

# Learning from practice: Successful approaches to parental engagement

The Alternative Provision Innovation Fund (APIF) supported nine projects in testing new approaches to improving outcomes for young people (YP) (YP hereafter used to refer to young people or young person as relevant) in alternative provision (AP). Parent and carer engagement is an important part of AP practice and three projects focused specifically on making changes to promote parental engagement in order to improve the outcomes experienced by YP.

This paper provides practical insights into how parents and carers were engaged and supported. This paper will be of particular interest to those working in AP, mainstream and special schools, as well as local authorities, e.g. as a checklist for discussion when reviewing their provision/role in engaging parents/carers of young people in AP.

## The three projects were characterised by:

- Approaches to parental engagement that **differentiated their offer of support** from that offered by other statutory services;
- **Flexible, tailored support** for parents/carers (e.g. mentors acting as companions/advocates at meetings with staff);
- Training for teachers, tutors or mentors in **positive** approaches to **communication** with parents/carers;
- Adaptive approaches designed to **include feedback loops**, incorporating learning from both parents/carers as well as staff supporting YP;
- Awareness of the **importance of the life experiences**, skills and attitudes of staff, ensuring understanding and empathy for those supported; and
- Investment in the **provision of information and guidance** for parents/carers, ensuring continuity of support within the home (e.g. through coaching around behaviour management techniques).

## The programmes were designed to:

- **Open up lines of communication** between the parent/carer and education provider (either AP or mainstream) as well as other statutory services;
- Build and sustain **trusting, non-judgemental and collaborative relationships** between the parent/carer, AP provider and mainstream school;
- **Build parent/carer capacity and confidence** in supporting their YP;
- Take full **account** of the YP's **household context**;
- Meet the needs of the young person and their family/carers, addressing relationship issues through direct **support and signposting** where necessary; and
- **Counter negative perceptions** of AP, enabling staff and parents/carers to work together in support of the YP.

## Reported benefits:

- Improved **family functioning and relationships**;
- Increased **understanding of the young person**, and their behaviours within the family context, among education professionals;
- Increased **parent/carer capacity** to provide continuity of support between school and home; and
- Greater **trust** and **collaboration** between parents and education staff.

## Impact on young people

Projects' engagement with parents/carers promoted different forms of parenting within the home. For example, the practical guidance on managing behaviours and identifying triggers enabled parents/carers to be less reactive, and more proactive, in dealing with YP's behaviour. The impact was reflected in YP's behaviour, engagement and attendance at the school:

"[Parents are] being more open and more relaxed about how they speak to their children. We have even seen that in how the children come into school and talk to us... you can see a change within the 10 weeks of the course, they show a bit of respect now [to the staff], whereas before it would have been a totally different ball game."

AP practitioner

# Key elements in parental engagement

## Initial offer to parents/carers and mode of engagement

- Finding creative ways of **inviting parents/carers to participate in sessions**;
- Overcoming any mistrust of services, including with programme staff working closely with parents/carers to **disentangle negative feelings** towards education interventions and helping them to **reform them as positive perceptions**; and
- Differentiating their offer e.g. by offering **collaborative learning sessions** with optional extras to go observe YP in class.

“[Parents] Wanted something that felt more like a group, where they could tell us what they needed and we could learn from their experiences, rather than us sitting and telling them that they are a bad parent.”

– Teacher

## Restorative approaches to building rapport, relationships and trust

- Understanding that **parent/carer engagement is influenced by their own needs**, the relationship with the YP's school(s), and their own experiences of schooling;
- Establishing **rapport and trust via face-to-face engagement** at the outset, demonstrating how the support was being offered to the student with follow-up telephone calls offering flexible and informal remote communication subsequently;
- Investing time in **understanding the family background** and context and incorporating this information in approaches to support;

- Selecting staff carefully on the basis of their skills and relatable life experiences (e.g. The Right Angle programme used **practitioners with lived experience** and mentors at Turnaround were all ‘Mums themselves’);
- Adapting to the needs of the YP and their family during the crucial period of relationship building. (e.g. by being **accommodating and offering flexibility** around meetings);
- **Meeting the family** where convenient for them, rather than for those **offering support** (e.g. within the home or at **neutral locations** such as a café); and
- **Day-to-day exchanges** between the AP setting and ‘home’ to ensure that YP are well supported (e.g. to understand potential ‘trigger’ situations or promote attendance).

## Supporting on-going engagement

- Being **sensitive to circumstances** that may impact the parent/carer's engagement and offering support where possible (e.g. providing bus fare for parents to attend where there are financial constraints)
- Being **accommodating and understanding** when parents/carers miss sessions, are late or are not fully engaged. This includes **not sanctioning or passing judgement** of parents/carers when this happens;
- **Supporting families** when there are **setbacks** with the YP; and
- Ensuring an **open and collaborative** environment to maintain a level of investment from the parent.

## Brokering access of parent or YP to wider /wrap around support

- Acting as a **trusted source of information** once AP professionals have built sufficient rapport to be perceived as someone who provides reliable information;
- **Signposting to financial information** and other sources of support (e.g. to access help with equipment costs to support vocational or FE-based learning);
- **Facilitating access to services** necessary to support the YP and their family (e.g. CAMHS, citizens advice and counselling services); and
- Offering support as a **trusted ‘companion’ during meetings** with other services or education providers (e.g. to support attendance).

“The logic of the programme is, that particularly in AP settings you can make progress with young people because you have excellent teachers, systems and processes...you can make more progress if you are able to engage their parents and coach their parent to become better at supporting their child's progress. So, the good work that goes on in school can continue after school, and wrap around the child.”

– Project Lead

“We are not seen as a threat. If the child is under social care they will get a visit from a social worker like every 3 weeks. Because we have the capacity we can visit the families at least once a week. We can support them, like with appointments, visits, paperwork. I think they do see the support and how we can benefit the family. It gives the family the confidence that someone is there to help them”

– Mentor

“They have changed our whole life, both of us”

– Parent

# Focus on practice

## Building relationships with parents /carers

The Anna Freud programme aimed to train teachers in an AP setting to deliver 10-week **engagement programmes** to parents/carers of their students. Based on the Anna Freud centre model<sup>1</sup>, the programme emphasised the importance of **family involvement** in providing comprehensive support for YP in AP. There was an awareness amongst staff members that a prescriptive parent/carer training course facilitated by the AP would not have secured their engagement. Therefore, the Anna Freud programme was delivered in a format that maintained a sense that **teachers and parents/carers** were standing '**shoulder to shoulder**' in supporting the YP.

"I think if we'd have knocked on the door and asked if they want support from school we might have got a closed door, but because they have come together as a group they didn't see us as leaders, or people in charge, so they were more comfortable asking for help"

– Teacher

This was achieved through **tailored content** specific to the needs of the parent/carer cohort, creating an **open learning environment**, supporting parents/carers to fully engage (e.g. course timings, reminders and ability to reschedule) and importantly, a focus on teachers learning from the perspective and experiences of the parents/carers.

"[We] wanted something that felt more like a group, where they could tell us what they needed and we could learn from their experiences, rather than us sitting and telling them that they are a bad parent"

– Teacher

## The APIF parental engagement projects:

The **Turnaround** project aimed to better reintegrate pupils into mainstream KS3 provision following a short period of intervention at The Harbour School. The reintegration journey focused on the PACE model (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy) and whole family support.

**The Right Angle** project was delivered in collaboration between two charities, The Tutor Trust and TLC: Talk, Listen, Change, working alongside a number of other delivery partners. The intervention aimed to support YP in AP and their parents/carers through a combined offer of academic support via one-to-one tutoring and therapeutic interventions.

The **Anna Freud** project trained teachers in AP settings to deliver 10-week engagement programmes to parents/carers of their students to remove boundaries affecting engagement with teaching staff.

<sup>1</sup> Anna Freud Centre <https://www.annafreud.org/schools-and-colleges/research-and-practice/parent-coaching-for-pupil-progress/>