

Hands-on

Learning from our implementing partners

Developing literacy through home visiting programmes: The case of the Family in Focus (FIF) programme

The value of early childhood development (ECD) programmes for young children is now generally accepted. However the situation of ECD in South Africa is that the vast majority of poor children are not exposed to ECD programmes due to financial constraints or to an absence of programmes in communities – only half of 3-4 year olds have had exposure to any form of out-of-home child care, let alone good quality early childhood education¹. Among poor children, the proportion is even less. Reaching the majority requires outreach and home-based programmes to ensure that children are afforded some opportunity to reach and develop their potential. The National Integrated Plan proposes substantial expansion of Home Care Based ECD to ensure reach to the poorest and most vulnerable children.

The Family in Focus programme

The Western Cape Foundation for Community Work (FCW) runs one such home based ECD programme – the Family in Focus Programme. *This is a home visiting programme that takes learning opportunities for children into their homes and strengthens the capacity of caregivers in their teaching role.*

Recent independent evaluations of the FCW's Family in Focus Programme concluded that it was making a significant contribution in ensuring that more young children in poor communities have access to ECD stimulation and development. It has both increased access to ECD services through home visiting programmes, while also creating employment opportunities in impoverished communities. Home visitors are from the community and therefore accessible to parents

and can meet at their convenience. The ratio between children and home visitors is low and this permits individualised attention with support that can be tailored to each child and family.

In 2005 the Family in Focus programme was relatively small. The projects in small communities dotted around the Western Cape had only two or three home visitors and their outreach was to 378 families with 644 children benefiting from the support. It has grown substantially since then, and in the 2010/2011 period, the FIF Programme created 161 employment opportunities, serving over 7800 families and 10 200 children (of which about 1500 children were prepared for the challenges of the formal school system).

The home visiting programme has made a positive change to caregivers' parenting practices – the largest effects being to:

1. *caregivers' skills and knowledge to stimulate their children using improvised learning materials;*
2. *caregivers' capacity to encourage their children to develop language and patterned speech;*
3. *caregivers' ability to take a primary role in the cognitive development of their children in preparation for formal schooling; and*
4. *caregivers' positive responses towards their children, this includes active listening, positive instruction and responses, and physical interaction.*

Incubating Community Organisations

Although FCW introduces the FIF projects in various communities, it is intended for the communities to eventually take ownership of the programme. In each project a local co-ordinating



committee is established to oversee the smooth running of the project. Over time they have learnt that broad consultation with community stakeholders is important to ensure the buy-in of the local community and ideally the formation of a stakeholder forum to help ground the project in the beginning. The stakeholder forum should then be tasked with the responsibility of identifying the best suited local people to be trained in the programme. This prevents conflict and tension with the implementing organisation.



Once training is completed and the Home Visitors are actively visiting families, regular debriefing sessions are required. They are also supported by mobile ECD Units (which are equipped with toys, puzzles, story books, as well as art and craft equipment) to ensure that children of various age groups can develop a range of literacy, numeracy and life skills that are important for their school preparation.

Strengthening Language and Literacy development in the FIF Programme

For ECD programmes to be most effective, they need to offer a package of services. This package should include literacy and numeracy development. In 2012, FCW partnered with Wordworks to strengthen the early language and literacy component of their ECD Home Visitors

programme in Atlantis. Wordworks is a non-profit organisation that was established in 2005 to support the literacy and language development of young children, through the provision of innovative programmes, high quality training and user-friendly materials. The partnership between Wordworks and FCW has important lessons for others trying to stimulate literacy development in their own programmes.

Wordworks provided training and resources directly to Home Visitors in the Atlantis area, and also worked with the FCW Home Visitor programme coordinators in the Western Cape. Wordworks also gave input into the development of the content of a new manual for Home Visitors. Working directly with Home Visitors in Atlantis ensured a hands-on approach to training and development of materials. However, the inclusion of the coordinators was vital in ensuring that the literacy and language work was integrated into the FIF programme as a whole.

Training and resources for Home Visitors in Atlantis

Home Visitors in Atlantis attended an initial two day training which gave them an overview of different ways of supporting literacy and language development and provided them with practical ideas to share with parents. They were given tasks to complete at home, and many brought examples of their own children's stories and drawings. The training included opportunities to practise using shared book reading to develop language, participation in drawing activities and playing listening games such as 'I spy with my little eye...!'

This initial training was followed by a one day workshop for Home Visitors and parents to revisit some of the ideas introduced earlier, present new ideas, and assess to what extent home-visitors were using their new knowledge. This was followed by visits to families with the Home Visitors to observe the language and literacy components of the programme.

The Wordworks team developed materials to support the Home Visitors' work with parents, which included: storybooks across three languages,



picture sequences, practical ideas for making and using small books and boxes with objects starting with different sounds to support the development of letter-sound knowledge. Home Visitors were also provided with crayons and blank drawing books to give to each of their families to use in between visits.

Some lessons and impact of the programme

We have not yet measured the language and literacy levels of the children and therefore this learning brief focuses only on the impact of the language and literacy training on the daily work of Home Visitors.

The importance of resources for language and literacy development

The partnership between FCW and Wordworks has highlighted the need for resources to strengthen the language and literacy work of Home Visitors.

Training with a focus on early literacy and language development

The following elements were included in the initial training and follow-up workshops:

1. *the importance of talking for language development ("responsive parenting" and "good talking moments")*
2. *developing language through play*
3. *telling stories*
4. *making little books and using picture sequences to tell stories*
5. *scaffolding drawing and emergent writing*
6. *reading books (doing a "picture walk" and "interactive storybook reading")*
7. *developing letter knowledge and awareness of sounds in words*
8. *paying attention to print in the environment*

The rationale was for caregivers and parents to first start with creating space for storytelling, listening to their children and asking questions. This space of conversation between children and parents would serve as a foundation before moving to the stage of shared book reading which involved posing questions before, during and after the story to develop children's language and understanding of the stories.

As books are a scarce resource, the provision of high-quality books across three languages was key to improving book sharing practices. Through the programme, the Home visitors developed a partnership with the local library to make provision for Home Visitors, the parents and children to visit the library during the morning for story-telling and to allow the young children to explore the library and engage with books.

Although the Atlantis Home Visitors had access to a range of developmentally appropriate and stimulating resources, there was nevertheless a need for materials that have been carefully selected to achieve specific outcomes for language and literacy. The kits provided to develop awareness of sounds and letter knowledge proved to be a valuable tool for developing this aspect of early literacy.

While improving resources of Home Visitors is key to strengthening language and literacy, there is also a need for parents to have resources that make it possible for them to give children daily opportunities to develop their language and literacy (for example: storybooks, crayons and blank drawing books).

Developing the knowledge and skill of Home Visitors

To achieve change in practice, the Home Visitors had to come to a personal realisation of the the value of activities such as good talking, storytelling, and book sharing for language development, and to an understanding of the importance of these activities for children's later performance at school. When home-visitors reported on how the training had changed how they interacted with their own children and grandchildren, it became clear that the value of this work had been understood.

This shift in thinking then needed to be followed by modelling and practice to develop Home Visitors' skills. Although many of the Home Visitors knew 'what' to do, the input from Wordworks helped them to know 'how' do things in ways that strengthen early language development. An example of this was storybook reading. Home Visitors knew that reading books to children was



important, however at the first training session it was evident that they were generally reading books from cover to cover without much interaction with children and therefore not maximising this opportunity to develop language. Wordworks modelled and practised doing a 'picture walk' and talking about the pictures in the book before reading and including children in book sharing by asking questions before and after reading the story. In the follow-up training session some of the Home Visitors demonstrated a storybook reading session that provided a model of good language practice.

As Home Visitors developed new knowledge and skills, language and literacy activities needed to be integrated into weekly planning sessions and balanced with the other work that needed to be covered in visits to families. There was a need for a certain amount of structure in terms of what activities should be covered in each visit and how long these should take. It was therefore essential that the Project Co-ordinator attended the Wordworks training so that she could play a role in providing ongoing guidance.

Once Home Visitors have acquired new knowledge, mastered new skills and integrated the language and literacy activities into their visits to families, the next step is to ensure that they not only model good practice for parents, but give parents opportunities to try out new activities and give them constructive and sensitive feedback. If this is not achieved, the risk is that Home Visitors end up playing the role of a visiting 'teacher' and the impact of the work is limited to the time the Home Visitor spends with a child. Parents must be empowered to respond in a positive way to their children, practise good talking and listening and tell and read stories on a daily basis. Small 'homework' tasks between sessions could help to give parents manageable goals and encourage

language-rich interaction between parents and children. Home visitor need to engage parents and caregivers, getting them to take ownership of their children's early learning, not just by 'doing for', but modelling to them 'how to'. This is the challenge of all home visiting programmes, not just in the realm of literacy development. Parents, as much as children, should be the focus of a successful home visiting programme.

This learning brief was developed through a collaborative process of reflection by the Foundation for Community Work and Wordworks. The process of writing the brief itself provided an opportunity for programme learning, review and improvement.

This learning brief tells of the hands-on experience of:



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