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Research Associate Full report

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Resource

How to involve hard-to-reach parents: encouraging meaningful parental involvement with schools

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Abstract

This research explores how different schools engage hard-to-reach groups of parents. It generates a toolkit of practical strategies and creative ideas to inform school leaders who wish to develop greater parental engagement in their contexts.

Recent government publications such as the 2010 white paper (DfE, 2010) and the special educational needs (SEN) and disability green paper (DfE, 2011) comment on the importance of parental engagement. This study has sought to capture good practice in this regard, drawing on data from 50 questionnaires completed by leaders of primary, secondary and special schools in different contexts in 15 local authorities across the country, together with interviews with 4 school leaders whose practice on parental engagement was deemed to be outstanding, and a further 16 leaders of good schools as identified by Ofsted. The findings from the interviews and questionnaires were then shared with a focus group of 12 hard-to-engage parents and supplemented by feedback from a further 18 parents and 2 health professionals with experience in this field.

The study concludes that all forms of positive parental interaction with school are important and can have a positive impact on children's learning, behaviour and attendance. The research found that schools in different contexts employ a wide range of practical strategies to encourage parents to engage more with school. Positive communication is essential for such parental engagement strategies to succeed, but this can take place in a number of ways. The best approaches are tailored to specific parental needs, and context is an essential factor when considering parental engagement strategies.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore successful practice in the field of parental engagement with the aim of producing a toolkit of creative ideas and strategies to support school leaders who seek to involve parents from hard-to-reach groups more effectively.

The key research questions were:

- What do school leaders mean by hard-to-reach parents?
- What are the perceived barriers to parental engagement?
- What strategies do school leaders use to encourage parental involvement and overcome these barriers?

These questions were explored using a combination of in-depth interviews with leaders in schools perceived to have effective parental engagement strategies in place, and questionnaires completed by 50 leaders from schools across the country, covering pupil referral units, special schools, primary schools and secondary schools in varying contexts of geographical location, size and socio-economic background. Findings were also explored with a focus group of 12 inner-city parents deemed hard to reach and supplemented by feedback from a further 18 parents and 2 health professionals to provide an external perspective.

Literature review

The literature reviewed for this practitioner research study included national and international research on home-school links, parental involvement, parent partnership and parental engagement.

The importance of parental engagement

Parental engagement is considered as parental engagement in learning, as opposed to parental involvement in schooling (Harris & Goodall, 2007). This distinction was made to ensure that policymakers and practitioners were not confusing the objective of getting parents involved in school life (eg, attending a parents' evening, which is seen as being reactive to school) and the objective of engaging parents with their children's learning (seen as proactive).

Feedback from school leaders shows that one of the major concerns in running a modern school is trying to get parents to engage more. Because of the changing demographic of modern parenting (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2010), traditional approaches to parental involvement have been largely unsuccessful. Working and single parents have little time to attend school activities and workshops during school hours, which would help them learn the skills they need to assist their children with academic tasks, yet parents and family background remain the biggest influence on a child's development and life chances.

Previous government policies such as Every Child Matters which followed The Children Act 2004 in the UK and the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) in the US have stressed the importance of involving parents in the education of their children. In the past, the roles of school and families were seen as separate. Recent international research now indicates a need for a shift in this perspective (Bojuwoye, 2009; Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009; Snell et al 2009; Hujala et al, 2009).

In the UK, the white paper *The Importance of Teaching* (DfE, 2010) and the SEN and disability green paper (DfE, 2011) both discuss the accountability schools have towards parents:

'Central to our approach is the need to make it easier for parents and the public to hold schools to account. In the past, too much information has been unavailable to parents, too difficult to find or not presented comprehensibly.'

DfE, 2010: 66

Such information-sharing is mutually beneficial. Bojuwoye (2009) sums this up in his study of South African schools by saying:

'When parents and schools interact closely together they share information among themselves and this information-sharing helps families to better understand the schools and schools to understand the families.'

Bojuwoye, 2009: 463

There is significant research, nationally and internationally, to suggest that parental involvement in children's learning is positively related to achievement. Cotton and Wiklund (1989) in their study on parental involvement in education propose that the more intensely parents are involved in their children's learning, the more beneficial are the effects on pupil achievement. Moreover, they state that this holds true for all types of parental involvement in children's learning and for all types and ages of pupils.

Research to date also suggests that there is significantly more evidence of parental engagement in the early stages of primary school than in secondary schools, although parental support of learning in the home has been seen to have a significant effect on children of all ages from pre-school to 16 (Feinstein & Symons, 1999; Sammons et al, 2007). Cotton and Wiklund (1989) say there are several reasons why engagement at secondary level is not as easy for parents.

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- Secondary schools tend to be larger and further from home.
 - The curriculum is more sophisticated.
 - Pupils have more than one teacher.
 - Parents of older pupils are more likely to be in full-time employment.
 - Children are beginning to establish a sense of separation from their parents.

Engagement may also take a different form in secondary school, for example in checking homework completion, supporting course selection or attending award days and school activities, compared with the more informal relationship parents have with their child's primary teacher and their involvement in, for example, extra-curricular activities and supporting reading.

Irrespective of school phase, research suggests that if we want to improve the life chances of all children, then parents and schools must work in partnership and be involved at every stage of a child's school experience. School leaders and parents must form trusting relationships to support children in attending school and behaving in an appropriate way that is conducive to learning and will enhance opportunities for themselves and their peers. In this, school leaders must be proactive:

'School leaders have a critical role to play in building trust and mutual understanding between schools and communities. Trust is nurtured through relationships, through information and through knowledge.'

Riley, 2009: 58-9

However, the practicalities of effective parental engagement often pose a real challenge to school leaders. It requires school leaders not only to think differently about how to involve parents in the educational life of their child, but also to consider areas where parents may have the potential to take the leading role. Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren in their study of parental engagement in Israeli schools comment:

'Parents are an important component within the school system, to which headteachers and teachers must be responsive. Policy-makers expect parents to be active partners who have influence over school decision-making and participate in school activities and governance.'

Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009: 805

School leaders therefore need to focus both within and beyond the school gates. A paradigm shift needs to be made; where previously leaders may have thought they were working for or on behalf of parents, now it is time to recognise that schools and parents must have a real partnership together:

'Home-school partnership is not only informed by the assumption of its underlying benefits, it is also driven by the acknowledgement of the rights of parents and their needs as consumers... parents must have a say in the way their children are taught and treated. Parents have the right to know what is going on in school and should be informed about the nature of the education their children are receiving. The general principle is that everyone who is a parent has the right to participate in decisions that affect their children's education.'

Bojuwoye, 2009: 463

Thus true parent partnership involves harnessing and utilising all the potential and strengths that parents can bring to the school. School leaders need to be sensitive and non-judgemental, and recognise the reasons why parents, from low-income families in particular, are underrepresented among those involved in schools. Indeed, research indicates that it is these disadvantaged children who have the most to gain from school-parent partnership (Henderson, 1987).

Once school leaders understand the importance of parental engagement and recognise why some parents are reluctant to become involved, they can then consider how schools can provide the climate and relationships to make both parents and school staff feel secure in working in partnership together:

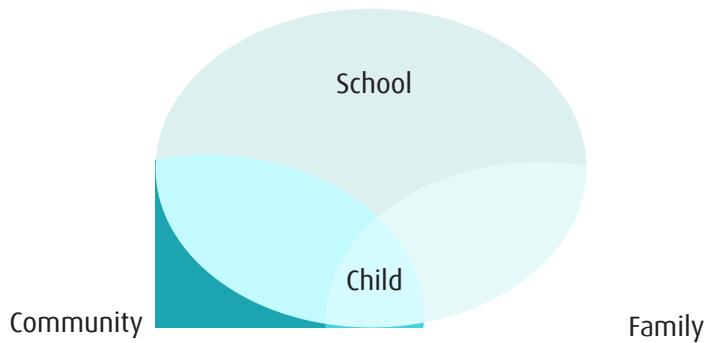
'The most positive attitude profiles towards parental involvement were found in schools where both teachers and parents were empowered [and] there is a balance of influence between parents and teachers... empowering teachers is not enough; parents also need to feel that they can contribute to schools and express their 'voice'... in this regard, the research findings are challenging and quite optimistic.'

Addi-Raccah & Ainhoren, 2009: 811

A taxonomy of parental engagement

Epstein (2001) has developed a theory of 'overlapping spheres of influence', which recognises that there are three major contexts in which children learn and grow: the family, the school and the community (Figure 1). In this model there are some practices that schools, families and communities conduct separately and some they conduct jointly in order to influence children's learning and development. The model puts the child at the centre. Epstein argues that pupils are the main actors in their education, development and success in school. School, family and community partnerships cannot simply produce successful students. Rather, partnership activities may be designed to engage, guide, energise and motivate students to produce their own successes. The assumption is that if children feel cared for and encouraged to work hard, they are more likely to succeed educationally.

Figure 1: Three contexts for children's learning



Source: Epstein, 2001

Epstein (2001) goes on to outline six types of parental involvement to characterise how families can get involved in the education of their children:

- parenting
- communicating
- volunteering
- learning at home (changed here to family learning)
- decision-making
- collaborating with the community

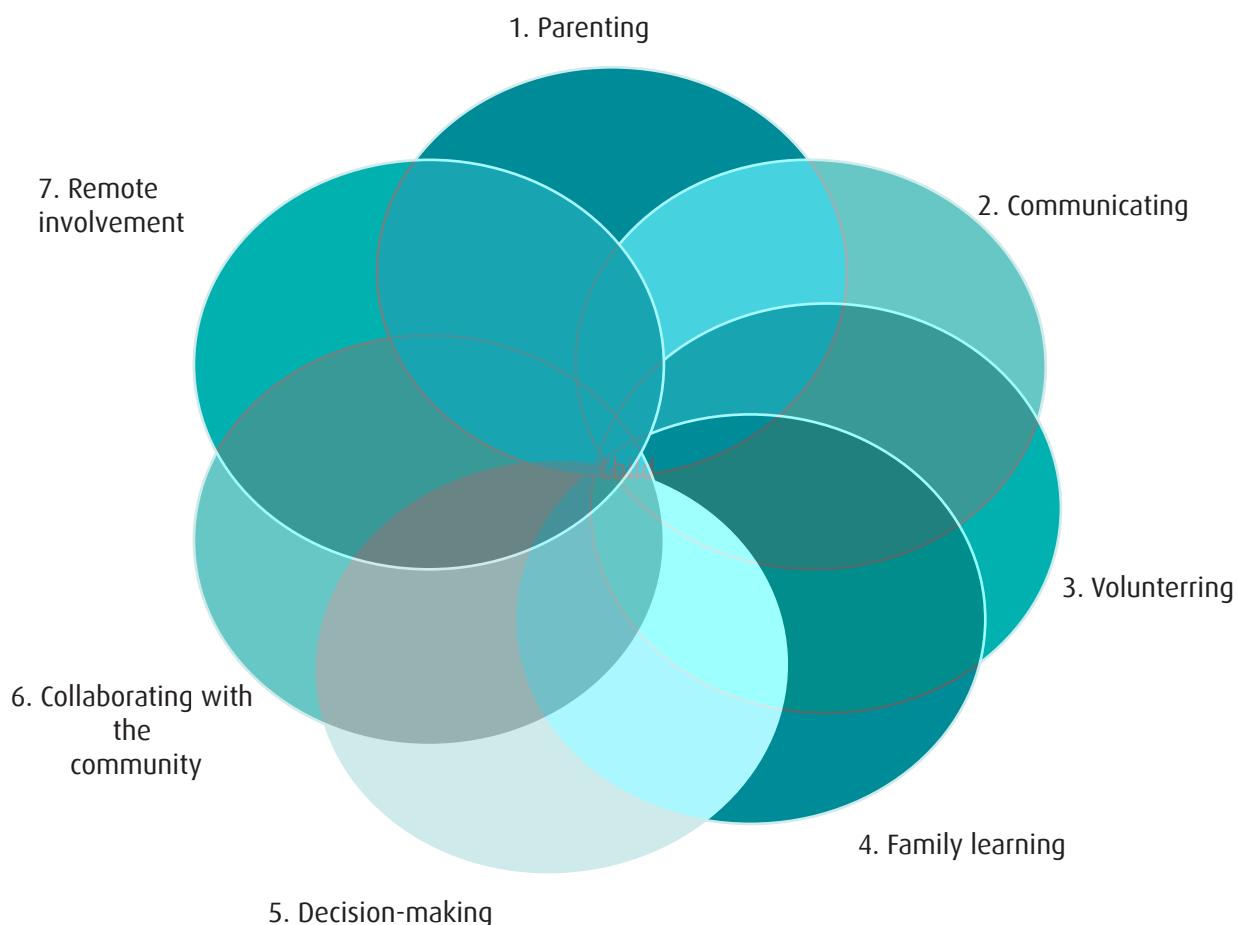
For the purposes of this research study, the term 'family learning' was used rather than 'learning at home' to remove the suggestion that such learning only occurs away from the school site. In these technological

times, it is necessary to add another category to this list for parents who communicate with school via ICT, for example contributing to or responding to websites, blogs and/or podcasts, which we will call:

- remote involvement

The revised taxonomy is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Taxonomy of parental engagement in learning



Source: Epstein, 2001

The taxonomy provides a structural framework for the analysis of the data gathered in this research study from questionnaires and interviews with senior leaders about parental engagement, together with information from the parent focus group. An overview of this data in accordance with this taxonomy is outlined in section 3 of the findings that follow. Specific strategies for parental engagement are further detailed and codified in Appendix 2.

Methodology

Following a review of relevant literature, both national and international, questionnaires based on the research questions were completed by 50 school leaders from across the country in 15 different local authorities in spring 2010. The schools varied in phase, geographical location, size, socio-economic context, church links and culture. In addition, 20 interviews were completed with a sample of leaders who worked in schools that were perceived to have high levels of parental engagement. Of these schools, 4 had been graded 'outstanding' by Ofsted for parental or carer involvement and 16 were graded 'good'. The schools were drawn from areas in Greater Manchester involved in the Greater Manchester Challenge.

Parents, a Healthy Schools co-ordinator for Salford Primary Care Trust (PCT) and the social marketing director from Stafford PCT were interviewed to gain a broad view of parental engagement strategies. The social marketing director had experience of working with hard-to-reach community groups and gave an insight into the social experiences of these groups, particularly teenage parents. A focus group of 12 parents from inner-city Salford was also involved in the research and gave a great insight into the views of parents from hard-to-reach groups. Feedback was also obtained from a further 18 parents from primary schools in the Greater Manchester area, including 2 parent governors. Further details of the sample of those contributing to this research are in Appendix 1.

Findings

Section 1: What do school leaders mean by hard-to-reach parents?

Precise definition of what constitutes hard-to-reach parents without knowledge of specific contexts and circumstances is difficult to achieve:

"It is difficult to determine who 'hard-to-engage' parents are as schools do not know the full extent of family circumstances. What we do know is that there are certain parents in every school who rarely, if at all, attend school events or meetings."

Healthy Schools co-ordinator, Salford PCT

However, school leaders responding in this research suggested a variety of characteristics are shared by members of hard-to-reach groups of the non-engaged:

"Our hard-to-reach parents are a mixture, the unemployed, the low income, [English as an additional language] parents, parents of poor attendees. They are non-responsive."

Deputy head, secondary school

The use of the term 'non-responsive' can suggest that there is simply something wrong with the parent, and that non-engagement with school is solely their fault and not the school's. To combat this perception, social marketing techniques of identification with the target group can be employed:

"Lessons can be learned from social marketing techniques, for example the importance of insight [or] qualitative research on the groups that you wish to engage with. Put yourself in their shoes - how might it feel to be asked by a school to engage?"

Social marketing director, Stafford PCT

Use of such social marketing techniques by PCTs in projects such as increasing breast-feeding or smoking cessation rates have demonstrated the powerful force of inertia when striving to secure client engagement. It was felt by responding school leaders that similar levels of inertia could be prevalent among hard-to-reach parents as a result of low parental self-esteem and previous personal bad experiences of school, as well as socio-economic factors.

Drawing together the issues identified above, this research study thus defines hard-to-reach parents as those who:

- have very low levels of engagement with school
- do not attend school meetings nor respond to communications
- exhibit high levels of inertia in overcoming perceived barriers to participation

Using the lessons of social marketing, this study in its review of relevant literature therefore draws on qualitative research regarding hard-to-reach parents and provides an opportunity for school leaders to put themselves in the shoes of parents in order to reflect on factors that could influence parental engagement and particularly the barriers to be overcome in securing it. This allows the creation of a toolkit of appropriate strategies to secure greater parental participation from this hard-to-reach group.

Section 2: Barriers to parental engagement

The majority of respondents in this study (90 per cent of the school leaders questioned) felt that barriers to parental engagement are attributable to parental factors rather than factors stemming from the school. Inertia or a lack of responsiveness by parents with school may be caused by low parental self-esteem, previous bad experiences of school, or gender and boundary issues.

Self-esteem

Much work is traditionally done by school staff at all levels to raise the self-esteem of pupils, but much less consideration is given to the self-esteem of parents. Bandura (1986) uses the term 'self-efficacy' to describe self-esteem in the sense of self-belief, and for parents this is demonstrated in the belief that they can make a positive contribution to their own child's learning. Research has supported the positive link between the level of parental efficacy and parental involvement:

'Parents with a strong self-efficacy are more likely to become involved in their children's education.'

Melhuish et al, 2008: 1641

Parents who feel more efficacious and who believe in their capacity to influence their child's performance will exhibit greater involvement in school-related activities. This is seen particularly in respect of literacy and home learning.

Some 80 per cent of the school leaders interviewed and questioned reported on the significance of parental support with regard to learning to read. School leaders report that the most positive results occur when parents are on board in the early stages of their child's education, and research (Zellman & Waterman 1998; Melhuish et al, 2008) indicates that high levels of parental involvement correlate positively with higher reading scores.

Home learning, or the promotion of families learning together, is also seen as a positive engagement strategy. Parents can have a large, significant, positive effect on the achievement and adjustment of young people by supporting their learning in the home (Desforges & Abouhaar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2007). One traditional approach used to promote greater parental participation is homework. However, British Educational Communications and Technology Agency research (Shaw, 2010) has shown that over half of all children are confused by their parents when working together on homework. The same source suggests that some 83 per cent of parents report that helping with homework has proved challenging because they do not necessarily understand the work that is set, and 58 per cent of children reported that their parents confuse them by using outdated methods and contradicting advice from their teachers.

If such issues constitute a challenge for the majority of parents, they are considerably more significant for parents whose self-esteem may be low and whose previous experience of education has been less than positive.

Previous experience of school

The attitudes of a focus group of 12 parents towards home-school partnership were explored in this study; 75 per cent of the parents cited negative relationships with school being linked to their experience of unfriendly or unwelcome encounters with school staff or indeed other parents. This negativity may have come from their own experiences as a child at school. For example, one parent described how she was badly bullied at both primary and secondary school, so the whole system of education had left her badly scarred as an adult. This then affected her relationship with school for her own children and actually led her to becoming banned from the premises for abusive behaviour for a short time. This ban was not only negative for the parent and her children, but the school staff were also deeply affected. The leadership felt it had failed by not being able to resolve problems, but also found that contacting the parent about her child, who was at risk of exclusion, became an impossible task and one that was feared by school staff, and even avoided at times. It was not until the extent of this parent's bullying came to light that the problem was rectified. Through careful mediation with the parent, tentative steps towards building a relationship were made, which benefited the child enormously. The child's behaviour had deteriorated considerably during the

time that his mother was banned from the premises, since her negative attitudes were passed on to him and in his eyes, the school was not dealing with the matter well.

There has been an increase in reported incidents of violence towards school staff perpetrated by parents. One headteacher of a secondary school stated that security had been stepped up in his school due to violent incidents involving children by other parents, for example, parents getting involved with bullying issues and punishing another child in a violent way. School leaders involved in the study unanimously agreed that this behaviour is unacceptable and all reported that they had been obliged to tighten their safeguarding procedures over the past 12 months. One school leader stated:

"It is imperative to keep staff and children safe, so in some cases bans are essential, so that boundaries are kept and unacceptable behaviour is stopped."

Headteacher, secondary school

The focus group of 12 parents highlighted that particular dissatisfaction arose where parents were not happy with their child's schoolwork, or where they perceived that their child was showing behaviour problems (in a minority of cases they blamed the school), and additionally felt that avenues of redress and exploration with the school were not readily open to them. Whilst some school leaders involved in the study (35 per cent) have argued that conflicts between parents and teachers will never be resolved as they are an unavoidable component of parent-teacher relationships, the potential consequence of such necessary boundary-setting is that parents may not feel positively inclined towards school if they feel unwelcome and unimportant, or if they feel that teachers do not have time for them.

Gender issues

It is acknowledged that when some school leaders discuss parental engagement, the term 'parent' tends only to be used in reference to mothers, even though there is a growing body of research that has shown that children benefit from higher academic achievement and social and emotional wellbeing if their fathers are involved in their education (Morgan et al, 2009:167). This is particularly acute for the early development of reading skills:

'It would be regrettable if educators, researchers and policy makers were to underestimate this, often unseen, contribution of fathers to their young children's early literacy development.'

Morgan et al, 2009: 183

However, in seeking to secure greater involvement of fathers, school leaders involved in the study identified the barriers as follows:

- absent fathers who do not regularly see their children
- fathers who only see their children at weekends and therefore do not come into contact with school
- working fathers who do not pick their children up, or drop them off at school
- men entering into home-learning practices that have already been established by mothers, for example reading, helping with homework
- gender role modelling due to a majority of women staff in primary schools

Boundary issues

Some school leaders spoke of the struggle they had in defining what the role of parental engagement is and how to reconcile this within the boundaries of their existing role and the daily demands of the job. Reflecting on and acknowledging these tensions and dilemmas and taking steps toward resolving them are necessary precursors to securing greater parental engagement and community cohesion.

Equally, it is important for school leaders to recognise the porous nature of boundaries in order to encompass work beyond the school. When discussing parental involvement, some school leaders did not recognise the amount of parental involvement in their child's education that goes on unseen in the home because it is not a traditional definition of parental engagement.

'Traditional definitions of parental involvement tend only to value those efforts by parents that take place within the physical confines of the school... the majority of what the parents do to support their children's education occurs at home.'

Snell et al, 2009: 251

As this parental involvement beyond the boundaries of the school can have a crucial impact on school achievement, attendance and behaviour, it becomes a priority for school leaders to find strategies to strengthen and support these existing home efforts. Such strategies are considered below.

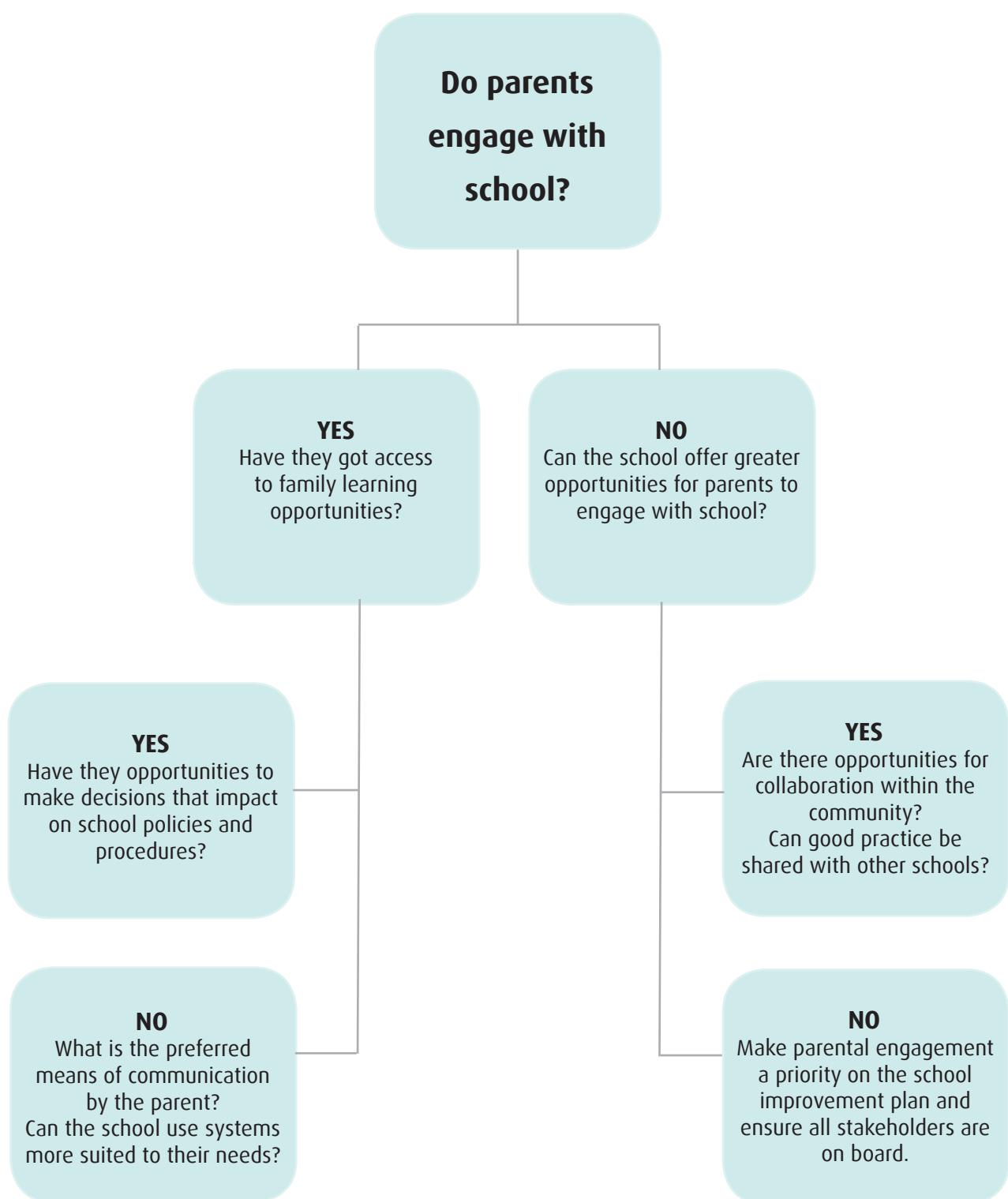
Section 3: Strategies to encourage parental engagement and overcome barriers

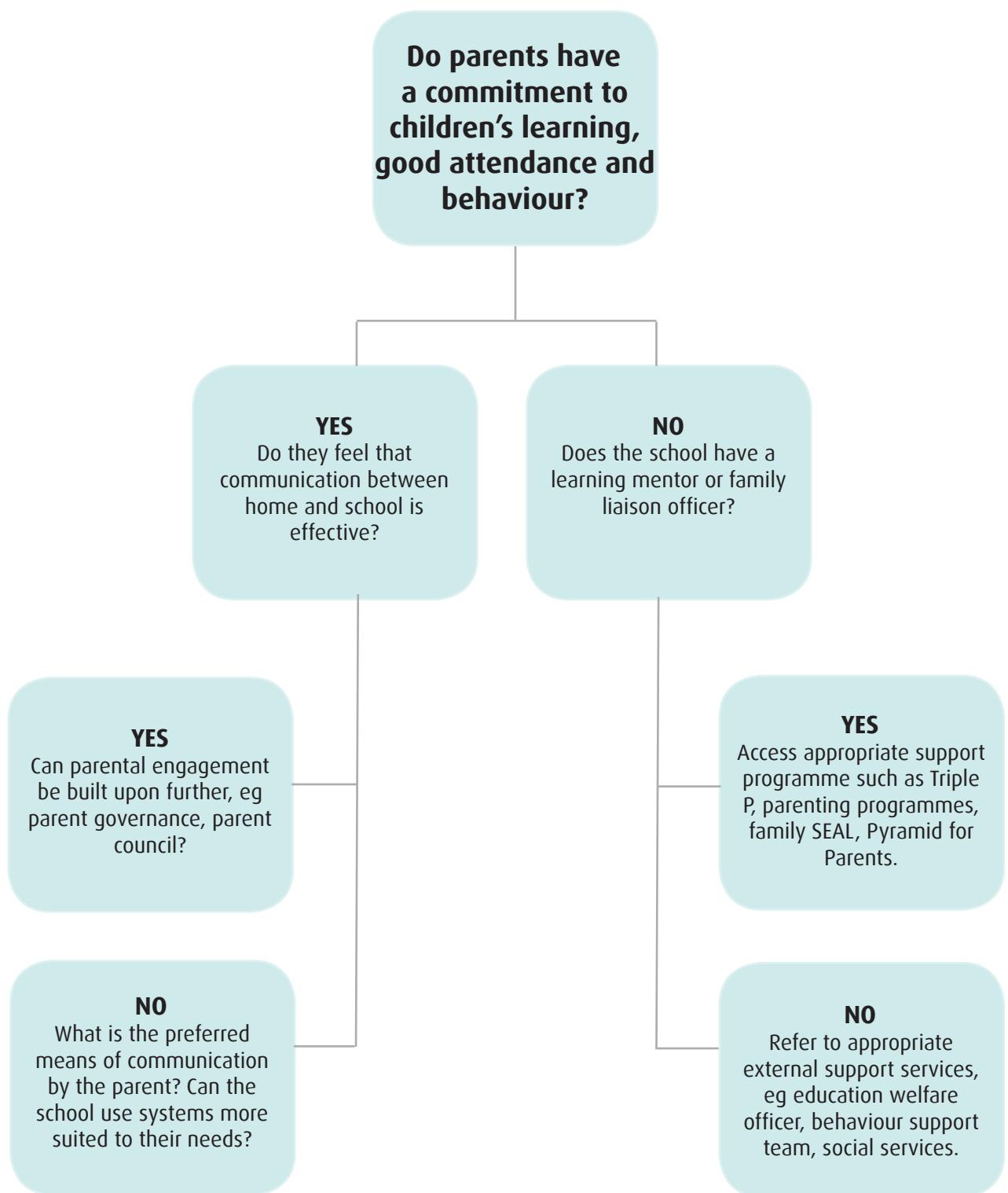
In order to determine appropriate strategies for enhancing parental engagement, it is necessary first to identify the characteristics that would identify such parents and areas of possible broad support. This leads to the creation of a toolkit of specific engagement strategies that might be applied to secure greater parental involvement.

A flowchart of identification

Figure 3 may assist school leaders in determining the target group of hard-to-reach parents in their particular school and in identifying broad areas of potential support.

Figure 3: Flowchart for tracking parental involvement





A toolkit of strategies

School leaders involved in this research study identified in interview and questionnaire responses a significant number of specific strategies to improve parental engagement. These creative ideas are captured in detail as Appendix 2 and Appendix 3 of this report. The strategies can be categorised using an adapted version of Epstein's (2001) overlapping spheres of influence concept as outlined in the literature review above to produce a toolkit of creative ideas for enhanced parental engagement. Adapting Epstein's taxonomy of types of parental involvement, the strategies identified by the school leaders who contributed to this research study may be considered under the following headings:

- parenting
- communicating
- volunteering
- family learning
- decision-making
- collaborating with the community
- remote involvement

Parenting

"I think 'drop-in' workshop type sessions that give the parents practical ideas to do with their children at home is a great start."

Headteacher, primary school

Such parental support strategies can include bespoke support from home liaison officers and parent support advisers, together with home visits from school staff linked to the new intake programme and followed up by subsequent invitations to opportunities at school:

"Anything that involves them seeing their child in the school setting and gaining a better understanding of what they do seems to work for us. 'Stay and play' days have been good with the parents of younger children and 'come and see my best work' days have been popular with parents of older children. Refreshments always help too."

Headteacher, primary school

Communicating

"I think the best way so far for us is simply by talking more to parents, entering into a relationship that is based on outcomes for their children and the role that they can play."

Deputy head, primary school

Communication strategies need to be personalised to fit context and parental need. Formal methods of communication such as a parent council and parents' evenings need to be supplemented by informal opportunities such as contact at the school gate and social events in order to build fruitful personal relationships. Riley (2009) states that:

'How schools and communities work in collaboration is unique to each context and based on intensely personal relationships.'

Riley, 2009: 60

This research project has explored relationships with school leaders who have developed successful parental engagement within their schools. What is common is the need for leaders to display openness, an ability to value the richness of children's home lives, and a striving to embed community cohesion within everything that is done within their schools by working in partnership with parents:

"I know it's an old-fashioned view, but the best education is when we both work at it together, the school and the parents."

Deputy head, primary school

Volunteering

"Give them a project – a group of parents have been given the task of developing a garden area and will involve some hard-to-reach parents who may respond more willingly to other parents rather than staff."

Headteacher, primary school

Volunteering opportunities, be they formal through service on a governing body or more informally through the PTA and seasonal fair involvement can break down barriers and capitalise on and use the hidden expertise of parents. Such involvement can also build up valuable networks which can draw in the hard-to-reach parent who would otherwise not engage:

"The parent council we set up nearly a year ago now has changed over the short time it has been running. At the meetings, as parents they discuss how to reach other parents who don't often attend by finding out what might attract them into school, as they network with parents in all key stages... when parent council was in the planning stages, I targeted some of the parents who had been hard to reach previously. They are very good at networking now and providing us with information we need to organise suitable social and other family learning events."

Deputy head, primary school

Family learning

"Some schools have family learning days with fun activities which parents and pupils engage in together. This again gives opportunities to chat informally and build relationships."

Headteacher, primary school

Family learning opportunities can encompass after-school clubs, parent-child homework sessions and opportunities particularly for fathers to get involved through such things as fathers' storytelling weeks and Saturday morning sessions to maximise availability:

"Target specific groups, eg dads, by organising themed days (ICT, cooking, sport) for parents to come in and work alongside children."

Headteacher, primary school

Decision-making

"On my school's governing body I have marketing consultants, managing directors of ICT firms and other business people... this shapes the school priorities, school ethos and vision."

Headteacher, secondary school

However, opportunities to get involved in the formal running of schools are not restricted to service on governing bodies or parent councils but can be enhanced by seeking parental contributions to the school development plan and soliciting feedback using regular parental questionnaires. Such opportunities need not be solely at a high level; particularly with hard-to-reach parents it will be necessary to start in small and non-threatening ways.

"Ask them to get involved in non-threatening tasks which don't relate directly to children/education, eg fence painting, washing water bottles. It all counts."

Headteacher, primary school

Collaborating with the community

"Taking part in community projects, working on things like the sustainability agenda and healthy schools, where parents can help to develop children and staff skills in areas of their own expertise. These would help to raise aspirations of parents for themselves and consequently for their children."

Assistant headteacher, primary school

Community collaboration through involvement in specific projects can be supplemented on a day-to-day basis through a concern for the parent-friendliness of the school buildings. School leaders reported that the design of schools can positively encourage parents to come into the building and, once inside, make the experience enjoyable and make them feel positive about returning. They reported that parents can be prompted to become involved by:

- making the school entrance welcoming and easy to find
- providing a comfortable reception area
- creating parent facilities within the school, such as a dedicated room for adult education classes (eg English lessons), governors' meetings or other community activities, to be used both during and outside normal school hours

The use of a buddy system, drawing on parents from the community who are eager to come into school to support parents who want to come in but are not at ease or confident enough to come alone, can be a valuable tool to break down barriers and promote inclusion.

Remote involvement

It is possible to harness new technologies for parental communication purposes through the use of school blogs and podcasts, a school website (regularly updated) and online questionnaires and resources in order to reach at a distance those who are unable or unwilling to engage with the school in person. The use of text messaging alerts regarding pupil absence and school closures is a further example of this.

Conclusions

Strategies from school leaders taking part in this research in summary cover the following areas:

- implementing training programmes for parents, where they learn to communicate and work directly with their child
- enabling parents to recognise that they are partners and consumers in the educational process, and providing them with suitable arenas to critique and formulate agendas
- making it easier for parents to participate by giving them meaningful roles in school decision-making
- emphasising to parents how needed and valued their involvement is
- communicating to parents that their involvement and support makes a considerable difference to their child's performance

School leaders need to foster an ethos of communication with all their parents and focus on the need to reach those who are hard to engage. All the headteachers involved in this study knew exactly who their hard-to-reach groups were and had strategies for monitoring and enhancing their engagement, ranging from taking registers at events to having different parent groups functioning within school, for example parent governors, PTA, parent forums and parent councils. Within such groups, the parents themselves take on the responsibility of networking with other parents and canvassing their views. Hard-to-reach parents can be personally invited by fellow parents onto the group, so that they feel valued and secure that their voice will be heard.

School leaders need to be committed to identifying their hard-to-reach parents and to persist in including them in their child's education for the benefit of their children, the school and the community as a whole. If hard-to-reach groups resist, the message from successful school leaders is clear - don't give up, keep trying to canvas opinion and keep inviting them, even if they turn you down. The key is to plan ahead well and to involve all staff, so that everyone is delivering the same message: that parent involvement is highly valued.

School leaders who are already overloaded with the day-to-day running of a school may find it difficult to plan for a more personalised agenda for parents. The findings of this research give a clear message that efforts put into working with parents, no matter how initially hard to reach, can pay dividends to the school in the long run, as parents who are supportive can have a positive impact on their child's learning, behaviour and attendance.

One of the most compelling messages from the focus group of 12 hard-to-engage parents was their desire to know and understand what is going on in schools. Many commented on how much schools have changed since their own attendance, but were curious to know why particular changes had taken place. Parents who feel cut off from school are prepared to believe the worst and be the most critical. It is with these parents that school leaders need to work the hardest to make the shift from the purely critical to the critical friend. Critical friends help schools to raise their expectations and are concerned about schools and want the best for their children.

Positive collaborative working in the variety of ways described above and in detail in Appendices 2 and 3 of this report gives parents the opportunity not only to support and encourage their children to respond positively on their learning journeys but also to be able to act as critical friends. Such partnership working can thus maximise the capacity of schools for improvement and reap rewards that cannot be achieved in isolation. Parent partnerships must be based on trust, commitment and determination, complemented by skills and knowledge on both sides, and capable of bonding parents to the work of the school through a sense of belonging. In short:

"Successful schools are those where parental engagement is at the centre of the school ethos as opposed to being at the periphery."

Healthy Schools co-ordinator, Salford PCT

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Download the summary report by visiting: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/researchassociates

The website also provides further information about the programme including:

- current projects
- other full research and summary reports

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Appendix 1: Composition of data sample

Questionnaire responses

A total of 50 school leaders completed questionnaire responses. They represented school contexts as follows:

School phase		Context	
Primary	42	Inner city	30
Secondary	3	Suburban	14
Special	4	Rural	6
Pupil referral unit	1		

Interviews

A total of 20 senior leaders of schools deemed by Ofsted to be 'outstanding' or 'good' in terms of parental engagement were interviewed. They represented school contexts as follows:

Outstanding	4		
School phase		Context	
Primary	4	Inner city	3
Secondary	4	Suburban	1
	1		

Good	16		
School phase		Context	
Primary	12	Inner city	12
Secondary	2	Rural	4
Special	2		

Parents

Some 30 parents in total were interviewed. A focus group of 12 parents from inner-city Salford was formed, and 6 of these also had elder children in secondary school. Feedback was also obtained from a further 18 parents from primary schools in the Greater Manchester area, including 2 parent governors.

Others

Interviews were also held with the Healthy Schools co-ordinator for Salford PCT and the social marketing director for Stafford PCT.

Appendix 2: What practical strategies do school leaders use to encourage parents to engage with school?

School leaders who responded in this research study offered the following practical strategies and creative ideas to enhance parental engagement. The specific strategies can be categorised by using an adapted version of Epstein's (2001) overlapping spheres of influence with the addition of a further category of remote involvement, referring to ICT access, as detailed in the literature review in the main body of this report. Owing to the nature of these overlapping spheres of influence, some strategies may appear twice, or be located in more than one category.

1: Parenting

- for attendance issues, use direct letters or home visits via the education welfare officer
- Triple P parenting class
- home visits
- home liaison officers
- looking to praise as much as criticise their child so that news isn't always bad
- parent support advisers
- family first officers
- employing an attached social worker and inclusion workers who aren't obviously school authority
- using extended services funding to employ a family support worker who works with families
- inviting parents to health checks
- Pyramid for Parents group
- new intake programme including home visits and several visits to school followed up by inviting them in to see what the children are doing
- attendance officers employed by the school to target persistent absentees

2: Communicating

- becoming a dyslexia-friendly school
- sharing information via noticeboards
- pastoral workers for children and families within school
- signage in various languages
- open-door policy and ready access to senior leadership team and learning mentor on a daily basis out on the playground
- information sessions
- learning mentor building relationships with hard-to-reach parents
- open afternoons to see the school at work and play
- specific invitations to certain parents to meet the headteacher and deputy at parents' evening

-
- combining parents' evenings with other information sessions
 - quick responses and constant dialogues to enquiries and problems
 - head of year rings parents directly whose children haven't made appointments for parents' evening
 - monthly drop-in
 - open afternoons – last hour on Friday – parents and families go into classes
 - weekly celebration assembly or reward assemblies
 - pupil leadership assemblies
 - use of language services, eg Language Line
 - local press
 - phone, text and email
 - contact at the school gate
 - personal contact with staff
 - try to reach out informally – just forming a relationship with them at the school gate can break the ice
 - newsletters
 - parents' evening
 - regular parent consultation
 - evening meetings with facilities for children to come along either to join in or with crèche facilities
 - being flexible with parents' evenings
 - nursery and reception classes open for parents to share play with their child for half an hour every morning
 - go out and talk to them in the playground

3: Volunteering

- parent governance
- Saturday opening for dads to play with children in playground
- PTA
- parent council
- help in the classroom
- seasonal fairs

4: Family learning

- read a book with your child day and father's story-telling week
- after-school clubs for children and parents with a craft focus
- family learning days
- after-school club including parent-child homework sessions

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- reading workshops twice weekly in Key Stage 1 with parents listening to their child read
 - inviting parents in to share play sessions with children
 - play club bags (story bags that are made with parents and children, with follow-up work in the home)
 - stay and play sessions
 - homework clubs

5: Decision-making

- Connexions advice on higher education
- parent governance
- parent-led curriculum
- parent-owned schools and academies
- parent council
- PTA
- parental contributions to the school development plan
- stakeholder day
- home-school agreement
- parent questionnaires

6: Collaborating with the community

- invitations to events where children are performing or receiving awards in and outside school
- refreshments and food at events
- a crèche for parents who wouldn't normally attend functions such as fairs or concerts
- football team
- various timings for meetings, parents' evening etc
- school reception area friendly and accessible
- pupil-led events bring in the parents
- religious ceremonies (eg mass)
- wide range of activities to try and meet the interests of everyone
- grandparents and parents have positive times to come into school, eg invitations, help in school
- dads' breakfast once a month
- family nights on a wide range of topics – fun ways of getting parents and children involved together, eg Italian night, race night, film night, fashion show, art workshop, clay workshop, poetry workshop
- local authority parent champion visits school to consult with parents
- dads and lads days
- SHARE project (this is ContinYou's family learning programme, see www.continyou.co.uk)

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- links with the children's centre
 - friendly meet-the-teacher evenings with local teaching assistants acting as hosts
 - buddy system (parents from the community who are eager to come into school round up parents who want to come in but are not at ease or confident enough to come alone)
 - theme days or weeks that involve external agencies that might encourage parental involvement
 - community room where parents are invited to attend courses and workshops run by the school and external providers
 - community week, where every child from nursery to Year 6 has the opportunity to have a visit out or a visitor in to enhance the curriculum
 - community fun day
 - visits to the local home for the elderly
 - transition meetings between private day nurseries, high schools and further education colleges
 - visits to the local university
 - enterprise days
 - engagement with city learning centres and media centres
 - use of high school sports facilities

7: Remote involvement

- text messaging alerts
- use of website for information
- contributing to podcasts
- contributing to and commenting on website
- contributing to and commenting on school blogs
- voting systems
- online questionnaires
- resources on the virtual learning environment (VLE)

Appendix 3: What further creative and innovative ideas do school leaders use to improve parental involvement?

In school and ongoing

- parent cafés in school
- internet access for parents in school
- face-to-face, one-to-one chats
- children performing and hosting events for their parents
- drop-in centre on site
- personalising letters
- open sessions in school to engage with learning on a weekly basis

One-off events and short-term events

- parents' workshops, dad and son schemes
- grandparents' schemes, grandparents' days
- focus groups
- school grounds working parties
- parental study and activities sessions on how to support their children
- evenings for parents where children have activities and really want to come along
- headteacher surgery once a month
- bring your parent to school days
- collaborative parent, child competitions, fund-raising
- coffee mornings, book mornings related to World Book Day
- involvement in charity events
- social and emotional aspects of learning (SEAL) for parents
- family learning days
- lunchtime mothers' day or fathers' day menu
- build a car with dads, dads and lads club
- running adult basic skills classes with friendly tutors on site
- joint fun activities with children, activities around their own wellbeing, training opportunities

-
- learning facilitator

Out-of-school hours

- community activities after primary drop-off time
- use of extended services money to build links between school and families and the church, eg volunteer base in the church leads activities and clubs for children out of the school day
- mix social and educational events
- meetings offsite
- parent council, parental voice
- library open to child and parents in the morning and after school
- family after-school clubs
- family sports

Targeted support

- translators
- crèche facilities
- look closely at what issues families face and remove specific barriers
- involve parents in planning events, eg looking at curriculum

Remote access

- regularly updated website
- blogs are an interactive way of communicating with parents that don't ever come to school
- resources on the VLE, both school site and extended schools
- use of technology
- all Key Stage 3 students have laptops they can take home as a family learning resource

Miscellaneous

- take the school situation out of the equation by taking event etc off site
- raffle tickets with a prize for attending
- find out what they are interested in – what do they want to know or be able to do? above all find out why they do not engage with school
- events need to be positive, short, cheap and light-hearted to engage most parents
- vulnerable parents will not attend formal serious events
- church events, whole-school baptism ceremony
- fundraising activities for school or children within school for specific trips and equipment
- parent workshops, eg keep-fit class, computer skills, CV skills, how to..., homework, ICT
- debt management

-
- invitations to events in school that are funded
 - special educational needs drop-in sessions
 - after-school parent classes run by the local college (eg yoga, flower arranging, circuit training)
 - prizes for those who return school questionnaires, free sherry and mince pies for those attending Christmas activities
 - revamped communication ideas
 - reader-friendly newsletter
 - a welcoming approach from headteacher and staff
 - change of staff timetable
 - work with external agencies that are already working with parents and form a link of communication via them
 - meet parents in a different location to form the relationship and then once the bond is made, introduce them to coming into school
 - parent support networks
 - promoting parents as partners
 - involving dads more
 - providing a room for parents to meet
 - inclusive activities such as picnics, cooking and other social events
 - learning opportunities for parents
 - get back to work schemes
 - involve parents in healthy snack preparation
 - parents helping run the library
 - reinforce the impact parents can have on their own child's learning and the school community
 - make the 9am time a little more informal and relaxed. In Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), give parents a little more time with their children to settle them
 - more input into homework diaries
 - do parents feel there is sufficient time at drop-in events and parents' evening to agree their child's targets and when they are next reviewed?
 - parents comment and sign pupils' reports to return to teacher
 - using messaging programmes
 - parent governor open sessions to explain how governors make decisions and to give parents the opportunity to comment before decisions are made, eg on extended services or after-school activities
 - daily diaries, one side is home and the other side is school for informal messages back and forth
 - bring back old-fashioned ideas, eg a queen of the May parade
 - coffee mornings where pupils serve their mums and dads
 - class assembly every half term
 - family partner liaison officer to reach families with children under four and refer to external services such as speech and language

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