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Developing effective partnerships with parents in the Early Years Foundation Stage: Stag Lane Infant and Nursery School

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Brief description

Developing parents' knowledge about and involvement in their children's learning have contributed to improved outcomes in the Early Years Foundation Stage and beyond. 'Parent ambassadors', recruited from the different communities represented in school, are key to involving all parents.

Overview – the provider's message

'Our overarching aim is to have knowledgeable and interested parents who have a good relationship with the school. We recognise that children's learning starts long before school with their parents and we try to break down any possible barriers between home and school, perhaps because parents have not experienced the British education system themselves or speak little or no English. We are so privileged to have such a wealth of cultures and languages spoken within our school community and see it as a wonderful resource – never a barrier!'



Nina Will, Headteacher

The good practice in detail

Stag Lane had always had an 'open door' policy as far as parents are concerned, but when Nina arrived as headteacher, she realised it did not go far enough. In practice, parents dropped their children at the door, and the roles that parents and school played in the children's lives were seen as quite separate, with many parents expecting a more formal

'3Rs' education from an early age. The drive has been to actively invite parents into school from the very beginning; to recognise the wealth of knowledge they already have about their children and to involve them in their future learning.



Mum and son together at the Stay and Play session

The dialogue starts in the summer term before children start in either Nursery or a Reception class. Parents are invited to a meeting at which they get basic information about school and staff 'sell' the idea of a home visit to get to know their child. Almost without fail, this approach works and in the autumn term the class teacher and Nursery nurse visit each child at home with a bag of resources. The visits serve several purposes: staff find out what the children like doing, which helps them to plan initial activities to settle children when they start school; they informally model playing with children as they get to know them; and relationships with the child and their parent start to develop.

Invitations to story sessions for Reception children and their parents or 'Stay and Play' sessions for Nursery children and their parents before they start school provide further opportunities to model how young children learn.

The conversation about learning becomes more formal once the children have been in school for a few weeks. First is a curriculum evening which starts with a brief presentation followed by parents experiencing what their children actually do in the classroom. With no children allowed (a crèche is provided), parents are encouraged to take part in typical Early Years Foundation Stage activities, with the staff on hand to talk with them about what the children will be learning through their play. Jessica Whitehouse, the Reception Year Leader uses the analogy of finding out what a lemon is by seeing a picture or a plastic model compared with handling the real thing. In her words, parents get to 'smell and taste' learning in the Early Years Foundation Stage. As one parent said, 'It's very useful to see how playing advances learning and teaches valuable life skills as well as giving a better understanding of the curriculum'. Another thought, 'It was useful because now we know what to do at home to help children improve'.



Parents and staff learning together at the curriculum evening

Informal and formal dialogue about the children's learning is part and parcel of practice. The 'soft start' to the day between 8.40 and 8.50am encourages parents to come into school to see what the children are learning and the opportunity to talk with staff. [Newsletters](#) keep parents informed about what the children have and will be learning and how they can help at home. Parents use email to send photos to school and staff use it to keep parents up to date, particularly where they have no direct contact because both parents are working or are separated. Questionnaires are used to check with parents what their children tell them they like doing at school, what they enjoy at home and to find out about any significant events in their lives.

By the end of October, through a combination of home visits and initial observations staff have a good baseline assessment of the children in their classes which they discuss with

parents at consultation evenings, discussing with them how it fits with what parents see at home and suggesting activities for them to do. The child's 'Learning Journey' is introduced at these meetings. Parents are encouraged to look at them (they are readily available at all times in the classroom), to make contributions and to take them home to share with the family. Because such importance is attached to them, they never have a problem with them being returned! The Early Years Foundation Stage leaders make no apologies for sharing their tracking of the children at these and subsequent meetings in the spring and summer term. As Louise Bloomfield, the Nursery Leader, explains, 'it makes for honest dialogue about what a child can do and is helpful if concerns about additional needs arise over time. It also encourages parents to ask how they can help their child.'

Almost all children are from minority ethnic backgrounds and the very large majority are learning English as an additional language. At the heart of building effective relationships with parents is the 'Parent Ambassador Initiative', recognised by [inspectors](#) as making the school more accessible for the different groups in its community. It started in the Canons cluster of schools in the London Borough of Harrow in 2007, following the identification of the need to improve links with parents, particularly those from minority ethnic groups whose children were most at risk of underachieving. Each of the nine schools in the cluster has parent ambassadors representing the main groups in the school, with ready access to those from other communities through the other schools. The role has status; its importance is underlined by the fact that the parent ambassadors have a job description, are paid members of staff (the role at Stag Lane is a part of their teaching assistant post), have a good command of English as well as their first language and receive bespoke training.

Over the last four years, Hodan Dalmar from the Somali community; Sri Lankan Vinotha Piradeeban and Gujarati-speaking Sonal Patel have been working at the school. Their passion for and commitment to the role are evident after just a few minutes in their company – you cannot fail to be persuaded that as Sonal says, 'we are working with the parents to make a difference for their child' and that they empathise with the children and their parents, knowing from first-hand experience what it is like to be a new arrival in an unfamiliar country. The role of parent ambassador has developed over time. They work alongside other staff in the Early Years Foundation Stage (and beyond) to support effective partnership with parents. For example, they attend and translate at the various meetings for parents, accompany staff on home visits where necessary (telephoning families the day before to confirm arrangements) and translate newsletters. They also support assessments in home languages to help determine whether children have additional needs and work with the main groups in the school community to encourage greater participation in and understanding of school life. Hodan describes how through her work with Somali mums she has enabled them to gain the confidence to have a voice within the school. From initially being an isolated group outside the school gate, they were encouraged to attend coffee mornings just for themselves in school and then later to take part in wider coffee mornings and events. Vinotha has worked with Sri Lankan parents and their children to put on a cultural assembly through which the children learnt about their own heritage. On an individual basis, parents can access support for a range of issues.

Quite rightly, the parent ambassadors pay tribute to others in school, recognising that they could not fulfil their role without the tremendous support they get from the headteacher and other staff. Indeed, the commitment to partnership with parents can be seen as a thread throughout the



school's work. Last year, recognising that much of the work with parents was with mums, the school took part in an animation project with the [Fatherhood Institute](#) aimed at getting dads involved in their children's learning. Thirteen dads got involved, culminating in a 'first night' event at the British Film Institute. From that, a dads' club has evolved which is taking forward a similar project and looking to expand into areas such as gardening. A Fathers' Day assembly attracted 128 dads into school at one event! Family learning opportunities offered on-site are helping to develop parents' own skills and are providing opportunities to achieve qualifications. Key to the success of the school's work with parents is not only the commitment from the top but the constant review, reflection and adaptations to practice. The views of parents are regularly sought and the impact of the considerable investment of time and resources evaluated. Some of the impact is qualitative, such as opportunities for parents to spend quality time with their children or improved relationships at home. On a quantitative level, the school can point to children's progress improving and increased attendance; increased numbers of children completing 'home learning' activities and high proportions of parents attending curriculum and consultation meetings.

Provider background

Stag Lane Infant and Nursery School is situated in the London Borough of Harrow, close to the borders with Brent and Barnet. Almost all children are from minority ethnic groups with the vast majority learning English as an additional language. About a fifth of its families are refugees and asylum seekers.

Are you thinking of putting these ideas into practice; or already doing something similar that could help other providers; or just interested? We'd welcome your views and ideas. Get in touch [here](#).

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