settle into the routine of the group, and to allow for a higher dose of content, particularly as regular attendance can be an issue)

---

[9] Ibid.

- Mentoring Guidance

Experienced Peep Practitioners piloted a range of different mentoring techniques to support the newly-trained practitioners. These have informed the mentoring guidance which is being used by the five mentors who are now supporting the Learning Together Study.

Measurement tools

- Parent measures

Three measures for parent outcomes were trialled. These were: The Very Early Home Learning Environment (to measure the home learning environment, parent self-report); The Tool to Measure Parental Self-Efficacy (TOPSE) (to measure parenting confidence and self–efficacy, parent self-report); and The Brief Early Skills & Support Index (BESSI) (to measure family support, practitioner report).

Participants were also invited to contribute to a focus group conducted by the University of Oxford.

The HLE and the TOPSE have both been selected as parent outcome measures for the EEF's evaluation of the LTS.

- Child measures

A number of different measures of early language and literacy development were trialled. These were The British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS), the Renfrew Action Picture Test (RAPT), Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals Preschool (CELF), and Concepts About Print (CAP).

- The CELF and the CAP measure aspects of language and early literacy were the most closely aligned to the aims of the Learning Together Programme. The CELF has been selected by the EEF evaluator for the primary outcome and the CAP as the secondary outcome for the LTS. As part of PEF **Peeple** were also able to trial the uses of different books with the CAP and have agreed on the use of The Gruffalo.

Learning from the Parental Engagement Fund feasibility study was a fundamental step in preparation for the EEF large-scale RCT study which commenced in January 2018.

Sally Smith - CEO Peeple

Outcome 6 – Leverage future support for delivery

The fund hoped to support the organisations to leverage future support - two have gone on to EEF large scale trials, all five of them have accessed new funding and delivery opportunities.

EasyPeasy is a smart phone app that sends parents of 2-5 year olds ideas for games and activities to try with their children, all designed to develop key skills like language, communication, and self-regulation.

Trained practitioners, or 'Pod Leaders' set up a local **EasyPeasy** Pod for their setting and invite families to join via text message. Participating parents can access a bank of activities from their smartphone and receive new content over the five-month period of the programme. The activities are demonstrated through short films of parents playing the games with their child, accompanied by pop-up tips and information on child development. Parents share experiences and feedback through commenting on their Pod, and Pod Leaders receive data on engagement through their settings' **EasyPeasy** digital dashboard.

Leveraging Future Support:

The association with and backing of the Sutton Trust and the University of Oxford was crucial in helping a small start-up like **EasyPeasy** to form their first large partnerships with local authorities and academy chains. In the 12 months following publication of the results from **EasyPeasy's** first efficacy trial in Bournemouth (150 families) as part of PEF, which found significant positive effect on parents' behaviour and consistency and on children's cognitive self-regulation (December 2016), **EasyPeasy** has gone on to secure the support of the EEF for a national, large-scale trial through which **EasyPeas**y will support over 10,000 families and to secure partnerships with nine additional local authority partners right across England (Islington, Camden, Durham, Doncaster, Knowsley, Coventry, Oldham, Bedford, and Luton).

In the past year, the organisation has also raised over £500k to extend its impact to more children, worked with over 200 individual early years settings and thousands of families in their communities, and trained over 200 early years teachers and practitioners in using digital tools effectively to drive outcomes. The combination of rigorous evidence and the advocacy of trusted and respected organisations like the Sutton Trust and the University of Oxford has allowed a young start up like **EasyPeasy** to grow and scale, without straying from their mission to transform social mobility starting in the earliest years.

Jen Lexmond - CEO EasyPeasy

7. Identifying elements of effective parental engagement practice – based on the qualitative review

While robust quantitative evaluation is essential to find out what impact a specific programme or approach has had on outcomes, we also need to find out why or how this has happened. Reports from parents and from setting staff on efficacy cannot be scientifically relied upon to prove impact, but they can give enormously useful information about what works to get parents involved in the first place and to ensure they stay involved. While involvement and enjoyment does not guarantee impact, the intervention is guaranteed not to have impact if nobody joins in.

PEF has identified likely elements of effective parental engagement across the fund, particularly focusing on qualitative case studies carried out by Dr Janet Goodall University of Bath, from **ECU**'s **Making it REAL** and **Parental Engagement Network** which both produced promising findings of a positive impact on the home learning environment.

Recruitment and retention

All the approaches rely on parents volunteering to participate, sometimes in response to invitations from the setting or school. The fundamental challenges that every organisation faced were recruitment and then retention.

(Additional examples above in Outcome one by ECU **Making it REAL** and **The Reader**, Stories for You and Yours)

What helps in recruiting and keeping families

- Relationship with practitioners

If there is a pre-existing relationship between practitioners and parents, or the approach is situated in a local setting - such as a children's centre or their child's nursery or school setting - parents are more likely to feel comfortable being involved. Regular contact also helps in establishing a relationship between parents and practitioners.

In the **PEN** project, practitioners reported that parents were more willing to take part in school activities as they became more comfortable with staff; as one setting reported; "*Parents feel confident approaching the teacher and the school activities, so they can help their children.*" **(PEN** trained practitioner)

REAL trained practitioners also reported that as the relationship developed it relieved some of the anxiety parents felt to coming into settings in the first place. This increased comfort also led to parents feeing able to ask for more information about supporting learning at home.

"*For me that has been huge, just the parents feeling so comfortable to be able to come and ask questions… 'Is there any way, can you give me some ideas of how I could help with their reading' or 'How can I help, they're really struggling to hold their pencil, what could I do?' Having that familiarity with us to be able to come and just ask us questions*" (**REA**L trained practitioner)

- Home Visits

ECU (**Making it Real**) and **Peeple** (Peep Learning Together programme) both deliver an element of their work via home visits:

> "...the enjoyment children derived from having their practitioner visit their home, the happiness displayed by the child helps to retain the parents and other family members who also see the benefit for the whole family, particularly other siblings." **(REAL** trained practitioner)

Home visits were identified as a particularly effective way to build relationships between practitioners and parents with the benefits seen by both parties. These visits also gave practitioners more information about children and families, as they "*saw the children in a different light*" at home than they did in school/setting.

REAL trained practitioners reported "*The dads got warmer during the visits and offered us cups of tea*", and led to parents being "*comfortable to talk*" in ways they were not in school, and during the visits, "*Dads tended to say they didn't know these things would help their child*".

Some parents were initially unsure about the prospect of home visits, either through concerns about why they had been included in the programme - fearing stigmatisation as 'bad parents'- or through concerns about the process of the visits - a parent with a low level of literacy could fear being asked to read to a child during a visit. However, **REAL** trained practitioners reported this initial trepidation soon changed, "*After the first [visit], they couldn't wait for the second*".

One of the outcomes of both the home visits and parents' presence in the classroom was an increased appreciation by the parents about how much "*the practitioners cared for the child*".

Home visits notably increased participation of the wider family, including siblings and dads; this appeared to lead to instances of family learning and increased whole family enjoyment of activities.

Practitioners pointed to some issues around home visits, mainly in relation to scheduling; some families needed to have visits rescheduled a number of times. Overall, however, staff seem to have placed a high value on the home visits.

The EasyPeasy App also reaches the family in the home. Parents access EasyPeasy game ideas via their phone app which provided families with an opportunity to practise in the comfort of their home.

- Peer Recruitment

When present, peer recruitment appears to have been particularly effective.

"*Parents speak to other parents about their positive experiences of REAL the year before; it makes recruitment easier in the second year of the programme*".

PEN trained staff noted "*the parents from last year are really encouraging each other so if they know there is a workshop on they'll say come on let's go – so we've found that turn out is higher – it's had a knock-on effect*.

- Parental belief in their ability to make a difference to their child

Parents were inspired to support learning in the home when they understood the value of the home learning environment and the impact they can have on learning, when they understood how easy this can be, and when they had increased confidence to support learning.

A **Real** trained practitioner commented noticed that "*Parents realised that they didn't need A levels to help their children with literacy*" and that they did not need to spend large amounts on new equipment or toys to support learning.

PEN trained practitioners commented how parents now "*understand how they help their children at home*", and, importantly, "*I think they are beginning to see the value of what they already do*". Parental confidence was supported by staff expressions of appreciation for parents' efforts.

- Parent and child enjoyment of the intervention

PEN trained staff comments often linked parents' enjoyment of the programme with their increased confidence in supporting learning. For example, after a playdough exercise, parents reported to staff that "*they enjoyed spending more time with their child, and felt more sure of how to help*". "*It was a fun task which C loved getting involved in because the whole family could get involved*".

A **Pen** trained practitioner reported that the benefits for parents were wider than support for children: "*I think it has a snowball effect as well, once they come to one thing, then they're interested in lots of things… "Our parents got a real kick out of the celebration and certificate*"

Parents often reported that they enjoyed teachers "*coming out to our house*".

- Use of appropriate technology

"*Through our co-design approach with parents we learned a lot about how they live their lives at the moment (e.g. using mobile to communicate rather than email; preferring video to written content) and using those insights to create a service that would fit in seamlessly to how they live their lies now.*" – **Jen Lexmond, EasyPeasy**

The value of using text messaging as a means of connecting with parents was also commented on by **REAL** trained practitioners and **Peeple staff**.

- Realistic expectations of parent engagement

It is important to be realistic about the time that parents are able to commit to attending settings as well as the time they can spend with their child on specific activities**. Making it REAL, PEN**, and the **Peep Learning Together** programme specifically focus on the learning and engagement opportunities in everyday life, such as noticing print and shapes when outside with children, focusing on counting when doing things such as sorting laundry or preparing a meal, and supporting the muscles needed for writing through activities such as baking (stirring, sprinkling). **EasyPeasy** provides game suggestions that work with resources readily available in the home and which can be played anywhere.

What helps practitioners to engage

It is not a given that all practitioners will embrace new interventions.

- Senior management support

Practitioners from both **PEN** and **Making it REAL** commented that support from their senior leaders had a significant impact on the success of the project particularly in terms of providing cover and/or time for preparation.

- A positive attitude to parents

This is often expressed as realising that all parents want the best for their children **PEN** practitioners described how much the training had helped them to better understand parents and "*the value of engaging parents and supporting them in helping their children learning and settling into school*"

REAL trained practitioner: "*The parents want to do it, but they just don't know what to do.*"

Throughout both projects, practitioners noted changes in their practice, in their understanding of the mechanisms and value of parents' engagement, and in their capacity to support that engagement. The projects were beneficial to staff as a means of continuing professional development and building capacity in the workforce.

Different Models of delivery

- Train the practitioner model

This model is where school or setting practitioners are trained by the programme experts to support parents. It was used in **EasyPeasy, PEN** and **REAL**. This model established a legacy within the setting, leading to sustainability of impacts and an increase in capacity within settings. Staff in the **REAL** and **PEN** projects reported that the training was very helpful to their work, both in relation to the support provided by staff but also from the interaction with other practitioners.

Practitioners in both the **Making it REAL** and **PEN** projects placed a high value on the training they received; practitioners in the **PEN** project often rated training, and support from the **PEN** team, as the best thing about the programme.

This model also has the benefit of increased sustainability of delivery. Practitioners in both **PEN** and **Making it REAL** projects pointed to ways they would continue the work they had undertaken during the project in future years, either directly, though continuing with the project, or by incorporating ideas from the project into their regular working practices.

PEN trained practitioners commented that they found the training efficient for staff and sustainable, which meant that 7 out of 9 of the schools in phase 2 said they would embed at least some of the strategies and materials into their practice longer term. One Headteacher said "*It was a very effective project with great benefits for the parents and children involved. We will continue to use the strategies and resources*."

When practitioners within a setting are trained in one of these approaches there is greater opportunity to develop the parent/practitioner relationship and to reinforce messages through regular contact.

- Direct delivery

Direct delivery, on the other hand, has the benefit of more experienced/trained practitioners interacting directly with parents. **The Reader** have engaged inspirational readers to inspire personal enjoyment of literature and model sharing books with children. So, what may be lost on legacy may be compensated for by the quality of the contact times. **Peep** setting practitioners' feedback on the benefit of having experts present weekly in some situations suggests it is possible to have a combination of both, where expert delivery is supported by follow-up support from setting staff.

EasyPeasy for example combines both, with the videos ensuring high quality demonstration of the intervention and the Pod administrator providing regular support. **PEN** would like to develop video clips as part of their future training package.

What promotes active engagement and changes to the home learning environment

- Modelling

Modelling is a key strand of the ORIM framework underpinning **Peep** Learning Together Programme and **Making it REAL**. [10] **The Reader** models sharing books with children in **"Magical Story time"** and **EasyPeasy** uses mini film clips for modelling. One of the **PEN** trained practitioners commented *"I realised that I needed to model how to praise and encourage children."* The expectation is then that the parents having seen and experienced these ideas, will continue those practices with their children.

- Opportunities to Practice

Whilst modelling appears to be very important it also seems to be helpful to parents to be able to practise. In **EasyPeasy**, parents and children watch the game and then practise themselves. **Making it REAL, PEN and PEEPLE** all give ideas and resources to parents, but the important element is when the parents practise with their child; within **Stories for You and Yours**, **The Reader** creates an opportunity for parents to practise sharing stories with their child.

- Peer Learning

Both parents and staff reported the **REAL** and **PEN** programmes generally encouraged parents to interact with each other, form friendships, share ideas and resources and support the learning of their children.

Parents forming friendships was a clear outcome of both the **PEN** and **REAL** projects. Often these friendships had wider effects, such as a reduction of feelings of isolation, parents helping each other with paperwork, encouraging each other to attend events, exchanging tips on supporting learning, even sharing resources such as books between families; in one instance, peer friendships among parents were credited with helping a parent overcome a fear of leaving the house.

- Access to resources and fresh ideas

Both staff and parents were positive about the resources provided by the project, "*Play dough activities were amazing They [*parents and children*] liked throwing and timing practical activities – best feedback from parents on those"* [**PEN** trained staff].

A **REAL** trained practitioner reported that parents had accepted, "*There's no need to spend money –. It's helped them to rethink the opportunities that they have to use every day resources with their children. They are using more natural resource around the home – every day materials; they have more confidence in using them".*

Staff in this project also report that parents are now bringing in their own, original ideas for supporting learning at home, to discuss with staff.

Even experienced parents found benefits from the **PEN** programme, "*Already have an older child (and younger) than T so already have some idea on how to engage. However, this project provided fresh ideas and accessories … Project helps provide ideas to engage with kids and helps their learning. They provided ideas that I would not have thought about – the best bits were the tangible toys and resources."*

Parents in the **PEN** project reported learning "*new songs*" and "*new ways of learning through play*".

A core strength of **EasyPeas**y is that participating parents can access a bank of activities from their smart phones and receive new ideas over the five-month period of the programme. Activities include using

---

[10] Developed by Peter Hannon and Cathy Nutbrown, the ORIM framework represents the four ways parents help their children learn. Parents are supported to create more Opportunities for learning; to Recognise and value small steps in development; Interact in positive ways and act as a Model of explicit literacy use (e.g. telling children when they are reading a text message or explaining they are reading a notice or the number on a bus).

imagination to turn a room into an 'imaginary safari' and taking 'selfies' of different expressions identifying and discussing different emotions.

8. What we learnt about the model of support

An innovation of the Parental Engagement Fund was to provide intense, highly skilled support from the expert evaluation team at the University of Oxford Department of Education. In order to benefit from this support, the organisations needed to have sufficient capacity, commitment and competency levels which should be clearly articulated at the start.

The model provided two kinds of support: advice related to programme implementation and advice related to evaluation.

Each project developed an evaluation design that included a target sample, research procedures, measurement tools for determining outcomes, and an analytic plan.

The structure of monthly 'progress meetings' meant that all aspects of the evaluation design (pilot study, feasibility study, or randomised controlled trial) were always under the spotlight. Was recruitment going well? Was attendance satisfactory? If not – why not? What could be done to improve? The Oxford Team advised on programme implementation as well as on evaluation methods. The formal scrutiny of both implementation and also evaluation shed light on diverse aspects of intervention that might (or might not) lead to success.

The Critical friend model of support has included evaluation expertise, bespoke support regarding developing a Theory of Change, and structure to their intervention. The Critical Friend approach adopted by the PEF team required these skills:

1. An understanding of requirements of successful implementation, especially recruitment, retention, and using informal feedback.
2. High level understanding of the science of evaluation, so that each intervention project assessed its current evidential base and then carried out an evaluation exercise to move on from this.
3. A knowledge of suitable outcome measures and their likely sensitivity to change for the particular intervention.
4. Understanding the practical challenges of grassroots evaluation and a willingness to work in a messy, low-budget context
5. An understanding of the challenges of front line organisational delivery and willingness not to overload managers
6. Enthusiasm for articulating in an accessible manner evaluation terminology and concepts.
7. Skill at challenging in a supportive manner.

The five evaluation studies that comprise PEF might be called 'upstream' evaluations in that they are closer to the intervention source than more rigorous 'downstream' evaluations in which the evaluation team are distant from the intervention team so as not to be influenced. Complete independence between interveners and evaluators is required for the highest evidential level on the EIF ladder of trustworthiness. The team that supported the PEF evaluations was only semi-independent, working closely with the five programmes. However, all the evaluation work in PEF was based on the premise that good evaluation practices should be used as early as possible when studying the effects of an intervention. These good practices include: a counter factual group (or control group), random assignment to condition, valid and reliable measures of outcome, a measure of pre-test against which to measure change, statistics that are appropriate to the design (e.g. randomisation of individuals or whole schools), statistical analyses that

take into account what might have occurred through pure chance factors, and clear reporting of all steps in design and analysis so that others can criticise what has been done.

All of the PEF projects had carried out previous evaluations, some without a control/comparison group, some using non validated measures devised uniquely for the specific intervention, some not taking into account differences between treatment and comparison groups that might have occurred by chance alone. Moreover, all had collected and reported anecdotal accounts of the benefits of the intervention. Finally, 'just quantitatively measuring' an outcome does not mean that it is rigorous. Measures have to be validated through earlier research, information needs to be collected in an unbiased way, statistical analyses must be appropriate to the design, and findings must be reported in an objective and open way so others can criticise.

9. The context and the challenges

Throughout this report we have tried to emphasise the challenge of identifying impact using a rigorous approach to collecting evidence. The organisations involved in PEF are to be congratulated for their heroic effort in embracing the opportunity and its significant challenges. It is very hard to 'prove' in any real sense that a social intervention works. Absence of evidence does not mean it does not work; it means we just can't be sure one way or another. In addition to these difficulties, it has been clear that other factors have proved challenging.

Three interrelated issues have been in play: the squeeze on the funding of initiatives, the increasing interest in funders of value for money, and finally, cultural aspects of the voluntary sector. The funding for parenting interventions largely comes from foundations and the public sector. The last six years has been a time of extraordinary restrictions on finance for local authorities. Discretionary funds have been cut to the bone, but demand has increased. The closure or hollowing out of children's centres, where much of the work on parenting would have taken place, has also put enormous strain on organisations who delivered their programmes in children's centres. Reduced availability of funds from government has consequently meant increased demand on foundations. Indeed, one of the six organisations selected for PEF had to pull out, in part, because of such pressures. Investing in innovation is a luxury because many very good ideas turn out not to work. Under such pressure, local authorities and indeed, central government, will be reluctant to fund anything without a solid foundation in evidence. Moreover, funders tend to look for two characteristics that while not mutually exclusive are in tension: innovation and evidence of efficacy. Funders like to support innovation and at the same time require evidence of effectiveness. The first may be a great idea yet to be tested and the second may take some years to establish; not easy to combine.

Hence, the second linked issue. Funders, including foundations are rightly interested in evidence that the money they spend will achieve what is promised. Evidence based practice has become a requirement to attract funding. But many commissioners, including some foundations, are reluctant to fund the cost of rigorous evaluation, and, as importantly, do not really understand the challenges of evaluation of social interventions. The requirements for short term funding, for quick wins and unrealistic achievements, often results in poor funding decisions. Some organisations are very good at selling themselves, without firm foundations to the work. Some of the larger charities import interventions from the US that have a strong evidence base in a totally different context. These tried and tested programmes are often more attractive than UK based smaller scale start up interventions.

Moreover, to prove effectiveness requires willing participants. Recruitment is often a challenge when participation is voluntary and when your target group are busy parents facing multiple demands on their time and unpredictable life events. Regular participation is essential to ensure impact can be reliably measured. The smaller the sample group, the harder it is to attribute any changes to the intervention, as opposed to any other issues that may be going on in people's lives. Divorce, bereavement, moving to a new house, and the birth of second baby can all negatively impact on family functioning. Improvements in circumstances like a better job, improved adult relationships, or housing security may positively affect the impact of an intervention. So, ascribing cause and effect to an intervention is a very tricky business. School based interventions may be more effective in attracting participants because children have to be in school, so some contact with one or other parent is very likely. Early years settings attract voluntary participation, so interventions run from such settings often miss more isolated families who do not attend a children's centre or other local service. Without data detailing who they are, and funding to do the outreach necessary to involve them, they will inevitably be missed out.

The third issue is somewhat subtler, but none the less important. It is about the culture of organisations delivering social interventions. In selecting the organisations for PEF, we were interested in those that demonstrated persistent curiosity. Some organisations that applied were convinced that what they were doing worked. They wanted to participate to improve the story they could give to funders, but they were in no doubt that the underlying assumptions in their delivery were right, and that parents and children really benefitted from their work. In some cases, they did not appear to consider the possibility of poor results. There are good reasons for resistance. Firstly, as mentioned above, it is very difficult to get funders to consider including the high cost of good evaluation in bids. But other cultural factors are in

play. It takes an enormous amount of self-confidence to seriously question whether assumptions could be wrong. The mainly women and some men who work in this field are extremely dedicated and hold strong beliefs about its social value. This is a great strength of the voluntary sector, and indeed delivery in many parts of the statutory sector. Asking the very hard questions about effectiveness can feel like a challenge to the dedication and hard work of staff, rather than a scientific enquiry about methodology and impact. Did we do the right thing but not well enough, or was it not the right thing to do in the first place? Social entrepreneurs need to be confident and creative. They have a wonderful idea about something, strongly believe it will deliver, spend huge amounts of time trying to raise money for the provision and finally get something off the ground. It then becomes particularly frightening to be asked 'how do you know it works?' Moreover, informal feedback is almost always very positive. Those who do participate do so because the find it helpful and enjoyable. It is very hard to find out who does not participate and why. And the hardest lesson is that parent reports alone do not prove changes in parents' behaviour, let alone measurable improvements in child outcomes.

There are wider lessons from these observations. Funders need to be better informed on what good evidence looks like, especially the high cost and often impracticality of randomised controlled trials. Providers need to be more willing to be honest about the basis for their thinking on why something might be effective, and then be brave enough to test the assumptions. Revisiting emerging results and making small changes based on ongoing feedback is a critical part of programme design. Establishing impact requires adherence to a core set of activities that do not change. Finally, the question 'does it work' is too simplistic. Clarity on what the programme is meant to achieve, for whom, under what conditions, and at what cost will yield more nuanced understanding of lessons learned for other users, other settings, and perhaps other social challenges.

We are delighted that of the five organisations that the fund was able to actively support, two have progressed to EEF trials, two others found promising evidence of impact on the home learning environment, and they all did an incredible job of rising to and overcoming all the challenges that we have outlined in this report.

Indeed, our selection criteria on 'persistent curiosity' proved to be really important. When the PEF was first developed, we were responding to the increasing understanding of the importance of working with parents while children are very young, as well as the increasing demand from funders for evidence. All the organisations involved have been on an incredible learning journey about evaluation. The Oxford Team have developed a deeper understanding of the difficulties of combining rigorous data collection and analysis with day to day front line work with families and children. As with many projects, all involved wound up doing much more work than originally expected. The legacy of this learning should be shared well beyond those directly involved. It is important for commissioners, researchers, and front-line practitioners to understand the complexity, difficulty and rewards of really understanding 'what works'.

10. Appendices

Appendix A: Measures used in the evaluations

Brief Early Skills and Support Index (BESSI; Hughes &White, 2015)
Designed to measures the broad foundations of 2.5-5.5 year olds' school readiness, including everyday social/practical skills as well as cognitive abilities, as assessed by early years/reception teacher/practitioner. It has 30 items that map onto four subscales: Behavioural Adjustment; Language and Cognition; Daily Living Skills; and Family Support.

British Picture Vocabulary Scale (BPVS; Dunn, Dunn, & Whetton, 1997)
Standardised measure of children's receptive (hearing) vocabulary, suitable for 2.5 years to adult.

Child Self-Regulation & Behaviour Questionnaire (CSBQ) from the Early Years Toolbox (Howard & Melhuish, 2016)
A questionnaire for parents or teachers on the self-regulation and behaviour of 2-5 year olds. 33 questions corresponding to 7 subscales: cognitive self-regulation; behavioural self-regulation; emotional self-regulation; sociability; prosocial behaviour; externalising problems; and internalising problems.

Early Years Home Learning Environment Index (HLE) (Sylva et al., 2010)
Parent-completed questionnaire on how often a child is engaged in specific learning and play activities at home. It has 7 items rated on a 0–7 scale: reading together, library visits, playing with letters/numbers, playing with/teaching letters in the alphabet, helping to learn numbers/shapes/counting, singing songs/poems/nursery rhymes, painting/drawing at home.

Parent Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1995)
Self-complete tool to measure parenting stress in parents/carers of young children (from 3 months to 12 years). It has three subscales: parental distress, parent-child dysfunctional interaction and difficult child, which yields a 'Total Stress' score.

Tool to measure Parenting Self-Efficacy (TOPSE; Kendall & Bloomfield, 2005)
Self-complete measure to assess parenting self-efficacy and self-confidence across 8 domains (6 questions in each): emotion and affection; play and enjoyment; empathy and understanding; control; discipline and setting boundaries; pressures; self-acceptance and learning and knowledge.

Table 1. measures used by each of the organisations

Project:	EasyPeasy	Parental Engagement Network (PEN)	Making it REAL	The Reader	Peeple
Measures: *Parent*					
Home Learning Environment (HLE)		✓	✓		✓
TOPSE	✓				✓
Parent Stress Index	✓				
Bespoke instrument				✓ title/author checklist	
Child					
BPVS				✓	
CSBQ	✓				
BESSI		✓	✓	✓	
Bespoke instrument			✓ Child Observation Form (COF)		

References

Abidin R. R. (1995) Parenting Stress Index, 3rd ed. Psychological Assessment Resource, Odessa, FL. Dunn, LM, Dunn, LM, Whetton, C. (1997). British Picture Vocabulary Scale. 2nd ed. Windsor: NFER-Nelson.

Howard, & Melhuish, E. (2016). An Early Years Toolbox for assessing early executive function, language, self-regulation, and social development: validity, reliability, and preliminary norms. Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment, 10.

Hughes, C. & White, N. (2015). The Brief Early Skills and Support Index (BESSI) Manual: A guide to completing and scoring the BESSI for Early Years staff and researchers. Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge.

Kendall, S. & Bloomfield, L. (2005). Developing and validating a tool to measure parenting self-efficacy. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 51, 174-181.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (Eds.) (2010). Early childhood matters: evidence from the Effective Preschool and Primary Education Project. Oxford: Routledge

Appendix B: Developing as a learning organisation

Outcome: Developing as a learning organisation

For our funded organisations we hope the collection of data will be used for two purposes. The first is evaluation; tracked using a scale based on the Early Intervention Foundation Scale of Evidence, and the second is to improve delivery; for which we have developed the scales below. This involves reviewing and analysing outputs and short, intermediate and long term outcomes in order to inform changes to day-to-day delivery and overall programme design. Timely reflection at a delivery and leadership level will help to give the intervention the best possible chance of having an impact.

Delivery level learning- regular analysis of session by session activity and reactive adjustment to give the best chance of each beneficiary achieving the intended outcomes.

1. Delivery with no output or short-term outcomes information formally collected.

2. Delivery and its outputs and short-term outcomes monitored on a day to day basis and ad hoc adjustments made at level of individual staff.

3. Delivery and its outputs and short-term outcomes monitored on a day to day basis and adjustments made consistently across all practitioners (while sticking to overall programme design).

Leadership level learning- cyclical analysis of overall activity and its impact and adjustment of content or targeting of intervention if required.

1. A clear programme design shared with the practitioners responsible for delivery.

2. Analysis of delivery information to monitor fidelity to programme design.

3. Regular reviews of overall outputs, and success rates of achieving short, intermediate and long-term outomes to understand impact of intervention.

4. Using data to inform improvements to the overall design or targeting of the intervention.

Delivery level learning:

Delivery level learning focuses on the people who deliver the service (practitioners)and the individual beneficiaries of the service (parents and their children).

Monitoring delivery and its results on a session by session basis with small feedback loops to help frontline practitioners make small adjustments to their work in order to achieve the short term results that they are aiming for.

This works best when practitioners have the expertise and autonomy to use their own judgement to make small adjustments to ensure that each (parent/child) beneficiary achieves the intended outcomes in each session.

Data you might use to inform delivery level learning:
-    Number of participants

- Demographic of participants (is the intended target audience participating)
  - For example, a practitioner monitors attendance and notices that despite many dads showing interest in the offer, this doesn't translate into attendance. She canvases the dads to find out why and discovers that the timing is impractical so she changes it and the dads who had originally showed interest now attend.

- Baseline profiles of participants
- Programme participation by enrolled participants (the dosage that each of the enrolled participants is receiving, how often, and for how long)
- Program completion data- including the rates at which people drop out early or are dismissed before achieving target outcomes, and the reasons for this
- Incremental progress on short-term outcomes for each participant
  - For example, the intended outcome of the third session of the intervention is for parents to be able to identify examples of environmental print in three different routine activities they do with their child. At the end of the session none of the parents are able to identify the three required examples. The practitioner recognises that this is fundamental to progressing on to the next stage, so decides to run a similar session the following week to ensure the concept is understood.

Leadership level learning:

A learning organisation is constantly clarifying and refining the chain of "if-then" assumptions that underlie the program or intervention e.g. *If* parents attend a session *then* they will engage more with their child and *if* they engage more with their child *then* it will improve the child's outcomes. Questions to be answered include; who does the intervention work for and who doesn't it work for? If it doesn't work, do we need to change the intervention or is it not appropriate for all of the groups we are targeting? What elements of the intervention work, what elements don't work and why? What elements should we be changing to increase our chance of achieving our intended impact i.e. content, training, dosage, and intensity?

They will look for opportunities to gather evidence of any kind that strengthens the linkages of these "if-then" assumptions (or undercuts them).

Leadership level learning should take place at the end of each cycle of delivery and uses the information from both short term and longer-term feedback loops to identify required adjustments for future delivery.

Data you might use to inform leadership level learning:
- Number of participants
- Demographic of participants (Is the programme reaching its intended target audience)
- Baseline profiles of participants
- Programme participation by enrolled participants (the dosage that each of the enrolled participants is receiving, how often, and for how long)
- Program completion data—including the rates at which people drop out early or are dismissed before achieving targeted outcomes, and the reasons for this
- Incremental progress on short-term outcomes for each participant
- Indicators of programme fidelity
- Achievement of intermediate outcomes across groups, for example:

Appendix C: Common Evaluation Framework

Table 2. Common Evaluation Framework: demographic characteristics of participants involved in the trials

Project Total (recruited) sample	EasyPeasy trial 1 (Bournemouth) 144 families from 8 children's centres	EasyPeasy trial 2 (Newham) 302 families from 8 children's centres	PEN phase 2 (Manchester) 167 families from 18 schools	Making it REAL (Oldham) 143 families from 10 preschool settings	The Reader (Liverpool) 204 families from 19 schools
Demographic information					
Mothers (or grandmothers) [total valid responses]	137 95.1% [144]	275 91.4% [301]	121 85.8% [141]	-	173 90.1% [192]
mean age of parent [total valid responses]	33.7 years [143]	34.3 years [291]	-	-	36.0 years [188]
Boys [total valid responses]	77 54.6% [141]	163 54% [302]	88 53.3% [165]	83 58.0% [143]	96 49.5% [194]
mean age of child [total valid responses]	43.1 months (range: 28-73) [144]	48.6 months (range: 22-87) [302]	43.7 months (range: 37-50) [148]	40.8 months (range: 30-53) [141]	45.1 months (range: 36-56) [201]
White British/Irish/European Black British/African/Caribbean Asian/Asian British Mixed/Multiple Other [total valid responses]	127 91.37% 1 .7% 2 1.4% 6 4.3% 3 2.2% [139]	70 24.0% 44 15.1% 132 45.2% 37 12.7% 9 3.1% [292]	74 50.3% 26 17.7% 24 16.3% 13 8.8% 10 6.8% [147]	45 31.5% 7 3.5% 86 60.1% 5 3.5% [143]	185 97.9% 1 .5% 3 1.6% [189]
EAL / speaks a language other than/as well as English at home [total valid responses]	29 20.7% [140]	220 74.1% [297]	58 36.7% [158]	57 40.4% [141]	8 4.2% [192]
FSM or EYPP at any time point yes no unknown/missing	- 	- 	110 65.9% 18 10.8% 39 23.4%	28 19.6% 72 50.3% 43 30.1%	42 20.6% 69 33.8% 93 45.6%
SEN / disability (yes) [total valid responses]	6 4/3% [141]		13 8.2% [159]	-	15 8.3% [181]
highest qualification GCSE or below further education university degree or above missing	42 29.2% 52 36.2% 44 30.6% 6 4.2%	72 23.8% 54 17.9% 157 52.0% 19 6.3%	-	70 49.0% 21 14.7% 8 5.6% 44 30.8%	89 43.6% 50 24.5% 51 25.0% 14 6.9%
married/in civil partnership/cohabiting [total valid responses]	106 74.1% [143]	237 81.4% [291]	-	-	-

Employed [total valid responses]	75 52.1% [144]	131 43.8% [299]	-	-	88 46.6% [189]
partner employed [total valid responses]	97 93.3% [104]	207 84.1% [246]	-	-	-
home owner rent privately [total valid responses]	67 48.6% 55 39.9% [138]	99 33% 125 41.7% [300]	-	-	-
Has an older sibling (yes) [total valid responses]	-	-	125 77.6% [161]	91 63.6% [101]	94 48.5% [194]

Parental Engagement Fund Self -Assessment Form Organisation name and intervention:

1. Outcome: Moving up the evidence scale

Along with providing funding for delivery, a core part of the Parental Engagement Fund is pairing organisations with a 'critical friend' both to promote a better understanding of evidence and to support organisations to move their interventions up the scale of evidence (based on the EIF standards of evidence). Having worked closely with the Oxford team to establish an evaluation model we would like each organisation to estimate their current rating, and where they hope to reach as a result of the Parental Engagement Fund support. We would like you to provide an explanation of each rating you give. The aim of this exercise is to map out what each organisation hopes to achieve as a result of the funding. We will repeat the exercise at the end of the project to understand if we have accomplished what we set out to achieve. To support you to assess where you are on the scale, and where you would like to reach, we have provided a fictional case study of an intervention that has been gathering evidence of its impact over the last ten years. As you will see, within each stage of the scale outlined below there are several sub-levels between which you can move.

0. Unspecified: Working towards a logic model, testable features, and evidence of outcomes andimpact

1. Theory based: Logic model and testable features but not current evidence of outcomes or impact.

2. Potentially effective: Medium quality evaluation showing better outcomes for programme participants.

3. Effective: Single high quality evaluation with positive impact.

4. Consistently effective: multiple high quality evaluations with consistently positive impact across populations and environments.

Please select what you consider to be your current rating and the target rating you are aiming for with an explanation for your choices.

Current Rating-

Target Rating-

THE
SUTTON
TRUST