Engaging parents and families

A toolkit for practitioners

Section 1: Background and definitions

March 2019

For Scotland's learners, with Scotland's educators

Contents

Background

This section provides an overview of key national legislation and plans relating to the involvement, engagement and communication with parents, families and communities. The legislation and plans provide the overarching framework within which local authorities, schools and practitioners should work. Definitions of the key terms used in reference to engaging parents and families are also outlined to help provide clarity and ensure a common language. However, some research referred to throughout the toolkit can at times use the terms 'parental involvement' and 'parental engagement' interchangeably.

Throughout the toolkit, reference is made to the application of the Parental Involvement Act across all sectors including early learning and childcare, primary, secondary and special. It should be noted that the application of the Act covers parents of children attending early learning and childcare provided in public primary schools - they are members of the school's parent forum and may join the Parent Council. The Act does not apply to parents of children in 'free-standing' local authority nurseries or those attending early learning and childcare provided by a 'partner provider'. Nonetheless, we would encourage early learning and childcare settings, currently not subject to the legislative requirements, to ensure that there are effective arrangements in place for parental involvement and engagement and that the key principles highlighted throughout the toolkit are adhered to.

## Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act (2006)

In 2006, the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act came into force. Within the Act, Scottish Ministers and local authorities have a duty to promote the involvement and engagement of parents in their child's ELC setting or school and their learning. The Parental Involvement Act (2006) recognises the benefits of involving parents in the wider life of the school and the vital role they play in supporting their children's learning. Providing and strengthening the framework to support parental involvement and engagement is therefore a key focus of the Act. Parents are encouraged to express their views and have these taken into account not just on matters affecting the education of their children but also the school's arrangements for promoting parental involvement and engagement, as well as other matters or issues of interest to parents.

National Improvement Framework

The National Improvement Framework was established in 2015 and set out a clear vision for Scottish education based on delivering excellence and equity. It has the following four priorities:

- improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy
- closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people
- improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing
- improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school-leaver destinations for all young people

To deliver this improvement, six 'drivers' were identified. These are: School leadership; Teachers' professionalism; Parental engagement; Assessment of children's progress; School improvement; and Performance information.
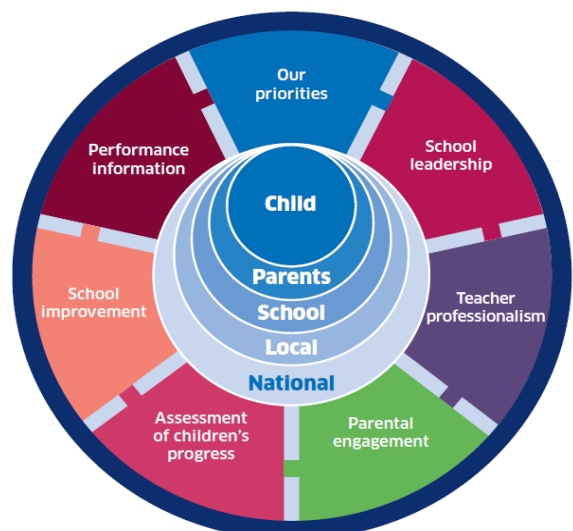
The Scottish Government annually evaluates progress against identified priorities. A commitment was made in the 'Delivery Plan for Excellence and Equity' (2016) to improve the information available about schools. This information is now available through the new School Information Dashboard on Parentzone Scotland. The dashboard brings together a wide range of information which was previously available on Parentzone Scotland and Scottish Government websites and includes some additional elements. At the same time, an Improvement Plan is produced by the Scottish Government. This plan is based on a wide range of evidence, including that reported on the dashboard, and helps directs the improvement work for the following year.

Further information can be found in the Driving Excellence and Equity: Advice on School Improvement Planning 2018/19 guidance.

Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (2015)

The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 focuses specifically on the promotion of effective engagement and participation to help communities achieve greater control and influence in the decisions and circumstances that affect their lives.

The National Standards for Community Engagement mentioned below are key in supporting organisations to put the Community Empowerment Act into practice. The standards can be used to help shape the participation process of public bodies and influence how community organisations can involve wider community interests.

National Standards for Community Engagement (2016)

'Community engagement is a purposeful process which develops a working relationship between communities, community organisations and public and private bodies to help them to identify and act on community needs and ambitions. It involves respectful dialogue between everyone involved, aimed at improving understanding between them and taking joint action to achieve positive change'.

(National Standards for Community Engagement, 2016)

The [National Standards for Community Engagement](#) are good-practice principles designed to support and inform the process of community engagement and improve what happens as a result. Originally launched in 2005 and revised in 2015/16, they have since been used to support community engagement and user involvement in Scotland in areas such as community planning and health and social care.

The National Standards for Community Engagement are key principles that clearly describe the main elements of effective practice. They provide detailed performance statements that can be used by everyone involved to achieve the highest quality results and the greatest impact.

National Improvement Framework Parent Communication Plan (2016)

The Scottish Government's National Improvement Framework [Parent Communication Plan](#) (2016) sets out the principles that should underpin all communication with parents, carers and families. These principles were developed in partnership with national parenting organisations and they capture examples of good practice in communicating with parents.

Although this is a national communications plan, the principles are relevant at local authority and school level. The principles are:

- simplicity and clarity
- transparency
- relevance
- partnership
- flexibility and adaptation
- timeliness

The National Improvement Framework Parent Communication Plan (2016) focuses on three key priorities. These are:

Priority 1   Explaining what the National Improvement Framework is, why it has been developed and where it is relevant to parents
Priority 2   Answering the questions that are most important to parents and families
Priority 3   Supporting good quality dialogue between parents, teachers and headteachers

A Research Strategy for Scottish Education (2017)

The Scottish Government's [Research Strategy for Scottish Education](#) was published in April 2017. It aims to support the four priorities set out in the National Improvement Framework. These are:

- improvement in attainment, particularly in literacy and numeracy
- closing the attainment gap between the most and least disadvantaged children
- improvement in children and young people's health and wellbeing
- improvement in employability skills and sustained, positive school lever destinations for all young people

The Research Strategy also builds on the recommendations from the OECD report *'Improving Schools in Scotland: An OECD Perspective'*. Within the strategy there are three key priority areas. These are to:

- support the research infrastructure and independent research
- develop knowledge base of 'what works'
- empower practitioners to produce and use evidence and data

The strategy recognises that each level of the education system in Scotland has a vital role in harnessing the power of evidence and data in order to deliver continuous improvement in the education

system. Leadership at system, local authority, school and class level is key to ensuring that effective collaborative approaches are in place to learn lessons for successful interventions.

This approach is designed to transform the production and use of evidence, and become an integral part of the promotion of better outcomes.
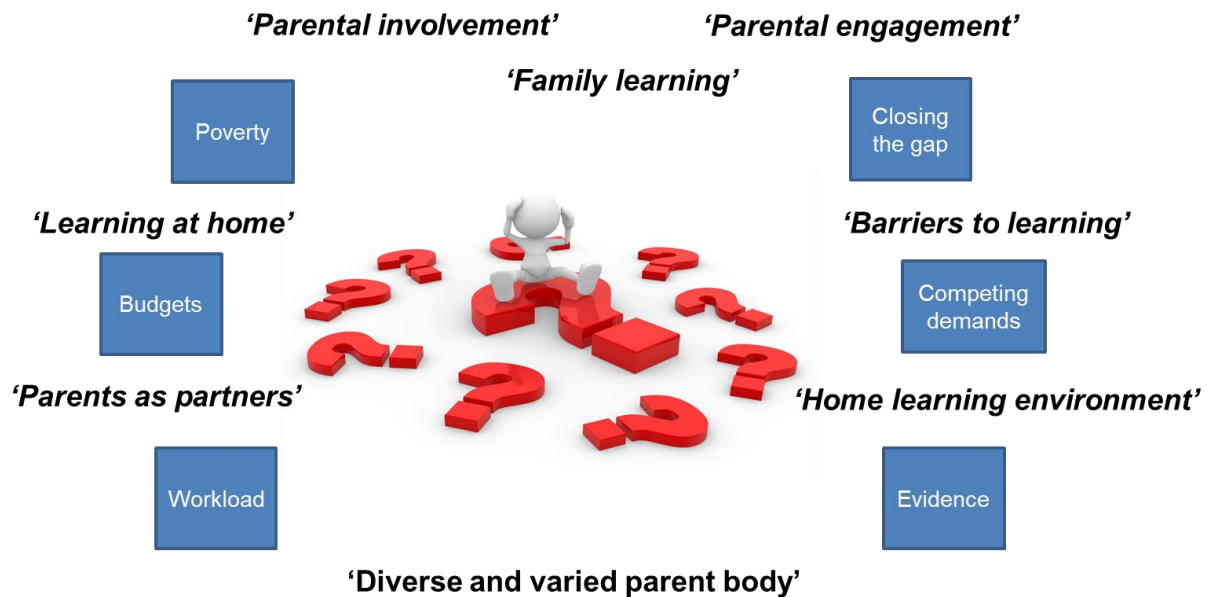
Learning together: Scotland's national action plan on parental involvement, parental engagement, family learning and learning at home (2018)

This national action plan follows on from the Review of the impact of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 (National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017). It sets out the Scottish vision for parental involvement and engagement, family learning and learning at home from pre-birth to age 18. The plan contains 13 goals and 52 national actions. Although the plan sets out the national vision, it also allows for local and community innovation and flexibility. At the heart of this plan is relationships based on trust, mutual respect and collaboration.

The aim of the plan is to:

- ensure that parents are supported to be fully involved in the life and work of their children's early learning and childcare setting or school
- encourage and support collaborative partnerships between practitioners, parents and families
- get the right support in place so that parents can engage in their child's learning
- expand access to family learning opportunities which meet participants needs
- improve the quality of all communication between practitioners, staff, parents and families
- improve the skills of leaders, front-line practitioners and support staff

Definitions and terms

'Parental involvement'   **'Parental engagement'**

'Family learning'

Poverty

Closing the gap

'Learning at home'   **'Barriers to learning'**

Budgets

Competing demands

'Parents as partners'   **'Home learning environment'**

Workload

Evidence

'Diverse and varied parent body'

Terms

The term 'parents' in this document refers to people with parental responsibilities (within the meaning of section 1(3) of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995) and others who care for or look after children or young people. A person with 'parental responsibilities' refers to someone with the rights and responsibilities that parents have in law for their child. Individual family units will comprise a wider range of people who might also contribute to a child's learning at home.

Corporate parenting is defined in the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act (2014) as 'the formal and local partnerships between all services responsible for working together to meet the needs of looked after children, young people and care leavers'. Throughout the toolkit the term 'care experienced' will be used to denote looked after children and young people and care leavers to ensure a more inclusive definition.

For the purposes of support for children and families, 'child' means a person under the age of 18 years. 'Family', in relation to a child, includes any person who has parental responsibility for a child and any other person with whom the child has been living (Children (Scotland) Regulations, 1995).

Parental involvement

> 'Parental involvement is about supporting pupils and their learning. It is about parents and teachers working together in partnership to help children become more confident learners'.

> **(Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act Guidance, 2006)**

'Parental involvement' is not a clearly or consistently defined term in literature. It has been described as: representing many different parental behaviours; parenting practices such as parental aspirations for their child's academic achievement; parental communication with their children about school; parental participation in school activities; parental communications with teachers about their child; and parental rules at home which are considered to be education-related (Harris and Goodall, 2007). The range of definitions implies that parental involvement is multifaceted in nature because it subsumes a wide variety of parental behavioural patterns and parenting practices.

While there are no universally recognised definitions of 'parental involvement' in Scottish education, the term most often focuses on parents getting involved in the life and work of the establishment. Early learning and childcare settings and schools involve parents by encouraging on-going, two-way communication between home and the establishment. They make sure parents views are represented and they have opportunities to contribute to improvement and decisions that affect the establishment as well as using the skills of parents to enrich the curriculum.

Parental engagement

> Parental engagement can be considered as active involvement in learning. Such learning can take place in a variety of settings including early learning and childcare settings (ELC) or schools, the community, through family learning and at home.

> **(Goodall and Montgomery, 2014)**

'Parental engagement' most often refers to parents actively and meaningfully engaging in their children's learning (Harris and Goodall, 2007; Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Such learning can take place in a variety of settings including early learning and childcare, schools, the community, through family learning and learning at home. Parental engagement is supported by discussion between parents and practitioners. It focuses on how families can build upon what they already do to help their children's learning and provide a supportive home learning environment. Parental engagement represents a greater 'commitment, ownership of action' than parental involvement within educational settings such as early learning and childcare and schools.

It is recognized, however, that there is a continuum between parental involvement and parental engagement. The movement between the two represents a 'shift in emphasis, away from the relationship between parents and schools, to a focus on the relationship between parents and their children's learning' (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Defining what is parental involvement and what is parental engagement is not always easy. Regardless of whether parents are involved with the wider life of the school or engaged in their children's learning, they can make a positive difference.

Learning at home

> 'Learning at home is the learning which happens in the home, outdoors or in the community. It can take place through everyday activities that families already do and can overlap with aspects of organised or active learning activities'.

> **(Scottish Parental Involvement Officers Network, 2018)**

Learning at home can happen through a range of events including play, leisure activities, fun events, sports, trips, cultural or volunteering experiences and everyday family life. It can also happen through curriculum related activities, homework, reading and sharing books. Activities for learning at home can be specifically designed to enable parents to engage in their child's learning and build upon the learning from the early learning and childcare setting or school. It can also provide intergenerational learning opportunities for the child, family, extended family and the community. Some families can be supported with learning at home through a family learning approach (see section 4 of the toolkit).

The definition of learning at home was produced as a result of a range of consultation events with practitioners from across Scotland and in partnership with the Scottish Parental Involvement Officers Network (SPION).

Further information can be found in the Review of Learning at Home (2018).

Home learning environment

'A growing body of research suggests that good parenting skills and a supportive home learning environment are positively associated with children's early achievements and wellbeing'.

(Economic and Social Research Council, 2012)

The home learning environment is the combination of everything within the home and the time that a child spends out and about, that affect their development and learning. These include the availability of toys and books, outings and having space and time to learn. Most importantly though, are the people who provide the love, security, encouragement, conversation and positive role models to their child to help them thrive. A good home learning environment encourages children and young people to have positive attitudes to learning, to be curious and to have confidence in themselves.

Research shows that the home learning environment has a strong impact on attainment and wellbeing. Furthermore, the influence of the home learning environment is 'over and above that of standard measures of family socio-demographic factors such as parental education, socio-economic status and income' (Melhuish, 2010, p3). Providing a 'supportive home learning environment is also positively associated with children's early achievements and wellbeing' (ESRC, 2012, p1; Kluczniok et al, 2013; Clarke and Younas, 2017). Parental support of 'learning within the home environment…..makes the maximum difference to achievement' and raising attainment more than parents supporting school activities (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Further information can be found in the Review of Learning at Home (2018) and on Parentzone Scotland.

Family learning

Family Learning encourages family members to learn together as and within a family, with a focus on intergenerational learning. Family learning activities can also be specifically designed to enable parents to learn how to support their children's learning. 'Family learning is a powerful method of engagement and learning which can foster positive attitudes towards life-long learning, promote socio-economic resilience and challenge educational disadvantage'.

(Family Learning Network, 2016)

Family learning is an approach to engaging families in learning outcomes that have an impact on the whole family. In order to support a consistent understanding of family learning, Education Scotland have published a number of documents, reports and case studies on the National Improvement Hub and resources such as 'I am a Scientist' and 'I am a Mathematician' on Parentzone Scotland. A copy of the postcard with the current definition of family learning in Scotland can be downloaded from the National Improvement Hub.

The definition of family learning in Scotland was developed after a series of consultation events throughout Scotland. Those involved in the process worked across sectors and were employed in a variety of positions. After an extensive process it was ratified by the National Family Learning Network of Practitioners in Scotland. Further information is available in the Review of Family Learning (2016) and Family Learning Framework (2018).

A family learning approach gives parents, families and children the tools from which they can continue to learn at home together.

Community learning and development

‘Community learning and development (CLD) is a field of professional practice that enables people to identify their own individual and collective goals, to engage in learning and take action to bring about change for themselves and their communities. It uses a range of formal and informal methods of learning and social development with individuals and groups in their communities’.

(Standards Council Scotland, 2018)

Community learning and development (CLD) covers a broad range of practice including youth work, community based adult learning, family learning and community development. It empowers people of all ages to work individually or collectively to make positive changes in their lives and in their communities, through learning, personal development and active citizenship.

Programmes and activities are developed in dialogue with communities and participants, working particularly with those excluded from participation in the decisions and processes that shape their lives. Working in these ways enables community learning and development to extend the reach of democracy and widen its scope.

Further information can be found on the Standards Council and Education Scotland websites.

Third sector

‘The third sector, which includes charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups, delivers essential services, helps to improve people's wellbeing and contributes to economic growth. It plays a vital role in supporting communities at a local level’.

(Scottish Government)

In 2011, the Christie commission on the future delivery of public services made several recommendations regarding the reform of Scotland's public services, including the third sector. The Scottish Government's response, Renewing Scotland's Public Services: priorities for reform in response to the Christie Commission, recognised the role of the third sector, particularly in regard to partnership working, collaborative spend in localities and preventative spend.

The third sector workforce offer specialist expertise, an ability to engage with families in a meaningful way, including vulnerable groups and a flexible and innovative approach. When working in partnership, these skills support families to achieve their goals as well as accessing community venues such as church and community halls. For some families these venues are less intimidating and allow easier access to provision at a reduced cost.

Early learning and childcare

'Early learning and childcare is defined as a service, consisting of education and care, of a kind which is suitable in the ordinary case for children who are under school age, regard being had to the importance of interactions and other experiences which support learning and development in a caring and nurturing setting'.

(Scottish Government, 2014, p12)

The term 'early learning and childcare' encompasses all previous terminology related to pre-school provision and early education. There are a number of important reasons for the change in terminology. 'Pre-school education' can be perceived as purely educational and has historic connotations of being only for children in the year before they start primary school. The term 'childcare' on its own can be open to misinterpretation, for example, it may be thought of as dealing with the physical needs of children such as feeding, washing, nurturing etc.

The concept of early learning and childcare (ELC) is broad and expands the idea that early learning and childcare are indivisible and should be seamless. Early learning and childcare is crucial to promote children's learning, development and enhance their educational outcomes (Scottish Government, 2014). The term also refers to the different types of settings, such as: private providers, Gaelic medium settings, local authority settings, voluntary groups and childminding' (Scottish Government, 2014, p3).

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