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Materials for Schools

Involving parents, raising achievement

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This booklet has been written with secondary schools in mind but most of the ideas apply equally well in primary schools and special schools. Involving parents and carers in their childrens education and learning supports inclusion as well as individual and collective success.

Other materials linked to this booklet are available on TeacherNet and a training pack with video is available from prolog.

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There is much more information about working with parents on teachernet. When you see an icon like this, go to www.teachernet.gov.uk



Parents can go to www.parentcentre.gov.uk for resources, advice and information on how they can help their children get the most from school.

At the end of this booklet you can find lists of useful websites and resources.

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Section 1

1. Rationale

A successful home-school relationship can be a key element in making a school stronger and more effective. In particular, it can make a real difference for groups of underachieving pupils and their families.

Research evidence and inspection data show that schools which have learned to work well with parents can expect significant, consistent and lasting benefits:

- increased parental participation in and support for the life and work of the school
- a greater willingness for parents and school to share information and tackle misunderstandings and problems at an early stage
- improved levels of achievement – parents' active encouragement and support for children's learning produce tangible academic benefits that last throughout a child's school career
- more positive pupil attitudes and behaviour.

Most parents want:

- The best for their children, in schooling, as in everything else. For most, this means a high quality education in a caring, effective institution.
- Regular, reliable and accessible information about what the school does and how this affects their children.
- Information that makes sense about their children's progress, achievements and problems.
- Practical help in identifying ways in which they can support their children's learning and development.

Strengthening home-school links can make a good school better, by developing practical partnerships, providing extra resources and support, and promoting the interests of the school, the students, their families and the communities to which they belong.

Developing home-school relationships may not always be easy. Because of pressures and circumstances, many families will need special arrangements, or extra help, to enable them

to become actively involved in their children's school lives, and to help their children get the most from school and progress satisfactorily. Schools are an educational dynamo in the community for so many people – not just children.

You are probably already implementing many of the practical ideas in this booklet and some of the case studies may be familiar to you. But do you have a whole school approach and a cohesive framework for developing home-school relationships is part of a whole school approach? This booklet will help you think about this.

Key research findings

- Children of parents who take an active interest in their schooling, and show high levels of interest, progress 15% more in maths and reading between 11 and 16 years than other children.
- Gains in pupil achievement that stem from parental involvement programmes and activities tend to be permanent.
- In schools with matched intakes, those that do best have, among other things, strong links with parents and families: the reverse is also true.
- Family influences have a much more powerful effect upon children's attitudes and achievements than either school or neighbourhood factors – even when these are added together.
- Much of the variation in achievement of 14 year olds in English, maths and science is due to home factors.
- When similar schools are compared, those with strong home-school links have consistently fewer problems related to pupil work and behaviour.
- Between the ages of 5 and 16, children spend only a small proportion (15%) of their lives in school.

This booklet is a summary of research and information available on the subject of home-school relationships. You can find much more on www.teachernet.gov.uk, including ideas for training and development activities. Look for the teachernet icon.



Developing a good clear strategy for parental involvement is hardwork – implementing it needs commitment and time but the outcomes will be significant. Research shows parental involvement in a child's schooling is a more powerful force than social class and level of parental education. Improving educational outcomes for one generation is a key factor in helping to break the cycle of deprivation.

In this booklet we have used the word 'parents' to mean parents, carers and guardians, reflecting the diversity of arrangements for looking after and bringing up children and young people.

What does Ofsted say?

Under the Ofsted Framework for the Inspection of Schools inspectors assess the contribution that parents and other partners make to a school and the pupils' learning. They consider whether the investment in partnerships is valuable, in the context of the school's priorities.



To find out more about what a school is required to do, go to www.teachernet.gov.uk.

What about Extended Schools?

The Extended Schools Guidance says:

Parents

- 'Parents are likely to be major users of extra activities, for both themselves and their children.'
- Organisers need to gather parents' views on the types of services that they need.

From the Extended Schools Consultation and Planning Guidance

www.teachernet.gov.uk/extendedschools

What about Specialist Schools?

Application for specialist school status requires that:

- 'The school and community plans are of equal importance.'

From the Specialist Schools Guidance

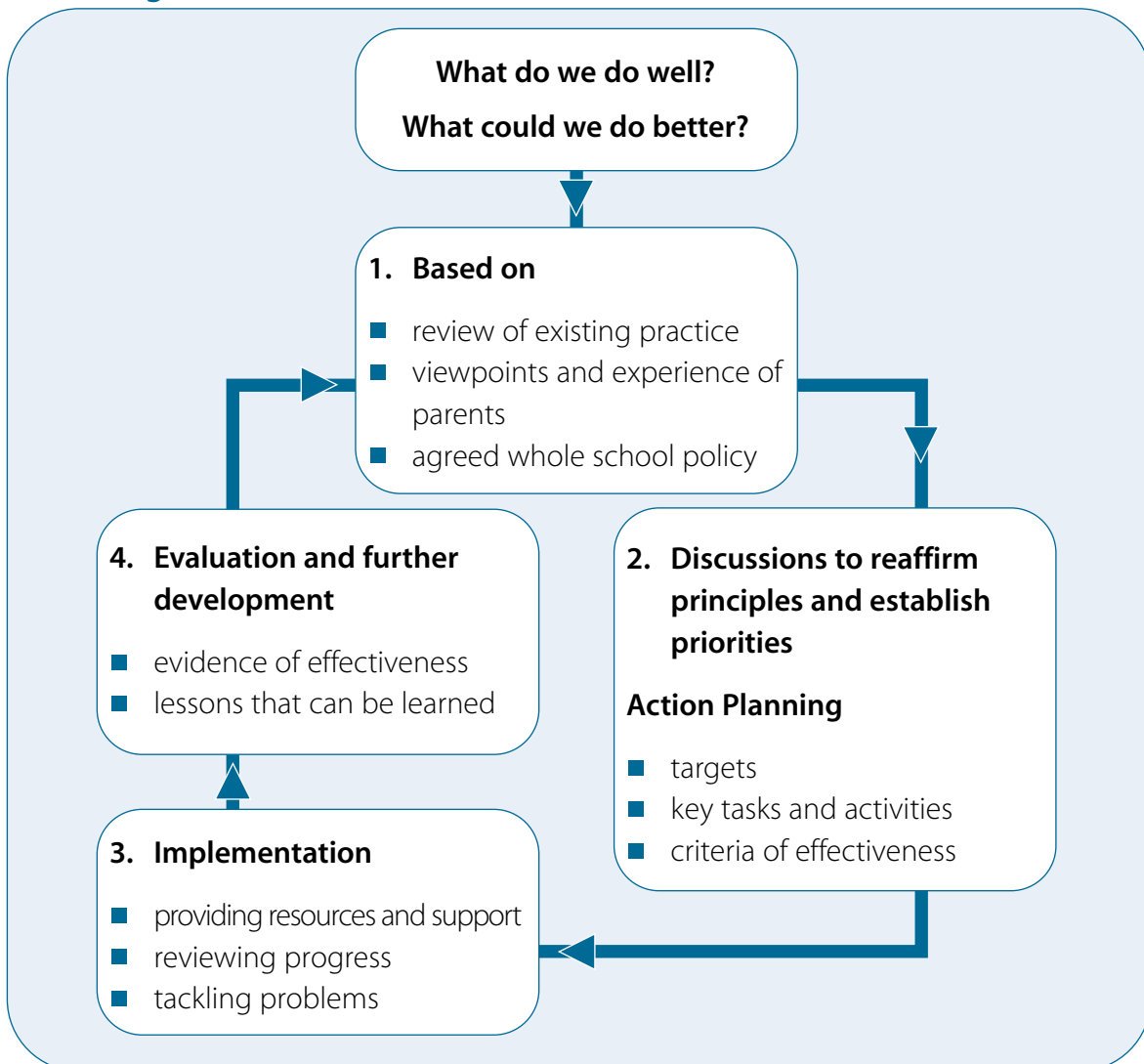
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/specialistschools

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2. Developing home-school links

This section includes some strategies and ideas for developing home-school links. We have included them for you to consider as options for your school, but you may prefer to develop your own ways of improving home-school working for your school.

Evaluating home-school links



An honest audit can provide the basis for improving home-school work, involving all parents, all staff and governors, and all pupils.

To do an audit, ask yourselves these questions:

- Where are we now? (monitoring and analysis).
- Where do we want to be? (evaluation).
- How do we get there? (review).

After your audit, this booklet will help you decide what action to take.

Where are we now?

As with almost all the work of schools, home-school work must be evaluated so that you can see it in terms of positive outcomes and improvements in pupil achievement. When you are evaluating home-school work there is a variety of different evidence you can use. For more see **TeacherNet**.

case study

One school collected this evidence to show that its home-school work had a wider impact on the school's development (it had improved its welcome to visitors and newcomers).

Indicator: The school is welcoming to visitors and newcomers.

Quantitative evidence: Numbers of scheduled and impromptu visits by parents. Visits by non-parent members of the community/local industry. Use of special provision eg Parents Room.

Qualitative evidence: Confidence of parents about visiting/dropping in. Nature of language of school notices and posters. Opportunities for people to make suggestions and explore alternatives.

Methods/instruments: Entries in visitors' book. Suggestion boxes. Evaluation forms from supply teachers. 'First impressions' questionnaires for new pupils.

Self-rating checklists – see **TeacherNet** for more examples

There are also different methods of evaluating the impact of home-school work. Here are some examples of self-rating checklists developed by different schools.

Strengthening home-school work	Give a mark from 1 (poor) to 10 (excellent)
■ Committed and active leadership	
■ A key element in the school's development plans	
■ A senior member of staff with a special interest in, and responsibility for, home-school work	
■ An effective policy for working with parents and families	
■ A whole school, cross-curricular working group with a brief to review implementation and progress and plan development in the home-school field	
■ An actively interested governing body	
■ An agenda item at important staff meetings	
■ A key element in staff appointments and staff appraisals	
■ A topic in the induction of newly qualified and arrived staff	
■ The focus of INSET and professional development activities	
■ Offers parents to take up learning	
How many marks did YOU score? TOTAL	

Parental Involvement Index (2002) LBTH

How well are we doing? – a self-rating scale

WEAK (1 POINT) BASIC (2 POINTS) GOOD (3 POINTS) EXCELLENT (4 POINTS)				
The school	Quality of current work			
	1	2	3	4
has a clear vision of what it is trying to achieve through its home-school work and why				
makes all parents and families welcome, and works hard to build and maintain strong relationships and a productive dialogue				
does as much as it reasonably can to encourage involvement of all parents in their children's learning, both in school and at home				
provides parents with a range of opportunities to have a genuine say in, and be an active part of, the life and work of the school				
is sensitive towards, and supportive of, the varying backgrounds, needs and circumstances of all pupils and their families				
is an integral part, and an active and responsive member, of the community in which it is located				
views its work with parents and families, as both a key feature of its current work and a major element in its efforts to improve				
bases its work on available/up-to-date information and evidence				
TOTAL				

- **Up to 10 points** – rather basic and underdeveloped: some weaknesses. Little impact on the life and work of the school.
- **Up to 16 points** – uneven provision: variable quality and effectiveness: Some gaps or obvious limitations.
- **Up to 22 points** – some clear strengths and strong practice. Possible need to review, overhaul and monitor in certain areas. Also to develop a more co-ordinated approach throughout the school.
- **Up to 28 points** – parental involvement is seen as a key feature and a major strength of the school. This is recognised and supported by all main partners.

You can find another example of self-rating on www.teachernet.gov.uk.



Questions to ask yourself

When you are doing a self-audit, these are the kinds of questions you should be asking. Ask staff, parents and pupils. Ask yourself. Try to be honest!

Do you:

- know what parents think about the school?
- ask them what they think?

What is important to parents? What do they tell you?

What is important to you and your staff? When do you share this with parents?

How do you work with parents to achieve the aims of the school?

Do you encourage parents to help their children learn through:

- telling them about the curriculum?
- giving them more than ten minutes a year with teachers?
- talking with them about their child's future prospects?
- providing short courses for parents wanting to support their children eg 'help with homework' 'keeping up with the children'.

Can you point to work that the school has done to engage with parents? Can you show that this work is grounded in an understanding of the habits, cultures and lifestyles of the parents rather than requiring parents to fit in with the structures that suit the school?

Can you show that this work influences the school as well as seeking to influence the parents?

Do you identify children and young people with potential for future development but at risk of under-achievement because of:

- exclusion?
- poor behaviour?
- long-term truancy?
- poor attendance?
- bullying?
- lack of concentration?
- lack of home support?
- lack of aspiration/expectation?

Do you involve their parents? Do you involve them in their child's school life at times when there is not a crisis?

If so, how do you involve them?

Where do we want to be?

The next step is to think about how you want to improve your home-school links, using your evaluation and analysis of where you are now. Here are some ideas from one school.

We want to:

- have good relationships with new parents, carers and families
- provide parents with regular, accessible information about the life and work of the school
- build a sense of shared identity and common purpose
- report pupil progress – discussing future targets, identifying ways in which parents can help
- have a programme of events and activities
- dovetail home-school activities into the school's overall efforts
- deal with acute personal, family and social problems
- provide training, professional development and support for all staff
- act as a focus for contact with other agencies
- link the school with its wider communities via families
- help pupils through transition.
- provide parents with opportunities to learn in school

Include some measurables so that you know how you are doing. For example:

- have good relationships with new parents, carers and families – run a questionnaire survey after six months to find out how new families feel about the school
- help pupils through transition – follow up parents and pupils to find out what went well and what went badly.

How do we get there?

When you know where you are and where you want to be, you can work out how you're going to get there.

Developing a home-school policy

Once your audit is completed, you can develop a home-school policy to help you put your ideas into practice. A home-school policy provides a framework and a process for improving a school's work with parents. It should show how a school's work with parents is a vital and necessary part of the school and a major part of its effectiveness.

A home-school policy that is obviously implemented will:

- show everyone that the school really means business in this area
- provide an important focus for key changes in the school's development
- be an important tool in the review, planning and development of home-school work.

Perhaps most significantly, the process of developing a home-school policy can in itself provide an opportunity and a vehicle for consultation and discussion with all those who have a stake in the education and development of the children in the school – including the children themselves.

A home-school policy is more likely to have a positive impact on a school's work if:

- most of those involved think it will help and feel they have contributed
- it enjoys general and widespread support
- it is a 'living' part of the school's work, and reference is made to it regularly
- it can be seen to have made a difference – for the better.¹

¹ 'For us, it was important that the policy document should arise out of experience and practice, rather than be simply the fond hope of things to come.'

Developing a home-school policy

Step 1 Understand what the school is trying to do and why. It is not always necessary to start with very clear principles and neat aims; sometimes these have to be made explicit 'on the hoof'.

Step 2 Audit existing arrangements and practices based as far as possible upon honest, accurate and up-to-date information.

Step 3 Bring together the views of stakeholders – a cross-section of teaching and support staff, governors, agencies that work with schools – and, of course, the views of children and parents. These should represent both the views of parents of children in the school as a whole, and also the needs of particular groups and communities, family circumstances and cultural experiences.

Step 4 Write the policy, outlining the key principles, plans and priorities. Include legal requirements, LEA support for home-school work and other broader information as appropriate.

Step 5 Write an action plan, summarising the practical and organisational arrangements necessary to move the school forward, addressing issues of staffing, resources, timing and priority, and evaluation.

A good home-school policy provides the basis for a home-school agreement. Every school should already have a home-school agreement which all parents, children and staff can sign up to.



There is more on home-school policies and agreements on www.teachernet.gov.uk including some exemplar policies.

Deciding who does what

Although a school's work with families is becoming increasingly important, it is not yet regarded by everyone as an integral part of the knowledge and skill that all teachers need. Working effectively with parents is assumed to be something that teachers will automatically learn and take on, without training or support.

If you go to www.teachernet.gov.uk you can find a helpful chart analysing what all teachers can do to improve the home-school relationship and why they should do it.



Some responsibilities will need to be allocated to individual teachers or groups of teachers.

After considering the results of the audit management may need to:

- undertake headteacher and SMT training and support
- develop a whole school policy and approach
- involve parents in policy-making
- 'mainstream' good ideas and effective practice
- monitor and evaluate the school's collective efforts
- strengthen two-way links with the local community.

Tutors and mainstream teaching and classroom support staff may need to:

- extend their communication and reporting skills
- work to involve parents in the life and work of the school
- contribute to and run curriculum workshops
- develop practical ideas and materials to encourage parents' involvement in their children's learning.

Subject departments have a key role to play in complementing whole school activity with a dynamic approach through their own subjects, for example, by:

- introducing imaginative homework tasks for families
- running curriculum workshops for parents
- co-ordinating their efforts for subject-based tutor evenings – sharing debriefing to pick up, and respond to, common concerns
- responding to parental concerns that are subject-related.

Here are some examples of different subject departments taking on responsibility for aspects of home-school work.

- 1 A Leicestershire junior high school (10–14 year olds) introduced a Family Challenge rota for subject departments. These set 'interactive homework' tasks which of necessity involved parents and other family members (based on the IMPACT philosophy). This work is being carefully monitored and will be reviewed by a home-school working party that has been set up as part of the school's drive to raise pupil standards of work across a wider range.
- 2 In another school, the Design Technology department has a policy for Key Stage 3 students which includes a study pack relating to the appropriate areas of study for the coming term. The views of parents on the effectiveness of the tasks are collected regularly.

Home-school liaison worker

If your school has a home-school liaison worker, it is important for their role to be made very clear to all staff. A list of key responsibilities might include work with children, parents and school staff.



You can find more on this on www.teachernet.gov.uk. Including job descriptions.

How can this booklet help us?

Home-school partnerships are, of course, much easier to talk about than to achieve in practice. In the next part of this booklet we look at practical ideas and opportunities for improving your school's relationships with families. We hope these ideas will help you build on what you are already doing in your school. You can use the checklist on page 27 to work out which ideas you would like to explore.

We also have a separate training pack and video on working with parents to raise achievement. For details of how to order a copy of the pack, go to



www.teachernet.gov.uk.

At the end of this booklet is a list of useful websites and resources.

3. Taking action to involve parents

In this section we look at some practical ideas and opportunities for making the home-school relationship stronger, building on what you are already doing in your school. Have a look through and think about whether any of these ideas might help you implement your home-school policy. For more ideas, go to www.teachernet.gov.uk. You can also let parents know about www.parentcentre.gov.uk, a website designed especially for parents to help them help their children learn.

'Although on paper the project may not seem particularly substantial or imaginative, in reality it has started a long-term (ten years) plan to change a 'culture' and through doing so to raise achievement in this area.'

Headteacher

Measures include:

- involving parents in running and organising parents' evenings
- developing a transition booklet for parents and pupils and a transition lesson held in primary schools
- inclusion of special responsibility for the Parental Support programme in the Deputy Headteacher's job description
- a programme of support sessions for parents
- supporting children's homework in years 7 and 8
- GCSE: what is your son/daughter doing in Year 10
- new technology open to all
- production of a How to help your child booklet based on Supporting literacy – a guide for parents
- production of an information booklet for pupils and parents.

From Successful Schools (1998) CEDC

Working with all families

When you are working with parents to develop a home-school relationship, it is essential to be able to work with all families. Families come in all shapes and sizes and there are many varieties of family experience and patterns of family organisation and childcare.

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From Stepladder, the newsletter of the National Stepfamily Association

- In some families there might be a single parent, others will be multigenerational families, or children living with foster parents. Some parents may have two jobs, long and antisocial hours, and perhaps complex childcare arrangements. In some families there may have been major upheaval and change, such as the break-up of a long-term relationship, new partners, divorce and remarriage.
- Some families may have particular linguistic, cultural and religious needs and circumstances. Newly arrived families or families from unsettled backgrounds may find it difficult to develop a relationship with school staff and other parents.
- For some families poverty, poor health, and social and educational disadvantage will be real obstacles to working with the school.
- There will also be parents who have been disaffected and disenfranchised by their own negative educational experience, who do not give education much priority and who do not wish to have much to do with the school for these reasons.
- Some parents may not have gained qualifications when they were at school and may lack confidence in their own literacy and numeracy skills.

There is more on involving parents from disadvantaged areas, and asylum seeking and refugee families on www.teachernet.gov.uk.



Good communication, flexible timing, a more informal approach and practical help eg with transport and childcare will all help parents and teachers work together better. Here are some practical ideas:

- offer home visits
- ensure that every family can access a direct telephone line to a 'link' member of staff who they know and trust
- arrange one-to-one consultation with parents, either individually or at parents' evenings
- make sure there is flexibility in times for parent interviews or other collective events
- hold open door sessions on set days of the week
- develop good 'front desk' reception practice, including bilingual office staff where appropriate
- ensure that all material sent to parents – newsletters, prospectuses, letters home – is accessible, easy to read, and in appropriate languages
- develop individual strategies with and for particular families
- for families with English as an additional language, provide details of the language services the school provides eg availability of interpreters or members of staff who speak a particular language.

Adapted from Removing the Barriers (DfEE)

Here is a case study showing how a project in East London encouraged Bengali families to be involved in school life.

The project aimed to enable the school to enhance the provision for involving Bengali parents, particularly mothers, in the life of the school, to enrich their own education and that of their children, and possibly to use the experiences gained, both positive and negative, as a way of enabling other schools/agencies to put something similar into practice.

During the three years in which the project ran, the following proactive initiatives were put in place:

- contacting and welcoming all Bangladeshi families new to the school
- a monthly parents' group which seems to have been particularly useful and well attended
- better communication with parents about consultation evenings resulted in a definite increase in numbers of Bengali parents, and again mothers in particular, attending consultations and meetings about their daughters' progress

- social events such as a funfair, Eid parties and a mothers' visit to the Commonwealth Institute
- ESOL classes for parents
- mother tongue classes at lunch time, supervised by the Language Support team
- contacting families reluctant to become involved in the life of the school, both by home visiting and telephone chats
- home visits, sometimes in conjunction with the School-Home Support Worker
- occasionally supporting the School-Home Support Worker on matters concerning attendance.

Listening to and consulting parents

All parents want to be taken seriously – to have a say and be listened to, to feel part of the school and to know that they matter.

Schools that successfully manage to stay in touch with the views of their parents:

- use a range of formal and informal techniques
- continuously update their ways of doing this
- demonstrate that their wish to hear what parents have to say is open and genuine – and applies to all families
- show that parents' views are taken into account in the school's work and development
- go out into the community – ask for views and make sure they are acted upon.

Why listen to parents?

- Nobody knows children and young people as well as their parents do! Parents are the only constant throughout a young person's life.
- Young people can be very different in school and at home. It is only by bringing the two together that a (relatively) complete picture is possible.
- The impact of parents' interest and involvement on children's learning is significant, especially when the parents are treated as co-educators.
- Parents have a number of important rights, as well as responsibilities. They are entitled to have a say and to be heard.
- Schools need to know what parents and families think of their current efforts, in order to know whether they are working well and how they can improve.
- Schools that seek parents' (and pupils') views, experience, understanding and support, in order to plan and do things together, produce more effective policies and have stronger practice for example involving parents in developing policies on sensitive issues such as SRE and drugs.

Communicating with parents

For a variety of reasons, many parents find it really difficult to keep in constant touch with their children's schools. Many families lead hectic and pressured lives; others do not have the confidence or the opportunity to maintain regular contact.

Some schools provide limited opportunities for such contact, are unaware of the family circumstances of many children, and perhaps rely too much on formal letters and school-based meetings. A growing number of schools, however, are trying harder to develop more appropriate, parent-friendly forms of communication to enable families and schools to genuinely share information and be responsive to one another. Parents need to see changes happening as a result of their contribution. They will then feel part of the process.

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Manchester LEA (2000)

Go to www.teachernet.gov.uk for examples of different ways of consulting parents, as well as parents' own views on what makes helps them get involved in the life of a school.



Meeting with parents

Research shows that parents sometimes find parents' evenings frustrating and unproductive, with mismatched expectations and mutual incomprehension (Power and Clark 2000). There is considerable evidence that parents find meetings with their children's teachers and tutors more effective when:

- **There is enough time to develop a real dialogue** – not a one-way conversation in which the teacher tells things to the parent.

- **Meetings take place within a clear framework.** This might be provided by individual learning plans or home-school agreements, or previously agreed targets. It can usefully be complemented by a discussion which stresses:
 - the need to review what has been achieved
 - the importance of taking the views of young people themselves into account.
- **Meetings are rooted in accessible evidence of the pupil's progress, behaviour and achievements.** This can be provided by:
 - a selection of the pupil's work
 - a copy of a recent report
 - information from his or her home-school diary/organiser.
- All partners go away knowing what joint targets have been agreed, what each might reasonably be expected to do and when the situation is next going to be reviewed together. **Significantly these meetings are often taken for granted, infrequently reviewed or monitored in any systematic way and seldom the subject of training and development. Yet they remain a key element in any partnership to raise pupil achievement.**

Regular meetings to discuss the progress of individual pupils between teachers and parents – and often the pupils themselves – typify many of the problems involved in creating an effective educational partnership between schools and families. Such meetings are close to the heart of any school's main business and are widely regarded by everyone as an important opportunity. The actual experience, however, often turns out to be both disappointing and frustrating for everyone – students, parents and school staff alike.

You may want to provide parents with the leaflets *Making the Most of Parents' Evenings and Formal Meetings with Teachers*. You can also let them know about www.parentcentre.gov.uk, a website designed especially for parents.

Sometimes expectations match and all partners are able to get on the same wavelength. Other times they do not, and everyone seems to be talking at cross purposes. Here are some comments from parents and teachers. You can find more of these and more on parents' evenings on www.teachernet.gov.uk.



What parents and teachers think about school reports

'Two weeks before the end of the summer term, it's pathetic! She's had that teacher and it's finished. Parents' evening is about building a relationship with a teacher which is going to continue. I'm interested in meeting next year's teachers ... if you can establish a little personal relationship then it's more of a partnership.'

Parent

'... Firstly you get this doctor's waiting room syndrome whereby you are sat there and they are very uncomfortable all sat the looking at their toes, it's an uncomfortable place. You have to remember that some of them went to that school and it was like it when they went there. It's like torture having to go back.'

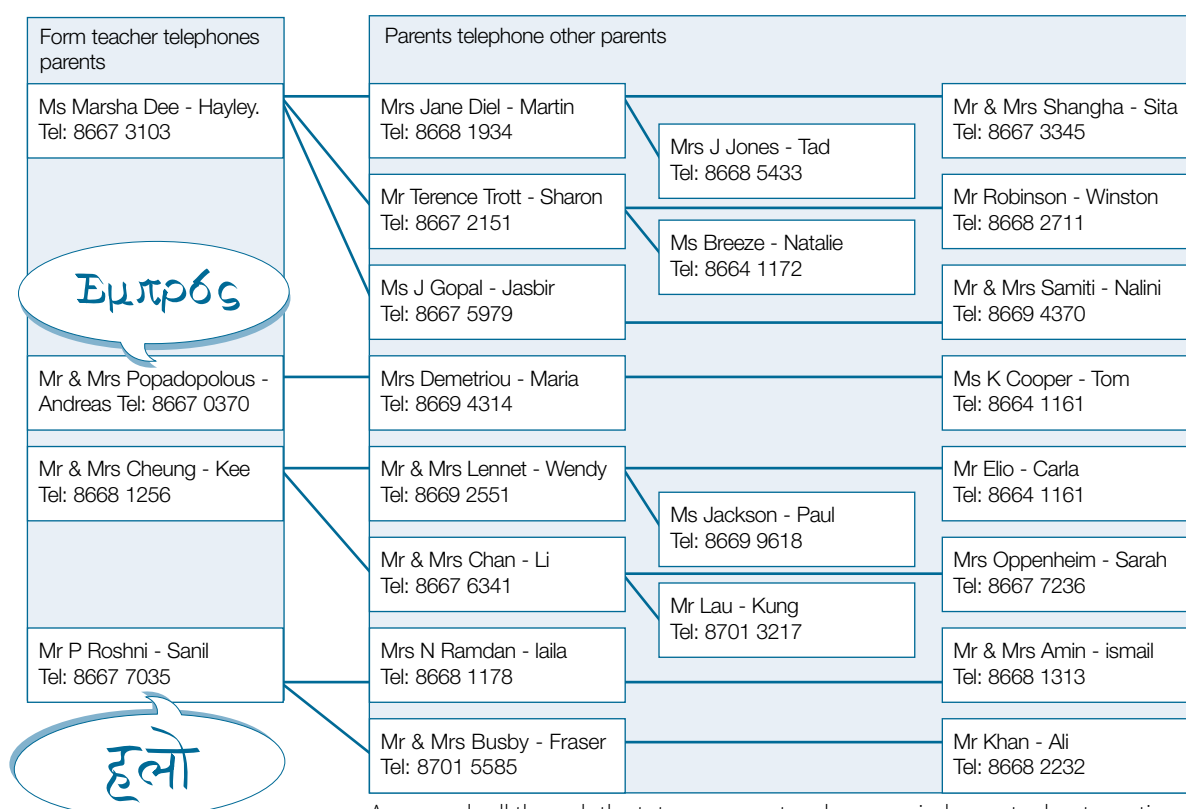
Teacher

From 'Could do Better' (1998)

Tutor group parents' meetings

Tutor group parents' meetings are relatively small in size and have as their focus issues of direct interest to parents. However, some parents – especially those with low levels of confidence – may feel apprehensive about attending and may wonder if their particular concerns will really be raised and listened to. Teachers need to explore a range of ways to make sure all parents feel that their contributions will be welcomed and responded to. Here are some ideas from teachers:

- ensure that all parents are told about meetings – through letters, messages via the children and, if possible, by telephone



A personal call through the tutor group network can remind parents about meetings

- arrange meetings to suit the circumstances of parents
- hold meetings outside the school if this is helpful eg in a community centre
- encourage parents to bring friends, family or members of community groups to meetings if this is helpful
- share the running and organisation of meetings, for example, by rotating roles such as chair and notetaker – so that meetings are not dominated by one group of parents
- find out what parents are concerned about and discuss the issues they wish to raise
- make sure that issues raised in meetings are shared afterwards with other staff, especially the senior management team
- if appropriate, invite other members of staff to join a meeting to answer queries and follow up points.
- make it a positive experience – if teachers start by asking parents – ‘Tell me one thing that you want me to know about your child’s special talents’ parents will feel involved and valued.

An obvious time to establish tutor group parents’ meetings is at the point of transfer to secondary school when parental involvement may be quite strong.

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From *Link Project Report: Action Research into Home-school Partnerships* (1999). The Manchester Metropolitan University in collaboration with Manchester LEA

Here is a case study taken from an Ofsted report, in which the school is praised for the way in which it runs its 'student academic counselling day' at the beginning of each autumn term.

'Student academic counselling day is at the beginning of the autumn term. Students and their parents are expected to attend this key event in the school's calendar to discuss and together agree the targets. Parents attend one hour before the appointed discussion time. This allows them time and space in comfortable surroundings, with refreshments provided, to receive the report and study it jointly with their daughters. Staff regard this as the most successful element of the target-setting approach; parents value the direct involvement and personal feedback they receive on their daughters' progress and feel they have a clearer understanding of how they can support the students' learning at home.

Parents also appreciate being given a detailed curriculum guide for each year, a homework timetable and a note of which member of staff to contact to answer specific queries about progress towards the targets. The time and attention spent planning and organising the reporting process is considerable but worthwhile. Staff here have given careful attention to organisational details in order to ensure maximum parental involvement in the process. They personally contact the small number of parents who do not attend, to make sure they are drawn into the learning agreement in other ways.'

Ofsted (adapted)

Parents and school reports

School reports are a really important way of communicating with parents, providing them with specific information that will give them a better understanding of how their child is doing and that they can use to help their child make progress. Research shows, however, that parents sometimes find school reports too general and grading systems confusing (Power and Clark 2000).

Here are some comments about school reports from parents. You can find more of these on www.teachernet.gov.uk.



This is what parents say they want from school reports:

- a rounded picture of their child which was recognisable and which lists a range of their achievements
- reports more than once a year (with feedback every half term)
- reports which set goals and describe how to achieve them
- help for students with self-assessment
- a balance between being encouraging and being truthful

- more detailed information than at present (within a realistic framework)
- information about the learning skills and competences that students need to have in order to do well
- more formative feedback, about progress that has been made and next steps
- practical ideas about how they can help their child
- to be able to make ready (but not over detailed) comparisons with other pupils of the same age, in the same school
- personal collection of report with an opportunity to discuss it with staff.

From a parent survey in a Midlands LEA and a national survey of parents of secondary school pupils



You may want to provide parents with the DfES leaflet 'Getting the most from school reports'. You can also let them know about www.parentcentre.gov.uk, a website designed especially for parents.

Parents and homework

Homework and home learning can provide an excellent opportunity for parents to become actively involved in their children's learning, giving them a window on school work.

Here are some different views on homework. For the DfES view on homework, you should refer to the Homework guidelines for secondary schools (DfEE, 1998). You can find an extract from these guidelines and more on parents' views and homework on



www.teachernet.gov.uk.

Schools can do a great deal to help to involve parents in homework and home learning by:

- being aware of, and sensitive towards, children's home backgrounds and taking these into account in shaping both the nature of homework tasks and the resources that are required for their completion
- providing a positive approach and constructive alternatives for pupils who need special help to enable them to work well. This may involve the special or additional use of school libraries and other relevant resources and study areas. Evidence about the positive contribution of homework clubs to both pupil attitudes and the improved quality of homework is very promising.

To be able to encourage, support and, where appropriate, help with their children's homework, there are things that parents need, and wish, to know. This becomes more problematic of course as pupils get older, their work becomes more advanced, and they want to be more independent.

Here are some ideas on how schools can help parents help children's learning.

- Give parents regular and accessible information about:
 - their child's programme of work
 - the school's approaches to learning/teaching methods across the curriculum
 - how they can encourage and help their child at home.
- Make sure each topic is linked to the formal reporting system through:
 - review of their child's progress at parents' evenings
 - their child's school report.
- Run workshops to encourage parents' practical involvement and support in key areas eg Maths, paired/shared reading schemes, ICT, Science. In the UK there are a number of homework and home learning programmes and schemes – for more details, go to www.teachernet.gov.uk.
- Have periodic surgeries and helplines on specific work-linked topics eg homework/revision hotlines (sometimes run by experienced parents/governors).
- Make sure that parental involvement in children's learning is a recognised topic of staff activity and professional development (eg staff handbook, review and discussion in staff/departmental meetings, training activities).
- Let parents know about www.parentcentre.gov.uk, a website for parents with information about homework and other ideas for supporting their children's learning.
- Have a homework policy based on a negotiated agreement between teachers, parents and students. Reinforce this with a two-way home-school link book or diary, the effectiveness of which is regularly reviewed.



You can find some more quotes and some examples of homework diaries on www.teachernet.gov.uk.



Moving from Key Stage 2 to Key Stage 3

The move from primary to secondary school is a crucial period in young people's educational lives. There is continuing evidence that a significant number of children find it hard to adapt to life in secondary schools: some never quite manage it. This is currently matched by widespread professional concern about the nature and input of Key Stage 3 generally.

Although secondary schools have in the past been generally less successful in involving parents and families than primary schools, they are now beginning to develop stronger links with parents and families that are tailor made, and are distinctly different, as the following chart shows. It would be fair to say that because of their size and circumstances, secondary schools have to work harder and do things differently to be as personal and in touch with children's changing family circumstances as many primary schools are.

Primary schools	Secondary schools
More opportunity for face to face contact	Contact via phone, letter or email
School-home (reading) support schemes	Homework logs and diaries
Mixture of formal and informal reporting, displays of work, open days etc	Three-way reports and discussions about progress
Primary Family literacy, numeracy and language initiatives	Curriculum evenings eg on subject areas, learning skills etc
Practical suggestions from the school on how parents can help	Involving parents in establishing a homework policy
Interagency family support	Parent led support groups, focusing on pupil behaviour
Class meetings for parents	Tutor group parent representatives, parents' forum
Parents helping in the classroom and on trips	Secondary Adult and peer mentoring schemes for parents and students

Improving transition – some practical ideas

- Carry out a 'welcome audit' to assess how welcoming your school is for new pupils and their families. You could adapt this checklist from Tower Hamlets.

Welcome audit – checklist

1.1 When children join the school

The school attaches great importance to the building of strong relationships with parents, carers and families when children first join the school. The importance of this is understood and widely accepted.

What arrangements are there for welcoming parents and visitors and making them feel at ease? How parent-friendly is your reception area and 'front line' staff?

What kinds of special help and support are available to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of (especially newly arrived) families during the admission of new pupils?

Does the school have a 'befriending' scheme for new parents?

How sensitive are admission arrangements for children with complicated, or changing, family circumstances?

Are home visits a part of your current practice?

1.2 Where there is a concern

The school recognises that the concerns parents have about their children are legitimate and normal and does its best to respond to these sympathetically and effectively.

What practical arrangements and procedures are there to respond to parental anxieties and concerns as quickly as possible? Are these clear to parents and staff alike?

What recognition is there of the special needs of:

- parents who lack confidence?
- parents who lack knowledge of the system?
- parents who are not fluent in English?
- parents who work long or difficult hours and are not available during normal school opening times?

Other ways to improve transition include:

- Making a video (with soundtrack in appropriate languages) for new families to:
 - welcome them to the school
 - address any anticipated parental concerns and anxieties
 - suggest ways in which families can support young people's learning.

Using the video at meetings for new parents and make copies available for home loan.

- Setting up special transition groups and arrangements for vulnerable children and their families.
- Asking parents who are already familiar with the school to establish and maintain early contact with new parents.
- Involving parents in reviewing existing arrangements and suggesting improvements.
- Strengthening and sensitising the admissions process for children from unusual or difficult family circumstances.
- Where initial contacts do not work, considering a home visit by an appropriate member of staff or using outreach workers.



Go to www.teachernet.gov.uk to find out more about how children and parents feel about the transfer to secondary school, plus look at details of projects to involve children with special educational needs, and a 'sixes and sevens' club for pupils and parents.

Using ICT to encourage home-school links

New developments in mobile phones, broadband, digital television and internet technologies are now widely available. A number of ICT projects have supported parents in helping their children learn and raise attainment through:

- increased feelings of empowerment and 'ownership' among family members, particularly when they are consulted at the design, planning and implementation stages
- the extension of services that schools offer to pupils, parents and the wider community
- the sharing of information and skills between friends and family, and the use of ICT as a tool for inclusion
- greater parental understanding of what their children are doing in school, how ICT is being used and how it can help with learning both at school and in the home
- better presentation, and greater motivation and organisation of thoughts among low-achieving pupils
- improvements in the quality of homework
- gains in literacy and communication skills, greater self-esteem and increased opportunities to extend work
- more challenging work being given and undertaken
- better exchange of knowledge between pupils and teachers
- increased interest and 'time on task' by students
- closer teacher and parent tracking of pupil performance and attendance.
- opening up school ICT facilities out of school hours for use by pupils, parents and the wider community.

BECTA is the government's lead agency for ICT in education. Its website www.becta.org.uk contains information about the use of ICT to improve communication between home and school, including case studies and examples of schools. You may want to review your communications with parents to see if they have kept up with new technologies.

Here are some ideas from schools on using ICT to involve parents. The possibilities are endless – and growing rapidly.

- Computerised attendance checks and follow ups.
- Electronic message displays in the school foyer.
- Joint parent/pupil workshops on computer-based learning.
- Accredited computer courses for parents.
- Presentational software displays by pupils for parents.
- Software programs especially for use by parents of children with special educational needs.
- Software – huge, easily obtained choice of educational CD-ROMs for home use, to reinforce what has been taught in school.
- Independent information, advice and support lines for parents, education centres and shops.
- Educational websites specifically for parents and pupils, many with downloadable worksheets and activities (see inside back cover).
- Involvement in Parents Online events.

You can find more on this on TeacherNet

Sending messages to parents

Very affordable systems now exist through which schools can send email, voice and text messages to parents and receive and store messages from them. These systems are used for:

- sending information and reminders about key meetings and events at the school and in the community
- checking out pupil absences
- sending 'good news' about pupil achievements.

Although these new tools offer enormous potential for communication and learning within schools and with the communities they serve, they can of course only enhance personal, two-way communication between schools and families. They cannot, and should not, replace it.



More can be found on this on www.teachernet.gov.uk.

Parents as volunteers

Schools with strong home-school links often make extensive and varied use of parent volunteers. This can be either informally agreed and arranged ad hoc, or as part of a recognised scheme or approach. Such arrangements can give the school important daily links to local families, cultures and communities, and at the same time can potentially offer parents an avenue to related training and paid employment.

Voluntary work in schools can take many forms including:

- as a **parent representative** for a tutor group, year or whole school basis
- as a **parent governor**
- as a **member of the PTA** or another school association
- **supporting the educational work of the school** eg running breakfast, after school and homework clubs, helping in the school library, running a family crisis/bereavement counselling group for pupils
- **supporting the work of teachers and classroom support staff** through remedial and bilingual support, special experience
- helping to run a **parental support schemes** for newly arrived families and those who lack confidence
- helping with a **mentoring scheme** for parents of children with special needs.

Although it remains largely unacknowledged and untapped, most parent bodies contain vast amounts of knowledge, skill and experience that represent a significant resource for any school.

Some schools have a semi-formal **inventory** listing parents' cultural knowledge, work experience and special interests. Such resources can be used to strengthen, enrich and extend both the formal curriculum and students' out-of-school learning and vocational education.

Learning in and out of school

In recent years, the overlap between children's education in schools and their lives in the outside world has increased. Many children attend study support activities which could include breakfast and after-school clubs, homework clubs and enrichment programmes at the weekends and in the holidays. Some may also attend supplementary schools.



Go to www.teachernet.gov.uk for more on different sources of learning and an example of a co-ordinated programme of provision at schools to involve parents through study support.

For more on study support visit the study support website at:
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/studysupport/

Parents as learners

A growing number of parents also attend special sessions and classes, often held in their children's schools, during the daytime or in the evening. These may cater for a wide range of topics of interest to parents themselves, or they may relate to the serious business of parenting, helping their children and supporting their progress.

Some LEAs also have a strong tradition of providing adult lifelong learning and community education, particularly in areas where many parents have been previously put off learning by their own school experiences. In some authorities, home-school link workers are very successful in re-igniting the spark of family learning.

All LEAs have a tradition of providing adult and community education courses and classes. In addition all LEAs offer family literacy, language and numeracy programmes. Many parents welcome the opportunity to learn at their children's school.

They may wish to choose from a range of courses for leisure or vocational pursuits or to update their skills and gain qualifications. Offering introductory courses linked to their children's learning may encourage them to return to their own learning.

All of these are effective in involving parents in schools and in supporting their children's learning at home. Opportunities to work in their child's school provide parents with a safe environment in which to develop their work skills. For many parents the gains in confidence and self-esteem are significant and contribute to their subsequent employment.

Supplementary and mother tongue schools

There are at least 2,000 supplementary and mother tongue schools in England – probably many more. They often have their own distinctive identity and purposes and make an important contribution to children's learning and development, providing many striking success stories, for children and young people of all ages, across the whole ability range. Many of these schools are held in great esteem by the communities that run and support them and they offer very positive models of parental and family involvement – in their management, in the day-to-day running of classes and centres and in supporting their learning tasks and activities at home. Working with supplementary schools may be a way of raising parents' awareness of the curriculum.

Supplementary schools provide a range of distinctive and valuable opportunities for practical co-operation with mainstream schools, to their mutual benefit. Here is an example.

In one supplementary school co-operation with a mainstream school involved:

- sharing and distributing a range of information about each other's work and activities
- identifying some possibilities for agreed approaches and complementary activities in teaching and learning
- sharing resources and materials
- sharing information about the progress and development of individual pupils
- tapping each other's skills and experience in relation to topics of special interest and concern eg music, cultural studies, and use of drama to explore experience of racism
- identifying an agreed approach to the arrangements for recording, assessing and reporting pupil progress and achievement
- working together to strengthen the co-operation and involvement of parents from minority ethnic groups in their children's education
- making more effective use of INSET and development activities in areas of shared concern eg language development, anti-racism work.

From Bastiani, J. (2000) *Supplementary Schooling in the CfBT/ Lambeth Education Action Zone*. A report commissioned by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). Downloadable from www.ippr.org.uk. under Research/Education Projects/ Parental involvement.

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4. Training and professional development

Although school-focused in-service training and professional development are acknowledged to have a crucial role to play in school improvement, this seldom extends to home-school work. This section includes a number of practical approaches to training and professional development.

A separate training pack and video on working with parents to raise achievement accompanies this booklet, including a suggested programme for an INSET day.

To order a copy of the training pack, go to www.teachernet.gov.uk

INSET and professional development are more likely to be successful, here as elsewhere, when they are clear in their purpose, carefully planned, adequately resourced and systematically monitored and evaluated.

Some practical approaches

- Review current practice generally and in specific parts of the school eg transfer to Key Stage 3, in relation to particular student groups.
- Set up a dedicated working group/task force to plan a programme of activity, consult staff and parents, and check out progress.
- Develop whole school policy and approaches in areas of key concern to parents and carers eg reviewing and reporting student progress, homework policy, student behaviour.
- Focus subject/faculty-based elements on issues of parental consultation, involvement and support, especially those that are related to classroom, homework and out-of-school learning.
- Provide joint training designed to increase the sense of ownership of stakeholders such as parents, carers, students and governors, and tap more explicitly into the different knowledge and experience of a range of statutory and community-based organisations and agencies that support children and their families. There have been some striking examples in recent years of joint training for all staff, for example, in the implementation of a whole school policies on behaviour, anti-bullying and anti-racism.

- Ensure that the full range of staff and departmental views, practice and experience are adequately represented in:
 - setting the development agenda
 - the composition of working groups
 - the evidence that is collected and examined.

This is especially important in a large school with many staff and pupils.

- Build on existing ways of doing things which have obviously worked well before and which are widely accepted, using information and evidence derived from existing practice as a good starting-point.
- Recognise that, as in other areas, home-school work is more likely to be successful when there is a recognition of the need for improvements in key areas, widespread support, and a general feeling that improvements are likely, that they will make a difference, and that they will bring genuine benefits for all those involved.
- Involve parents.
- Involve pupils through the school council.

New staff and NQTs

Newly qualified staff and those who are unfamiliar with the school will need initial training and induction providing:

- basic information about the importance of home-school links
- practical ideas about how to develop home-school links to improve achievement.
- opportunities to develop the practical skills of communicating and working with parents
- familiarity with key processes eg reporting pupil progress, initiating an active concern, successful parents' evenings.
- mentoring and support schemes involving experienced staff with positive attitudes and experience towards working with parents.

The training pack and video will be a useful resource for trainers of new staff.

Some useful websites

www.teachernet.gov.uk

www.dfes.gov.uk/parents

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ethnicminorities

www.dfes.gov.uk/sen

www.ofsted.gov.uk

www.ncsl.org.uk

www.bbc.co.uk/schools

www.learn.co.uk

www.becta.org.uk

www.educationextra.org.uk

www.literacytrust.org.uk/index

www.casenet.org.uk

www.ace-ed.org.uk

www.risetrust.org.uk

www.cedc.org.uk/educ/success1.html

www.nestafutureslab.org

www.learndirect.co.uk

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If you would like to share your experiences, or you have any queries or require further information, please visit our website

www.parentcentre.gov.uk or contact Carolyn Unstead at parents.website@dfes.gsi.gov.uk

Copies of this toolkit can be obtained from:

DfES Publications

Tel: 0845 60 222 60

Fax: 0845 60 333 60

Textphone: 0845 60 555 60

E-mail: dfes@prolog.uk.com

Please quote ref: **PICE/IPRA**

Some useful materials

The Learning Journey. A parent's guide to the school curriculum. Ref: Learning Journey.

Help your children to learn. Leaflets by parents for parents. Ref: HYCL, HYCL 1-4.

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