



Oxford School
Improvement

Parental Engagement

How to make
a real difference



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Parental engagement at the heart of learning

“
If parents engage with their children’s education, the attainment of the child will increase by 15% no matter what the social background of the family.
”

Professor Charles Desforges¹

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The purpose of this report

This report describes ways of increasing parents’ engagement with their children’s learning.

It begins with a summary of research showing the impact of parental engagement. The audit later on (pages 4-17) is a self-evaluation tool – a set of questions to get you thinking about your current practice.

Parental engagement and the Ofsted inspection

Parental engagement forms an important part of the Ofsted inspection framework. Inspectors must consider:

- how well leaders and governors engage with parents, carers and other stakeholders and agencies to support all pupils
- the leaders’ and governors’ vision and ambition for the school and how these are communicated to staff, parents and pupils²

The handbook’s grade descriptors suggest that schools judged outstanding are likely to provide parents ‘with clear and timely information on how well their child is progressing and how well their child is doing in relation to the standards expected’ and provide ‘guidance about how to support their child to improve.’³

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean Gross CBE

Jean Gross was the government’s Communication Champion for children. Previously she headed a charity responsible for the very successful Every Child a Reader and Every Child Counts one-to-one tuition programmes, and was a Senior Director within the National Strategies. Here she led work on overcoming barriers to achievement for disadvantaged children and other vulnerable groups.

Jean has been a teacher, an educational psychologist, head of children’s services in a local authority, and a Visiting/Associate Fellow at three universities. She has frequently acted in an advisory capacity to government. She is the author of numerous articles and best-selling books on children’s issues. She was awarded a CBE in the 2011 New Year’s honours list, for services to education.

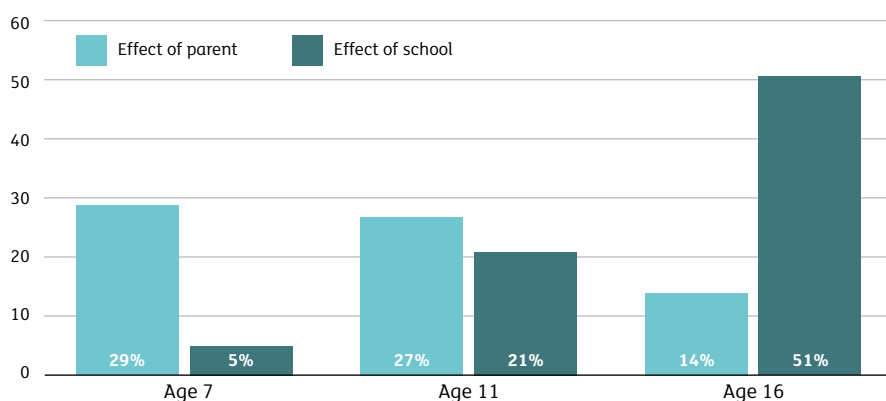


Figure 1: The proportion of variance in attainment explained by parent and school effects⁴

What does research tell us?

Key research summaries, listed at the end of this report, tell us that:

- children of parents who take an active interest in their education make greater progress than other children
- in the primary years, family influences have a more powerful effect on children's attainment and progress than school factors
- parental engagement has a significant effect throughout a child's school years
- gains in pupil achievement stemming from parental engagement initiatives tend to be permanent
- in schools with matched intakes, those with strong parental engagement tend to do best – they have higher attainment and fewer problems with behaviour
- levels of parental engagement are linked to socio-economic status, but in parenting it is what you **do** not who you are that counts. Even where families live in poverty children can achieve if their parents are involved and committed to their child's education
- the home-based factors that make the strongest contribution to the child's achievement in the primary years include the extent of one-to-one interaction between parent and child, and parental involvement in educational activities and outings with their child
- reading achievement is best where parents engage in activities that involve putting words into broader contexts (such as telling stories or singing songs), read to the child (in the early years and first year of school), and listen to their child read (at age seven)
- parents' aspirations for their children strongly predict their achievement, as does parents' self-efficacy (the belief that they can make a difference to their own lives through their own actions and efforts)
- levels of parental engagement vary, with mothers more likely to be involved than fathers, a general decline in involvement as the child gets older, and significant differences between ethnic groups
- Black/Black British and Asian/Asian British parents are often more likely than White parents to want to be involved in their child's education and to feel that it is extremely important to help with homework
- schools can make a difference. One study⁵ showed that if families who were initially uninvolved with their child's education became more involved as a result of the school's efforts, there were marked improvements in the child's literacy.

How can you use this research to shape your practice?

The audit on the pages which follow will help you translate research findings into strategies to promote parental engagement in your school. You might want to involve your senior leadership team and a school governor – perhaps a parent governor – in working through it. Within each step you will find action points, practical steps you can take to make the difference that will raise standards for your children.

ABOUT THE THE NATIONAL LITERACY TRUST

This publication supports the National Literacy Trust, an independent charity that transforms lives through literacy. The organisation believes that society will only be fair when everyone has the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills they need to communicate, to fulfil their potential.

From helping parents with their children's communication and literacy development with its Words for Life campaign (www.wordsforlife.org.uk), to motivating disadvantaged children and their families to read for pleasure with its Young Readers Programme, the organisation is dedicated to improving literacy levels in the UK.

PARENTS MATTER

Parents matter – but so do others who look after children too, from foster carers to grandparents. We have used the term 'parents' in this report as shorthand for all these different carers.



Step 1:

Creating a welcoming ethos

This step focuses on the messages conveyed by the way that adults in your school behave, and the school environment.

Is your school environment welcoming to parents?

The school environment can give out subtle messages to parents, making them feel at ease – or at a disadvantage. Some parents, for example, will feel more comfortable if your reception area has local radio playing rather than Mozart, and magazines on the coffee table rather than just the school prospectus. It will help if there are toys for toddlers to play with, information in community languages and posters inviting families to join in with a wide range of activities.

Some schools have set up a café in their entrance area, open for parents and children at the start and end of the day – for a “tea and toast” time, for example. A good general principle is to make sure the school premises are regularly used by families in the evenings and at weekends, so that the school is part of “the backyard” of the community.⁶

Are there opportunities for frequent, informal contact with parents?

Parents are more likely to engage with school where there are plenty of opportunities to chat informally with staff. In many successful schools, teachers and the senior leadership team make a point of being out in the playground before and after school, greeting parents and engaging them in conversation. The school will also make

“
In the schools visited ... headteachers made it a daily priority to present the school as a welcoming, friendly environment.

The Extra Mile: Achieving success with pupils from deprived communities, DCSF, 2009

”

opportunities for parents to stay on when they have dropped their child off.

Is there a physical space in school that is just for parents, and designed to meet their needs?

A dedicated space for parents within school is a powerful symbol that they are welcome. Consulting them on how they want the room to look and how it should be used is important. At Highgate Infant school in Norfolk, relationships with parents were once poor, with a “them and us” atmosphere. The headteacher began by visiting families at home, and really listening to what they wanted. She then set up a “Learning Lounge” – a home-like room equipped with sofas and cooking facilities. Parents used the room for a variety of activities, including Friday afternoon adult education courses arranged in conjunction with the local FE college.⁷

Have you asked parents what you can do for them, as well as told them what they can do for you?

A two-way partnership with parents means asking them what information or support they would like the school to provide, as well as setting expectations about their support for their child's learning.

One infant school, for example, surveyed parents and found that 61% didn't have a computer; they did not want courses but did want internet access, so the school set up its own internet café.

Another school, at parents' request, introduced drop-in sessions with the school nurse, “Sums for Mums” sessions, workshops on phonics and Family Days Out at weekends.





Have you asked parents when and how they want information?

Many parents find it difficult to take time off work to come into school, but will be able to tell you what timings might work for them. They may also like to hear about websites that have reliable information on how to support their child's learning – like *Oxford Owl* and the National Literacy Trust's *Words for Life* website.

Surveys have shown that parents particularly value extra contact with the school at times of transition: when their child starts school or moves to a new key stage with different curriculum expectations.

Are parents seen as real partners or is there a “them and us” mentality among staff?

Staff may occasionally see parents as a hindrance, consumers (who might complain), or true partners. It can be helpful to explore these attitudes, and undertake shared professional development to bring everyone on side.

You might, for example, have a staff meeting where staff share a time when their engagement with a parent made a difference, and reflect on what made that possible.

You might ask those members of staff who are themselves parents to talk about their own positive and negative experiences of engaging with their child's school.

Or you might divide the group into two and ask one group to generate a list of barriers that stop them communicating effectively with parents, and the other group to put themselves in parents' shoes and consider what it is that prevents them from communicating effectively with teachers. Groups can then compare notes and work together on identifying ways of overcoming the barriers.

Is your school culture about “doing with” or “doing to” parents?

“Doing with” rather than “doing to” parents is the ultimate challenge. You might want to evaluate where you are on the ‘ladder’ of parental participation.

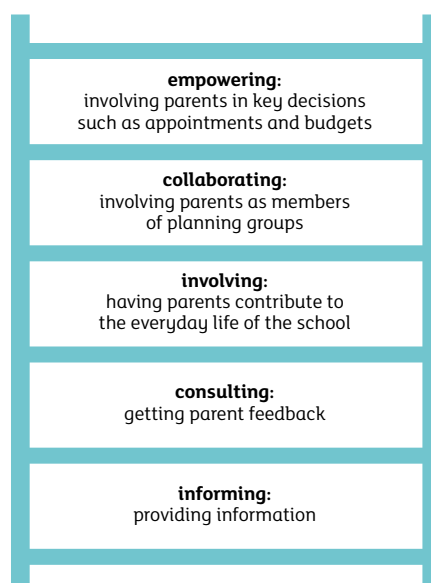


Figure 2: Ladder of parental participation

ACTION POINTS

- 1 Plan a programme of home visits to better understand the community context. Then with this in mind pay a ‘visit’ to your school as if you were a parent, and consider what changes to the environment might be made to ensure parents feel welcome and comfortable.
- 2 Set up a systematic process to seek parents’ feedback on the work of the school, such as a suggestions box or organised survey.
- 3 Invite parents to take part in a focus group or Parents’ Forum, making sure the group is representative.
- 4 Plan a programme of staff development on parental engagement. Involve parents in planning the programme and providing input.
- 5 Survey parents to ask what activities they would like you to provide for families.

Step 2:

Communicating effectively with parents

Communicating with parents can mean many things, but Step 2 focuses primarily on communicating **about the child's learning** – as that has the most reliable links to improved attainment.

Do you keep parents informed about your curriculum and teaching methods?

Good practice here might involve formal curriculum workshops, demonstration lessons and open afternoons, text on the school's website, and links to useful parent-facing websites.

Many schools create opportunities for parents and children to learn together in school, for example working with visiting artists, or exploring maths and environmental trails.

Some schools post on the web the learning programmes for the week, with suggestions about how parents/carers can help at home. Others put a poster on a door or window where parents bringing or collecting their children will see it. At Owlbrook Primary in Sheffield, each classroom has a shelf outside the door displaying objects and books about the topic the class is working on each week.

Another good idea is to give younger children a daily sticker with a suggestion for their parents – “Today I have learned about floating and sinking. Ask me to tell you about it.” Older children can construct their own messages and write them on stickers, or record them on Talking Tins.

Do you keep parents informed about what their own child is learning?

Below is an example of how to “go the extra mile” in informing parents about their own child's learning.

To help them understand and use the system, parents were invited into school (with a crèche and doughnuts provided) to go online and see how it worked. They soon concluded that “It's just like Facebook” and now regularly log on, helped by the school's system of sending every child home once a week with a wireless enabled netbook or 3G-connected netbook if a child has no internet access at home.

One powerful benefit has been enabling distant dads to keep in touch with their child's learning.

Do you regularly share good news with parents about their child?

Effective schools take care to ensure that parents' first experiences of contact with the school are positive, by, for example, sending home “praise postcards”, texts or e-mails to let parents know when things have gone well.

“Parents don't exist solely as the receptacles of bad news about their children's problem behaviour or poor attainment.”

Reva Klein, Defying disaffection¹⁰

Do you use a range of strategies to communicate?

Electronic communication and the use of social media are making communicating with parents ever easier. Texting can enable a teacher to quickly send parents a message about what children are learning in any given week, and how they can help. Many schools have also developed a Facebook page to give parents a channel to communicate with school and each other.

CASE STUDY

Brook Primary school in Dudley⁸ used the INSPIRE programme to engage parents. Teachers used the relevant term's curriculum overview to plan an afternoon of activities for children and parents. Parents evaluated the sessions very positively, “valuing the quality time spent learning with their child individually.”

In another primary school parents were invited into school every week for about half an hour for workshops on phonics, where the teacher taught parents alongside their children. Parents learnt strategies and were given a booklet of examples, so that they could reinforce the work at home.⁹

CASE STUDY

Grays Infant and Nursery School uses its learning platform to involve parents. Every child has their own e-portfolio space on the school's learning platform, with data on their attainment, targets, activities and achievements. Staff are given regular time to upload information and photographs – for example, for a child where a target agreed with parents was to “build confidence in class and group situations”, a TA or teacher might upload a photograph of him succeeding in a PE lesson. Parents can upload information too.



"Everyone uses their phone and accesses their texts – it is instant and engaging and speaks to parents in an area where they feel confident and comfortable."

*Leadership for parental engagement,
National College¹¹*

Some schools make good use of film too. Watercliffe Meadow Primary in Sheffield involved its youngest children in making and starring in an induction video about the school and their learning for their parents – a sure-fire way of making sure it was watched.

Where print is used, it can be planned to provide parents with a lasting reminder rather than a piece of paper that ends up at the bottom of their child's schoolbag, or in the bin. One school sent every parent a calendar with significant school events marked on each month and on the facing page year-group by year-group ideas for supporting the curriculum at home.

Do you use homework to get parents and children thinking, talking and learning together?

Research has shown that where children are set interactive homework assignments, and parents briefed on how to complete them, the amount of time parents spend working with their child more than doubled. There was also a marked improvement in reading test scores – up to four times that in comparison schools not using interactive methods.¹²

Helpful ideas for home activities which link with year-by-year learning objectives are available in the DfE archive.¹³

The SEAL resources¹⁴ provide another useful model, with a half termly letter to parents on what children will be learning in school and fun 'take home' activities linked to this learning.

ACTION POINTS

- 1 Survey parents to find out whether they feel well-informed on the curriculum, teaching approaches and their own child's learning targets.
- 2 Review the range of media you use to communicate with parents.
- 3 Monitor communications with parents to establish the balance between 'good news' and concerns.
- 4 Sample homework assignments to monitor the extent to which they are interactive.
- 5 Discuss findings as a staff group and consider what forms of professional development might be useful.

“

The schools judged by inspectors to be good or outstanding had particular strengths in ... discussing pupils' assessments and targets with parents.

Ofsted, 2011¹⁵

”

Step 3:

Reaching the hard to reach

This step is about making sure you have strategies in place to reach out to parents who may not be confident in engaging with you – parents whose own experience of education may make them anxious or angry when coming in to school, parents who have low literacy levels, and parents of children learning English as an additional language.

Do you start with activities that parents want and in which they can engage confidently?

Schools that are successful in engaging parents always start where parents are, rather than where they would like them to be. This may mean engaging parents in non-threatening activities to start with, before building up slowly to ones that focus on academic learning and the curriculum.

Activities range from fitness classes to relaxation and stress management, ICT, salsa dancing, cooking or dressmaking or embroidery – whatever it takes to engage a particular community. A crèche for younger children encourages attendance, and providing food always helps.

At Netherfield Primary in Nottinghamshire, there is a Breakfast Club for families, which creates a daily opportunity for informal contact. At school events there will always be food, and often prizes for parents. Staff think carefully about what will hook parents in, rather than assume that some are unreachable. An example is the opportunity offered to parents to have a free framed family portrait done in school, whilst working on a vision for their family's future.

CASE STUDY

Candleby Lane School in Nottinghamshire, judged outstanding by Ofsted, serves a former mining community. In the past, says headteacher Chris Wheatley, “teachers were afraid to go out into the community, and parents were afraid to come into school.”

All that has changed now. The school offered families free bacon and sausage cobs first thing in the morning; in the first half term only a few came in, but after two years there are now more than three hundred – and once in school, they stay on for workshops on how to help their child with learning.

The school also dedicates a lot of teacher time to face-to-face meetings with parents. In exchange, teachers were freed up from writing end of year reports, which are now produced using an IT programme.

CASE STUDY

A group of schools in the town of Winsford in Cheshire, where deprivation levels are high and children's language and communication skills poor on entry to school, implemented an initiative called Talking Boxes. Children and their parents work together in school to decorate a sturdy wooden box which they then fill with objects that are special to the child. Each child has the opportunity to bring their box into class and tell everyone about their special things.

“
Parents who were
viewed as ‘hard to reach’
often viewed the school
as ‘hard to reach’.

Professor Alma Harris and
Dr Jane Goodall¹⁶

The schools have found this a good way of getting parents to come into school. “We would never have got them in for literacy or numeracy”, they say. “But decorating a box – everyone felt they could do that. It was safe.”

Do you have strategies to build bridges between home and school?

Some schools work with volunteers from the community who act as ambassadors or champions, reaching out to other parents to encourage them to take part in school activities or helping them develop their own child's language and literacy skills at home. Other schools employ or share a worker whose role is to bridge the gap between home and school, engaging with parents on a personal level and providing practical support as a first step towards building trust.

CASE STUDY

At Christ Church Primary in Lewisham, relationships with the community were once very poor. Headteacher Geraldine Constable, recalls a time when “parents were very reluctant to engage and could often be volatile, requiring us to call in the police to sort out rows or fights.” The school decided to contract with the charity School-Home Support to provide a highly trained worker. She visits families at home to help them overcome problems that are leading to poor attendance, behaviour and learning and runs a variety of groups for parents in school. The impact has been strong. At its last inspection, Ofsted noted that “relationships with parents and carers are excellent” and that pupils were making outstanding progress from their starting points.



Do you have specific strategies to communicate with parents who have literacy difficulties?

Telephone and face-to-face contact are obvious alternatives to written communication. New technologies, like Talking Tins and Talking Postcards, allow short pieces of text to be recorded and sent home. Becoming a dyslexia-friendly school will help.

Some schools are also creative in their use of film.

“A special school provided parents with an annual record of their child’s learning and achievements using DVD technology. Each DVD had a minimum of three short video extracts, each of which was introduced by a teacher to provide information and a focus for attention. The parents were very positive, saying that this approach brought their child’s learning to life and helped them to understand and celebrate it better.”

Ofsted (2011) Schools and parents

Do you have strategies to communicate with parents of children learning English as an additional language?

Many schools use bilingual home-school liaison workers and local community groups as well as drawing in members of the wider family as interpreters. The most effective look at all their communications to make sure they reach out to diverse groups. The website of Christ Church Primary, for example, has an engaging video about the school on its home page, and a translation button enabling content on the site to be translated into a range of languages.

Other schools plan ways that parents can support their child’s learning where they are taking an extended holiday to visit the family’s country of origin, providing learning packs with a diary, disposable camera, worksheets and books.

These schools also demonstrate that teachers value the contribution of different cultures, inviting parents into school to share their knowledge and skills (“My mum/dad’s got talent”) – showing how to cook a recipe, for example, or sharing artefacts from their religion.

ACTION POINTS

- 1** Look at your data on parental involvement, for example attendance at parents’ evenings and other formal meetings. Are there particular groups who engage less, and strategies which might help draw them in?
- 2** Check whether you are making full use of parents’ skills and expertise – particularly parents from other cultures.
- 3** Review the range of activities you offer in school for parents, and who tends to attend them. If you need to, extend the range so as to include activities with which less confident parents will feel comfortable.

Step 4:

**“
Fathers’ involvement in
their children’s learning is
associated with better
outcomes, higher attainment,
more positive attitudes and
better behaviour.
”**

Asmussen and Weizel, 2010²²

Engaging dads

This step is about reaching out to fathers, so as to capitalise on the strong influence they have on their children’s success at school. Research shows that this is particularly important for boys, and for disadvantaged children.¹⁷ It applies to fathers who do not live with their child just as much as those who do. Academics have found that the amount of time fathers spend with their children is not as important as the quality of this time. Children who have a close and supportive relationship with their fathers are more likely to do well in adulthood regardless of whether or not the father lives with them when they are growing up.

Do you draw on Dads’ interests to engage them?

Schools which are successful in drawing fathers in often do so by using their interests – organising sport-themed events and Family Learning Days when families can build go-karts or rockets or dens. One school has a regular Saturday opening for dads to play with their children in the school playground.¹⁸

activities in which families designed football kits, posters, team logos and so on, for which they used the school’s ICT suite and art rooms. They registered for the fantasy league, worked out how to spend their money, researched players, wrote about them and downloaded pictures.

It is important to focus on educational outcomes in dad-oriented activities. Research has shown that fun dad-friendly activities can act as a ‘hook’ to draw them into other family services, but this does not always lead to improved child outcomes unless they are followed up with more structured opportunities to support children’s learning.

Do you ensure that activities have a clear purpose linked to improved outcomes? Is there an element of challenge?

Research suggests that fathers are more likely to attend activities when there is a clearly-stated purpose that is linked to improved child outcomes. In other words, fathers benefit from knowing why it is important for them to attend.

An element of challenge is often helpful, too. One early years setting put up posters and sent home leaflets saying “Did you know that 80% of fathers these days say they do not have time for bedtime stories – it can’t be true here, can it?” They then sent home story sacks and digital cameras for dads to take photos of their child sharing the book and props – with great success.



CASE STUDY

One scheme in Staffordshire involved ‘Fantasy Football’. During the sessions, held on Saturday mornings, children and parents practised football skills, led by professional sports coaches. They then took part in creative

Do you involve fathers in planning and organising activities?

Fathers may particularly welcome an active role in planning your engagement activities.

Cooper's Lane Primary School in Lewisham, for example, devised a "Dads Matter" scheme. A group of fathers and male family figures met once a month in a local pub or restaurant to plan a strategy to encourage fathers to become more involved with their children's learning. Support was particularly targeted at families of children with behaviour difficulties. The group planned trips, home reading activities, fun homework tasks, and a "Bring your dad to school day", when dads would come in and use their talents and interests to work with children. One father, for example, brought in his motorbike to show to the children. About sixty fathers took part in the first year of the scheme, which had a marked impact. Fathers became much more confident to come into the playground and into school, and there was a reduction in behaviour problems amongst the target children.¹⁹

Do you engage fathers in improving boys' literacy, in particular?

Fathers' willingness to support their son's literacy development is a strong predictor of later attainment and wellbeing. But surveys undertaken by the National Literacy Trust show that while mothers' encouragement for their child's reading and opportunities for children to see their mothers reading has stayed stable since 2005, there has been a decline on both these indicators for fathers. So an effective strategy for engaging fathers is likely to focus on literacy.

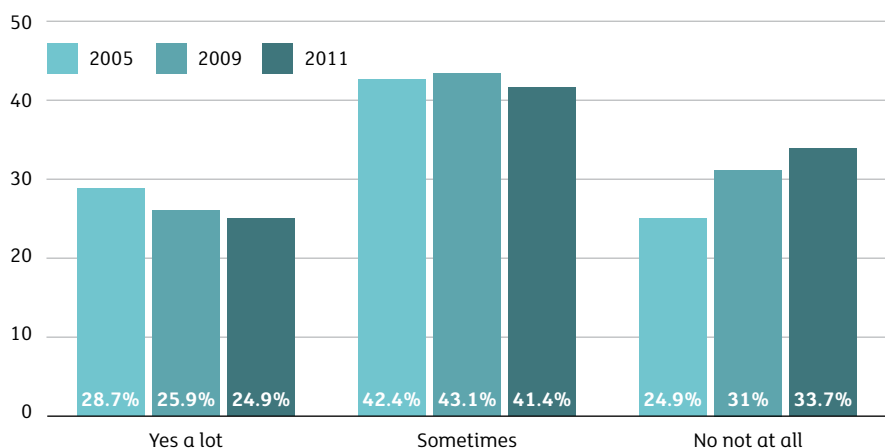


Figure 3: Encouragement to read by father, National Literacy Trust survey, 2012

CASE STUDY

Janine Ashman, from Castle Batch Primary School in Weston-Super-Mare, describes their Lads 'n' Dads reading scheme

We decided to run the reading scheme to encourage more boys to read and to provide them with a positive male role model. To ensure the project was manageable for families, we said they needed to commit to reading just three books or texts during the summer term. We deliberately said they could be any text – a magazine, newspaper or website. We also made sure we had lots of boy-friendly texts in our library. When the completed reading records were returned, we presented both the lad and dad with a certificate in a celebration assembly, along with a book for them to keep.²⁰

Valerie Hill describes how Pipers Grove Primary School in Barnsley involved dads and male carers

We wanted to set up a project to develop an enthusiasm for reading among a targeted group of boys. We called the project "Big lads and little lads", as most of the boys worked with their dads or granddads, but any male family member or friend could be chosen as their "big lad". The boys and their chosen adult male worked together for six weeks to write a book about dangerous sports. Our role was to support the research and provide IT equipment and materials. The project provided an interesting insight into how boys can be enthused by male role models. There were also lots of opportunities for the "lads" to enjoy reading together, researching and discussing what they had found.²¹

ACTION POINTS

- 1 Undertake a special audit of your current work with fathers, seeking views from families and staff. There is a useful model in *Engaging Fathers: Involving Parents, Raising Achievement*, available from the DfE web archive.
- 2 Develop a policy about fathers' involvement (including non-resident fathers) that clearly explains why this is so important.
- 3 Review the range of activities you offer in school to see which are attended by fathers. Consider involving a group of fathers in developing plans to extend the range.
- 4 Take a look at the Fathers Reading Every Day (FRED) programme, which encourages fathers to read intensively with their children. Research has shown improvements to children's reading accuracy, reading comprehension and behaviour. It was developed in the US but is now available here through The Fatherhood Institute. www.fatherhoodinstitute.org.
- 5 Monitor attendance at dad-orientated events to check whether they are only or mainly attended by fathers who are already highly involved in their children's lives.

Step 5:

What works? Parent groups and workshops

This step is about what works in courses, groups and workshops for parents.

Do you offer parents language, literacy and numeracy courses and workshops which have evidence of impact?

There is good evidence that workshops or courses which model for parents the ways in which they can help the child's learning at home can be very effective.

Examples of approaches with good evidence of impact include:²⁴

It Takes Two to Talk®. This is a programme for parents of children aged five and under who have delayed or impoverished language. Workshops show groups of parents how to use effective interaction strategies in everyday

situations – allowing the child to lead a conversation and communicate about what interests them, and responding with interested comments. Evaluations show that the children involved make significant language gains when compared to a control group.

Paired Reading. Here schools offer a workshop for a group of parents in which they learn how to follow a very simple procedure – first the parent and child read simultaneously out loud until the child signals (for example by knocking on the table) that he wants to read by himself, then the child reads independently until they get stuck or make a mistake, when the parent joins in until the child signals again, and so on. Evaluations show that children can make over three times the 'normal' rate of progress after a period of regular, supported paired reading.

“
Schools which offered bespoke forms of support for parents, including literacy classes, were most likely to engage parents in their children's learning.
”

Professor Alma Harris and Dr Jane Goodall²³

Family Literacy and Numeracy. These courses offer parents and children a combination of separate, then shared, activities. Evaluations have shown that the proportion of children whose low reading level would leave them struggling in school fell from 67% to 9% after the programme, with similar gains for numeracy.

Ocean Maths. This programme provides parent-child workshops alongside interactive homework activities. Evaluation studies concluded that “the majority of participating schools have witnessed improvements – in some cases dramatic – in levels of mathematics attainment.”²⁵

Do you offer support to parents with their child's social and emotional development?

Schools are increasingly linking with outside agencies to connect parents with courses aimed at developing parenting skills. Research shows that these can be very effective – often halving the rate of severe behaviour problems.²⁶ Courses include the Family Links Nurturing Programme, Families and Schools Together (FAST), Incredible Years, Triple P, Mellow Parenting and Positive Parents.



CASE STUDY

A recent successful import to the UK is the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme. This eight-week after-school programme is offered to families with three- to eight-year-old children. Families sit at family tables and eat together. Parents are coached by a trained volunteer in how to give instructions and have the child follow



them. Children then go off to play while parents discuss issues of their choice in groups. At the end there is a fifteen minute special play session in which each parent plays with their child, coached to follow the child's lead. An evaluation found that the programme reduced teacher-rated emotional and behavioural difficulties in the classroom by 46% and also raised attainment compared to children whose parents just received behavioural parenting pamphlets.

Many schools also run their own Family SEAL workshops, which support parents in understanding their child's SEAL learning at school and applying ideas from SEAL to relationships in the home. These too can be highly effective.

Do you offer these courses and workshops to all parents, but also target those you think would particularly benefit?

Academics have concluded that universal approaches – offering parenting programmes to all – are important because improvements in 'normal' parenting can help all children, and because parents with particular needs are more likely to take part if they don't feel singled out and stigmatised.²⁷

Many schools therefore offer a general invitation to all parents, then follow this up with personal invitations to those they think would find the course or group particularly useful.

Do you have strategies in place to encourage targeted families to take part?

Learning mentors and parent support workers, often themselves trusted members of the local community, can act as the 'bridge' between home and school, drawing parents in to the school's courses and groups by contacting them and offering to come with them to events.

CASE STUDY

At one primary school in Hackney, the School-Home Support worker recruited nine families to a Family Learning programme. She began by approaching families she was already supporting – phoning them or having an informal chat in the school playground. Later she reminded parents in advance of each session. Whenever a parent didn't attend she phoned home to check they were OK and remind them about the session the following week.

ACTION POINTS

- 1 Review the opportunities you currently offer parents to take part in structured courses and workshops.
- 2 Consider partnering with external agencies and other local schools to extend the range you provide.
- 3 Explore ideas to support family literacy activities on Oxford Owl and the National Literacy trust website.

“
One of the mums on the SEAL course said “thank you for changing my life” when her daughter had turned to her and said “I love you”.

National College, Leading and Developing Parental Engagement²⁸

”

Step 6:

Parents' evenings and meetings

This step is about ways of getting the best from parents' evenings and other planned meetings with parents.

Do you structure conversations with parents in ways which signal partnership?

Seating arrangements, greetings and 'openers' can give out powerful signals about the parent-teacher relationship. The most effective schools create a feeling of partnership by focusing on asking and listening rather than telling. Teachers might ask questions like the ones in Figure 4.

Schools taking part in Achievement for All have implemented 'structured conversations' with parents of children with SEND or low attainment. The aim of the conversation is to really listen to the parent's point of view, to understand what they see as the key barriers to their child's learning, what they think has worked well in the past, their hopes and dreams for their child and the provision they would like to see in place.

The approach has been highly successful. External evaluation²⁹ found that the percentage of schools reporting excellent relationships with parents rose from 12% to 48%. Pupils made outstanding academic progress – 37% of the pupils with SEND involved in the pilot made progress as great as or greater than that made by all pupils nationally in English, and 42% per cent in maths.

CASE STUDY

As a junior school where parents 'drop and go', Torriano School identified parental engagement as a key issue. Class teachers were trained in Achievement for All structured conversations with parents and held these three times a year for every pupil with SEND. From these conversations came one curriculum and one personal 'wider outcomes' target for the child. Linked to these targets, children took part in drumming, sports coaching, canoeing and residential outdoor programmes. Parents were surveyed to ask them what support they would like from the school. They identified maths, reading, transition and ICT as their priorities, so the school organised workshops for them – on the National Curriculum

and how to use the software that is part of the school's approach to boosting literacy. The results speak for themselves. Despite their SEND, Achievement for All pupils have made good or outstanding progress in English and good progress in maths.

Do you involve parents in setting targets for their child?

In Achievement for All schools, parents are involved in the actual target setting process. A survey of parents by Ofsted found this was not the norm nationally: while 84% felt fully aware of their child's personal targets, only 49% said that they were involved in setting them.³⁰



Figure 4: Good questions to ask at parents' evenings



ACTION POINTS

- 1 If you do not already have one, develop a system for adding information about contact with parents (dates of meetings, whether parents attended etc.) to your school information systems.
- 2 Use this data to draw out patterns for different groups of parents.
- 3 Link the information to data on pupil progress, so that you can evaluate the impact of parents' involvement.
- 4 Plan PD for staff on how to get the best from parents' evenings and meetings.

“

The strategy of getting parents to talk about their child first rather than us jumping in is interesting ... I think that's a really good idea that we can fly with.

Teacher in a school involved in Achievement for All

”

Step7:

Involving parents in their child's intervention programme



This step is about how you communicate with parents when their child is taking part in an intervention programme designed to help them catch up in language, literacy or maths, or to provide enhanced opportunities for social and emotional learning.

Have parents been consulted about the child's need for extra help?

Current thinking emphasises the need for parents to have more control over decision-making about their child – to know, for example, if they receive the Pupil Premium and how the money will be spent, or if their child has SEND or a disability to have the option of holding a personal budget and deciding what provision they want to see in place.

Effective schools manage this by regularly exchanging information about the child's progress so that there are 'no surprises'. Where a child needs help, they share with parents the school's provision map of extra interventions and discuss which would be most suitable.

Some interventions, like Reading Recovery, ask parents to sign up to a semi-formal contract that sets out what the school will deliver, and what the parent is asked to do in return.

Do your chosen published intervention programmes involve parents in supporting the child's learning at home?

Many published interventions have parental involvement built into their design, for example:

- the take-away activity notes in the Project X CODE literacy intervention
- the children's activity books which children take home and share with parents, in the Talk Boost language intervention
- the 'Special Delivery' parcels of games and activities sent home to families of children involved in the post/letter-themed 1stClass@ Number intervention programme.

It is important that home activities are not too onerous. In Reading Recovery, for example, parents are asked to hear their child read one or more short books each day, that they

“
It is crucial to families... that parents are empowered to make decisions about their child and their support.

DfE, Support and Aspiration, 2012³¹

”

can already tackle well independently, and help the child re-construct a cut-up sentence they have written and already re-assembled and re-read several times in their lesson in school.

CASE STUDY

Bankside Primary in Leeds uses the Numbers Count intervention. Teacher Jan Kauser regularly has parents observe their child's lessons. She also sends home personalised newsletters to parents every few weeks, describing what the child has been working on and including photographs and comments about their success. Parents as well as children take part in a graduation ceremony and receive a certificate thanking them for the help they have given their child.³²

If you are using 'home-grown' interventions, do you involve parents?

*"In one school, the teachers in Year 5 ran an after-school mathematics club for pupils who had been identified as underachieving. Parents were invited to attend for the second half of the session. They were shown the teaching strategies used and games which could be played at home. Children and parents were shown links to carefully chosen websites which could support learning in mathematics."*³³

Ofsted (2011) Schools and parents

ACTION POINT

Review the intervention programmes you currently use, to see whether they provide opportunities to involve parents. Consider building these in if you need to.

Step 8:

Pulling it all together – leadership and management

This step is about the type of leadership and the management systems which support increased parental engagement.

Do you have a vision that conveys the transformative power of parental engagement for the achievement and wellbeing of children in your school?

Vision is the starting point. Engaging parents – particularly those you may not be reaching at the moment – is hard work. Unless you have and convey a personal conviction about the impact parental engagement will have on children's learning, you may as well stick with the status quo.

But as Mark Twain reminds us, "If you do what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got." Without a vision for change, there may forever be a group of parents who remain outside your school gates and outside their child's learning. With a vision and good management, they can be welcomed in.

Do you personally model the values and attitudes you want to see throughout the staff team?

Your own behaviours and language will inspire others if you consistently model the belief that parents are the experts on their own child and equal partners in the child's education.

Do you use normal school management processes to increase parental engagement?

The management levers to enact your vision include:

- prioritising parental engagement in the School Improvement Plan
- building parental engagement into recruitment, induction, job descriptions, performance management and professional development
- allocating a senior member of staff to take responsibility for parental engagement

“

The importance of leadership cannot be overstated. It is the glue that holds the provision together. It keeps the focus on impacts and outcomes. It ensures practice has real purpose and brings real benefits.

Leadership for parental engagement, National College³⁴

”

- distributing leadership to enable others to make a contribution too – for example, learning mentors or family support workers working in a team with the SMT lead
- identifying a lead governor and a system for monitoring and reporting to the governing body.

CASE STUDY

At Watercliffe Meadow Primary in Sheffield, parental engagement is an integral part of the school's vision. It underpins the process of recruitment and selection of all staff – job descriptions of all staff include community engagement as part of their duties.

A large distributed leadership team incorporates community engagement as one of its three core strategies. There is a specific engagement team made up of the deputy headteacher, one of three assistant headteachers (early years), learning mentors, an early intervention manager, the community learning co-ordinator and front-of-house staff. It has as its remit responsibility for the engagement of all children and families, 8am–6pm and in the holidays.³⁵



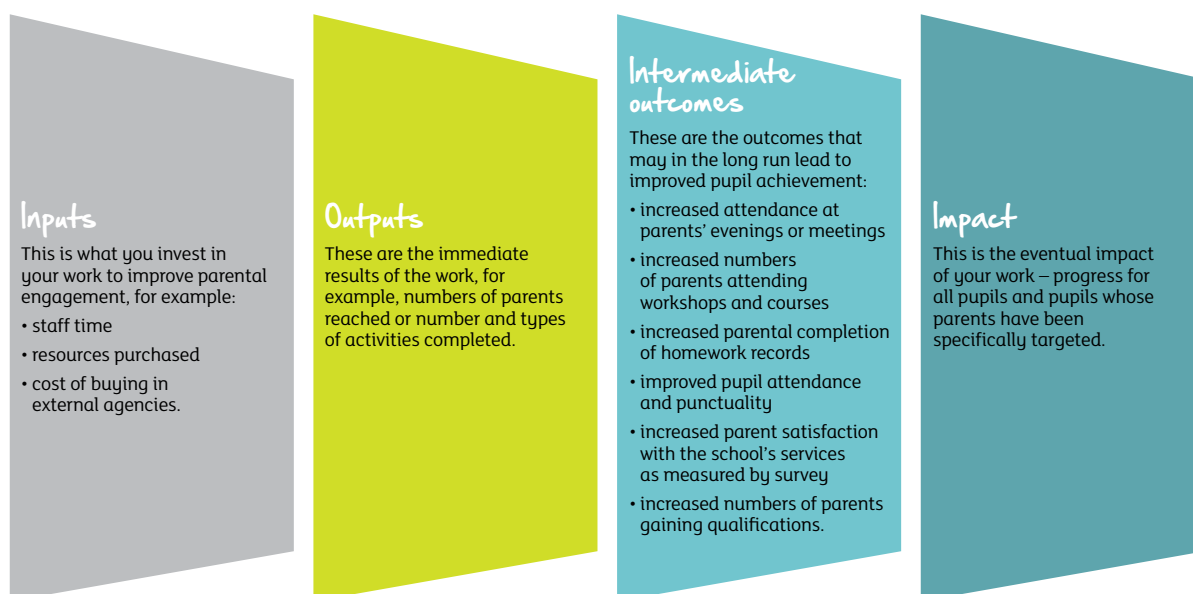


Figure 5: A model for evaluation

Do you celebrate success?

Motivating the staff team in what can sometimes feel like an uphill slog means a need for frequent encouragement. One way of doing this is celebrating every success, however small. As Chris Wheatley, headteacher of Candleby Lane School says "You need to shout about it all the way. If a member of staff has any success, stand them up in a staff meeting and say 'Tell us about it.'"

Do you work in partnership with other schools locally?

Collaborating with other schools and pooling funding is often essential. One cluster of schools collectively funded a co-ordinator to manage a team of parent advisers from community development backgrounds. They provided direct support to individual families, liaised with outside agencies and organised a range of courses for parents. In another group of schools, a shared family learning co-ordinator organised curriculum information sessions, an accredited course on "How our children learn", and sessions on transition to the high school. The cluster has contracted a mental health nurse who runs courses for parents on basic behaviour management. Parents can also sign up for adult learning courses to improve their literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.

Do you draw on all possible sources of funding for your work?

The grants that once supported parental engagement work have gone, causing a real problem for stretched school budgets. Nevertheless, there are still some funding opportunities. The Pupil Premium can be used to tackle barriers linked to lack of parental support for learning in some disadvantaged families. Some of your actual or planned activities may fall under local authority strategic priorities and grants, such as support for families in the Foundation years, parenting programmes to tackle behaviour problems in troubled families, or early help for children at risk of family breakdown. Other activities may be directly provided by voluntary and community groups, or attract government funding for adult education – talk to your local FE college about this.

Do you have systems in place to evaluate outcomes and impact?

Ofsted has noted that schools – particularly primary schools – find it difficult to evaluate the impact of their work with parents. In visits to nearly fifty schools, they found that "Although the schools, including those judged to be outstanding, pointed to anecdotal evidence of positive results from involving parents, this information was poorly collated and analysed."³⁶




It is often impossible to disentangle the effects of increased parental engagement on attainment from the effects of other factors. Nevertheless, it is useful to track pupils according to characteristics like:

- › high/medium/low attendance at parents' evenings and meetings
- › parents' participation in specific workshops and courses
- › ratings of the extent to which take-home activities from intervention programmes have been completed.

Then you can pull out progress data for pupils and groups of pupils tagged according to these criteria, and compare it with national pupil progress expectations.

You can also gather evidence showing that you are achieving intermediate outcomes – steps on the way to the final impact you want to see. Figure 5 provides a model for evaluation that includes steps towards the hoped-for endpoint – improved achievement for all your pupils.

Useful tools for engaging parents

PROGRAMME	SUMMARY	WEBSITE
Oxford Owl	<i>Oxford Owl</i> has a dedicated parent website, designed and developed by Oxford University Press to help parents with their children's learning at home. <i>Oxford Owl</i> has 250 FREE eBooks with linked activities, as well as lots of fun ideas and games to integrate reading and maths learning into everyday life. It also has invaluable expert advice on a wide range of 'hot topics' including phonics, the Year 1 phonics screening check, motivating boys, keeping juniors reading and engaging children with their maths learning.	www.oxfordowl.co.uk/ 
Words for Life	<i>Words for Life</i> is a campaign from the National Literacy Trust which gets parents involved with their children's communication and literacy development and gives them confidence to feel they can make a positive difference. It is aimed at parents of children aged from birth to eleven.	www.wordsforlife.org.uk/ 
Young Readers Programme	A project that motivates disadvantaged children and their families to read for pleasure. The programme helps children and young people to acquire the skills they need to develop as a reader, from knowing how to choose a book that engages them, to where they can find books once the project is over.	www.literacytrust.org.uk/programmes/young-readers-programme/
Professional Development	You will find a wide range of free PD videos on www.oxfordowl.co.uk on the subject of parental engagement including Jean Gross talking about reaching hard to reach parents. The <i>Oxford Owl Pathway on Parental Engagement</i> will lead you through effective ways schools can reach out to engage all parents.	 www.oxfordowl.co.uk

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Oxford University Press is grateful to the headteachers and staff of those schools referenced in the case studies.

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