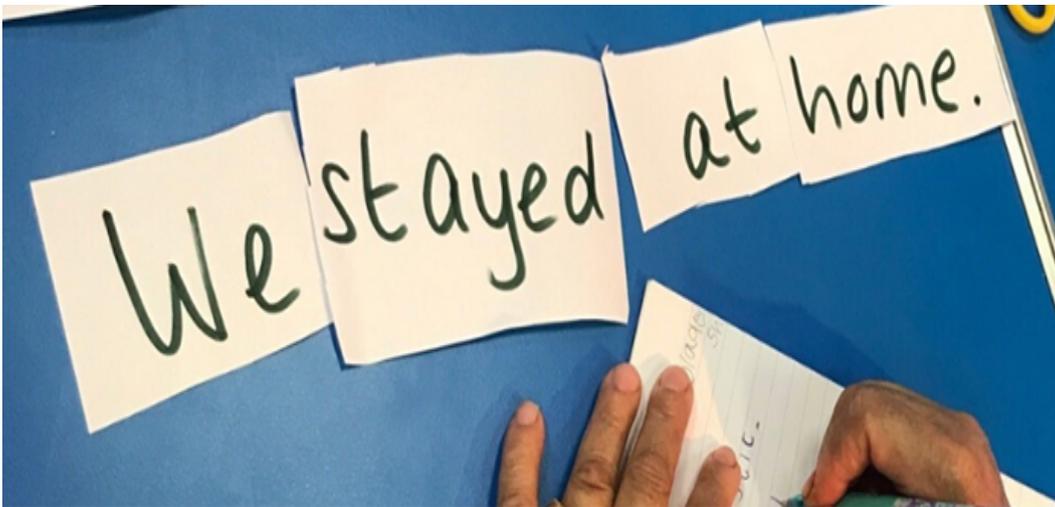


Family Learning Online Report 2020

How do we Improve our Family Learning Online Interventions During the Covid-19 Pandemic?



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Executive Summary

- In the survey a majority of parents and carers (17/20) responded positively to a question about the influence of learning online through the LU programme, while 15 spoke about the online learning helping both their own and their children's confidence grow. A small but significant group (4) found the loss of physical contact more difficult.
- Parents and carers enjoyed learning with their children and understanding aspects of supporting their children's learning. They enjoyed the motivational interactive sessions.
- Parents and carers valued the regularity of sessions during lockdown, giving structure to their time and support to their children's learning. When considering the session structure they asked for more 'talk time' in future sessions; between themselves as parents, participants with teachers and child to child.
- When considering future sessions, teachers were found to be the main source of knowledge for new courses, Parents and carers expressed interest in a wide range of possible online learning courses but requested the information be given in a timely way so they could plan family activities.
- Parents and carers described Family Learning (FL) online programmes simply as, learning at home with the family. Whatever the term used, research into Family Learning and Home Learning identifies many benefits to all generations involved (Brasnett-Grundy, 2002; Carpentieri et al, 2011; NIACE, 2013).
- During lockdown families and tutors were 'pushed' by the changes in society (Moreton, 2010) in response to the pandemic, into online learning, there was no choice. Research into digital learning points to the influence of technology and the need to develop new approaches to teaching and learning (Bassendowski & Petrucka, 2013).
- Teachers need access to good technology equipment, internet connections and professional development to manage the new demands of online programmes. The pedagogy for the FL programmes required teachers to adapt their teaching and learning approaches to support families in remote locations, while developing their skills managing technical programmes and utilising technology as a learning tool (Englebrecht, Llinares & Borba ,2020).
- Teachers spoke about teaching online being tiring. The larger the group the more difficult it is to be flexible around some learners without upsetting the whole group. Team teaching enabled more flexibility and differentiation for individual learners. It also enabled one person to teach while another dealt with the technological challenges and administration such as form filling.
- Participants on the programmes found the 'role' of the teacher important during these sessions, influencing their children's behaviour. A clear structure to the session was important where teachers give precise guidance on activities and use of resources, both on and offline.

Introduction

During the 2020 national lockdown in the UK, as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, Learning Unlimited (LU) tutors had to adapt quickly to deliver online courses and workshops, instead of face-to-face teaching. This change in teaching approach enabled Family Learning (FL) practitioners to continue with their work and to support many learners who may have felt isolated during the current crisis. However, this form of supporting learning is new for LU practitioners and online learners. The purpose of this short report is to describe the research undertaken into the variety of interventions used, to explore their effectiveness from the participants' perspectives and possible adaptations for future work.

Given the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and the consequential uncertainty of future teaching situations this research is intended to help LU tutors to develop as practitioners (CPD), engage with learner preferences, gain further knowledge of online technical issues and adapt to create new opportunities for future online learning opportunities. It will further enable the LU Family Learning team to continue their work with a range of families including those who are more vulnerable, helping the teaching team to meet the participants' current needs.

Key Terms

This short review explores the characteristics of the terms Family Learning, Home Learning and Online teaching and learning and considers recent research into wellbeing during lock down.

Methodology

Action Research

The research team used an action research approach. This reflective cycle moves from identifying a problem, gathering information in order to interpret the data and then acting on the evidence before finally evaluating the results to review improvements

Parents and carers participating in a range of LU Family Learning online learning courses during lockdown (March –April 2020) were invited to join the research project. Participants were asked to engage in an interview in a variety of ways; during online sessions, by email and through Facebook. Each person who participated answered the same set of questions (appendix 1). All participants were made aware of the ethical approach used in the project, see statement (appendix 2).

The majority of participants came from the courses; Helping my Child with Reading and Spelling (11) Family Fun at Home (6) and the Junk Modelling Workshop (appendix 3).

The semi-structured interviews took 30 to 45 minutes. The research team of four developed the questions for the interviews, and put the questionnaire online. This enabled it to be accessed by participants if they chose this way to respond. It also enabled the team to use this as a storage method for all of the responses in the sample. This allowed the researchers to store the data anonymously, identifiable only by date and time of interview. At the beginning of each interview and written at the top of the online questionnaires was a statement ensuring the interviewee was aware of the purpose of the research and that we were following ethical guidelines on data collection BERA (2011).

The participants in the interviews were identified and recruited by the online FL tutors. This method of sampling was purposive (Bryman, 2012, p. 422) in that adults interviewed fulfilled a particular set of criteria, essentially that they attended the new online FL courses which started during lockdown,

March 2020. However, the teachers could also be seen as acting as 'gatekeepers' to access the participants and Atkinson (1986) warns against a reliance on 'gatekeepers' for the research data as they could be engaged in 'impression management'. However, the interviewers also included people unknown to the learners, and some participants completed the questionnaire on-line so were less open to any management of data.

Family Learning

Research indicates Family Learning has a very broad set of characteristics: it encompasses learning that happens in families and is intergenerational. It involves parents supporting children's skills development and parenting skills (Brassett-Grundy, 2002). It can be described as formal, non-formal or informal. Formal, is described as learning following a state-regulated curriculum, copying what happens in schools. Non-formal learning is that which happens more in everyday life, such as during cooking while informal learning occurs when it happens outside the classroom, such as during a museum visit (Evans, Wedege & Yasukawa, 2013). It can happen when children learn from parents and when parents learn from children, such as undertaking an internet search (Grant, 2009). Put another way it fosters parents in the cognitive, social and emotional development of the child (Carpentieri et al, 2011).

However, research (EEF, 2018) undertaken on *school-based* family learning programmes run for parents of four and five-year olds found that children of families offered interventions made no more progress than those who were offered none, however this was partially due to poor attendance to classes of parents and carers. Brassett-Grundy (2002) explored parents' reasons for not attending school-based provision and found they spoke about poor previous classroom experiences, as well as lack of time, distance to travel and the financial costs of childcare.

Research by NIACE (2013) suggests that Family Learning can actually help parents considered 'hardest to reach' to overcome practical, financial or dispositional barriers to learning. While research into Learning in Families with digital technologies (Grant, 2009) argues this form of learning can contribute to the narrowing of 'the achievement gap for children from disadvantaged backgrounds while developing parental skills and strengthening intergenerational relations contributing to creating cohesive communities' (ibid, p2).

While research into family learning is growing, Carpentieri et al, 2011 found it rarely explores broader aspects of learning such as family numeracy, wider family learning or indeed the influence of technologies on the family learning experience. Even so the research that has been undertaken identifies many perceived a range of benefits for the child, the parent and the wider community.

Home learning

Home learning, or learning at home, is another broad concept described in many different ways in research and by parents involved in this project. Research terms used to describe it includes home education, home schooling and the home learning environment (HLE).

Research suggests that parents are not a homogenous group but do it for different reasons. Morton (2010) identifies three possible reasons for home learning. It might be 'political' opposition to conforming with existing social structures, or might be 'social' reasons relating to the conscious transmission of various values, such as particular religions or it might be perceived as a 'last resort', where local schools offer poor quality or their child has experienced bullying at school. For this

research the home educators have no choice as the pandemic forced schools to close, so have been 'pushed' into online learning to support their children's development.

Home learning is usually viewed in a limited way, as preparation for mainstream education, or comparing the children's learning outcomes. However, research into the home learning environment (Lehrl, Evangelou and Sammons, 2020) considers the role of education in the broader context, in relation to wider community or society. Indeed Whalley (2007) argues against the traditional separation of families and communities from the professionalised support services for children, while Moreton (2010) argues for the closer involvement of parents in their child's more formal education.

Research into learning online

Englebrecht, Llinares and Borba (2020) argue that the Covid-19 pandemic is encouraging educators to use online learning thus developing a greater understanding of this relationship, creating what they call knowledge that is developed collectively as 'humans-with-media'. They see humans-with-media affecting education, arguing the internet is changing the way generations learn so that the traditional approach which is teacher driven, where the teacher is the source of knowledge and students passively absorb ideas (known as *pushing* knowledge) is being changed to a more student driven approach, where students take control of the learning process—referred to as a *pull* process (Bassendowski & Petrucka, 2013). This change allows students to select and transform information enabling them to explore ideas that are interesting to them thus designing their own curricula.

By asking participants their views about their online learning experiences through Family Learning interventions this project explores how participants prefer to interact with family learning online and explores the characteristics they identify as key to effective learning experiences. Thus the parents are influencing the use of technology, as well as being influenced by it, what is known as developing an 'intershaping' relationship between humans and the internet (Borba & Villarreal, 2005)

However, research into Learning in Families with Digital Technologies (Grant, 2009) also found a great variation in 'demographic differences in the types and amount of family learning that parents report they engage in' (ibid, p4), including social background and age. This research points to possible ways to help overcome these barriers, including supporting local and informal learning approaches. LU family learning research also engages with those often identified as under-represented groups to ensure the provision addresses both the needs and the aspirations of these groups. Further supporting what recommendations by researchers (Borba, 2005; EEF, 2018).

Wellbeing and lockdown

International research (Grover et al., 2020) identified mental disorders as an issue due to lockdown and the prevailing COVID-19 pandemic. While some managed to display resilience during lockdown, coming together in the face of adversity, others identified (Sibley et al., 2020) mental distress as a continuing problem for many people, post lockdown.

Research in France (Rechi, 2020) found an upswing in inequalities across different groups. In health, they found inequalities 'hitting the working classes ('ouvriers') the hardest' (Rechi, 2020). They found self-reported wellbeing deviated in Paris from the rest of France, which they ascribed to space restrictions. Not surprisingly, stress levels were also found to be higher amongst those working longer hours at home. While this research was not undertaken in the UK it nevertheless has resonance with our experiences and points to the need to be sensitive to the issue of mental health and wellbeing.

Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The findings indicate that participants see LU tutors and their learning programmes as being an important lifeline during lockdown. The tutors provide online support for families, enabling parents and children to develop confidence with their learning while online, helping to maintain their wellbeing. When describing the online learning with LU the participants used phrases and words such as 'well organised,' 'enjoyed it', 'loved it' and 'excellent' to describe the learning experiences. One was so pleased with sessions she said. *'Thank you to the wonderful team there [in LU].'*

The participants in the survey appreciated regular online contact with tutors and with other participants/parents, which offered structure to the day or week. They enjoyed the shared activities, discussion and interaction this contact afforded them. The interactive activities and warm up games and taking part in discussions about supporting and understanding their child's learning. They enjoyed being creative and 'bonding' with their children, appreciating the range of 'good ideas' on offer, which enabled them to *'...gain new skills to stimulate a child's imagination,'* as well as physically making objects with their children.

What the participants liked about the LU online FL sessions

Participants indicated several aspects of Family learning and teaching online which they liked. Twelve of the twenty said that online learning (via Zoom) worked well for them, although some did struggle with the technology. Half of the sample of participants (10) spoke about valuing learning under lockdown.

Describing the pedagogy used in LU FL sessions

Five participants liked engaging in the activities where they were supporting their children with learning. For example, one said *'...spending more time with my children and I learnt from them sometimes.'* Another, who had a son with autism spoke about there being *'...no pressure time wise.'* Two participants spoke of how they valued insights into the difficulties learning can create for children. *'Helped me to help my child to read- to see things from his point of view.'*

Five participants spoke about the importance of the role of group leader or teacher. They spoke about the group leader *'..acted like a teacher'* and the *'..teacher was always there [ensuring] good communication'*. Another spoke of liking the way the teacher was *'..introducing the topic well and getting instant feedback'* another observed the impact on behaviour the teachers had, *'My daughter will do more for the online teacher than for me, as they want to impress her.'*

Three said they liked the warm up activities at the beginning of the sessions. One said *'Early in the morning you don't feel like doing much, but felt ready afterwards.'* Another said *'The warm up games - word games.'* While another indicated she liked it when the tutor had an activity planned for the time spent waiting for others to join the class.

Two stated their children tended to enjoy interactive sessions which linked to different activities or making wider use of the internet, for example finding a video or a game. One was *'...very impressed by extra learning about elephants being added during the workshop which kept my kids interested and made the session very interactive and fun.'* This idea links to what can be termed 'sideways learning' or 'embedded learning' where the teacher moves away from the main topic and into another area of interest, while maintaining the interest of the child. Indeed five participants also indicated they liked finding out from others about useful resources and researching information online.

When considering the way the learning influenced the families' time while in lockdown the importance of the regularity of sessions was mentioned, as one explained it *'...made me realise that for my children a zoom session with their teacher at least once a week would be really good too'*. Another spoke about how they *'look[ed] forward to the next [session]'* while another described the sessions as a much needed *'...break from the monotony.'*

A key point was a request from participants for more 'talk time' during sessions. Ten wanted more time to share experiences with other parents, eight wanted more 'talk time' with the teacher. Two others suggested it would be good to give the children more speaking opportunities, while two others suggested having longer sessions to include breaks for talking.

Challenges

There were challenges to engaging with online Family learning, including managing children's behaviour and keeping them motivated, problems with using the technology and the challenges of finding useful and relevant resources for their children on the internet.

Six people spoke about the challenges of using technology and Zoom when interacting with others. Some participants report that they found the medium awkward, *'You can't read people's feelings and emotions.'* Another said it was difficult *'...not being able to see everyone at once'* and new faces appearing on the screen. Another described the problem as *'The conversation in class can't flow so easily online, it can get noisy if people aren't muted during class.'* While another complained there was too much noise in an online class. One participant who uses her phone reports that, *'It was much harder to follow the course on a small screen and take notes at the same time.'*

Five mentioned managing their children's behaviour and keeping them motivated while online learning. One explained *'If I want to learn something they distract me.'* Another said it was difficult *'...keeping my children quiet.'* One participant suggested it was because *'It doesn't feel like the school environment so it takes more effort to get them to concentrate.'* Another linked this to the *'...need to be around constantly to support children with learning and technical difficulties.'*

On a wider point of accessing the appropriate learning resources, three participants had difficulty finding the right topics for learning on the internet and found some websites confusing. One spoke about a website where *'...they didn't categorise and line the activities up with the curriculum. They just provided loads of activities and it was confusing.'* Another said *'I wouldn't know which ones to use'*. Another found it difficult to get pens and paper, she said *'It was difficult to get materials to do the workshops because shops were closed.'*

Comparing learning with the school experience

Two people made comments about the demands made on parents/carers by schools as an issue with limited online support from the school teaching staff during lockdown. There were positives and negatives. As one explained: *'I felt like I had loads of information. It (school requirements) felt draining and overwhelming - I didn't know where to go. I had to filter it down. I wish the school had directed me to 1 or 2 helpful websites instead of taking bits from here and there. It was also very stressful as we only had one laptop. It really frustrated me and I felt very sorry for my children.'* Another said *'At the moment they are just getting sent homework through a phone app but there is no teaching. They have had to do their own research but it's difficult as not sure what to research or if it's right. Children really need zoom classes to make it more interesting. If you have discussions you remember what you have learnt.'*

However, five found the reduction in physical demands of preparing for the school day meant learning at home was less pressurised. As one described there is *'...no school run, or rush to get food and dressed ready for class.'* Two others spoke about it being *'...harder to attend [classes] in person.'*

Confidence and well being

Seventeen of the twenty people responded positively to a question about the influence of learning online through the LU programme. They described the learning as building their and their children's confidence as well as contributing to their wellbeing. Participants used phrases such as, *'...a light in the dark,'* *'...it was very special,'* *'...nice to feel part of a community,'* *'...less isolated,'* *'...focus for my week,'* while fifteen of the participants believe the online learning helps both their own and their children's confidence grow.

Four said they enjoyed the interaction with others, one said they enjoyed *'Watching the children interacting with others.'* This was especially important for those who have newly arrived in the country. *As she explained the interaction with others 'gets my daughter to talk.'*

However, four spoke about the lack of physical interaction as an issue. One explained the *'lack of physical interaction and not having people in the room'* was a challenge. Another described *'Not meeting everyone face to face. Not being able to move around, interact with each other and have breaks together.'* as something she missed. While another described it as *'Losing human contact. Human interaction is a precious thing, talking with someone.'*

Other online learning

Focusing on mathematics

Half of the participants in the sample had accessed at least one mathematics website during lock down, although they were from a range of sites including Twinkl, Oxford Owls and School work. For those who did not access any mathematics website, three gave no reason, three said they had enough to do while three others expressed other concerns. For example, one participant said there are too many sites and not knowing which to choose, another spoke about not knowing which one to 'trust' while another said they did not like online learning and maths as it *'...is always a bit painful.'*

When asked for general comments about mathematics interest was expressed in understanding more about the methods used when learning mathematics as they had to *'...use the methods [the children] use to help explain it to him.'* Another said she was happy with addition and subtraction but did not know how to introduce multiplication. However, some found it hard as one parent explained the school giving too much work and her *'...son was exhausted...it was hard to keep up.'*

Marketing and Research

When asked about more opportunities for the development of online courses the following were identified:

- Art – painting and drawing (6)
- Advanced TA (including children's educational development for learning at home and SEN information) (5)
- Writing
- Numeracy/Maths (5)
- Science
- Supporting children with writing

When trying to reach learners LU tutors were the best source of awareness for new courses (7). Some participants heard about courses through more than one route e.g. a friend and a Whatsapp group. When collecting data for the research, personal requests by the tutors were also the most effective way to collect data. Although there are 68 members in the Facebook group, only 33 saw the post about the survey and the response was very low (3), perhaps an incentive might have helped? One participant indicated it would help to have more information on summer courses earlier, to support parents planning. When thinking about publicity it was also suggested that LU keep an up to date database of clients' emails and consider alternative publicity routes to increase advertising, such as, flyers in schools and links on relevant websites. Also, consider providing materials through the post. There were some issues on Facebook with the publicity which was difficult to read. Perhaps there could be a PDF to download.

Tutors' Reflections

The three family learning tutors that delivered online courses during lockdown were consulted and asked for their reflections on their teaching experiences. They reported finding it very inspiring to see the motivation and determination of participants' willingness to adapt to online learning. Adapting to the remote delivery of courses and workshops was fun and challenging to do. A big advantage was that there was no printing required!

Teaching using Zoom during lockdown has meant that some participants have had access to LU courses who might not have had access previously. That said, it has also meant that learners with no access to the internet or electronic devices were not able to participate in the LU family learning programme.

Tutors experience of participants' feedback were varied. Some found it difficult to 'read' how individuals had found the sessions using Zoom. One tutor reported that during the sessions she could assess participants' weaknesses and strengths better as classes were smaller than usual. However, it would be challenging to teach more than twelve individuals.

Engagement was more difficult face to face and tutors had to find inventive ways to get to know the group and build trust. An important part of engaging participants in family learning sessions is the ability to differentiate and provide additional support to meet individual's needs. This was more difficult to do online without disturbing the class and the group dynamics.

Tutors also reported that it was more difficult to be flexible when teaching online - for instance when needing to adapt a lesson plan.

There were also challenges on the technical front. Internet connection was a problem for both tutors and learners at times, meaning that some individuals had to drop out for part of the session until they had re-established their connection. Completing form filling electronically also had its challenges as not many participants had printers and scanners. Google forms were easier to get completed although there tended to be fewer completions than when done in person over the phone.

A general reflection was how online teaching is more tiring than face to face while sitting in front of a screen was difficult for tutors who like to move around when teaching.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

FLO Survey Questions

- 1.1 What do you use for online learning? (desktop, computer, phone, tablet, laptop)
 - 1.2 Did you have any difficulties accessing the courses?
 - 1.21 If you had difficulties, what were they?
 - 1.3 Do you have a printer?
 - 1.4 What age range are you in?
 - 1.5 What age/s of child / children are you supporting?
 - 1.6 Do any of your children have any special needs or disabilities?
 - 1.7 Any additional comments?
-
- 2.1 What was the most useful thing you found learning online? (or what did you like most)
 - 2.2 What was the most challenging thing you found about learning online? (or what did you like least?)
 - 2.3 Is there anything that could have made the experience better for you or your child/ren?
 - 2.4 Any additional comments?
-
- 3.1 Which Learning Unlimited activity did you attend? (tick all that apply)
 - 3.2 What made you choose Learning Unlimited's online activities?
 - 3.3 Which online activity / activities did you like the most or find the most helpful?
 - 3.4 Which were the least helpful?
 - 3.5 Do you think you or your child / children have developed confidence through online learning?
 - 3.6 What other courses would you like? (e.g. art, maths, healthy living, history, science ... other...)
 - 3.7 Do you think the contact with Learning Unlimited has been useful for you emotionally or helped your wellbeing during lockdown?
 - 3.8 Any additional comments?
-
- 4.1 Have you done any other online activities with your child / children during lockdown, and if so, what?
 - 4.2 What do you like about online learning courses with your child/ children?
 - 4.3 What would improve your online experience? (e.g. more talking time with other parents, more talking time with the teacher...other ...)
 - 4.4 Have you ever used free maths materials online?
 - 4.41 If yes, which materials / websites?
 - 4.42 If no, any particular reason?
 - 4.5 Any additional comments?
-
5. Is there anything else you would like to say about supporting children's or your own learning during lockdown?

Appendix 2

Ethical statement

Interviewees had the following statement read to them before undertaking interviews or available to read prior to undertaking the online questionnaire.

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this research interview about your experiences of learning online with your children during lockdown. The research is to help Learning Unlimited tutors to understand better what you thought were helpful on-line activities and what was less helpful. This will then be shared with colleagues to help improve the content of our courses, from your point of view.

All of the information you give me will be anonymised and should you decide to withdraw your answers you will be able to do this up until August 30th and your answers will be removed from the data. We will not share any of your personal data with any other organization.

All of the data collected will be held anonymously and kept under secure conditions. The data will be destroyed at the end of the research project.

Are you still happy to go ahead with the interview?

Appendix 3

Online Learning programmes

Programmes engaged with by the participants in the survey .The numbers indicate the number of participants who undertook the survey from that course.

Courses:

- 11 - Helping my child with Reading and Spelling
- 6 - Family Fun at Home
- 4 - Teaching Assistant Award Training

Workshops:

- 5 - Junk Modelling Workshop
- 3 - Handful of flowers Workshop
- 2 - Puppet Making Workshop
- 1 - Picture This Workshop
- 1 - Monster Making Workshop
- 1 - Cityscape Workshop

Other:

- 4 - Facebook Group

