



# **Working Together** *Approaches to Family Literacy*

## Summary



**NALA**

An Áisíneacht Náisiúnta Litearthachta do Aosaigh

**National Adult Literacy Agency**

[www.nala.ie](http://www.nala.ie) Tel: 01 855 4332

# Introduction

The vital role played by parents, grandparents and other care-givers in their children's education at all stages is gaining recognition. As a result, there is a growing need to support those parents who may wish to improve their own literacy skills and confidence in the context of family life and learning.

Family literacy work can help to overcome the barriers to learning felt by some adults and children who find it difficult to relate to school learning. It is an important way of recognising and building on the strengths of families and communities who feel marginalised or excluded from the expectations of school.

By encouraging both informal and formal learning and by giving support to learning at home, family literacy approaches contribute to the development of literacy and learning for all age groups.

Family literacy work brings new learners into adult literacy and community education programmes and is a key element in developing lifelong learning opportunities for all.

## Summary

### *Family Literacy*

The term family literacy describes:

- the uses of literacy within family networks, especially activities which involve two or more generations;
- education programmes which help to develop literacy and numeracy learning in a family context.

The family literacy approach:

- supports the learning that happens in the home and in communities;





- breaks down barriers between learning in different contexts;
- gives vital support to parents whose own education has been limited for various reasons;
- develops both children's and adults' literacy learning.

In this document the word 'family' describes a relationship of care and support between different generations, usually over a long period and the word 'parents' refers to adults who are in a long-term caring relationship with children and responsible for their well-being and development.

Recent studies show that the most important aspect of parents' role in their children's learning is interest and

involvement (Tuckett, 2004, 4). There is also increased understanding of the importance of creating and recognising learning opportunities at home and in the wider community.

Parents or care-givers whose own access to education was limited, for whatever reasons, may find support in relation to their children's learning especially helpful. Access to this support may encourage them to take part in further courses. The family literacy approach makes it possible for parents and carers to:

- understand and develop their role as their children's first educators;
- improve their own confidence and skills in literacy and numeracy;
- learn about how children and adults learn.

## ***National and international context***

The concept of family literacy was introduced into the education debate in 1983, by the American writer and educator Denny Taylor. Taylor's research revealed the range and extent of literacy activity engaged in by young children at home with parents and recognised the importance of literacy activities in everyday life.

Various approaches to supporting family literacy have emerged around the world. Successful programmes are based on a response to the needs and concerns of the learners, adequate long-term funding and a commitment to strong partnership (Padak *et al*, 2002, 31).

In Ireland family literacy programmes have developed in conjunction with the

adult literacy service, schools, libraries and community projects since the early 1990s. Courses vary according to the context and the learners involved.

Jeanne Paratore (2003) describes three types of family literacy programmes:

- those that provide comprehensive services to parents and children;
- those that provide services to parents with the intent of influencing the literacy achievement of both parents and children; and
- those that focus on affecting the literacy achievement of the child alone, with the parent as the instrument of change (13).

This document is concerned with the first two of these three types of programme.





## ***Principles***

The following principles are recommended as a basis for the development of family literacy and numeracy programmes:

- The family is the first and primary educator of children and the home is the child's first and primary literacy resource.
- Family literacy work respects the difference between the various ways in which literacy and numeracy are developed and used within the home and in school.
- Family literacy work recognises that learning in families is a two-way

process, as the adults in the family often learn from the children and young people.

- Family literacy programmes are developed through discussion with the participants. Listening to families is at the heart of the process.
- Family literacy work respects the right of families to protect their privacy and separateness.

***“I feel good now when I do something with the children. I take more notice of what I'm doing, both good and bad”***



## **Guidelines**

The guidelines for setting up and running family literacy programmes include ideas, suggestions and practical information on aspects such as:

- getting started and building partnerships;
- programmes;
- recruiting participants;
- funding and key practical issues;
- evaluation.

Programmes are likely to fall into one of three categories:

- A. Short 'outreach' courses for learners new to adult education;
- B. Programmes which focus on specific skills, such as language, reading or using a computer.

- C. 'Intensive' family literacy and numeracy programmes involving parents, carers and children.

Partnership is a key feature of family literacy work and may require commitment to training to help the partnership develop successfully.

Supportive and creative partnerships with local schools and pre-schools and with community development projects can be very effective. It is important that senior management personnel support the partnership approach.

***"I never felt confident reading to my kids, but sure, some books don't even have words. We can both read to each other!"***

## **Recommendations and NALA strategy**

The document recommends that the Department of Education and Science should take a lead role in promoting an integrated National Strategy for the development of family literacy.

This strategy should involve other key Government Departments: the Department of Health and Children, the Department of Social and Family Affairs and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.

There is a need for:

- a designated family literacy budget;
- training in family literacy approaches for staff from both adult literacy and school settings;
- research into home and school literacy development;
- the promotion of a partnership approach to family literacy work.

NALA is urged to include and promote family literacy in all aspects of its work.



## **References**

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**National Adult Literacy Agency**  
76 Gardiner Street  
Dublin 1

**Telephone** 01 855 4332  
**Fax** 01 855 5475  
**e-mail** literacy@nala.ie  
**Website** www.nala.ie

**NALA Freephone**  
1 800 20 20 65

**NALA Mullingar**  
Education and Employment Centre  
Austin Friar Street  
Mullingar  
Co. Westmeath

**Telephone** 044 40374  
**Fax** 044 45834  
**e-mail** nalamullingar@eircom.net

**NALA Cork**  
c/o VTSU Building  
Tramore Road  
Cork

**Telephone** 021 431 7011  
**Fax** 021 431 5054  
**e-mail** mmurray@nala.ie

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## What is NALA?

The National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) is the co-ordinating, training and campaigning body for all those interested and involved in adult literacy work in Ireland.

NALA is a membership-based organisation and was formally established in 1980. Since 1985 NALA has received a grant-in-aid from the Department of Education and Science.

## Working Together: *Approaches to Family Literacy*

This document explores the concept of family literacy, describes some of the family literacy work taking place internationally and in Ireland and offers guidelines for setting up and running family literacy programmes.

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