



How schools and families can work better together

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The importance of good schooling and parenting is well recognised, but the importance of how schools and families relate is much less understood. The impact of the relationship between schools and families reaches far and wide; affecting wellbeing, behaviour and attainment to name a few. If we are to harness the potential of this relationship, much more must be done to overcome the barriers that exist between teachers and parents today.

Previous studies have convincingly shown that parental engagement in a child's learning, rather than simple involvement in school activities, is the most effective way for parents to improve their child's attainment, behaviour and attendance. Sadly poor parental engagement is having an adverse effect; also taking its toll on pupil, parent and teacher wellbeing.

Many parents say that they have felt patronised, sidelined or ignored by their child's school, and an equally worrying number of teachers said they had been verbally or physically abused by a pupil's parent.

Parents and teachers must work as a team to enable parents to connect where it is most important - beyond the school gate, as active agents in the learning of their children in the home. Taking an interest in their child's education, helping with homework, backing school disciplinary practice in the home and being a source of moral, motivational support are all ways in which parents can effectively engage in education, but such engagement is much easier said than done.

This guide identifies some of the challenges that exist in improving teacher and parent relationships, and offers tips on how to overcome them.

The benefits of parental support in education

Parental involvement with their child's school may include attending parents' evenings, signing student diaries, responding to reply slips, membership of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or parent governor status.

Yet research has shown that the most important aspect of parental support in education is in supporting learning in the home. This could be helping with homework, ensuring the home environment is conducive to study, encouraging conversations about learning and showing an interest in the school day.

The benefits include:

- ▶ Improved attainment
- ▶ Increased attendance
- ▶ Better behaviour

Other forms of parental involvement, which may be beneficial for the school environment, may not improve outcomes and raise standards in the same way. Schools should therefore focus efforts and resources to engage parents in supporting their child's learning beyond the school gates.

Parental engagement is effective at improving these outcomes because parents give children the skills and desire to succeed in a school environment. In younger children, this would be helping develop the skills to learn, and in older children motivation is the most important.

There is also convincing evidence that parents can significantly affect teacher wellbeing. While the majority of teachers enjoy a positive relationship with pupils' parents, when difficulties do occur they can have a significant impact on the mental health of the teachers concerned.



What are the barriers to effective parental engagement?

Parental experience

The differences between a parent's level of engagement with their child's education can be partly attributed to their own experience while at school. If learning was confined to the school environment, with little engagement from home, they are likely to replicate this pattern with their own children.

In addition to this, some parents may have had a poor school experience themselves, with lower levels of educational attainment. This may mean they lack the skills and confidence needed to positively engage with their child's schooling.

A chaotic or disordered home environment

When children display behavioural problems in school, disrupting the class and making it difficult for the teacher to teach, there is often an underlying problem in the child's family life.

If there is nowhere at home for them to study, and no one to help them with that, it will be difficult for children to show that discipline at school.

Parenting support programmes have been shown to be very helpful in engaging the family and boosting achievement, behaviour and attendance.

Family structures

Families in Britain are becoming more diverse, with marriage rates falling and blended families and kinship carers becoming more visible. Schools are challenged to take this into account, ensuring that they are not inadvertently preventing family engagement in education.

Some parents may face particular barriers to engaging in their child's education, including disabled parents, fathers, grandparents or other kinship carers, non-resident parents and parents for whom English is a second language.

Family breakdown can have an enormous impact on a child's wellbeing. Their attendance, behaviour, and ability to concentrate in class may all be affected by disruption at home. In particularly acrimonious family break-ups, where custody is an issue, schools may be faced with difficulties in engaging both parents. Keeping non-resident parents engaged and active in their child's life can improve the outcomes for that child.

Ineffective home-school communications

Communication between families and schools is an important part of improving relations between the two groups.

Parents, in their comments to us, regularly make reference to shortcomings they perceived in the way the school communicates with them. These shortcomings fell into three categories; (i) parents wanted more communication, particularly in the form of a named contact; (ii) parents wanted more informal contact; (iii) parents wanted more personalised contact – more information that was specific to their child.

Some parents may also feel that there needs to be a problem with their child's progress before contact with the teacher can be made.

School-parent communication can be a significant source of tension and frustration for both parents and school staff. The issues tend to be around the timing, frequency and effectiveness of the communications. Generic communications and those that include jargon and industry terminology should be avoided to prevent alienating parents.

Pressure on teachers' time

Teachers are still working on average 50 hours a week and workload is a contributory factor to the high levels of stress among teachers. While there is an appetite for more communication, the subsequent impact on teachers cannot be underestimated.

With large class sizes, there is also the potential for a teacher's time to be dominated by spending time with parents, leaving little time to actually teach the children.

Pressure on parents' time

Parents need to juggle a range of family and work responsibilities and their engagement with the school can suffer as a result.

In addition to the lack of physical time to engage, there is often a lack of flexibility from some schools, which can be perceived as a sign of hostility. The need for flexibility for parents is clear but must be balanced with respect for teachers' work-life balance.

Pupils

Children themselves can be a significant barrier to successful engagement between schools and families, particularly as they get older. Teenagers can feel that they have a right to privacy, and neglect to pass on notes from teachers to parents or show them their homework.

Poverty

Material deprivation has a profound effect on a family's ability to support their child's education. The effects of poverty manifest themselves in numerous ways, from long working hours and shift patterns preventing families from supporting homework, to lack of money for travel preventing families from taking part in cultural activities or visiting historical sites or museums.

Poverty impacts on children's outcomes in many overt and less obvious ways. There have been a number of excellent initiatives by successive governments to try to address the gap in attainment. Parental engagement has been shown to be a more significant predictor of educational outcomes than socio-economic status. However, there is also a need from the government's side to maintain momentum and funding for initiatives to raise families out of poverty.



Solutions and recommendations

In order for children to excel, parents and schools need to have a positive relationship and understanding. It is essential for parents and teachers to have a common understanding of their roles in a child's education. Parents, teachers and pupils must be equipped with the right resources to meet each other's expectations and benefit education overall.

Home-school agreements

These agreements can help make clear what parents should reasonably expect from schools and teachers, and what schools should expect from parents.

Drawing this up must be a collaborative process to which parents, pupils and teachers feel able to contribute. They should be flexible and regularly reviewed to ensure that they reflect the changing nature of the school community.

By setting clear and realistic expectations, the potential for frustration and misunderstanding on both sides can be alleviated. There must be clear procedures in place to deal with any persistent breach of the agreement on either side.

Parent support workers

Where behaviour and low achievement continue to be an issue, parent support workers could play a vital role in ensuring that a family's individual circumstances are taken into account. They have a critical role to play in being the first port of call for teachers that have concerns about a particular child.

Parent support workers are a unique resource, as trained professionals with the skills to reach out to families and ensure that all relevant agencies are involved in giving support. With the potential to ease time pressures on schools and families, they have a vital role in supporting positive relationships between parents and teachers.

Every school should have adequate access to a parent support worker who is trained to deal with a spectrum of family and emotional issues. They should be a visible member of the school community, ensuring that all parents, teachers and other staff understand their role, and how to contact them when required.



Communication between schools and parents

The emphasis of parent-teacher communications needs to shift so it is focused on how parents can best support their children's learning in the home.

Increased use of technology has opened up opportunities for better communication between schools and home. However, parents are keen to see communication that is personalised to them and their child.

For teachers, providing personalised communications is a huge burden on their already excessive workload and increasing the frequency of communication will not necessarily make parents feel more engaged.

Less frequent, more personalised and relevant communication which highlights both the negatives and positives about a pupil's performance is important. These communications need to include explicit recommendations for how the parent can support the child's learning and development at home. This approach should be jointly agreed within the Home Support Agreement.

Training

Teachers need specific training about how to work successfully with parents, particularly those newly qualified teachers who are new to the profession.

This would also help address some of the barriers that are now more common, such as engaging non-resident parents.

This will help to develop positive relationships between schools and families and ultimately help pupils to succeed. Parent support workers are ideally positioned to play a positive role in the delivery and tailoring of such training.



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