

Cash for parents to learn how to support schoolwork

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Education & Family

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Image caption A new project will test whether payments to parents will encourage them to learn how best to support their children's schoolwork

Parents in two urban areas in England are to be offered money to attend a parenting academy to learn how to support their children's schoolwork.

Some parents will be paid around £600 to attend all 18 sessions in the trial.

The scheme, for disadvantaged families, will test whether cash can encourage parents to help their children learn.

Brian Lightman, general secretary of the heads' union ASCL, said parental engagement was a good thing but feared the payments could be seen as a bribe.

"We need to look at different ways of helping parents engage in their children's learning but I have reservations about simply paying them," said Mr Lightman.

But he added that the cash could be a genuinely positive thing if it were used, for example, to enable parents to take time off work to attend the courses.

Numeracy, literacy and science

The trial, funded by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), will run in 14 primary schools in Middlesbrough and Camden and will cost a total of almost £1m.

The idea is to equip parents with the skills to support their children's learning in numeracy, literacy and science.

This project includes financial payments so that parents can afford the childcare and time off work needed to take part. If it works, it could save significantly on the future benefit bill

There will be a total of 18 sessions, each lasting 90 minutes, in the year starting next September.

Some 1,500 parents and carers will be randomly divided into three groups.

One group will get free childcare and meals when they attend. A second group will not only get these benefits but will be paid for every session they attend. A third control group will not attend the sessions.

The attitudes and abilities of all the children with parents in the three groups will be assessed at the beginning and end of the project.

The idea is based on a US project, in which parents of pre-school children in an area of Chicago were paid up to \$7,000 a year to attend two sessions a week aimed at boosting their basic maths and literacy as well as their knowledge of how to support teachers and help with homework.

'Rigorous evaluation'

Dr Kevan Collins, EEF chief executive, says the project aims to test whether such schemes are good value for money.

"Parents are a child's first educators, and their ability to support their children's learning can have a big impact on whether or not their child succeeds at school and in later life. Where parents themselves don't know enough about basic maths or literacy, they can't help with homework and support teachers.

"Tens of millions of pounds has been spent by successive governments on lots of different parenting initiatives. But very few of them have been subjected to rigorous evaluation.

"This project includes financial payments so that parents can afford the childcare and time off work needed to take part. If it works, it could save significantly on the future benefit bill.

"However, at this stage, we are simply testing whether or not it works. If it does we will say so, but if it doesn't we will also say so. That way we can ensure that the best parenting interventions are used in ways that help parents and their children, and provide taxpayers with value for money."