There is extensive evidence demonstrating the critical role of the family in child literacy development. Despite this, national and international literacy strategies traditionally overlook the role of parents/carers, in part because of a long-standing focus on schools, and in part because of the limited and/or mixed evidence on the impacts of family literacy programmes. At the European level, a series of key policy publications in 2009-10 addressed literacy issues and objectives for either children or adults; none, however, said anything about the family.

This paper presents findings from a pan-European study for the European Commission undertaken by NRDC and partners in 2011 to investigate the effectiveness of family literacy programmes and examine the barriers to family literacy policies, as well as the means to overcome those barriers.

This mixed-methods study reviewed meta-analytic evidence and high quality primary research from around the globe; researchers also conducted case studies of successful programmes throughout Europe. Quantitative evidence indicated that family literacy programmes are efficient and effective tools for improving child literacy; case studies highlighted mechanisms through which successful programmes achieved their objectives. To investigate family literacy policy, researchers conducted interviews with key policy actors in 12 countries. In addition to analysing policy challenges and success factors, the study investigated a key question for EU policy makers: how to effectively transfer successful programmes from one policy context to others.

The study produced a range of evidence-based policy recommendations, many of which were acted upon. In particular, the EC increased its emphasis on the role of the family in supporting child literacy development, and family literacy became more visible in EU literacy directives. For example, the final report (2012) of the EU High Level Group of Experts on Literacy mentioned "family literacy" 13 times. Subsequently, the EU Council of Ministers' Conclusions on Literacy suggested that Member States should develop national literacy strategies in which family literacy initiatives played an important role, because "[t]here is evidence to show that [they] are cost-efficient and highly effective". A 2013 EC proposal for the launch of a "European Policy Network of National Literacy Organisations" made it clear that this network must include family literacy experts and organisations.

These developments suggest that our 2011 study was part of growing EU-level interest in family literacy and, moreover, played a key role in that growth. The study thus produced what for researchers is a particularly rare outcome: genuine policy impact.