Time to Talk
Parents as Partners

Deliberative Event Research Report

Opinion Leader

department for
children, schools and families

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1.1   Context

Background to engagement activities

The Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was formed in 2007 with the aim of giving every child the best start in life. In September and October of that year the department undertook a wide ranging consultation on children's services and the role of DCSF with parents, children and young people and practitioners working in education, health and social care.

A deliberative debate, conducted by Opinion Leader, with young people, parents, practitioners and policy experts, called Time to Talk, was a part of this consultation. This debate took the form of four events held simultaneously in Leeds, Birmingham, Portsmouth and gave different groups of stakeholders (namely parents and young people) a chance to give their opinion on the challenges facing parents and young people, and to allow these different stakeholders to engage together in small groups and discuss their different and needs.

The outputs from this consultation were fed into the development of the Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures, which was published by DCSF on 11th December 2007. This laid out how the department planned to achieve its aim of making this country the best place in the world for children and young people to grow up. It detailed policy initiatives around strengthening early years support, achieving world class education, providing play and activity opportunities outside of school, ensuring child safety and joining up children's services.

Opinion Leader then conducted four further events, called Time to Talk 2, on 8th March 2008. This brought back together participants from the first consultation. The purpose of the event was to update participants on progress made on the Children's Plan, show them how their views had fed into the development of policy, and then to gather feedback on the specific policy initiatives in the plan. Before the event participants were sent abridged versions of the Children's Plan and on the day participants were asked for their views on it and the specific proposals it made.

Background to this research event

At present parents face a number of challenges in supporting their children with their schoolwork. Parents lives are increasingly time poor meaning they have less time to help their children with their homework. The Office for National Statistics found in a recent survey that a typical working parent was spending 35 minutes per day 'looking after' their children. Because of pressured lifestyles, time together can be stressful for parents and children, and so may not be an ideal environment in which to assist a child. Parents may also feel unequipped to help children with homework due to a lack of knowledge on the subjects; this is especially true for science and mathematics. A General Teaching Council for England study found that parents are calling for more help to understand their children's schoolwork, so they are able to help their children.

Against this background DCSF wants to engage parents more in their children's learning and education. Key to this will be the formation of partnerships with parents to encourage and support their involvement with their children's education from early years setting through to secondary school. To encourage the development of these partnerships, and to equip parents with necessary information on the strategies and initiatives that are being developed, the Department commissioned Opinion Leader to conduct 3 deliberative events on 13th September 2008 in London, Leeds and Birmingham involving parents and practitioners

working with children and young people or in children's policy. DCSF is planning several strategy documents and initiatives connected to child learning, education and development for publication at the end of the year, and the results from this engagement exercise will be used to help develop these documents.

1.2 The challenge

The overall objective of the event was to help in the development of policy to drive parental support for and involvement in education and learning. DCSF want to ascertain how it can encourage parents to become more involved in their children's education, both at school and in the home.

The main objective of the event was to:

- Gather the opinions of parents on a range of issues around engagement, as well as the opinions of practitioners who will be involved in the implementation of the policy and the delivery of services

A secondary objective was to:

- Inform participants about current services, support and good practice relating to parental involvement in learning

Gathering opinion from parents and stakeholders

The Department of Children, Schools and Families wanted to obtain the views of parents and practitioners on three policy areas:

1. Parents as Partners in Learning

The opinions of parents and practitioners will feed into the content of the Partners as Partners in Learning strategic document. To guide the direction of this strategy the Department wanted to ascertain how parents want to be supported in helping their children to learn. Specifically they wanted to find out:

- The kinds of learning support that parents already provide for their children and how they think they could further support their children

- What factors prevent them from providing the support they would like to

- What could be done to overcome these barriers to supporting their children at home and in school, and what could be done to encourage them to support their children's learning

The Department needed to understand whether opinions on supporting their children's learning and the issues they face in doing this are different for parents of children of different ages, and whether they need different kinds of support to overcome this. They also wanted to test a number of specific initiatives aimed at engaging parents with their children's educations and encourage them to support their children's learning, including personal tutors and online reporting.

2. Parents complaints about schools

The Government is planning to legislate to improve the way parents' complaints about schools are handled so wanted to include some discussion of parental complaints in this event. Specifically they wanted to gather parents' views on:

- How they feel about making a complaint about their children's schools

- Knowledge and / or experience of how their children's schools complaints procedure works

- How they feel a good complaints procedure could work

This element of the research concentrated on children of school age.

3. Childcare and the Early Years Foundation Stage

In terms of childcare, The Department was seeking to hear about experiences of childcare and what elements are felt to be important in the provision of childcare.

This discussion focused on children across the 0-14 age range, and differences in views between parents of younger children (0-5 years old) and school aged children (5-14 years old) were apparent. The Department also wanted to seek reactions to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) amongst parents of younger children (0-5 years old) and parents were presented with an outline of this.

Alongside a number of other sources, the thoughts and ideas from participants at these events will feed into the update of the 10-Year Childcare Strategy which is due to be published early in 2009.

Informing participants about existing services, support and good practice

DCSF wanted to get feedback on the services and support that are currently available. To ensure that participants are able to comment on these current provisions they were provided with relevant information on what they are and how they work in the form of presentations as well as leaflets and other materials to take away.

1.3 Research Approach

The deliberative consultation took the form of three 'Time to Talk: Parents as Partners' events taking place in London, Leeds and Birmingham on the 13th September 2008. Each event was age specific:

- Parents of and practitioners working with 0-5 year olds (early years) attended the event in Birmingham

- Parents of and practitioners working with 5-10 year olds (primary school) attended the event in London

- Parents of and practitioners working with 11-19 year olds (secondary school) attended the event in Leeds

The agenda for the day was developed following an evidence review by Opinion Leader to assess what existing information was available on parents and practitioners' views towards parental engagement, childcare and parental complaints. The topics for discussion were also developed in conjunction with the relevant DCSF policy teams, who briefed Opinion Leader on their objectives and commented on the agenda in the run up to the event.

Each event consisted of round table discussions and plenary presentations. Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families, attended the event in Leeds and made a short introductory speech to all sites at the beginning of the day. Beverly Hughes, Minister of State for Children, spoke to all the events from Birmingham regarding childcare and the Early Years Foundation Stage. The three sites were linked via satellite, which created a sense of a national debate, and allowed participants to hear feedback on discussions from the other locations. A number of presentations (live and via satellite link), written handouts and table exercises were included on the day to help build participants' knowledge and aid informed discussions.

Participants worked on tables of ten with a facilitator. A summary of the discussions and particularly pertinent quotes were captured by the table facilitator using a laptop. For some exercises, the participants themselves captured the key points of the discussions on to flipcharts.

1.4   The participants

A total of 269 participants attended the events on 13th September 2008, 90 in Birmingham, 84 in London and 95 in Leeds. Participants represented a wide range of audiences:

- Parents of children and young people, including parents using targeted services, such as education psychologists, extended schools. Parenting classes, speech therapy and play therapy, family ESOL classes

- Policy experts, for example, representatives of children's campaigning groups, people working in Local Government and others.

- Practitioners, including a mix across policy areas such as youth workers, practitioners from Early Years settings, and primary and secondary school teachers.

Most parents were recruited by Opinion Leader's network of on street recruiters to ensure that each event was representative of the general population. At recruitment, participants were asked questions to assign them to DCSF's recently developed parental segmentation so we could ensure that a minimum of three parents per segment attended each event. A small number of parents were recruited via specialist services and agencies so that we could ensure that at least five parents per event had used some targeted services such as parenting classes. Practitioners were recruited via schools, charities, children's' centres and other relevant institutions as well as through the list of practitioners attending previous Time to Talk events. To recognise the importance of the role played by both mothers and fathers in supporting their children in learning and education, there was a 50:50 split amongst the parents between mothers and fathers.

Bringing practitioners together with lay audiences demands very careful management; therefore the recruitment was designed so that practitioner and expert stakeholders would not outnumber parents and potentially dominate or inhibit discussions. To this end, we aimed to recruit the following balance of participants at each event:

Table 1: sample structure for each event[*]

Participant type	Number
Parents of children and young people (with a child in the age group relevant for the specific event)	60
Practitioners working with children and young people who are involved in their learning, such as teachers, children's centre workers and youth workers	25
Policy experts	15
Total	**100**

Involving children under 19

It was very important to include children's voices in the debate since any policy initiative surrounding parental engagement in learning will need to take into account children's needs and preferences. Vox pops interviews with children were therefore conducted to produce a video shown at the events. Parents attending the event were also given a pre-task to ask their children to write or draw something to illustrate how they would like to be supported in their learning, which parents also brought along to the events to help ensure children and young people's views were considered.

1.5   The agenda

The day's discussion was structured around 3 key debates. Participants began the day on homogenous tables (i.e. all parents together and practitioners sitting together) but moved tables once in the morning and once in the afternoon to form mixed tables to develop shared solutions to each debate.

Debate 1: Parents as partners in children's learning

This debate sought to explore current parental involvement in children's learning and to develop ideas to enable parents to be more involved in their children's learning. For parents, this debate was informed by their learning diaries which they were asked to complete with them for the week prior to the event and bring along with them on the day[1]. Online reporting and personal tutors were discussed where relevant to the age of the child.

Debate 2: Childcare and Early Years Foundation Stage

This involved discussion of current childcare arrangements and a visioning exercise designed to understand what parents and practitioners want for childcare in the future. Reactions to the Early Years Foundation Stage were discussed in Birmingham by parents of and practitioners working with 0-5 year old children.

Debate 3: Parental Complaints

This debate sought to explore ideas for improvements to the way parental complaints to nurseries and schools are handled. Participants discussed their current experiences before exploring the idea of a new independent body and mediation.

A full agenda for the day is shown in the Appendix.

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[*] Please see Appendix for actual breakdown of numbers attending each event

[1] The learning diaries asked parents to detail the formal and informal activities they did with their child with the objective of understanding in more depth the ways in which parents currently support their children's learning

1.6   The report

This report presents the findings of the day's discussions, highlighting the main themes and actions proposed by participants. At several points in the day participants were asked to think of new or different ways that services could be delivered. These ideas are deliberately represented as 'blue sky' thinking and are not intended to indicate exact or concrete changes to services, but to provide stimulus for thought on new directions for service delivery.

Many views were shared by participants, whether they were parents or practitioners, across all the different age groups of children. Throughout the report, views which were shared by all participants are presented first as general findings. Differences in views are then reported, where relevant, by age of child (Early Years, Primary School age and Secondary School age) and participant type (parents or practitioners).

Quotations in the report are intended to illustrate broad points, rather than to represent the views of a particular participant type, unless this is indicated in the attribution. The report reflects the view of those of who participated in the events and, whilst a significant number of parents and practitioners attended and were recruited to represent a broad cross section of views, these findings are not intended to provide conclusive evidence of the views of ALL parents and practitioners.

The findings reported are mainly qualitative but it should be noted that some feedback may based on a small sample size as some topics were relevant only to some parents. Where possible, an indication of the scale of views has been provided (e.g. the majority, a few) however, due to the qualitative nature of the exercise, it is not possible to place further quantification on these views. Quantitative feedback is provided via the polling which took place throughout the day. The polling results are presented in charts in each of the chapters. Where participants were asked to give their top 3 choices (first, second and third choice) the results have been weighted to show the overall response. The total number of participants voting for each question is shown as the 'base' in each chart. Some of the base sizes for responses are small and these results should therefore be viewed with some caution and as indicative of views of those who attended; data has not been weighted to be representative of the national population.

2. Executive summary

Parents as partners in their child's learning

- Parents currently use a range of information sources in relation to their child, however word of mouth from other parents and the internet are most frequently used because they are trusted and easily accessible to most parents

- The areas in which parents want information are dependent on the age of the child. Parents of children of early years age say that they need a wide range of information and support services spanning education, health and childcare and local activities, whereas parents of children at primary and secondary school are more focused on educational needs

- Parents of primary and secondary school age children believe there is currently a lack of support and information to help parents engage with their child's learning and cite better communication between schools and parents as a key priority in underpinning parental involvement in children's learning

- Parents and practitioners suggested a number of ways of improving information and support to parents including a parents guide which includes information relevant to different stages of children's development and developing parents ability to help their children with homework

- There exist a number of barriers which limit greater parental involvement in children's learning including: a lack of time, financial considerations, a lack of confidence and family circumstances

- Parents and practitioners identify a number of potential solutions to getting more involved in their children's learning including: encouraging flexible working, support and guidance for parents, greater involvement in the school / nursery and more information about what is expected from the child

Views on specific ideas for involving parents in their children's learning

Online reporting

- Parents and practitioners believe there are some key benefits and disadvantages of online reporting. The main benefits are the ability to track their child's progress, have greater communication with the teacher and imagine the system to be interactive. The main perceived disadvantages include concern over the security of personal data, a worry that on-line could replace face to face communication and the increased workload on teachers to update records.

Personal tutors

- Parents and practitioners believe that there are clear benefits for pupils and parents from personal tutors, particularly in terms of them being someone they can have regular communication with and be a single point of contact. However, practitioners have a number of concerns regarding personal tutors and feel they need clarification on who would fill this position and how the role would fit into the school structure.

Involving parents in setting targets for children at school

- The majority of parents and practitioners agree that parents' becoming involved in their child's education is important for them to do well but believe that target setting is not an appropriate method of active involvement for parents to engage in. These participants do not feel that parents have the skills and knowledge to set children's targets, rather there should be target sharing events where teachers inform parents of their child's targets.

Childcare and Early Years Foundation Stage

- Parents use a range of both formal (e.g. nurseries and childminders) and informal (e.g. family and friends) childcare arrangements

- Some feel they have a choice about which childcare provision to use whereas others feel they have limited options typically due to availability or cost

- Parents of secondary school age children were more likely than other parents to feel that there are limited childcare options available. As a result many make informal arrangements with friends and neighbours which are not always reliable

- Current experiences of childcare are mixed, a few parents are very happy with their arrangements, however others express concerns

- The main concerns are: a perceived lack of available places; cost and lack of financial help for parents; inflexible opening times; and the variable quality of staff and childcare environments.

- When asked to imagine their ideal childcare, participants set out a vision with common elements for all ages of children: places which are available locally; are affordable; have flexible opening hours; and qualified staff; where the environment is safe, clean and stimulating for children both intellectually and physically; and with activities that are child-centric with on emphasis on fun and play that offers parents and family members opportunities to get involved.

- Parents of early years children and practitioners are positive about the EYFS: they believe it will address many of the concerns they have surrounding childcare in terms of staff qualifications and consistency in childcare and generally support the focus on play-based learning

Parental complaints

- Around one third of parents attending the Time to Talk events have actually made a complaint to their child's school or nursery - this falls to 10% for parents of early years children. Satisfaction levels after making a complaint vary considerably, however many parents (particularly those in primary and secondary school) complain of dissatisfaction with the outcome of complaints relating to bullying.

- There are a number of barriers to making a complaint which are identified by parents and practitioners including; concern that their child could be singled out, a lack of information about how to make a complaint, fear about being labelled a 'trouble maker' and a worry that the complaint will not be taken seriously

- Parents and practitioners attending the event want more open and less formalised communications between parents and schools to both prevent complaints escalating and encourage speedy resolutions if they arise

- Parents and practitioners attending the event like the idea of a new independent complaints body to provide oversight and ensure that processes are consistent across schools and nurseries, however many have concerns that adding this extra layer to the process may over-complicate the system and waste resources

- There is a lot of support for using mediation for difficult complaints, but many suggest it should not be employed unless the school or nursery has failed to resolve the situation without it. Many parents and practitioners question whether Parent Support Advisors could be used as mediators, because they are not independent from the school

3. Parents as partners in children's learning

3.1 Summary

This section summarises the current support received to support children's learning, current involvement in their child's learning, barriers to greater parental engagement in children's learning and solutions to overcoming these barriers.

- Parents currently use a range of information sources in relation to their child, however word of mouth from other parents and the internet are most frequently used because they are trusted and easily accessible to most parents

- The areas in which parents want information is dependent on the age of the child. Parents of children of early years age say that they need a wide range of information and support services spanning education, health and childcare and local activities, whereas parents of children at primary and secondary school are more focused on educational needs

- Parents of primary and secondary school age children believe there is currently a lack of support and information to help parents engage with their child's learning and cite better communication between schools and parents as a key priority in underpinning parental involvement in children's learning

- Parents and practitioners suggested a number of ways of improving information and support to parents including a parents guide which includes information relevant to different stages of children's development and developing parents ability to help their children with homework

- There exist a number of barriers which limit greater parental involvement in children's learning including: a lack of time, financial considerations, a lack of confidence and family circumstances

- Parents and practitioners identify a number of potential solutions to getting more involved in their children's learning including: encouraging flexible working, support and guidance for parents, greater involvement in the school / nursery and more information about what is expected from the child

3.2   Views on current information and support provided to parents

Parents and practitioners discussed the general information and support given to parents by the government and their satisfaction with this information.

Parents with children under 5 and practitioners discussed a wide range of information and support sources across the entire needs of children, as these parents are likely to have a greater level of contact with, and have information needs across, a wider range of childcare organisations and issues relating to their children than parents of primary and secondary school children. Parents of and practitioners working with primary and secondary school age children, however, focused on children's educational needs.

Current information needs

Early years

The type of information parents want tends to be related to the age of their child. For very young children i.e. under 3, advice on health, nutrition and general well being of children is very important. For children under 5, advice on childcare issues such as the availability of childcare facilities, what to look for when choosing childcare and Ofsted reports on nurseries is important. Parents also want more general information about what financial assistance might be available to help pay for childcare.

Primary and secondary school

Parents of and practitioners working with primary and secondary school age children focus primarily on information and support needs relating to their child's schooling and helping their children with their learning. Overall parents believe that there is a lack of support and information relating to their child's schooling and helping parents' better support their children's learning.

Current sources of information

The sources of information about childcare that are currently used by parents of children of all ages are: parents and siblings, other parents', websites, libraries and information via schools such as newsletters and teachers.

Early years

Parents of Early Years children use other information sources which relate to their child's health and wellbeing such as

- NHS Direct

- Health visitors

- Nurseries

- GPs

- Sure Start / Children's Centres[2]

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[2] Parents use the terms Sure Start and Children's Centres interchangeably

Of all the sources used, word of mouth from other parents and browsing the internet are most frequently used. Both of these sources are trusted and easily accessible for most parents. Parents use a combination of dedicated sites like NHS Direct, local authority websites, Sure Start, and more general baby and toddler focused websites, as well as using search engines to find out more about a specific area by typing in key words.

Primary and secondary school

Parents report a lack of information and support regarding how they could engage in their child's learning. Many say that they do not have access to their child's curriculum at the beginning of the school year and that they are unaware of what their child is expected to learn in a given period. This makes it difficult for parents to know how best to help them.

> *"You find things out from the media. Like about the (cervical) jabs for the girls, but there's not enough information and detail about these things. The recent changes in legislation about leaving age changing, I heard that on the radio, but it's too slow and it's not very effectively communicated at the moment."*
>
> Parent, Secondary School

However, a few parents have received a booklet explaining the school curriculum and activities that parents could undertake with their child to aid learning. These parents found this resource valuable since it explains the subject areas which are being covered and gives practical guidance on how they can help support their child's learning.

Some parents receive regular school newsletters and/or access the school's website to find out about the latest developments at a school and a class level. These parents are more satisfied with the level of support they received than those who do not receive information from the school.

> *"It's hard to say initially where you get support for this age group, you do not immediately think of any area that you can actually get help with?"*
>
> Parent, Secondary School

> *"There is a booklet that primary schools give out regarding what your child will cover on the curriculum. It is supposed to help parents understand the activities they can do with your child that fit in with what you know they're doing. But I am not sure these booklets are handed out to everyone"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Reactions to the information and support available to support parents

The type of information available and used by parents of early years children is very different to that used by parents of primary and secondary school age children. However, there are some themes which are common to all ages of child. There are perceived to be inconsistencies in terms of the amount and quality of support and information and the types of delivery mechanisms used to provide information and support for parents. Some parents report inconsistencies in the information that is provided by different agencies and others find the information provided on some government websites confusing.

Early years

Many parents believe that other parents of 0-5 year olds are an invaluable source of information, as they have first hand experience of a range of issues and would in many cases be the initial channel used.

> *"They, other parents, have been there and done it and so are much better than any leaflet. That's what we talk about when we meet each other"*
>
> Parent, Early years

Some parents are not sure about what information is available and where to get it. Many believe the quality of information and support available depends on where you live.

> *"My sister gets a much better deal. Her local council are geared up for things like this, she goes into her local library and it's all there for her."*
>
> Parent, Early years

Some mothers claim that after receiving some initial advice when they first have their babies they are largely left to their own devices and feel they need to be very pro-active in order to get the information and support they need, which can be difficult and time consuming when raising young children.

Few doubt that the information they need is available, but many are not sure where to get it. Word of mouth is key to signposting relevant information sources for parents.

Help and assistance offered initially by health visitors who can offer parents one-to-one help in the home can be a good source of information and human contact for those that stay at home with their children. However, some question if health visitors are qualified to help with education and learning issues. Some parents would like more visits from health visitors and would like to receive regular visits until the child starts school so that they can benefit from their advice.

> *"I would like more access to health visitors and a place to go for advice that might know my child since birth."*
>
> Parent, Early years

However, a minority of parents claim to have not ever had a visit form a health visitor.

> *"I have a three and half year old son and have never seen a health visitor"*
>
> Parent, Early years

There is limited use of Sure Start facilities, a few claim they have used it previously for their older children, however several parents believe that eligibility for the Sure Start service is limited to children with special needs.

When discussing information sources, many parents agree that the vast array of official information available can be confusing and is sometimes contradictory. Examples of contradictory information include health and nutrition (breast feeding, weaning) and also in terms of day care and education (availability of pre-school places and funds available for paying for childcare).

> *"I was told one thing by the people at Sure Start but the nurseries tell me another, it can be really confusing, not to say frustrating"*
>
> Parent, Early years

Primary and secondary school

Regardless of any information and support received, parents believe that they do not have sufficient access to teachers and schools to enable them to find out more about their child's learning. Some report that teachers only communicate with them during parents' evening or when there is a problem relating to their child. They think that there is little on-going communication between the parent and teacher about general learning and ways in which they could help their child learn.

Practitioners share parents' belief that information and support aimed at engaging parents in their child's learning is patchy. They also agree that there is a lack of on-going communication between parents and the school. Some practitioners explain that teachers are trained to communicate with children and not with their parents. Therefore teachers do not always have the ability and/or training to effectively support parents in their child's learning. Teachers attending the event also report that they have a heavy workload which prevents them from being more available to parents.

There is a considerable amount of variation in the way schools communicate with parents and how effective this is. Some feel they are well informed by email and text messaging already, but many others say that these details have been taken, but their preferred communication method is never used. Many recommend text messages as an effective way to communicate to parents about topical issues for example cervical smears, changes in legislation etc. since this is a quick and immediate mechanism. One parent highly commended an on-line portal they use which has a unique log-in which they can get carefully categorised information about their child, which is regularly updated.

The content of school letters is generally highly praised for being relevant and informative. However, letters are also thought to be unreliable and also not very timely especially if these are sent home with children.

> *"You can't beat a school letter, when the child eventually passes it on!"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Some parents currently receive planners, providing information on school holidays, activities and a breakdown of lessons and timetables, which are highly praised. Those who did not currently receive these think these would be a great idea for keeping parents informed about their child's school.

Information / support gaps

Parents of children of all ages want more information and support on how they can help their child's learning and development, however, other information needs tend to be specific to early years or school age children. Parents of all ages want to receive parental guides which inform them about key information relating to their child's learning and wider development (specific information requirements are outlined in the sections below). Parents want information to be sent to them using their preferred method(s) of communication e.g. leaflets, text, via email etc.

Below we detail some specific issues for children of different ages:

Early years

Parents with children of 5 and under want additional information about a number of issues relating to the physical, intellectual and emotional development of their children:

- **Health** - information from local health bodies about health checks, immunisations etc. which children need at different ages

- **Parenting skills** - an 'idiots' guide to being a new parent, outlining useful suggestions for bringing up children

- **Supporting children's learning** - information on teaching / development techniques which parents can use to help their children outside the nursery / classroom

- **Choosing childcare** - A guide to the childcare options available in the local area which includes Ofsted ratings

- Local activities for babies / toddlers such as play groups, soft play areas

Parents of early years aged children generally prefer information to be sent to them via the post as it allows them to look at it when they have a quiet moment. Parents also think that leaflets and other forms of information about local activities should also be held at local / community establishments like doctors' surgeries and supermarkets which are easily accessible to many parents. Some parents also want to receive phone calls from organisations supporting parents and families to inform them about services which are available.

Some parents want a drop in centre for parents where they can talk informally with other parents to share experiences and information. The drop in centre could also be used as a venue for running parent workshops which some parents think could be useful for imparting knowledge about various aspects of a child's development.

Primary and secondary school

Better communication between schools and parents is cited as a key priority area by parents and practitioners in order to better support learning outside the school and to ensure that parents are better informed and more involved in their child's learning. Participants want both *more* communication and *more timely* communication from schools.

> *"I would like more timely information on what my child is studying, I only receive this on parents evening at the moment. This would give me time to read up about it and help more."*
>
> Parent, Secondary School

Increased communication was suggested in a number of key areas:

- A **'Parents Guide'** or **'Idiots Guide'** outlining a range of information relating to:

  – School rules and policy

  – The national curriculum - clarity on what a child should be doing at each development stage / what SAT and GCSE really mean etc.

  – How schools deal with bullying / any preventative methods they have in place

  – The procedures for complaints i.e. how long it will take, where they should go etc

- **More communication** during the holidays about what activities are available to entertain children during the holiday period, for example information on clubs, sports centres and general activities

- **More detailed communication** about key issues that get significant coverage in the media which affect children (e.g. cervical cancer jab)

- **Help with homework** - some parents find it difficult to support their children with their homework, this is particularly so where teaching methods have changed since parents were at school e.g. maths and science

Parents want information and support to be delivered via a number of different communication channels depending on the type of support and the parent's personal preferences. However, parents believe it is important to increase the amount of face-to-face contact they have with teachers. Parents claim that trust needs to be built between parents and teachers in order to help underpin their faith in the system. The most effective way of restoring trust is perceived to be via face-to-face contact. Face-to-face contact between parents and teachers is perceived to improve parents understanding of the latest developments in the school, how their child is developing and what parents can do to support their child and the school. Different ways of increasing this face-to-face contact are suggested including:

- Courses for concerned parents (e.g. helping with homework)

- A parental drop-in service

- Monthly social events (i.e. film nights, brainstorms)

3.3   Current parental engagement with their child's learning

Perceived importance of parental involvement

The results from one of the polling questions reveal that the vast majority of parents are very conscious of the importance of parents learning with their children regardless of their age as shown in Figure 1. Parents of 0-5s and primary school age children and practitioners are more likely than secondary school age children to strongly agree that parental learning with children is important to help children do well in then future.

Figure 1: How much do you agree with this statement: Parents learning with children before school / at primary / secondary school is important to help them do well in the future?
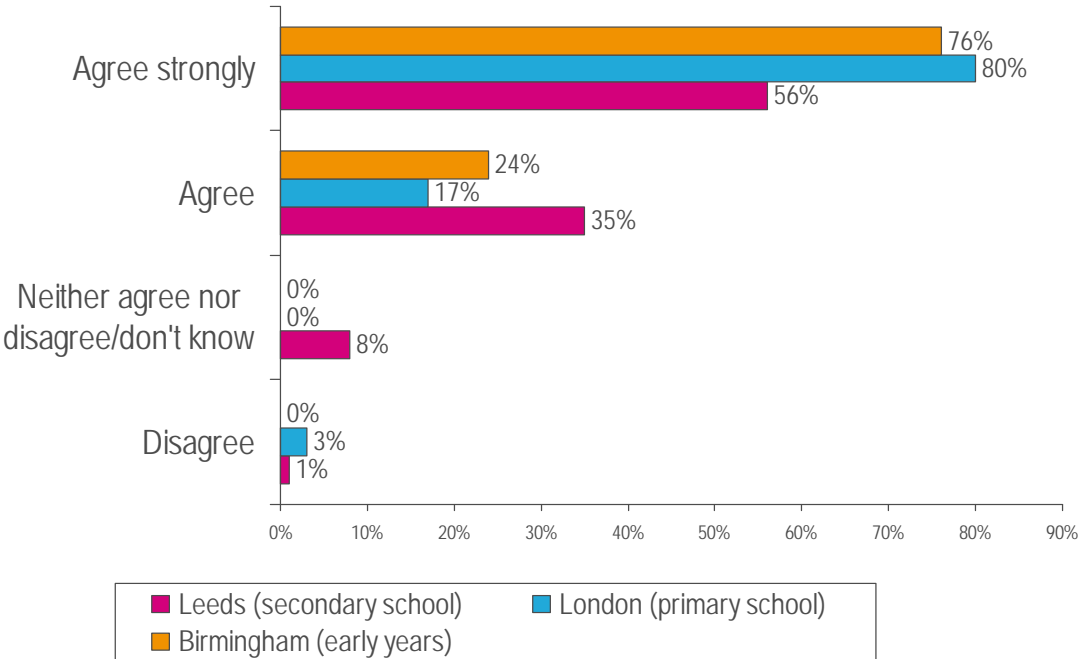
Base: All participants (Birmingham = 90, London = 75, Leeds = 95)

Figure 2 shows responses from all participants at the end of the day to the same question and it can be seen that participants across early years and primary school age groups are more likely to strongly agree that getting involved in their children's learning is important. The shift is particularly evident in the early years age group where an additional 15% of participants agree strongly that it is important for parents to learn with their children before school age. However, participants attending the secondary school event are more likely to believe that parental learning is only moderately important, even after the discussions on the day.

Figure 2: How much do you agree with this statement: Parents learning with children before school / at primary / secondary school is important to help them do well in the future?
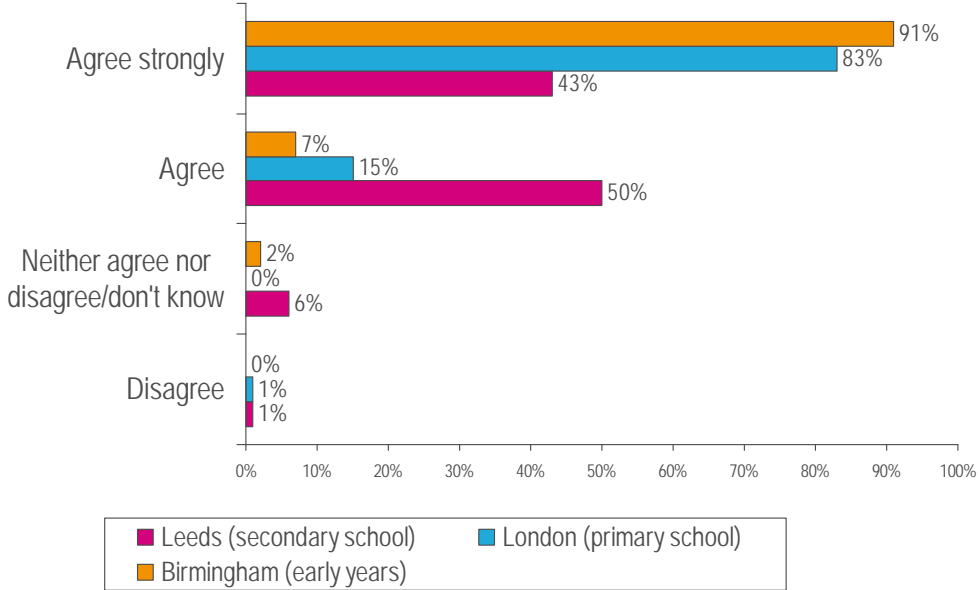
Base: All participants (Birmingham = 90, London = 75, Leeds = 95)

Time spent engaging children in learning activities

At the beginning of the day, participants were asked how much they currently support their child's learning and their attitudes towards learning with their children. In all three locations, 3-5 hours a week is the most popular response (see figure 3). On average, parents with pre-school children tend to spend most time learning with their children per week, and this reduces as children get older.

Figure 3: How much time a week do you spend doing activities which help your children learn?
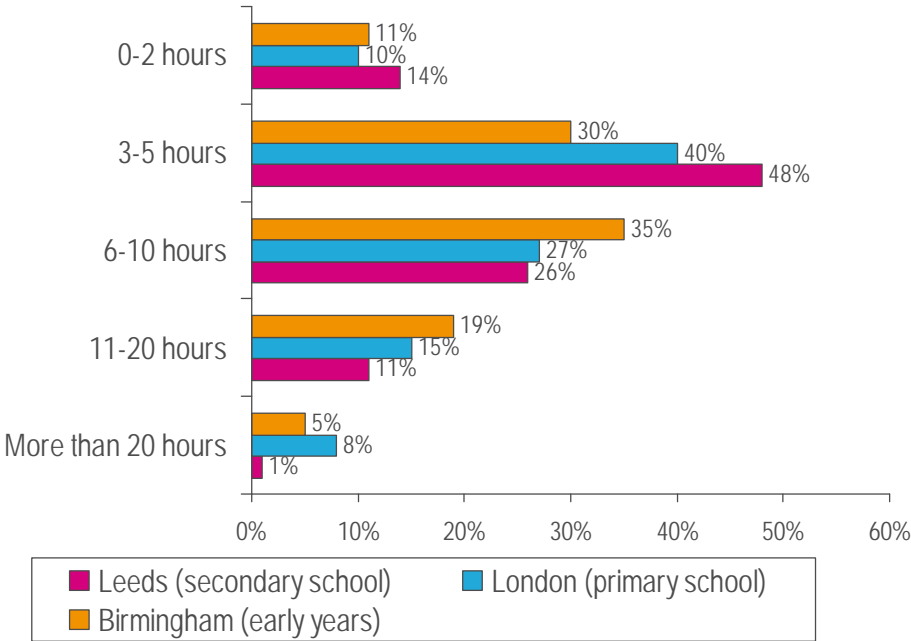
Base: Parents only (Birmingham = 53, London = 50, Leeds = 59)

Which parent should support learning?

The vast majority of participants (approximately three quarters) of early years and primary school age children believe that it does not matter which parent helps a child learn (see figure 4)

Figure 4: How much do you agree or disagree with this statement: It doesn't matter which parent helps a child learn, just as long as one of them does?

Base: All participants in Birmingham (90) and London (84)
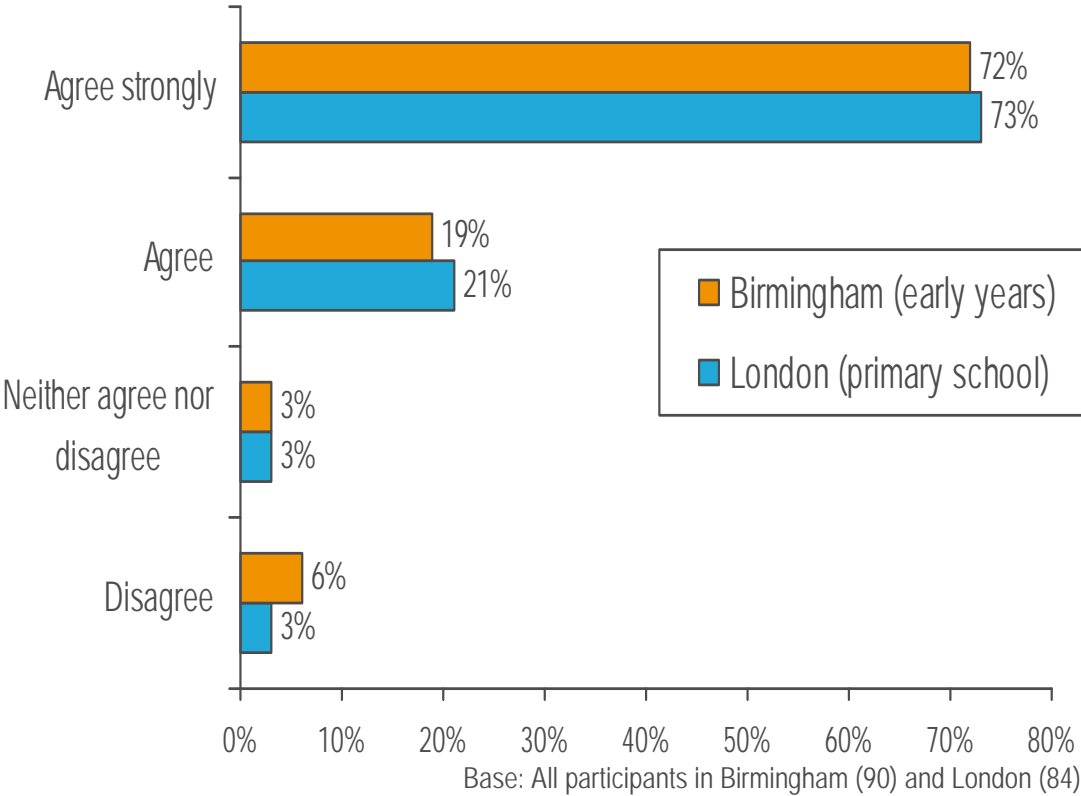
Both parents are more likely to be equally involved in their child's learning at primary school age, however once children reach secondary school mothers are most likely to get involved in their children's learning. Overall, across primary and secondary school age mothers are more likely to help with their child's learning than fathers. Only 7% of secondary school participants and none of the primary school participants believe that dads are most likely to think it is most likely get involved in learning.

Figure 5: Which parent do you think is most likely to get involved in learning?

Mum
London (primary school): 40%
Leeds (secondary school): 50%

Both equally
London (primary school): 60%
Leeds (secondary school): 43%

Dad
Leeds (secondary school): 7%

Legend:
■ London (primary school)
■ Leeds (secondary school)

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70%

Base: All participants in Leeds (secondary school) = 95 and London (primary school) = 84

Types of learning activity

In order to better understand how parents currently support their child's learning in the home, parents were asked to complete a home learning diary for one week prior to attending the event (a copy of the diary can be found in the appendix). The diary was sufficiently broad to encompass all of the informal and formal ways of supporting their child's learning. Parents discussed their observations about how they currently support their children's learning at the event.

The type of learning activity parents engage in with their children varies considerably according to the age and development stage of the child. Even within different educational stages there are some differences in terms of the types of learning activity which parents take part in with their children which reflect the wide educational and developmental stages which children pass through. There are however a few activities which transcend age such as talking with children about their environment and issues affecting their lives.

Early years

Analysis of the parental learning diaries reveals that reading is the most common activity parents engage in with their children by a clear margin, across all age groups. Activities with a creative component, such as painting / colouring or baking, are also very popular and become increasingly so as the child gets older and more able to participate in them.

It is evident that the range of activities undertaken increases as the child grows. Early learning (0 to 2 years) largely comprises of reading, supervised physical and tactile play, music and learning basic life skills such as getting dressed, washing and socialising with friends and family. From 2 to 5 years, as children's skills develop and activities extend to encompass those which require more advanced physical dexterity such as jigsaw puzzling, building things and play related to numeric / spelling / writing ability such as interactive computer games and reading books. At this age children get more involved with different

21

aspects of domestic life, ranging from shopping to housework. Swimming and trips to the park are the most common physical activities parents of early years children participate in with their children.

Several parents mention interaction with other children as being an important part of their social development and this aspect of learning occurs in a variety of forms including: visits to cousins/friends, nurseries/play groups and birthday parties. Day trips to various parks and farms feature occasionally but museum visits are very infrequent activities.

Feedback from the parents on the process of completing the diary primarily focused on the 'spotlight' effect that it had in highlighting the difference between what they thought they did and what they actually did. Whilst the diary exercise made some parents feel they are not putting in as much effort as they could, some became aware during the exercise that they were doing more than they thought, as it became evident to them that even small gestures were important. Aspects of everyday life that parents take for granted are perceived by parents to be new, exciting and rewarding to a child. From discussions during the day, both parents and practitioners agree that it is important to take the time to answer the questions children have about what could be perceived to be the most mundane or simple things in order to build a child's understanding of the world. Parents and practitioners agree that there should be an emphasis on making activities fun and rewarding and that learning is not always a 'take time out and sit down' exercise.

Parents also claim that the diary highlighted that many of 'silly' things that parents do with children (e.g. spotting all the different colours of cars when walking down the road, talking in a silly voice or any other form of what might be construed as 'play') are also very important, educationally valid and greatly assist in the child's development. Overall, participants (both parents and practitioners) agree that all forms of stimulation help make children make sense of their environment and help them develop their senses.

Participants (both parents and practitioners) identify a wide range of different ways in which a parent can engage with a child's learning, these include:

- Interacting with the child

    - Joining in with the child's games

    - Read with / to child (depending on age)

    - Talk / listen to the child

    - Watch the child (to better understand how they go about simple tasks)

- In-home activities

    - Cooking

    - Drawing, painting, crafts

    - Music (singing and listening)

    - Playing with other children

    - Toys

- Introduce child to range of stimuli out of the home

  - Parks, swing parks, activity parks

  - Swimming

  - Walking

  - Museums

  - Libraries

  - Zoos

  - Other children

  - Other families

Primary school

The home learning diaries reveal that parents of 5 to 7 year olds spend much of their time helping children with academic activities such as reading (including phonics), writing and spelling. Whereas parents of 7 to 11 year olds report spending more time engaging their children in experiential activities outside of the home including cycling, swimming and going to the park and museums.

During the table discussions parents report that keeping the diaries revealed to them how much they already do to help their child learn and how much more could they could do. They also recognise that there are many ways of engaging a child in learning as well as more formal activities around homework tasks, including:

- Getting children involved in day-to-day activities such as shopping and cooking

- Playing sports / games

- Looking up things on the internet together

- Getting children to observe and talk about the world around them

- Reading together

> *"The exercise made me realise how little I helped with homework and reading"*
> Parent, Primary school

> *"We go to the park, bake with them etc…I'd never thought too much about that being a learning aid and helping their development until this activity"*
> Parent, Primary school

Secondary School

Some parents of secondary school age children feel that despite being committed to supporting their children with learning activities, the older their children are, the less involvement parents actually have with their learning. During discussions about their home learning diaries some parents are genuinely surprised that they do not spend as much time with their secondary age children as they had thought. Parents believe that a significant proportion of parent-child time at secondary age is being spent on schoolwork. Some parents found it difficult to spend the time on supporting their child's learning.

> *"It's a struggle to fit everything in. Sometime homework can take 2 to 2.5 hours an evening"*
>
> Parent Secondary school

Parents also describe helping their children with homework as being more difficult and stressful than at earlier stages in their child's education (see section 3.4 for more details on barriers to greater engagement).

> *"It would be nice if we had time to relax, discuss topical issues, go to activities etc together but homework can take up all the time and energy."*
>
> Parent, Secondary School

Parents help their children to learn valuable life skills which they claim are not taught in schools. Life skills include being able to deal with and handle crises and emotions with friends and boyfriends / girlfriends, money management and how to use a cash machine. Within the home, parents are increasingly eager to get young people involved in the running of the household, particularly housework, DIY, cooking and gardening. Children / young people are often more receptive to being 'taught' these life skills than being helped with tasked related directly to school lessons or homework.

> *"Children become compartmentalised and don't want your help. Particularly towards the higher end of secondary. But you can teach them things like how to wire the electrics"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"Also, I would like her to teach me what it is like to be an adult and how to use my money carefully to pay bills. I would want her to teach me how to drive and how to cook some of the meals she makes which I like".*
>
> Secondary school child (written statement)

Other common forms of parent-child interaction include: general discussions / chats, sporting activities, family walks, internet research, day / weekend trips and watching the news/documentaries together. The transportation of children to and from sports clubs / events, school and other activities at a distance from home often contribute to quality time spent together and there are numerous references to discussions and games played on car journeys. Moreover, there is a noticeable sense that both parents and children are fitting learning activities time into their busy school / work / extracurricular schedules. This involves combining activities simultaneously; as mentioned, discussions and game-playing on car journeys but also at the dinner table.

Practitioners describe two very different types of parents in terms of their learning and engagement with children. The committed / practitioner / engaged parents (often middle-class, 2.4 children) who are heavily involved in their children's learning and development, and the uncommitted / distant parents (usually lower income, kids spending a lot of time amusing themselves outside) who struggle to engage with schools and have little involvement with their children's development. However, they recognise these as being

parental stereotypes and to be far too simplistic. They claim there is too much emphasis on these niches at either end of the spectrum, rather than the abundance of parental types in-between. Practitioners believe that parents who really need to help and support their children are the ones who, in the main, fail to engage with the schools in any meaningful way. Practitioners believe that learning should, and still could, be fun. At secondary level there is some suggestion that the fun was often side-lined:

> *"It's so important they're having fun when they're learning - if they enjoy doing it, they learn, they remember, it's greater engagement"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

> *"It's difficult to generalise, it varies so much from parent to parent. There is a broad range of parental types, those who are practitioner people, those who have difficulty engaging in schools, those who lie somewhere in the middle and every other range in between. But the parents that teachers **really** need to see don't turn up at school."*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary School

> *"Class is an issue; people divide parents into middle class engaged and working class disengaged when it's far more complicated than that."*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary School

3.4   Barriers to further engagement in children's learning

Many parents express a desire to better support their child's learning, however they face a number of barriers which affect their ability to be able to do this. There are a number of barriers which are common to parents of all ages, these include:

Lack of time

Both parents and practitioners feel that parents often lack the time to support their child's learning. They explain that inflexible working hours and the needs of other children limited the amount of time either parent can support the learning of an individual child.

> *"I don't always have the time and energy"*
>
> Parent, Early years

> *"Just finding time to do parenting can be very tough for some parents"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

> *"Sometimes life can be very stressful and it's difficult to do all of the things you want to do. It can be especially stressful if you have lots of children - making time to support all of them in their different ways at different stages in their education means you are pulled in lots of different directions"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Financial circumstances

Some parents and practitioners feel that a lack of money is also a barrier to some parents supporting their child's learning. Some parents express dismay at the financial pressures that necessitate spending more time than desired at work and away from their children. They can also report that they cannot afford to take their children swimming or pay travel costs that would enable them to take their children on educational day trips. Whilst some parents cite money as a key reason for avoiding trips to museums, historic sites etc. practitioners think this is partly linked to an inherent fear in some parents that they would be out of place in unfamiliar environments and would not belong

"It is the cost of doing educational things, like ballet classes etc…you feel like you're holding them back because you can't afford it"

Parent, Primary school

"Poverty - parents who need money for rent, food etc or have drug habit then that will hinder child's learning"

Parent, Secondary school

Lack of confidence

Both parents and practitioners feel that some parents lack the confidence to effectively support their child's learning. They explain that this can be due to several factors:

- Parents may not have enjoyed school and / or learning themselves and therefore feel less supportive of learning or less able to help their child

- Some parents are intimidated by the school / nursery environment / attitude of teachers / nursery staff and do not feel able to ask for help

- Some parents are unfamiliar with what and how the child is learning at school or nursery

Several parents highlight their lack of familiarity with the way that some subjects are taught at primary and secondary school. Parents specifically mention the phonic system that is used to teach their children to read, as well as some forms of maths being taught. In secondary schools some parents are unsure how to help their children with science homework

"Parents don't always feel confident with their job description"

Parent, Primary school

"Another barrier is not knowing enough - frustrating for parents if they can't understand the homework"

Parent, Primary school

"Schools have changed a lot since parents went to school and since grandparents went to school and parents often have difficulty understanding this changed environment."

Practitioner, Secondary school

English as a second language / no English

Both parents and practitioners believe that some parents are unable to support their child's learning due to the fact that they speak little or no English.

"English is not a second language for some, English is not spoken"

Practitioner, Primary school

Family circumstances

Parents and practitioners believe that family circumstances often prevent parents getting more involved with their child's learning. Ill health within a family and general turmoil within the home environment are given as specific examples of this. Fathers, in particular, report that living apart from their child is a barrier to greater involvement in their child's learning. They report that any communication from the school usually goes to the parent with whom the child resided and that they often felt excluded from their child's learning.

*"I don't live with my children and most information goes direct to their mother
and I get it second hand"*

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

Age of parent (practitioners only)

Some practitioners believe that young parents are often less engaged in their child's learning as they have a lot to deal with in their own life which limits their ability to focus on the needs of their child.

Early years

Some parents express anxiety over the mess that particular activities (related to art and food, for the most part) create. This can limit the frequency which parents engage in these activities.

Secondary school

There are a number of additional barriers which are expressed by parents of secondary school age children and practitioners:

- Poor communication from schools

    – Some participants perceive secondary schools to be poorer at communicating with parents than primary schools. For some parents this can lead to them having a lack of understanding about secondary schooling which can in turn lead to them becoming disengaged

- Cultural barriers

    – Many secondary schools are perceived to be mainly comprised of middle class teachers, who are not thought to understand mind-set or cultural context of parents and children from different cultures

    "There are often cultural differences and barriers too. But some of these can be very positive. Parents from India and Africa have a very positive view of education and see the importance of it for their child."

<div align="right">Practitioner, Secondary School</div>

- Attitudes of the child

    – Some participants believe that children not as be eager to learn as when they were young

    – Some think that children have many competing activities which they are more interested in pursuing such as their social life and entertainment / communications devices such as computers, mobile phones and games consoles

    – Some participants think that their children do want to do certain things with parents which might help them with their learning such as visiting museums and going to the theatre

    – They can also feel that children are unaware of the amount of help that parents are able to give them and therefore become reluctant to receive help.

- The secondary school set-up

  - Some parents and practitioners feel that the way that secondary schools are currently set up contributes to parents feeling less engaged with the school and in turn with the child's learning

  - The lack of playground culture which exists in primary schools where parents interact more with each other and pass on information and where the teacher is visible (and possibly available) at the end of school

  - A lack of continuity with form teachers can also make it difficult for parents to know who to contact and develop a relationship with

    "Children think they know it all, I don't think they (teenagers) realise how important us parents are!"

    Parent, Secondary school

    "It's hard to overcome at secondary as there is no playground culture. The only time schools get in touch with parents is when something negative happens or when kids have really, really excelled. Primary you are more involved with the playground, secondary you just drop the kids off, they don't want you in there!"

    Parent, Secondary school

3.5 Overcoming barriers to greater involvement in children's learning

Parents and practitioners suggest a range of ways in which barriers to involvement in children's learning could be overcome. These are detailed below.

Support and guidance for parents

Having greater levels of support and guidance is a consistent theme across all ages of children, however, the ways in which parents want to receive support and the types of support needed varies according to the educational stage of the child.

Early years

Parents' lack of confidence in being able to help their children learn is cited as one of the major barriers by practitioners working with early years children (and less overtly by parents). They suggest providing information or free workshops at local schools/nurseries that can teach parents how to support to their child's education and highlight the benefit of certain activities.

Both parents and practitioners believe that fathers should be encouraged to do more with their children. They feel that fathers should be encouraged to play with their children more frequently and be taught the importance of play in helping children learn.

Primary and secondary school

Parents want more support and guidance about how they can get involved in helping their child learn, for example via newsletters and text messages with useful tips on activities that would help children learn.

Parents and practitioners also believe that occasionally, more hands-on support and guidance is required by parents. They suggest workshops for parents should be introduced which outline what the children were leaning (in maths and English and science) and how parents could help. They also recognise the need for providing this support in languages other than English.

> *"More education for parents about how key subjects are taught now so that the way parents help to teach from home complement what's going on in school, for example, how do they teach phonetics at school?"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"Parents need to feel valued as partners"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

Greater involvement in the school / nursery

In discussions, practitioners and parents are particularly strong in their opinions that schools need to become more accessible to parents. Some think schools could achieve this by being more welcoming to parents, having more opportunities to get involved with the school and being more flexible about when parents are able to visit. One suggestion is to have regular drop-in sessions where parents could speak informally to teachers about issues they are concerned about. Parents and practitioners think the culture of schools needs to be made more responsive, accommodating and open to parental interaction with increased opportunities at every touch-point; for example more parent teacher meetings, after school classes, workshops, and lessons about specific learning areas for parents.

> *"Teachers don't talk to parents enough and there are too few opportunities for working parents to discuss things with them."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"Time with school tends to be taken up with problems so there is less time do to any positive engagement. We need engagement as well as the academic stuff."*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

It is suggested by some participants that a firm set of rules for parental engagement could be used to make schools make greater efforts to engage with parents and encourage those who do not currently come in for assistance to do so. In order to enable teachers to better engage with parents some believe that teachers ideally need more time. It is believed that too much time is taken up with the teaching and the parent / teacher time / feedback needs to become a bigger feature for schools moving forward.

Secondary school issues

Parents and practitioners of children in secondary schools want the schools to find ways to have one point of contact or a mentor for children throughout their school years, despite the constantly changing timetables / teaching staff, so parents know who to access for feedback on their child's progress.

Practitioners are particularly keen to see the fun injected back into secondary schooling, which is considered much more prevalent in primary school. It is hoped that this might help make parents feel less intimidated by schools if they are seen to be slightly less serious and authoritative. Parents and practitioners also suggest the inclusion of more informal / fun homework tasks that could build bridges between parent and children and encourage greater interaction.

> *"Remove the authority figure status of teachers. Everyone is so frightening! Primary is much more fun-focused. Bring the fun back into secondary schooling and remove the intimidation factor."*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

Teacher / nursery staff training

Some participants believe that teachers and nursery staff need to be better trained to communicate with and support parents. A recent Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) thought that it would have been useful to have had a module on 'supporting parents' in her recent training.

> *"Nursery staff are not taught how to interact with parents in the basic training"*
>
> Practitioner Early years

Flexible working hours

A number of parents and practitioners believe there is a need to ensure that employers operate more flexible working hours for parents. They think that this flexibility would enable parents more daytime opportunities to engage with their child's learning and make school visits more feasible.

> *"Employers should have more flexible working hours for parents"*
>
> Parent, Early years

> *"Employees could offer a "time release" scheme to enable working parents to spend more time with their children and not lose out financially"*
>
> Mixed table, Primary school

Inviting parents into schools

All participants strongly advocate that schools should be more open to parents. They believe that encouraging parents to come into schools is an important method of establishing ongoing communication as well as building parents' confidence and giving them an insight into how their children are taught. Some practitioners explain that they are already trialling ideas to make their schools more open to parents. For example, one practitioner explained how his school is running 'dads and lads' football sessions to encourage dads to spend time with their child and engage with school on an informal basis.

> *"Get parents into the school to do easy, less threatening things like art. Then move on to literacy things"*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

> *"Schools need to be more welcoming"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

More information about what is expected from child

A vast number of parents call for more information about what their child is learning at school and the expected levels of achievement. They think that this information should be made available throughout term rather than at the beginning of every academic year.

> *"School should provide more information about what's going on in kids education, milestones, what is expected from the child etc"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"Send out information about what subject matter is going to come up in a term so that parents can prepare themselves and relevant activities to help their child learn. But you have to take into consideration that some parents cannot read so this information has to be put out in a variety of formats that can be accessed by all"*
>
> Mixed table, Primary school

Voting on the most effective ways of getting parents involved in their child's learning

Parents and practitioners suggest that a whole host of initiatives would help overcome these key barriers to greater engagement in development and learning. This feedback was used to compile a list of ideas at each event, which participants were presented with and asked to vote for the 3 ideas they felt would be most effective at helping parents to be more involved in their children's learning.

The top 3 ideas for supporting parents of early years children are:

- Better communication between children and those involved in their child's learning

- Greater flexibility with working hours for those with early years children

- Activities for parents and children to do together

Figure 6: What would be most effective at helping parents to be more involved in their children's learning? (weighted score)

Early years

Base: All participants at Birmingham (n=90)
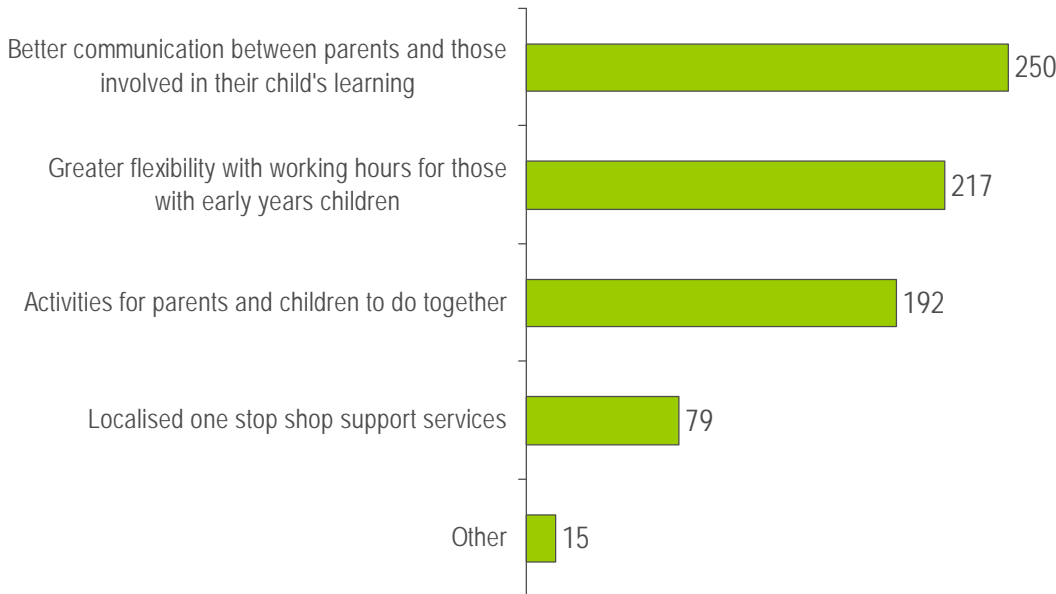
The top 3 ideas for supporting parents of primary school age children are:

- Improving communications and relationships between parents and teachers

- Informing parents about children's schoolwork and activities

- Providing government support to working parents

Primary school

Improving communications and relationship between parents and teachers — 170

Informing parents about children's school work and activities — 133

Providing government support to working parents — 100

Providing a variety of ways for parents to get involved — 94

Building parental skills and confidence — 89

Offering use of schools and community centres as a resource for parents and children — 68

Improving access to teachers — 37

0 20 40 60 80 100 120 140 160 180 200

Base: All participants at London = 77

The top 3 ideas for supporting parents of secondary school age children are:

- Tailored support to make parents more confident in helping their child to learn

- Making parents feel more welcome in school

- Using new technologies to give parents information

Secondary school

Category	Value
Tailored support to make parents more confident in helping their child to learn	151
Making parents feel more welcome in school	122
Tailored support to make parents more confident in helping their child to learn	117
Personal tutors	110
More information about where your child should be at each stage of their development	109
More face to face meetings with schools	91
Initiatives to get dads more involved - e.g. "dads days" at schools	11

Base: All participants at Leeds (secondary school) only = 95

3.6   Summaries of parent and practitioner pitches

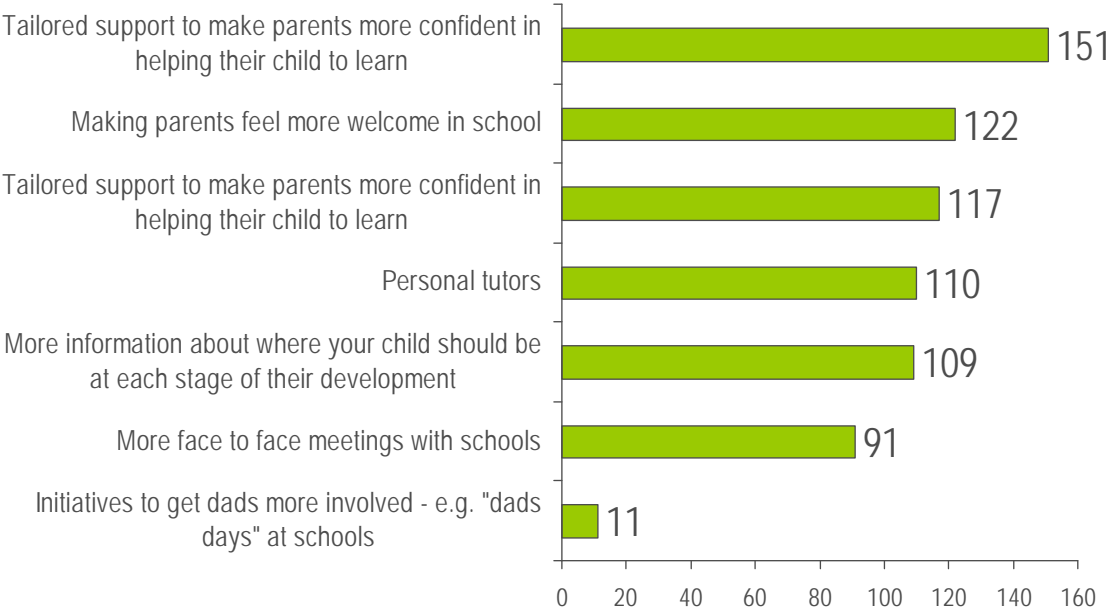Parents and practitioners were asked to work together in groups to create a pitch for what they believe would be the best way to support their child's learning.

From analysis of the pitches three clear themes emerge:

- Engaging parents with their children's learning

- Services and opportunities to support parents and families

- Information and communication for and with parents

Parents and practitioners who have or work with children between the ages of 0 to 5 years have a greater affinity to ideas that improve the opportunities and services that support parents and families. Parents and practitioners who have or work with children aged 5-11 years old mainly suggest ideas to engage parents with their children's learning. Parents and practitioners who work with or have children aged 11 and above mainly advocate ideas to improve and increase the information available for parents. None of the parents of or those working with secondary school age children offered ideas that are linked directly to engaging parents with children's learning.

Figure 7 illustrates the key themes of the pitches.

Figure 7: Parent and practitioner pitches themes
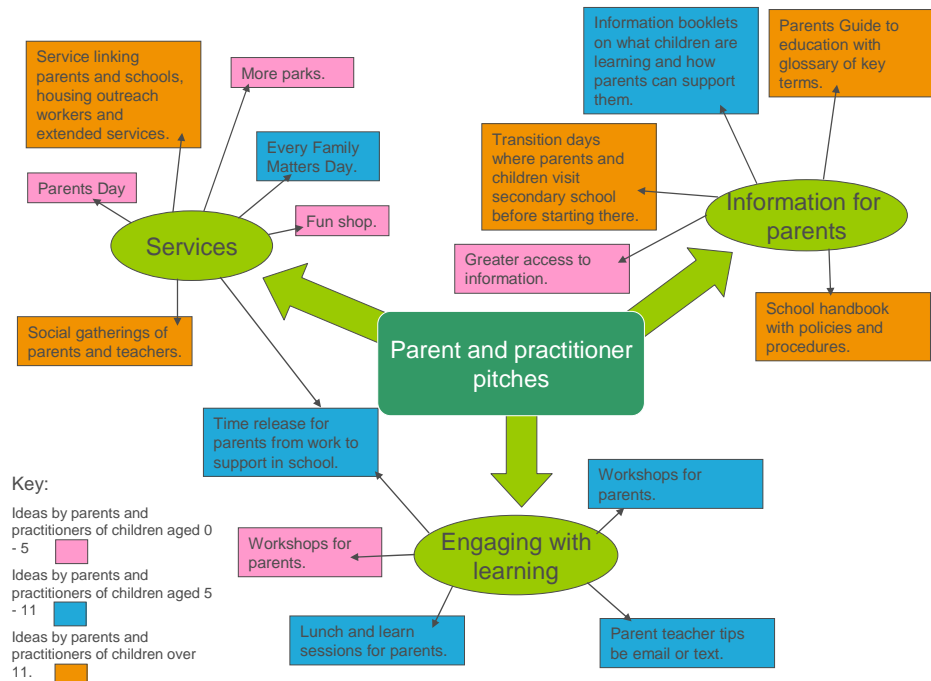
Engaging parents with their children's learning

Parents and practitioners of children in primary school feel that it is vital that parents are actively engaged in their child's education. Several ideas were put forward as to the most effective method of engaging parents.

Lunch and Learn - this is seen as an opportunity for parents to visit their child's school and have tasters of lessons or observe lessons happening. This is viewed to improve parental engagement as parents understanding of current educational methods could be improved and relationships with teachers could be built on as well as providing parents with an opportunity for them to learn and gain new skills.

Parent Teacher tips - it is envisaged that parents could sign up for hints and tips that would be sent to them via text messages or email. These tips would inform parents about ways to engage with their child and help them learn. They would include facts about the benefits of engaging with their child's learning.

Workshops for parents - parents and practitioners think that parents should be offered the opportunity to attend workshops that would inform them about new approaches to teaching maths and English and provide parents with skills that would enable them to help their children learn and assist with homework in these subjects outside of school.

Parents and practitioners of early years children also support the idea of workshops for parents and feel that they could be used to bring parents and children together and to teach parents how to engage and play with their children.

Services and opportunities to support parents and families

Some of the suggestions made by parents and practitioners of primary age and early years children are very similar to each other and encompass the notion that parental involvement should be celebrated for example the Parents day and the Every Family Matters day.

Time release - parents and practitioners think that employers should give parents a one-day a year release to allow them to help out in schools. This would enable parents to actively engage with their child in the learning experience, build better relationships with the school and learn new ways to support their children.

Every Family Matters Day - this is regarded as a day that would be funded by the government and all working parents would have the day off to visit schools where they would engage in fun activities with their children and be able to get more information from the school. Participants believe that such a day would promote communication and understanding between the school and parent through shared experiences.

Social gatherings - parents and practitioners from the 11 years and above category think that through informal social gatherings, activities and events the communication between schools and parents could be improved. These events would also provide parents with an opportunity to ask questions in an informal setting and make them feel more comfortable and confident about approaching schools regarding issues.

Services linking parents and school - parents and practitioners think that a start has already been made in improving the relationship between parents and schools but that this needs to be developed further. The idea put forward suggests that centres should be established that provide a link between schools and families and they should house services such as family outreach workers, extended services and external agencies. It is felt that this would become a central point of contact for learning support services with information, counselling and health services.

Parents Day - parents and practitioners suggest a national day where parents are given time off work which they dedicate to 'having fun with our kids'. It is believed that such an event would focus the importance of parental involvement in children's learning.

More parks and play settings - parents and practitioners believe that this would provide a good setting to bring parents and children together in which to play and learn.

Fun shop - parents and practitioners suggest that this should be a centre where various activities are held. The services the centres provide should be wide ranging and include toy lending, library facilities, EAL, sign language and Braille materials and interpreters. Participants also recommend that the centres run group activities to help parents learn with their children. These activities could include reading circles, drama workshops and confidence boosting sessions.

Information and communication for and with parents

Transition days - parents of children who have started secondary school believe that all secondary schools should have a transition day. This would be a day where parents and children could visit the secondary school, children could meet their prospective teachers and other new students as well as sampling a taster of the types of lessons they will experience in the following year. Parents and practitioners feel that this would be a good experience for parents as they could receive all the vital information they need to know from the school and it would form the basis for a good relationship between the school and parents.

Parents guide - parents and practitioners envisage that this would provide information as to what the different Key Stages mean, at what ages children are in the different Key Stages and when they will have to sit exams. They think that it should also include what students should be learning as well as a glossary of key terms that parents may not understand.

School handbook - parents and practitioners imagine that this would be a good method of providing parents with all the information that they needed to know regarding the school their child is at.

Greater access to information - parents and practitioners of early years children think that they should receive more information about learning from when their child is at a young age. They think that this information can be provided in a variety of ways; through health visitors, leaflets in supermarkets, adverts on billboards and information in local drop in centres.

3.7   Conclusions and possible ways forward

There are a number of key areas which parents and practitioners of all ages of children feel could be improved to make them better informed about the services available to them and to support them to better engage with their child's learning:

- Improved access to information

- Better communication between parents and teachers/nursery school workers

- Additional help for parents to effectively engage with their child's education

- Making schools / nurseries more welcome and accessible to parents

- Additional help for fathers

Improved access to information

Early years

Parents of early years children feel unsure where to access information about the range of services available e.g. health visitors, GP surgeries, sure start centres, nurseries. Parents suggest that they should be provided with a booklet/leaflet that they can keep at home with **all of** the vital information that they need relating to being a parent and their child. They would want this information to cover a wide range of issues, for example:

- Child nutrition

- Child health and health services available

- Child immunisations

- Child care facilities

- Financial assistance available

- How to engage with their child's learning

Parents believe that much of the information they need is available and that better signposting to the relevant information sources is needed. We suggest that the health visitor or another key worker could be used to signpost useful information at key stages in the child's development. In addition, local authorities could be encouraged to provide information that is relevant for specific ages.

Primary and secondary school

Parents want schools to provide parents with more information on what their child is learning, what the key stages mean and what SATs and GCSEs involve. Parents suggest that this could be provided in a parent's guide. Parents and practitioners think that schools should provide all parents with a guide to the school and that this should include:

- The school rules for students and behaviour policy

- National Curriculum outline and what their child will study in the different years

- When their child will be tested

- Suggestions and information on how parents can support their child's learning

- The schools policy on bullying

- The schools complaint procedure

- At what age their child can leave school and when they will have the different immunisations

- General advice on how to support their child's education.

Better communication between parents and teachers / nursery school workers

Parents with children of all ages believe that there was a need for improved communication between parents and those involved in their child's learning. Practitioners and parents think that those working with children should be trained in how to deal and speak to parents about a variety of issues and how to effectively support them.

Primary and secondary schools

Parents express some difficulties around the information they receive from schools, with some communications being late or not being received at all. We suggest that parents are asked to nominate their preferred method of communication e.g. text, email, letter and for the school to use this method to communicate with parents

Additional help for parents to effectively engage with their child's education

Early years

Whilst many parents believe that play is the most effective way of encouraging children to learn about the world some parents either believe that more formal methods are more appropriate or do not know how they can use play to help their children learn. We suggest that a number of initiatives could be implemented in nurseries including encouraging parents to attend the nursery and play with their children, nurseries could also run workshops with parents to demonstrate ways of using play to help with children's learning.

Primary and secondary school

Parents feel that not understanding teaching methods in particular subjects, specifically maths, science and some aspects of English such as phonics is a real barrier to engaging in their children's learning. We suggest that schools could be encouraged to run workshops or 1-2-1 sessions with parents to help them understand their child's school work or provide information guides with suggestions for how parents can help their children learn.

Parents want to be better informed about what their children are being taught, expected attainment levels and suggestions for how they can support their child's learning. An on-line facility was suggested by some parents as being a useful resource to provide this information, however alternative methods need to be made available for those who do not have access to the internet.

Making schools more welcome and accessible to parents

Parents of primary and secondary age children want schools to be more open and welcoming to parents. Parents desire easy access to schools and a clear straight-forward way to be able communicate with schools and teachers. Parents feel that schools should consult parents about the 'big' decisions such as the transition from primary to secondary school and the move from Key Stage 3 to Key Stage 4.

Secondary school

The transition to secondary school often coincides with parents becoming less involved in their child's learning. Parents and practitioners believe that there are a number of ways in which secondary schools could improve the relationship between the school and parents. These include having a personal tutor who parents can discuss all aspects of a child's schooling with, having a 'transition day' where parents and children are introduced to the school and become familiar with the set up. Parents want more face-to-face communication between parents and teachers in order to encourage better relationships between parents and teachers.

Additional help for fathers

Practitioners and parents believe that fathers should be given additional support to encourage them to be more engaged in their child's learning. Parents suggest that schools/nurseries ensure that information about a child's schooling and nursery should be made available to parents (usually fathers) who are separated from the mother of the child so that they are informed about their child's progress and how to help them with their learning. Fathers should be enabled to work flexible hours so that they can spend more time with their children and have the opportunity to get more involved in their child's learning. Employers could be encouraged to be sympathetic to requests for flexible working via communication campaigns. Schools and nurseries should be encouraged to run targeted initiatives which focus on dads such as dad and child learning workshops.

4. Views on specific ideas for involving parents in their children's learning

4.1 Summary

This section of the report discusses some specific ideas for involving parents in their children's learning. Parents of primary and secondary school age children discussed:

- The concept of providing online reporting where parents will be able to use the internet to check information about how their children are doing in terms of their achievement, progress, attendance, behaviour and any special needs.

- The idea of parents becoming involved in setting their child's academic targets alongside the teacher.

Parents of secondary age children only discussed the concept of each child having a **personal tutor** who will get to know them well and support them throughout their time at the school.

- Parents and practitioners believe there are some key benefits and disadvantages of online reporting. The main benefits are the ability to track their child's progress, have greater communication with the teacher and imagine the system to be interactive. The main perceived disadvantages include concern over the security of personal data, a worry that on-line could replace face to face communication and the increased workload on teachers to update records.

- Parents and practitioners believe that there are clear benefits for pupils and parents from personal tutors, particularly in terms of them being someone they can have regular communication with and be a single point of contact. However, practitioners have a number of concerns regarding personal tutors and feel they need clarification on who would fill this position and how the role would fit into the school structure.

- Parents and practitioners agree that parents becoming involved in their child's education is important for them to do well but believe that target setting is not an appropriate method of active involvement for parents. Many parents and practitioners do not feel that parents have the skills and knowledge to set children's targets, rather there should be target sharing events where teachers inform parents of their child's targets.

4.2 Responses to online reporting

Parental perceptions of online reporting

Overall parents express mixed views towards online reporting, some parents believe that online reporting will improve the parent - school relationship. However, there is a concern that the initiative would pose a security risk due to the large amount of data online.

Some parents regard the initiative as a good idea as parents will have the ability to track their child's progress and double check things with them. They believe that online reporting would improve the relationship between parents and teachers by helping parents to develop and expand their engagement with teachers. Parents envisage that with a greater knowledge of their child's progress they will be in a better position to talk to teachers and highlight any issues before they become a problem.

"It would be good to have regular updates"

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

Parents express concerns about having a system where individual data on their children is online and want reassurances about the safety and security of the data.

Parental and practitioners shared perceptions of online reporting

All parents and practitioners imagine any online reporting system to have interactive elements to it. Parents picture that an online reporting system would include sections where they could ask questions as to what certain sections or pieces of data mean and be able to receive feedback and answers to their questions. Without interactive elements, parents and practitioners believe that parents would not actively engage with it or use it. Practitioners however, worry that an interactive system would over-stretch teachers who are already perceived to be over-worked, if they are to respond individually to every parent and explain their child's progress. It is felt that parents need to have online reporting fully explained to them and that opportunities to discuss the data with the teacher should be provided to reduce the possibility for confusion.

Parents and practitioners also express concern for parents who do not have access to a computer or the internet that they could be disadvantaged by not having access to this information.

"It assumes that parents have computers and access to Internet. That is too big an assumption especially in the most needy areas"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Primary school</div>

Some parents and practitioners are also worried about the burden completing the reports will place on teachers who they believe are already over-stretched.

"This should keep in mind different types of people and the fact that not everyone is happy using a computer"

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

All parents and practitioners are explicit in saying that they do not want online reporting to replace face-to-face contact with teachers. Parents regard online reporting as an addition rather than a substitute to any other form of contact or information provided by schools.

"It's fine so long as it stimulates discussion and it never replaces the original system"

<div align="right">Parent, Secondary school</div>

"It would enable me to keep up to date but it should not be a substitute for human interaction"

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

Practitioners' perceptions of online reporting

Practitioners' main concerns are over the time commitment that completing the online reporting will take. Teachers are apprehensive about the additional pressure that will be placed on them to complete the online reports as well as their daily teaching requirements. Teachers also believe that it will be difficult to keep the information up to date and relevant.

"Teachers would be scared to death of a system like that!"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Secondary school</div>

Differences of opinions between the age categories

Primary schools

Some parents with children in primary schools regard an online reporting system as unnecessary and gimmicky. A few parents used the term 'Big Brother-ish' to describe the scheme, as they perceive it as a way for the government to keep track of children's, teachers' and schools' progress. These parents do not think that online reporting would enable parents to build closer relationships with teachers and the school.

> *"It is not really offering support and it is not really getting teachers to talk to parents"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Some practitioners working in primary schools do not believe that an online reporting system would address the issue of getting unengaged parents more involved in their child's learning. These practitioners assume that online reporting would simply be a means of communicating with parents who are already involved in their child's learning.

> *"It is just a nightmare for teachers and not great for parental engagement"*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

> *"It shuts out a group of parents"*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

Secondary schools

Parents with children in secondary school are more positive than parents with children in primary school towards the idea of online reporting. This may be due to the fact that many of the parents with children in secondary schools already have experience of using online reporting. Parents who have experience of using this system comment that they think the system works well and that the online reporting has been a useful addition to the structures already in place.

Parents of children in secondary school think that online reporting would be beneficial as they would not have to rely on the trustworthiness of their child delivering regular and important information to parents so that they can keep up to date with the progress of their child without bothering the teacher.

4.3   Perceptions of and reactions to personal tutors

Parents and practitioners views of personal tutors

Personal tutors were only discussed with parents and practitioners of secondary school children. Parents and practitioners view the role of a personal tutor as a positive academic and emotional support for parents and children. Parents believe that a personal tutor would fulfil the need for someone who is one-point-of-contact that is strongly desired from by parents at secondary level and they perceive the personal tutor to be someone they can approach and email regularly.

> *"A single point of contact? Definitely…you ring school, you get reception, then you get year head, then you get teacher, then you get deflected. It's really frustrating at the moment…Personal tutors would be brilliant! Too good to be true!"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Although parents view having a single point of contact as a positive initiative, practitioners are more anxious about the scheme. Practitioners are concerned about having only one point of contact and feel that the personal tutors workload would be very heavy. Practitioners are worried about the number of children each personal tutor would be responsible for and feel that if there are a number of young people with problems and issues then this would take up all of their time and it would not be divided equally between all young people. Practitioners are also uneasy about the position of the role within the school system and feel that it may create too much middle management. Some practitioners are unclear as to how the role of a personal tutor differs to the current role of form tutors and heads of year. These teachers are confused as to how this new position would fit into the school structure with what is already offered.

> *"It's too big a role for one person. The person would need to be highly skilled."*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

> *"The single point of contact is good in principle but what happens if they don't know their job or the relationship breaks down. It's still always good to talk to the relevant teacher who knows the child at the time."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Some practitioners are apprehensive about where the money to fund personal tutors would come from and feel uneasy about whether teachers will be used to fill these roles and as to what training personal tutors would be given.

4.4   Responses to parental involvement in setting targets

General perceptions

The majority of parents and practitioners who have or work with children in primary school agree that parental involvement in their child's education is important (97% of participants), while 91% of parents and practitioners of secondary age children agree that parental involvement is important for their child to do well. However, through the discussions it is apparent that most participants agree that the idea of parental involvement in setting targets is not necessarily an appropriate way for parents to get more involved in their child's learning.

Figure 8: Response, by parents and practitioners to the statement 'parents getting involved with their child's learning is important for them doing well'.

Agree strongly — 56% (Leeds), 80% (London)
Agree — 35% (Leeds), 17% (London)
Neither agree nor disagree — 8% (Leeds), 0% (London)
Disagree — 1% (Leeds), 3% (London)

Legend:
■ Leeds (secondary years)
■ London (primary school)
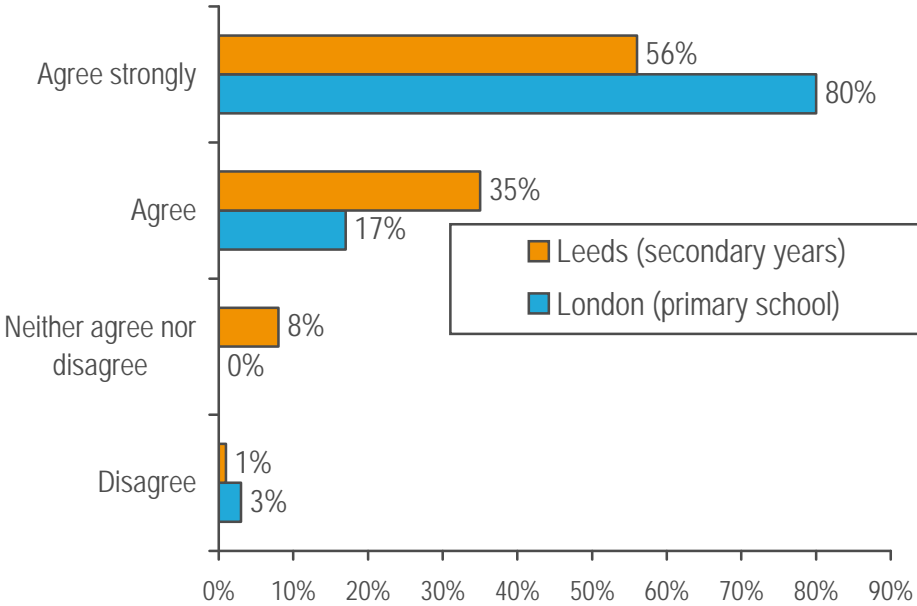
Base: All participants in London (84) and Leeds (95)

Parents and practitioner views on target setting

The concept of parents getting involved in setting academic targets for their children was presented as a loose idea at the events and provided an example of one of the ways in which they could get more involved in their child's education, to provoke discussion. Target setting was discussed briefly by participants to get their top of mind thoughts on this idea and to help a gain a greater understanding of where the boundaries of parental involvement with their child's education might lie.

In relation to this idea, the majority of those who attended the events feel that:

- Time could be a barrier to getting involved in this way - most parents imagine the process would quite time consuming and do not feel they could fit this in alongside other work and home commitments

- Most parents do not necessarily have required skills and knowledge to set accurate and achievable targets - ultimately parents believe that setting targets is the role of the practitioner.

  "I worry that I would not have enough knowledge to do this properly"
  Parent, Primary school

- Having knowledge of their child's targets is nevertheless important to parents, who would like opportunities to meet with teachers to understand what the targets are and discuss the best way these can be reached**.** Similarly, practitioners, feel that it is part of their job to take responsibility for leading the process of setting targets and making sure parents are aware of (and buy in to) these

  "It should be parents doing this in conjunction with teachers and setting targets that the teacher agrees with"
  Parent, Primary school

"Sharing targets is better than setting them. The latter is a professional job"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Primary school</div>

"It has to be parents and teachers sat down together, with the teacher taking the lead"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Primary school</div>

4.5   Conclusions and possible ways forward

Online reporting

There are mixed reactions to online reporting and parents and practitioners need the reassurance that any data online is secure and that it can only be accessed by individual teachers and parents. Parents and practitioners are very keen for online reporting to have an interactive element to it so that parents can contact teachers and it is felt that this will ensure that parents fully understand the data presented to them.

Parents who do not have access to the internet should be offered alternative ways of accessing information about their children.

Personal tutors

Overall parents are very positive about the role of personal tutors whereas practitioners have more concerns. Practitioners want more detail on the exact role of a personal tutor and an understanding of how they would fit into the current school structure. Practitioners would like clarification on what responsibilities the personal tutor would hold and the responsibilities of children's form teachers and heads of year.

Target setting

The majority of both parents and practitioners express concern over this initiative and believe that parents do not have the skills and knowledge to set objectives. Rather, both parents and practitioners agree that there should then be opportunities throughout the school term and year for parents and teachers to discuss again whether the child is meeting those shared and agreed targets.

5. Childcare

5.1 Summary

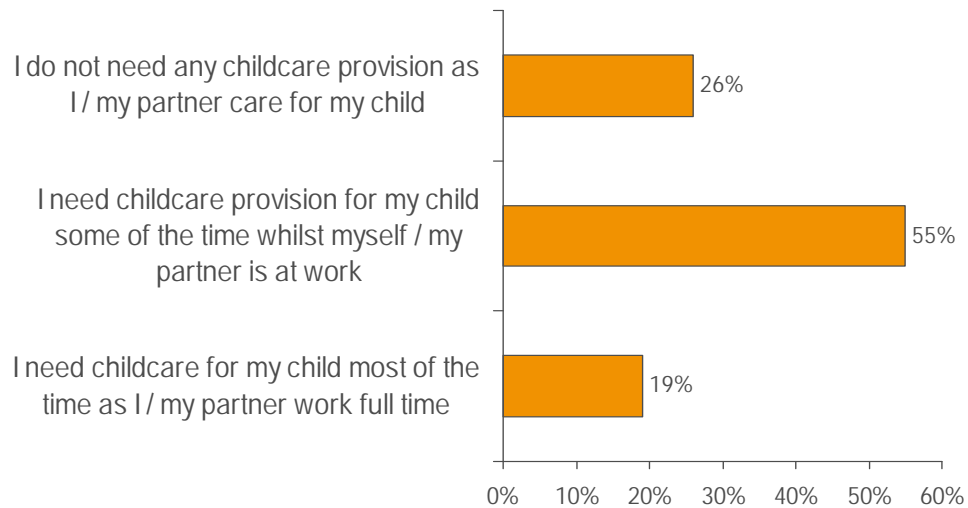This section of the report discusses participants' views on current and ideal childcare provision.

- Parents use a range of both formal (e.g. nurseries and childminders) and informal e.g. family and friends) childcare arrangements

- Some feel they have a choice about which childcare provision to use whereas others feel they have limited options typically due to availability or cost

- Parents of secondary school age children were more likely than other parents to feel that there are limited childcare options available. As a result many make informal arrangements with friends and neighbours which are not always reliable.

- Current experiences of childcare are mixed, a few parents are very happy with their arrangements, however others express concerns

- The main concerns are - a perceived lack of available places (or family members to care for children); cost and lack of financial help for parents; inflexible opening times; and the variable quality of staff and childcare environments.

- When asked to imagine their ideal childcare, participants set out a vision with common elements for all ages of children - places which are available locally; are affordable; have flexible opening hours; and qualified staff; where the environment is safe, clean and stimulating for children both intellectually and physically; and with activities that are child-centric with on emphasis on fun and play that offers parents and family members opportunities to get involved.

- Parents of early years children and practitioners are positive about the EYFS: they believe it will address many of the concerns they have surrounding childcare in terms of staff qualifications and consistency in childcare and generally support the focus on play - based learning.

5.2   Current experience of childcare
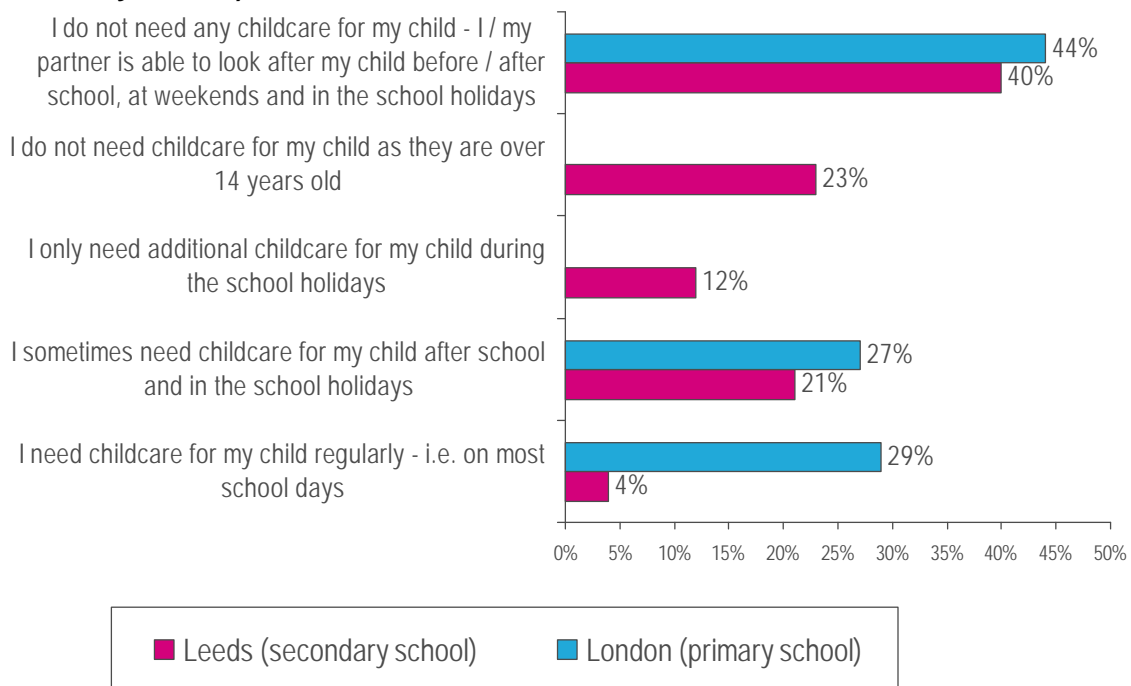
Existing childcare arrangements

The amount of childcare needed by parents decreases with the age of the child (although it should be noted that childcare needs in London do tend to differ from elsewhere in the country). Around three quarters (74%) of parents with children under 5 need some childcare help, just over half (56%) of parents of primary school age children and over a third of those with secondary school age children (37%) also need help with childcare.

Figure 9: Which of these best describes your childcare needs for your 0-5 year old?

I do not need any childcare provision as I / my partner care for my child — 26%

I need childcare provision for my child some of the time whilst myself / my partner is at work — 55%

I need childcare for my child most of the time as I / my partner work full time — 19%

Base: Parents only in Birmingham (early years) = 53

Figure 10: Which of these best describes your childcare needs (primary and secondary school)?

I do not need any childcare for my child - I / my partner is able to look after my child before / after school, at weekends and in the school holidays — 44%, 40%

I do not need childcare for my child as they are over 14 years old — 23%

I only need additional childcare for my child during the school holidays — 12%

I sometimes need childcare for my child after school and in the school holidays — 27%, 21%

I need childcare for my child regularly - i.e. on most school days — 29%, 4%

■ Leeds (secondary school)   ■ London (primary school)

Base: Parents only (London = 50, Leeds = 59)

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Early years and primary school

For children in the early years parents perceive childcare as being a place which children go, often for long periods of time each day which helps them learn and develop essential academic and life skills. Parents of primary school age children have a range of expectations of childcare. Many want a place where children can relax and have fun before and/or after school whereas others want childcare to incorporate some learning activities and/or homework.

Parents of early years and primary school age children use a range of informal and formal childcare arrangements including grandparents, sharing between themselves, nurseries and childminders. In many cases parents perceive they have little choice as their decisions may be based on factors such as:

- Locality

- Ease of getting there (especially for those with several children that need to get to different schools etc)

- Availability of spaces

- Cost.

Those who have childcare provision tend to choose it based on:

- Word of mouth

- Advice from bodies such as Sure Start / Children's Centres and health workers and advertisements

Parents are most likely to trust word of mouth for childcare recommendations since this tends to be based on people's experience of a particular childcare facility.

Secondary school

Parents perceive 'childcare' for secondary school age children to be focused around providing a safe, stimulating environment where children can relax and socialise.

Some parents are managing to share childcare requirements out with other parents (or neighbours) but this is not always a reliable solution. Others are using grandparents, but sometimes this can only be done in an emergency. On the whole, if parents are able to rely on regular family support for childcare, this works really well and is considered an 'ideal' set-up because of the reduced cost, greater flexibility in accommodating the needs of parents e.g. drop off and pick up times and because people are more likely to trust family members more than people they do not know. Parents also feel that their children will be well looked after by family members due to familial ties and the closer, emotional connection this brings . Grandparents, in particular, are cited regularly as very positive role models, parents also believe that they have the best interests of their child at heart and will give them high levels of attention There is much merit seen in mixing children more with older people to improve relationships, understanding and confidence:

> *"It's a break from being with a load of other children. More pressure is being put on kids earlier and earlier. I think it calms the kids down a bit too to be around grandparents"*

> Parent, Secondary school

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Satisfaction with current childcare provision

Some parents have had good experiences and are very happy with their childcare provision. The positive aspects which were mentioned by those who had positive experiences included:

Affordability - typically associated with informal provision where parents pay less than they would pay a for 'professional' childcare e.g. registered child minder, private nursery

Flexibility - often associated with informal provision especially grandparents

Good quality environment - high quality toys, cleanliness, professionalism of the staff, caring attitude of staff

However, other parents have concerns that they would like to see addressed. Parents and practitioners agree that there are a number of issues with the current childcare system which are common to all age groups:

A lack of availability of places - There is a perception that there are not sufficient childcare places available to meet the local demand which results in some parents making compromises with their childcare choices for example by asking friends or relatives to look after their children or looking after them themselves rather than returning to work.

High cost of childcare - The current cost of childcare is perceived to be high for parents and prohibitively expensive for lower incomes, preventing some parents from returning to work. Many parents associate higher cost providers of childcare with higher quality which results in some who are unable to afford this childcare feeling that their children are missing out on higher quality care.

> *"I earn £15,000 a year which does not even cover the cost of sending my chid to nursery"*
>
> Parent, Early *years*

> *"Unless you can afford the best, which most people can't, it's probably better to stay at home"*
>
> Parent, Early years

Inflexible opening times - Many participants feel that the current opening times of childcare facilities do not always fit with parents' requirements for childcare. A few parents have experienced difficulties negotiating flexible working hours to fit with opening times, others feel that they are unable to participate in full time employment due to the restricted opening times of childcare providers. Some parents do recognise that some schools have extended the hours in which they provide activities for children via breakfast clubs and after school facilities and they welcome this development.

Variable quality of staff - Participants recognise that some childcare practitioners are excellent, possessing all of the key skills needed to provide a high quality environment for children to be stimulated and the inter-personal and observation skills to identify and report on a child's progress. However, participants believe that some staff lack the necessary training and abilities to provide high quality care. Participants identify a number of issues which they perceive as leading to poorer quality staff being employed, including low pay levels and a lack of training on how to interact with parents.

Variable quality of childcare environments - participants believe there is a considerable gap between the best childcare environments and the poorest. The best childcare environments are those which are clean, bright, and fun with a good range of activities to stimulate children. Poor quality childcare environments are dirty, have a limited range of activities and are in a poor state of repair. Participants believe that all childcare environments

should be of a high quality and welcomed the role the EYFS would have to play in this. Those parents who were aware of Ofsted trusted the judgements made by the organisation and used this as an important factor in deciding whether to place their child with the childcare provider.

Variable levels of awareness of the free entitlement and childcare vouchers - Awareness of and attitudes towards the entitlement to free early learning and childcare for three and four-year olds and also childcare vouchers amongst parents vary significantly, with some additional confusion regarding if, and how, childcare vouchers relate to child tax credits. Some parents that are aware of these subsidies for childcare are frustrated that they do not extend to care by extended family instead of registered childminders and nurseries. Some parents also believe that the free entitlement (currently 12 ½ hours per week over a minimum of 38 weeks and rising to 15 hours by September 2010) falls far too short in terms of hours for them to be able to take on work.

Lack of support for parents to provide childcare themselves - Some parents believe that they should be given greater financial support from the government to stay at home and provide childcare themselves. They think that incentives available to parents to help them pay for private childcare should also be available to them if they choose to provide childcare themselves. Some parents resent the perceived implication (by incentivising the provision of formal childcare) that formalised childcare is better placed to look after their children than they are.

In addition to these issues which are common to all age groups, there are a number of issues which are particularly important for specific age groups:

Early years

A few parents have concerns with the quality of some nursery environments, citing dangerous toys and furniture that is not childproofed (hard corners, splinters etc). There are also concerns around daily maintenance, cleaning and hygiene.

> *"Sometimes I don't want to leave my son there, the tables are dirty and could do with being made childproof."*
>
> Parent, Early years

However, some practitioners disagree that investing in the environment should be a high priority and believe that investing in better quality staff would provide better outcomes for children than investing in better environments.

Primary school

Parents and practitioners mention that there is a lack of means by which parents can assess the quality of childcare provision for primary school age children. Some parents believed that some local authority childcare provision is inspected by Ofsted although most were not aware that all registered provision for under 8's (and some provision for those over 8) will be inspected by Ofsted. However, parents would like a standardised system put in place where they can easily tell the quality level of any childcare provider so that they can be reassured that their child is receiving the highest quality care available to them.

Secondary school

Parents of secondary school children and practitioners do not think that the term 'childcare' is engaging to either parents or young people.

> *"Childcare is an awful name for care for older children, and it's not cool. After school clubs is better, it will really put young people off"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

Despite secondary school age children requiring the least amount of childcare compared to younger children, practitioners and parents believe that there is a distinct lack of options available for families with children this age, even though those under the age of fourteen are not old enough to be left alone at home.

> *"It is non existent at the moment if there's no family or neighbours to rely on"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"Childminders and the after school clubs won't take them. There is a huge gap between kids, and kids old enough to be on their own"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

The provision for secondary school aged children is thought to have changed markedly over the years, with a perceived reduction in affordable and available childcare. Some parents are sending secondary school age children to after school clubs, but these can often be few and far between for this age, and are also expensive.

> *"Bring back the youth clubs! There used to be £1 sessions in churches and halls to do crafts and games and all sorts. What is there now?"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"It's hard to imagine a 14 year old being positive about going to childcare! After school clubs don't sound as bad"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

5.3   Ideal childcare

Parents and practitioners were asked to imagine the 'ideal' childcare provision. When parents are asked to visualise their ideal 'childcare' arrangements, they are clear that this would be high quality and involve a combination of family support (i.e. from parents, grandparents) and formal childcare provision.

Some parents believe that in an ideal world children should always be able to rely on family for childcare. Some believe that family members can provide children with the love and degree of attention which cannot be provided in a formalised childcare setting. They believe that to make this a reality there would need to be both emotional and financial support for parents (and even grandparents) to allow them to stay at home.

Others think that formal provision of childcare (e.g. nurseries, childminders and after school clubs for example) is the best form of childcare. They believe that spending time with other children and childcare staff/teachers is the most positive childcare experience for children. It allows them to socialise with other children and be inspired by teachers (for primary and secondary school children).

There is general agreement amongst parents and practitioners and across age groups about the most important elements of ideal childcare. These elements are:

- Accessibility / flexibility - opening hours which are flexible enough to allow families to balance childcare with work and other responsibilities

- Affordability - places which are affordable enough to enable those on lower incomes to work and pay for childcare
- Availability - sufficient amount of places available locally

- Collaborative - offering children and families opportunities to get involved

- Child centric - activities that are child-centric with on emphasis on fun and play

- The right environment - spaces that are safe, clean and stimulating for children both intellectually and physically

- The right staff - staff who are qualified and friendly and able to respond to the concerns of parents

Although this ideal vision was broadly the same for all ages of children, within some there are issues which are specific to particular age groups and will be identified separately at the bottom of each section.

Accessibility / flexibility

Parents and practitioners believe that childcare provision needs to offer more flexible opening hours. They explain that, as parents, they are under constant pressure to meet the opening and closing times of their current childcare arrangements. Some parents also face punitive measures if they are late in picking up their child, such as fines. They believe that flexible opening hours at both ends of the day would ease this pressure and enable more parents to work full time.

> *"Opening times need to be appropriate and flexible. I am currently killing myself to meet the opening hours for my daughter's childcare"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Parents of children of all ages and practitioners want greater local childcare capacity so that children do not have to travel and to ensure that everyone has access to childcare.

> *"We should have more services locally and we should make use of the services that are available more effectively"*
>
> Parent, London

Early years

Some parents want the intake into nursery to be staggered to ensure that children do not miss out on a term of nursery because their children's birthdays fall slightly short of the intake date. Some participants want childcare to be offered free? to all parents after a mandatory period of maternity leave, to allow mothers to go back to work if they want to. A few parents think that maternity leave should be extended to two years for those who want to spend more time at home with their children before returning to work.

Secondary school

Parents of secondary school children want any 'ideal' service to take into account their very different set-ups and lifestyle, for example access to transport, working times, number of other children and number of parents. It was suggested it might be possible to pay on an hourly rate, as many parents only need children to be looked after for one or two hours after school. Parents also suggest that the service could run on weekends.

Affordable

Parents and practitioners of children of all ages want childcare to be affordable so that parents who want to work are not prohibited from doing so by the cost of childcare. Views on the cost of ideal childcare provision range from 'free' through to 'reasonable' with few parents and practitioners willing or able to put a price on it. Some suggest that the cost of childcare should be means tested thereby ensuring that those who can least afford it are given the most assistance. Many sources of funding are cited including the government, taxes, voluntary organisations, charities and lottery money. However, most agree it should be in part paid for by the parents themselves unless they are on very low incomes.

> *"I think everyone would agree to pay a penny more in tax if we knew it was going toward this (making childcare services free at point of access) you would pay it."*
>
> Parent, London

Collaborative

Parents and practitioners across all age groups would like to see more parental and child involvement in the childcare service. This manifests itself in different ways according to the age of the child.

Early years

Practitioners and parents want greater parental involvement in nurseries in the form of ad-hoc visits and sitting in on sessions as well as attending workshops at the nurseries or schools. Parents want to be introduced to new staff when they start at the nursery so that they can begin to develop a relationship with them and feel confident in the skills of the staff member.

Parents want informal daily updates on what the child has done that day in nursery so that they can feel informed about their child's progress and any issues which have arisen during the day. Parents think it would be helpful if they were told in advance what the child will be doing on a particular day so they can be dressed accordingly, for example wearing old clothes if the child is going to be doing messy play. Parents would also like to be told what the child is going to be eating that week so they can provide alternatives if necessary.

Parents and practitioners believe it is important to have formal feedback sessions with staff on the child's development, and for staff to discuss the ways in which the parent can help their child with their learning at home.

Primary school

There are no specific mentions from primary school parents and practitioners asking for greater parental involvement in their child's childcare.

Secondary school

Some parents of secondary age children want to be involved in the childcare services for their child. Some parents think that there should be designated sessions where parents could come along to learn and play alongside children. Parents think that by having greater involvement in their child's childcare or activities they will be able to foster better relationships with their children at what can be a difficult time for parental relationships with children.

Child centric activities

Parents and practitioners working with all ages of children believe that childcare services should be firmly focussed on the needs of the child rather than the needs of the provider. They believe that child-centric childcare should offer children a wide range of activities incorporating a strong element of fun and play. They think that children and parents should be able to choose from a menu of activities which are appropriate to the age of the child. Ideally parents want a programme of activities to be tailored to each child's personal needs. This is perceived to be particularly important at the Early Years stage where children can be at very different stages of development across a range of competences.

Early years

Parents and practitioners believe that staff should ideally stay with the same children throughout their period at nursery so they get to know their needs and are able to develop a strong bond with the child and the parent. Parents and practitioners agree that children learn best through play and having fun, and that this should be at the centre of a child's experience. A few parents disagree with this and think that young children should have more formalised learning, for example learning to read and count via more formal methods. The types of activity which parents and practitioners deem to be appropriate for children in the early years include:

- Explorative and messy play

- Baking

- Art

- Music

- Outdoor play

> *"It should be completely child focussed with a choice of fun activities and the emphasis on play"*
>
> Parent, Birmingham

Primary school

Both parents and practitioners believe that a range of activities are essential in order to cater for the needs and preferences of individual children, and to ensure that childcare was not viewed as an extension of school.

> *"To provide fun physical learning activities - with no academic stuff!"*
>
> Parent, London

The activities which are deemed to be appropriate for primary school age children include:

- Baking

- Art

- Music

- Outdoor play

- Sport / physical activity

- Dressing up

- Supervised homework
Secondary school

Practitioners and parents believe that children and young people should be heavily involved in the design of their childcare or activities (e.g. design of services, allocating and spending budgets, deciding on activities) in a bottom-up approach to service development. They believe that this is important to encourage ownership of the services and ensure that they are tailored to young people's interests and needs. They think it is essential that it is fun and involving from the children's perspective. Some practitioners who attended the event admit they often get it wrong with young people, finding it difficult to second guess what they want and need. It is also thought that children should play a key role in service delivery, for example by helping to run some of the activities.

> *"It should be governed somewhat by children, let them learn some life skills and make them feel like it is theirs…."*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

The activities suggested by parents and practitioners in childcare facilities for young people are many and varied, but all revolve around the creation of a fun and stimulating but also relaxing environment. Suggestions include:

- Indoor and outdoor activities

- Sports

- Social and life skills (e.g. cookery, IT)

- Entertainment (e.g. TV, PlayStation)

- Specialist activities (e.g. break-dancing, martial arts) etc

Participants debated whether children should be able to do homework there too. Some believe it should not all be about play and could also double up as a 'homework club' where children initially relax and have snacks and then settle down to homework or more educational activities.

Others, particularly practitioners, are keener for the activities not to involve school work and to make sure it is distinctly different from schools and more focussed on fun, relaxation and socialisation:

> *"They're sick of it, they've had a whole day of it and need time away. It should be next to school but not like a school. A sort of open school"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

"Let them learn through play, 'cool play', and let them meet other kids with similar interests"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Secondary school</div>

Environment

The environment of childcare facilities is considered by parents of all ages and practitioners to be vital to its success. All participants agree that the childcare environment should be safe, clean and stimulating for children both intellectually and physically. Participants think it is important that all sorts of different children and young people mix together, regardless of culture or ethnicity, to promote cohesiveness and understanding between children and parents of different backgrounds. For example, shared understanding could be promoted within childcare establishments by cooking or through celebrating different cultural traditions.

"It should be inclusive and reflect the social mix of the area you are living in"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Secondary school</div>

"You can invite parents in to read children's stories in their own language. It helps the other children learn about different cultures too"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Primary school</div>

It is also suggested by parents of all ages that standards should be set by an independent body and inspected by OFSTED to ensure that all childcare is of a high quality.

The aspects of the environment which are deemed to be most important regardless of the child's age are having a child friendly environment, risk and safety, and the provision of healthy food.

Child friendly environment

The aspects of the physical environment which parents and practitioners believe are important are: being warm, bright, colourful and spacious. Participants think that the atmosphere should be fun and welcoming for children and parents. The staff need to support the creation of this atmosphere, for example by being able to cope with mess so kids can enjoy activities such as painting, cooking and water play, and have a friendly and welcoming demeanour. Childcare facilities should encourage respect, for example by not allowing slang, making sure children eat with a knife and fork and encouraging good manners.

Participants want the childcare environment to be bright, inviting and inspiring to children and clearly distinct from the more academic environment of a school. They consider it essential to be different from school so that children can have a break from the school environment. They stress the importance of both the indoor and outside environment, as provision of outdoor activities is regarded as key in creating child centric childcare.

"Clean, colourful, spacious, tidy, child themed, like a theme park - children love it!"

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

Risk and safety

Some parents also want their children to be able to engage in activities which include a degree of risk such as outdoor play. However, they want this to be carefully managed to minimise the chances of their child being injured.

Healthy food

Participants want the childcare facilities to encourage healthy eating by providing healthy food. Some suggest that parents could get involved in cooking the food, as a way of involving parents in the childcare facility. Parents also believe that children should be able to eat a healthy meal whilst in childcare if it is appropriate. For example, parents who want to take their children to childcare in the early morning welcome the idea of their child receiving a healthy breakfast but recognise that it may not be appropriate for children arriving later in the morning to have breakfast.

> *"Lot of choices, from healthy snacks to organic meals. Children could get a main meal there if their parents selected it"*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

There are some aspects of the environment which are particular to children of a specific age group which are discussed below:

Early years

Some parents want stricter guidelines on safety in the classroom and minimum requirements in terms of the safety standards of the equipment used in nurseries. Currently, some parents think the furniture in some nursery classrooms is in a poor state of repair which they feel could compromise their child's safety. Some parents also want stricter security on access to nurseries to prevent members of the public from accessing them.

Primary school

There were no specific issues relating to primary school age children.

Secondary school

Despite a need for after school care to be different from school, some believe schools could still be effectively used as premises for alternative secondary school care, so long as the facility is run by another body (e.g. the local authority). In this scenario, the appropriate school facilities (e.g. pool, gym, computers etc) could be made use of and, although these facilities are housed within schools, efforts could be made to ensure it didn't feel like being school.

> *"Children would need to feel positive and good about going there. It would need to be radically different from schools so they would be desperate to get there!"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

> *"It mustn't just feel like another hour in school, even if it is actually held in school"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

Other participants disagree that school facilities are suitable locations to provide childcare. They think it would be best to use existing community buildings for example church halls, town halls or build totally new state-of-the-art facilities involving children in the design of the premises. Any new facilities would need to be spacious (with significant indoor and outdoor space) to provide a range of both stimulating and relaxing activities.

> *"Young people are going to be unlikely to go or be at their school for any sort of aftercare"*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Others think that any secondary care facility should be comprised of a flexible 'group' who escort secondary school children to different places and activities, rather than being based in one specific place. It would be a 'youth service', instead of an actual facility, made up of young, dynamic and qualified people.

Some parents also think a swipe card system at the centre, which activates a text, would also be a great way to alert parents to a child's arrival and therefore to their safety.

Parents and practitioners agree that separating age groups 11-14 and 15-19 would be beneficial since children will feel more comfortable with children of a similar age and be more likely to be interested in similar activities in a smaller age cohort. However, some participants are open to the idea of sometimes including a mix of primary and secondary school age children, to help to ease the transition phase into secondary school.

The right staff

Parents of all ages of children want reassurance that those looking after their children are adequately trained to do so, and that all have undergone a formal background check to ensure that they are fit to work with children. Some want the qualifications of staff to be on display to reassure parents. Some parents suggest that childcare staff should go on refresher courses every five years to ensure that their skills are kept up to date. Practitioners support thorough training for childcare practitioners but they further believe that there is a need to ensure that childcare practitioners are adequately paid and recognised for the role that they do. Some participants also think that childcare staff will be more likely to remain in the profession if it is better paid which would lead to children and parents being able to develop better long-term relationships with them. Parents and practitioners currently believe that childcare practitioners are underpaid and the importance of their role is not well recognised.

> *"They need proper training…qualifications. Also they should be mums themselves"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"Staff should be educated to degree level with a background of parenting/teaching/work"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Most participants think that there should be a higher ratio of staff to children. Participants think that this would result in children receiving more attention from staff and allow for greater levels of personalised care.

Participants want staff to be able to deal with a broad range of scenarios, for example: talking to parents, dealing with conflict, dietary needs, safety, play, and education. Participants also want staff to be enthusiastic, bright and cheery to welcome children and parents and to be good role models. Parents and practitioners think that staff should welcome parents, especially fathers who can feel intimidated or sidelined when visiting to drop off or pick up their children.

> *"You want a Mary Poppins"*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

Some participants think it is important to include more men in childcare services to act as role models for boys and to expose children to a greater male influence which some think is currently lacking in the service.

Parents and practitioners working with teenaged children think it is crucial that anyone running activities or childcare for this age group are in-tune with teenagers and able to deal and engage with them effectively. There are mixed views on exactly who these people should be. Some want teachers who would ensure the safety of the children and a respectful environment. However many others, particularly practitioners, are opposed to this idea and think teachers would bring in an element of hierarchy and not relate well with children. Ideally they believe that staff would be best comprised of youth workers - young, alternative and dynamic volunteers who would be better able to relate to children and provide good role models.

> *"They need a youth worker type, young, approachable and dynamic. Definitely not an authority figure, someone who wears funny clothes, an older friend but someone they will respect"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

> *"The staff don't need to be qualified teachers, they just need to know youth and be genuinely interested in young people"*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

Other ideas offered are for a parent-led initiative, in a community setting, run by respected mums or dads, or a mix of parental volunteers and fully trained youth workers.

5.4   Perceptions of and reactions to the EYFS

At the Birmingham event, Beverley Hughes (Minister of State for DCFS) gave an address to participants on the early years foundation stage. This next section deals with participants' reactions to the address and the early years foundation stage (EYFS).

Overall parents and practitioners are positive about the EYFS. They believe it will address many of the concerns they currently have about childcare. Being made aware that Ofsted inspects pre-school care is reassuring to parents who feel more confident that childcare provision meets minimum standardised criteria. Having one overall set of standards is perceived to lead to greater consistency in terms of the quality of childcare provision across the sector.

> *"If it works it would be great, and give everyone the same start regardless of class or background "*
>
> Parent, Early years

> *"It should give parents what they want, it covers what we have been talking about"*
>
> Practitioner, Early years

> *"We've already said that staff need to be qualified and this will help with that and we won't have to settle for second best because we can't afford the best nurseries"*
>
> Parent, Early years

Most parents and practitioners welcome the focus on learning through play and perceive it to be the most conducive way to helping children learn. There is a very small minority of parents who believe that more traditional learning activities are more appropriate and perceive learning through play as being too unstructured.

"These areas will inspire confidence in kids which is more important than anything else"

Parent, Early years

"I'm really pleased with the emphasis on play and individualised learning, we all know it works"

Practitioner, Early years

The focus on individual needs also chimes with what parents see as an essential factor of ideal childcare. Parents and practitioners recognise the importance of identifying the individual needs of a child and providing tailored learning activities to improve their development in key areas.

"This is going to make it flexible and give them the focus to deal with individual needs which I believe is crucial "

Parent, Early years

The six areas of focus are also welcomed as an approach that look holistically at a child's needs rather than just focusing on traditional learning. Whilst practitioners are generally positive about the EYFS, there is widespread concern about the effect it might have on staff and additional workloads, which may in turn have an impact on an industry that in many cases already suffers from lack of resources and high staff turnover.

"It doesn't reflect the reality of staff issues, we are really stretched and get through staff and this could add to their complaints"

Practitioner, Birmingham

"Resources are more important than a vision"

Practitioner, Birmingham

Moreover, there is concern amongst practitioners that many of the staff entering the profession can be ill-equipped with the skills needed. This could be exacerbated by the need to formally engage more with parents.

"New staff are not really that qualified anymore, doing qualifications in 6 months and then thrown in at the deep end. I'm not sure some of them are good with parents and they need to be with this"

Practitioner, Birmingham

Practitioners are also concerned that little or no information was provided about how parents will be included as partners in their child's learning, and they believe this is essential in making the EYFS work.

Participants are positive about the six core areas of focus for EYFS. Both parents and participants believe that the wider focus on essential life skills is as or more important at a young age than learning to read and write. Indeed, many feel that this should be a primary focus at pre-school. However, some practitioners are concerned that EYFS could build a 'target culture' leading to testing and league tables, and exacerbate already wide divisions in childcare around quality and cost.

5.5   Conclusions and possible ways forward

Parents' requirements for childcare vary significantly depending on the age of the child. However a number of overarching issues which affect childcare provision, and the ideal vision for childcare, are broadly the same across all age groups. We have therefore made a number of recommendations which apply across the entire childcare spectrum and others which are specific to a particular age group.

Crosscutting conclusions

Many parents are concerned at the expense of childcare. Awareness needs to be raised amongst parents about the entitlement to free childcare for 3 and 4 year old, support through the Working Tax Credit system and parents' rights to request flexible working. We suggest that effective ways to raise awareness might be to encourage employers to include this information in parents' pay packets, or to publicise key messages more through childcare settings. Parents also suggest that the amount that parents pay for childcare could be further subsidised by the government to help ensure that more parents are able to afford to return to work if they want to.

Since many parents rely on informal childcare provided by grandparents and other family members, some parents want the free entitlement for three and four-year olds and tax free childcare vouchers to be extended to provide financial incentives for them to look after their children.
Parents want to be able to access childcare at times that fit their working hours, to enable more parents to return to work and to work longer hours. We suggest that childcare providers could be encouraged to provide more flexible opening times to cater to these needs. We also suggest that local authorities could ensure that a proportion of the childcare provision available locally has flexible opening hours.

Parents strongly support the idea of service user involvement in service design and delivery. In order to encourage this, we suggest that childcare settings could be encouraged to involve parents and children in the design and operation of the setting, or assessed on the extent to which they do this. We suggest that settings could also ensure that there are formalised systems in place to give parents regular feedback on their child's progress and to offer support to parents to help them with their child's learning. In order to build capacity for parental involvement within settings, we suggest that childcare staff are trained on how to interact with parents and how to work with parents to help them support their child's learning.

The right childcare environment is perceived to be integral to the provision of high quality childcare. We suggest that national guidance could be produced which sets out best practice in terms of what constitutes a high quality environment for children of different ages.

Early years recommendations

Parents request greater flexibility in childcare provision, particularly the age at which children are accepted into nurseries and play schools. A recommendation coming from parents is to stagger intake dates to ensure that children whose birthdays fall just short of these do not miss out on an entire term.

Parents want their children and themselves to have stronger relationships with staff in settings. Parents suggest that settings should be encouraged to ensure as far as possible that each child is assigned a key worker who stays with them for the duration of their attendance to foster a strong relationship between the child and the key worker, and the key worker and the parent.

Primary school recommendations

Parents of children of primary school age want to ensure that extended services through schools do not feel like an extension of school, rather that they offer a wide range of fun activities which revolve around play and sports.

Secondary school recommendations

Parents and practitioners do not want activities for children aged 11-14 years to be described or referred to as 'childcare' as they do not think this is appropriate for this age group and does not engage parents or young people.

There is a clear demand from parents for increased provision of out of school activities for teenagers, which should be provided in a safe and secure environment with trained and qualified staff.

Parents are keen for their children to experience a range of activities before and after school. Some parents suggest that after school provision for this age group does not necessarily need to involve fixed premises but could be a supervised 'group' travelling to different facilities.

6. Parental complaints

6.1 Summary

This section of the report discusses participants' views on parental complaints and the possible new independent complaints body.

- Around one third of parents have actually made a complaint to their child's school or nursery - this falls to 10% for parents of early years children. Satisfaction levels after making a complaint vary considerably, however many parents complain of dissatisfaction with the outcome of complaints relating to bullying.

- There are a number of barriers to making a complaint which are identified by parents and practitioners including; concern that their child could be singled out, a lack of information about how to make a complaint, fear about being labelled a 'trouble maker' and a worry that the complaint will not be taken seriously

- Parents and practitioners want more open and less formalised communications between parents and schools to both prevent complaints escalating and encourage speedy resolutions if they arise

- Parents and practitioners like the idea of a new independent complaints body to provide oversight and ensure that processes are consistent across schools and nurseries, however many have concerns that adding this extra layer to the process may over-complicate the system and waste resources

- There is a lot of support for using mediation for difficult complaints, but many suggest it should not be employed unless the school or nursery has failed to resolve the situation without it. Many parents and practitioners question whether Parent Support Advisors could be used as mediators, because they are not independent from the school

6.2   Experiences, expectations and knowledge

Experiences of making a complaint

Over a third of parents of school age children (primary and secondary school) have made a complaint about their child's school (see Figure 11). Parents of early years children are far less likely to have made a complaint - this is partly explained by the fact that many of their children do not yet go to school or nursery.

Figure 11: Which of these statements best applies to you?
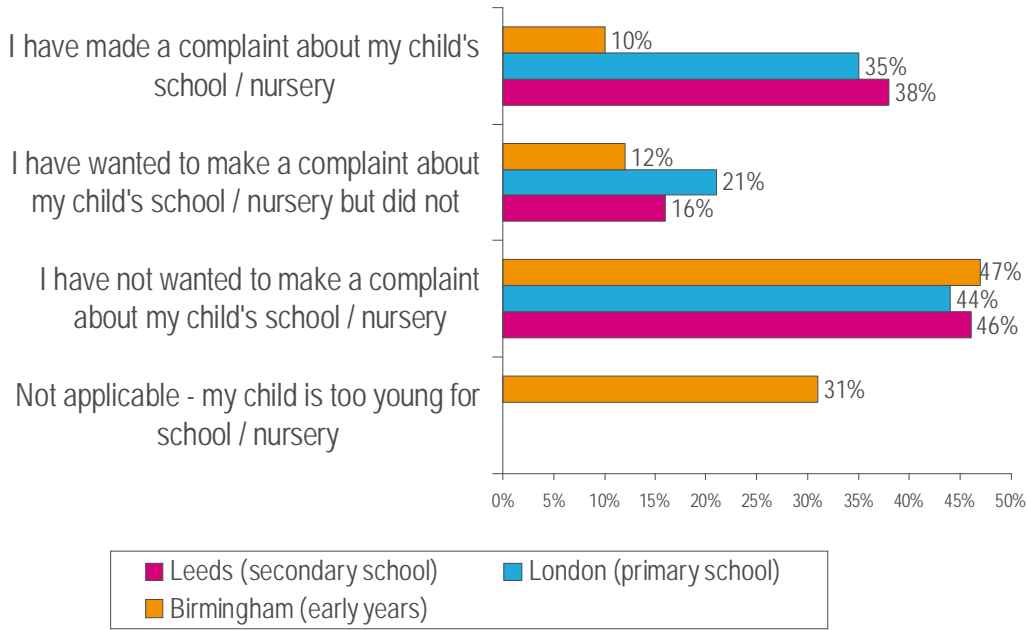
Base: Parents only (Birmingham = 53, London = 50, Leeds = 59)

Complaints to nurseries

Although 10% of parents of early year's children have experienced making a complaint, only a few have actually complained to a nursery regarding their pre-school aged child. More parents of children this age have experienced complaining to a primary school about an older child.

Complaints to nurseries concerned the following issues:

- A carer not applying sunscreen to a child

- Behaviour of another child at the nursery (they had bitten other children)

- Illness in the nursery - i.e. other children attending when they were sick, spreading colds and flu

These parents report variations in satisfaction levels after making the complaints. Those who have informed the manager of the nursery about their concerns, report that the complaint has been resolved and that they are satisfied. Others who simply told their child's nursery teacher report feeling that too little had been done and suggest that they are still not entirely happy with the situation. This suggests that escalating a complaint (i.e. taking it to more senior staff) leads to greater satisfaction.

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"The nursery failed to put sunscreen on my son when it was a really sunny day. I complained direct to my child's carer but they denied responsibility . . ."

<div align="right">Parent, Early years</div>

"A child bit my daughter, I took it up with care worker, but they didn't really do much so I reported it to her manager who explained they did care but they did not tell other girls parents. It upset me so I insisted they tell them."

<div align="right">Parent, Early years</div>

Complaints to schools

Bullying is a common reason why parents complain to both primary and secondary schools[3]. Parents of primary school children in particular are generally dissatisfied with the outcome of these complaints. They are concerned that primary schools do not take bullying, or the parental complaints concerning bullying, seriously.

"My child was bullied and the other parents would not admit that their child was bullying my child . . . nothing was happening."

<div align="right">Parent, Early years</div>

"My son was being bullied . . . talked to his class teacher . . . nothing happened so I talked to the head teacher. He talked to my son and the other boy and also got his parents involved but the bullying didn't stop . . . I had to go to the governors in the end . . . I was pretty annoyed with that, I think the school should have handled it."

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

"There are two types, some are trepidatious and some complain all the time and they make it very difficult to deal with complaints. It makes your reactions much more defensive."

<div align="right">Practitioner, Secondary school</div>

Other reasons for complaints to schools include:

- concerns about a lack of homework (primary school)

- teachers being too officious (secondary school)

- clerical errors (secondary school)

- false accusations of their children by teachers (secondary school)

Ability to make a complaint

Though nearly half of all parents have not felt the need to complain about their child's school or nursery (see Figure 11) and few knew how they would go about making a complaint, most would feel confident to make a complaint (see Figure 12) - indeed over half would not hesitate to complain if required.

"I would not have a problem complaining if I had a complaint."

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

"I'd have no problem approaching the school . . . ."

<div align="right">Parent, Early years</div>

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[3] Complaints about bullying arose at all events including the Early Years event where parents discussed making complaints about these issues to schools about their older children

Figure 12: Thinking about making a complaint about your child's school / nursery, which statement best applies to you / most parents?
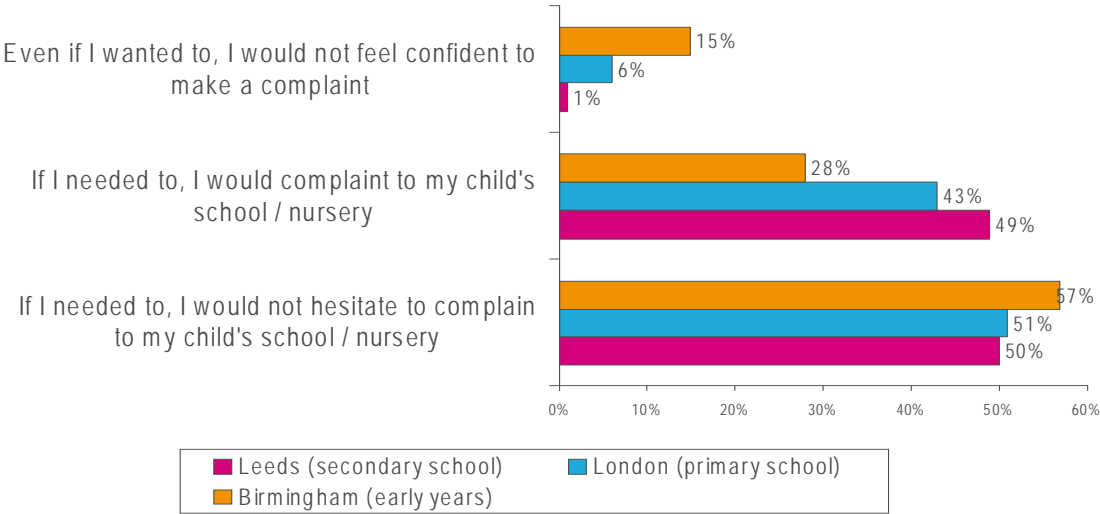
Base: Parents only (Birmingham = 53, London = 50, Leeds = 59)

Despite this, many parents and practitioners, across all age groups, mention fear of their child being singled out as a result of a complaining as a possible barrier to making a complaint. Many parents are unaware whether complaints can be made in confidence, making them more worried about possible repercussions for their child. This is more likely to be the case for parents of early years children, perhaps explaining the reason why more of them (15%) say that they do not feel confident to make a complaint.

> *"Some might fear their child would be victimised by the teacher and draw negative attention"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Other things that could stop parents making a complaint include:

- Worry that the complaint will be seen as trivial and thus not dealt with

- Lack of information and knowledge about how to complain – particularly regarding whether parents can complain in confidence and around who to approach initially

- Teachers talking down to parents / being patronised

- Lack of necessary skills to complain - such poor English and lack of assertiveness

- Fear of being labelled as a trouble maker or problem parent by teachers

> *"*[parents] *don't often know about the process, nor have confidence in it."*
>
> Practitioner, Secondary school

The following additional barriers to making a complaint are mentioned by parents and those working with school age children:

- Fear of authority

- Concern about a 'them and us' situation where the school or nursery becomes very defensive

- Fear of teachers taking complaints personally

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"Teachers are always offended; their attitude is why are you moaning?"

<div align="right">Parent, Primary school</div>

Amongst all age groups practitioners identify more barriers to complaining than parents. While many parents claim they would feel confident enough to complain if necessary, practitioners highlight that in reality many parents who would like to complain do not. Practitioners recognise that certain parents (i.e. those who are highly educated or who have strong opinions on education) are far more likely to complain than others and some argue that those who are likely to complain do so often and in situations where a complaint is not warranted.

"Most parents don't complain but some do it all the time."

<div align="right">Practitioner, Secondary school</div>

Expectations of the complaints system

Parents and practitioners expectations of the complaints system are broadly very similar. Many of the expectations highlight the importance of communication and the need to resolve complaints at the lowest level possible, avoiding the escalation of a complaint wherever possible.

Clear publicised policies and processes

Though schools are required to publicise their complaints policies few parents are aware of the details. Many parents and practitioners feel that that complaints polices, along with a brief explanation of the complaints process, should be publicised in school prospectuses and on the school websites. Parents and those working with secondary school children also highlight that these policies provided clarity on who parents should complain to.

Regular communication between parents and teachers

Both practitioners and parents recognise that communication between teachers and parents is very important in terms of both preventing complaints from arising and in order to resolve complaints. Regular communication between parents and teachers helps to ensure that parents are aware of school policies and as well as making them feel more involved in their child's education, both of which can prevent complaints from arising. Practitioners working with early years children suggest an organised introduction session at the beginning of each school year or term, where parents meet staff working with their children could help to kick start this communication.

Regular communication once a complaint is made is important, both to reassure parents and to help the complaint to be resolved quickly. Parents expect feedback on every step of the complaints process and to be kept informed of what is happening, even when there is no news. Regular communication can also help to resolve the complaint sooner as the complaint is less likely to be escalated if the two parties are talking to each other (for example, in order to establish the facts of the particular situation and avoid anger and false accusations).

Written records

Parents of and those working with early years children feel that written records and incident forms could help to resolve particular complains and thus they expect school and nurseries to keep them. For example, records on when children's nappies were changed could help to resolve a complaint by a parent concerned their child's nappy was not being changed frequently enough.

Confidentiality for the child

Parents of and those working with early years and primary school children emphasis the need to ensure that parents can make complaints in confidence to avoid the child becoming victimised as a result.

Guaranteed access to staff

Parents of and those working with secondary school aged children expected to be able to contact the person they wanted to complain to easily. They feel it is important that parents could raise issues when they came up and were able to access the right staff to do so in order to avoid contacting the wrong person and thus possibly escalating the complaint.

> *"You don't want to leave problems 'til parents' evening. Parents' evenings are very rushed and a bit scary for parents. It's not really appropriate criticism for that occasion."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"You are pushed from pillar to post and you never get the right person."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Timely

This is the only area where the expectations of parents and practitioners somewhat diverge. Both groups recognise that different complaints will take different amounts of time to resolve and both expect that the higher the complaint is escalated, the longer the complaint will take to resolve. However, parents expect complaints to be dealt with more speedily than practitioners. For example, parents expect their complaint to be acknowledged almost immediately - i.e. on the same day - whereas practitioners indicate that this may not always be possible.

> *"Complaints are never resolved in the way you want. It's all to bureaucratic, it makes it very difficult."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"They must acknowledge within a day that a complaint has been made. And they have to keep one regularly informed, especially if there are going to be delays. The system should be impartial but they need to be allowed the time and resources to investigate properly."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Some parents and practitioners indicate that giving parents feedback which manages their expectations as to how long things will take is more important than sticking to strict deadlines, which suggests that timelines can be flexible as long they are clearly communicated.

6.3   Perceptions and expectations of independent complaints body

In this session participants discussed their experiences of making complaints about schools and local authority funded nurseries. Participants were then given a number of scenario handouts which depicted a range of different types complaints and discussed how they felt about these complaints. They were then given information about parent support advisors and asked if they could provide a role as a mediator between the school and parents. They were then given a timeline with the main milestones in a complaints procedure and asked what they thought was a reasonable amount of time for each of these stages. Participants were asked to generate a set of guiding principles about how complaints should be dealt with. Finally participants were given a handout with a set of draft guiding principles which have been developed by DCSF and asked to discuss how they felt about this.

Overall perceptions

Early years

Parents of and those working with early years children tend to have greater support for the idea of an independent body to look at complaints not resolved at school or nursery level. Although some practitioners feel the body should have certain exclusions to avoid spending time over trivial complaints, other participants argue that an independent body will help to ensure that the system as fair and consistent between across many schools and nurseries.

School age

Parents of and those working with school age children, particularly primary school, have more concerns and identify more possible problems with an independent complaints body. They worry that this body will make the system too complex and bureaucratic and will be a waste of resources. They argue against having an 'extra process' and feel that the money spent on such an institution should instead be spent directly on education. Some suggest that if an independent body was created it should be incorporated into an existing service, such as Ofsted, in order to save money.

> *"Too bureaucratic, more wasted money . . . combine it with what we have already."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"Does this mean extra process and bureaucracy?"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"I don't like the idea here of another layer of bureaucracy. It would cost millions of pounds that would be better spent on education."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Some other primary school parents query whether an independent complaints body would be able to resolve complaints that had not been resolved at school level.

> *"If the school can't deal with it then how will it be dealt with independently?"*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Although parents of and those working with secondary school aged children recognise the need for some complaints to be overlooked with independent eyes they worry about the complexity of the proposed independent complaints body. Like their primary school counterparts, parents of secondary school children are confused by the proposals for the independent body. They suggest that the idea lacks clarity, with some of the suggested principles contradicting each other. These parents feel that modifications to the current complaints process must emphasise clarity and simplicity which the "extra step" of new body appears to contradict. Those working with secondary school age children reflect these views, fearing that the independent complaints body may make the process seem more complicated and official to parents, thus putting more off complaining.

> *"It seems heavy-handed for day to day could really put some parents off making a complaint."*
>
> Practitioner, secondary school

This concern around complexity and bureaucracy means that both parents of and those working with secondary school age children feel that the independent body should only be involved in more serious complaints when the head teacher or senior management of a school could not manage the situation.

Guiding principles

This section considers parents and practitioners views on each of the principles suggested and indicates where appropriate where they felt principles were unnecessary or missing.

Principle 1: One route for complaints and one single review service

Parents and practitioners tend to support this principle, particularly parents of and those working with early year's children who feel a major benefit of the independent body will be achieving and consistency of process across different schools and nurseries.

Principle 2: All complaints should first be considered at school / nursery level

This is strongly supported by parents and practitioners, particularly parents of and those working with primary school age children who have concerns that the new independent body could make the system more complicated.

> *" . . . keep it a localised issue as much as possible, there is not point in escalating it."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Some practitioners suggest that mediation should be utilised to try and resolve complaints at a local level, prior to involving the new independent body.

Principle 3: Independence from Government

Parents and practitioners emphasise that the new body should be independent and thus support this principle, however it is clear that for many parents in particular, independence from schools and nurseries is more important than independence from Government. Some primary school parents feel that staff rotation (i.e. different people working with the same school on each new complaint) as well as institutional independence would be essential to avoid the body building a relationship with the school.

> *"It should not be the same independent person who deals with the complaint ever time or they might start to build a rapport with the school."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Principle 4: Discouraging unnecessary or time-wasting complaints

Parents across all ages, along with some practitioners working with primary school age children, are not entirely comfortable with this principle. These participants argue that parents feel any complaint they make to be serious and would thus want any complaint they make to be recognised and taken to the independent body if not resolved at a local level. Some parents of secondary school age children also suggested that parents who complained were labelled as timewasters more easily.

> *"Everything should be looked into – nothing is off limits."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"Who will decide whether it is an unnecessary complain? As a parent every complaint is important."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"I think teachers label parents who complain as time wasters too easily without really listening to what they have to say - you only complain if you really have to."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Many practitioners disagree and suggest that the principle is necessary. Practitioners working with secondary school children argue that a large proportion of complaints come from a few parents who are very aware of their rights and who appear to seek to make the jobs of teachers difficult, repeatedly complaining until the resolution is something that they are seeking. They argue that parents do not realise this extent of this problem and thus feel the new independent body needs to be able to discourage unnecessary or time wasting complaints. Practitioners working in early years suggest that a clear and open definition of an unnecessary or time wasting complaint should form part of each school or nursery's complaints policy so that parents are aware of what these complaints are and that they will not be considered by the independent complaints body.

Principle 5: Role in considering the substance of the complaint as well as the process followed

There is some concern and confusion with regard to this principle amongst some parents and professions. Parents of early years children fear possible tension with the school or nursery if the independent body could override its decisions, though some thought this power was essential.

This principle causes confusion about the role and remit of the independent complaints body amongst those working with primary school age children. In particular they clarity over whether it will only have the power to check that schools have followed the complaints handling process correctly or whether it will actually have the power to change a school's decision with regard to a complaint. Linking with parents' scepticism over its value detailed previously, practitioners suggest that parents will not see any point to the existence of an independent body whose role is to simply check that schools have followed the complaints handling process correctly.

> *"If they can't change the decision, are they just checking that the governing body have followed the right procedure? Parents might not see the point of such a body that just checks processes rather than makes decisions . . ."*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

Principle 6: Range of actions when it upholds a complaint

Both practitioners and parents recognise the need for the new independent body to be able to have some sort of power to ensure its decisions were acted upon in order for parents to value it, though as indicated above, some parents feared tension between the school and the complaining parent if it upheld a complaint previously dismissed by a school or nursery.

Parents of and those working with primary school age children also suggest that the new body should have some sort of audit power and function so that it is able to review whether particular schools are consistently linked to particular types of complaints.

> *" . . . should be auditors of complaints to see whether schools are improving or getting worse."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

Parents of children in the early years also suggested that the new body should have the power to suggest and action temporary resolutions if complaints are not resolved within a specified time frame.

Principle 7: Better communication between different bodies

There is support for this principle amongst parents and practitioners, however many suggest that this principle of communication is extended to include communication with parents. If a complaint they make goes to the independent body parents want to receive regular feedback as to how things are progressing, even when there is no news to be had.

> *"They should tell parents what's going on regularly - even when nothing has happened."*
>
> Parents, Early years

Gaps in the principles

Participants identified a number of principles that they think the new independent complaints body should adhere to, but which are not mentioned in the handout.

Clarity and simplicity

As indicated in the previous section, a clear and simple complaints process is very important to parents and those working with school age children. Both parents and practitioners amongst all age groups (including early years) feel that simplicity and clarity should be a guiding principle of the new complaints body. Some, particularly parents of school age children, are concerned that the current principles do not take the need for clarity and simplicity into account as some cause confusion.

> *"We just want a simple, short, sharp process and to be involved."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

Accessible for parents

Parents of and those working with early years children feel it is very important that the new independent body is easily accessible to parents so that it does not place a barrier to complaining. They suggest a number of ways to help ensure this:

- Parents are offered the support of a practitioner once their complaint is refereed to their body

- Parents can contact the new body out of hours

- Parents can contact the new body via telephone rather than in writing

Views on locality

Parents tend to feel that the new body independent body should be organised at a local level so that it is easier for parents to engage with and is aware of local issues and concerns, although it should be independent of the LEA and any schools or nurseries. Practitioners disagree, fearing that a local operation cannot be truly independent and may be inconsistent across the country. Ultimately, if the independent body is about monitoring schools' complaints processes than they feel it should be done to a national standard.

6.4   Support for parents

Polling results on what parents would find most helpful if they had a complaint reveals strong support for a mediation service and relatively high levels of support for a independent body despite the concerns raised in the previous section (see Figure 13, overleaf).

Figure 13: Which of the following would be most helpful if you had a complaint?
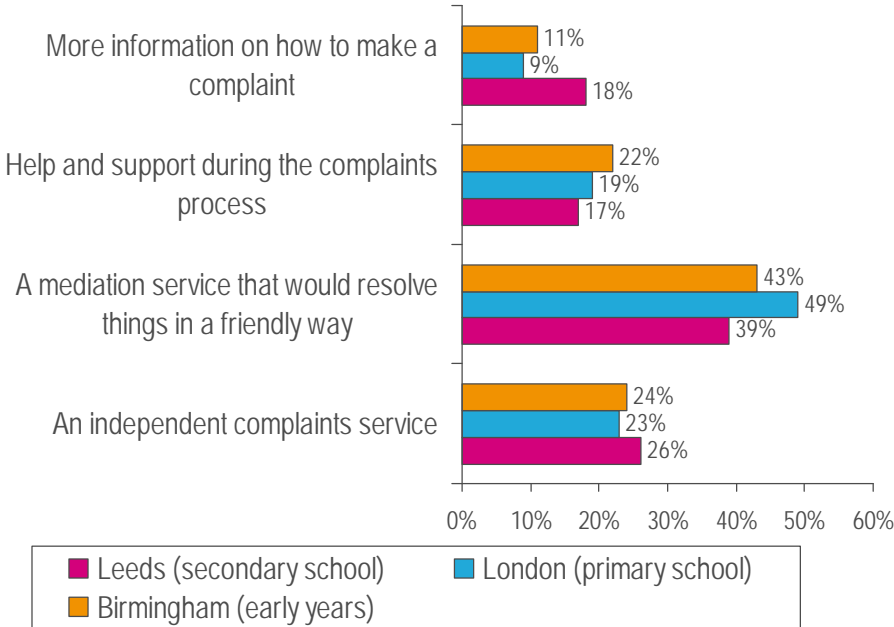
Base: All answering question (Birmingham = 63, London = 78, Leeds = 78)

Although having more information about how to make a complaint was not revealed as one of the most helpful forms of support via the polling, table discussions in fact indicated that there is an appetite for more information about this. Parents and practitioners suggest that schools and nurseries publish their complaints policies online, as indicated in the section on expectations of the complaints system, with many suggesting that this is not done at present. Many argue that more information would give parents more confidence to complain.

> *"You need to raise awareness of the complaints procedures when children first enter schools as teachers themselves don't always know the complaints procedure."*

> Parent, Primary school

Practitioners also feel that the relationship between parents and schools or nurseries needs to be 'deformalised' through regular communication so that parents feel more comfortable providing feedback, as indicated in the section on expectations of the complaints system (section 0). Indeed, some practitioners working with secondary school age children suggest that this 'deformalisation' should be applied to the complaint policies and procedures themselves by not using the word 'complaint'. Instead, they suggest that a more neutral term such as 'feedback' so there is not such an obvious tonal link with negativity and an adversarial atmosphere and parents feel more comfortable talking to the school or nursery if they have concerns.

> *"The term 'complaint' is a bit troublesome itself - these issues are not complaints."*

> Practitioner, Secondary school

Mediation service

Parents and practitioners support the idea of using mediation for more difficult complaints, such as those about bullying or directed at an individual teacher, complaints which have caused anger or complaints which have taken too long to resolve. They like the idea of involving someone who can look on the situation from a non-judgmental position and with a fresh point of view. Some also feel that it could help make the process less intimating to parents.

> *"It's good when someone not heated by the problems can help - they can be objective."*
>
> Parent, Early years

> *"They wouldn't be judgemental - they would consider a different point of view."*
>
> Parent, Early years

> *"Mediation is a good idea . . . having something independent and external can help nip things in and to stop relationships breaking down and parents disengaging."*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

> *"A mediation service is needed . . . parents can get frustrated by the process more than by the original problem."*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

However, most feel that the mediation service should not be used for all complaints: in particular it should not be used when the parent and the school are communicating effectively about the complaint. As already indicated in the section on the new independent body, parents in particular are not comfortable with the complaints processes being made more complex by inserting in extra steps when not necessary. Therefore, many suggest that mediation should only be utilised if the complaint cannot be resolved by the school or nursery themselves. Parents see mediation as a way of avoiding taking complaints to the new independent body.

> *"Mediation should not be for something small but it would be useful for something more serious like bullying."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"A mediation service is needed for things that are not resolved internally."*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

Parents in particular, emphasise that all mediation services should be independent from the school. Some parents of primary school children feel so strongly about this that they suggest mediation takes place away from the school or nursery premises. They also suggest that all mediators should be parents themselves to ensure they emphasise with their situation.

> *"A mediator is a good idea . . . a neutral person, independently employed."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"I like the idea of mediation but it could be too in with the school."*
>
> Parent, Primary school

> *"It can't be someone involved in the school system - they wouldn't be impartial advisors. They would have to be truly independent to have any credibility."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

However, some parents feel that the mediation service will only be effective if it knows the school and the local situation which could be very problematic if the mediators were totally independent of the school. They are unsure how to resolve this contradiction of the need for independence combined with the need for local knowledge.

Parent Support Advisors

Views regarding whether Parent Support Advisors (PSAs) could have a role in supporting parents make complaints or mediate complaints are mixed. Many parents across all age groups have had a positive experience with PSAs and are thus generally supportive of them having a role in parental complaints. These parents feel that as PSAs are on the side of parents and suggest that PSAs could provide a helpful guiding hand to a parent navigating the complaints system for the first time.

> *"She* [the PSA] *was brilliant. She had coffee mornings with parents and could be contacted any time of day but was in school two days a week. She came from a social work background and was in really high demand by the parents even thought they were a little wary at first."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"They're like a go between - they sort things out for you."*
>
> Parent, Early years

Many others parents are less convinced about whether PSAs could have a role in supporting parents make complaints or mediate complaints. In particular, many question their independence. Parents, particularly those who have not come across PSAs, feel that as PSAs are based in schools and paid by the school, they may be biased towards and are thus an unsuitable candidate to offer parents support or to help mediate a complaint where that is required.

> *"When school is giving the money to fund the PSA, it is very hard for that person to be independent and support the child. Then the parents lose confidence and feel that they are not independent."*
>
> Parent, Secondary school

> *"They're based in schools, right? . . . I think they'll get too close to the staff and side with them if there was a complaint so they wouldn't be able to offer proper help to the parent."*
>
> Parent, Early years

Some practitioners on the other hand feel that PSAs' independence is compromised as their role is to help and support parents that they would side with parents.

> *"PSAs could have it as part of their role but they may be seen as always being on the side of the parent"*
>
> Practitioner, Primary school

Some other parents feel who have had more negative experiences of dealing with PSAs feel that they are overly interfering as they tell parents how to parents which is seen as 'stepping over the mark'. They therefore consider PSAs to be intimidating and not the sort of people who could help them in something difficult like complaining to a school or a nursery.

Some parents and many practitioners are concerned that the PSA's current remit is already too broad and suggest that they would not have the capacity or skills to support parents make a complaint and provide mediation where necessary. Some practitioners suggest that this could be overcome with training.

"PSA's could provide this role if they had the proper training"

<div align="right">Practitioner, Primary school</div>

"But they're covering too many areas - too broad. Would they be paid? Good idea but impractical. Like an HR Department but for a school"

<div align="right">Parent, Secondary school</div>

6.4   Conclusions and possible ways forward

Communication and low level resolutions

While most parents argue that they would not lack the skills or confidence to complain to their child's school or nursery if necessary it is clear that there is a need for more regular and more informal communication between schools / nurseries and parents in order to make parents feel more comfortable complaining if they need to. This communication will also help to prevent complaints from arising in the first place and preventing them escalating to higher levels for resolution.

Both parents and practitioners want complaints to be resolved at the lowest most localised level possible and many hope that more regular and less formal communication between teachers and parents will help achieve this. While there is support for the use of mediation and the establishment of the new independent complaints body, it is clear that both of these services should only be utilised if other avenues have failed to reach a resolution.

DCSF may which to consider suggesting ways in which schools and nurseries can establish channels to enable parents to have more regular communication with them and provide feedback on their work so that if they have a concern they do not have to make a formal complaint, such as an anonymous comments box. Providing more occasions where parents and teachers can interact informally, including an introduction session where by new parents can meet staff, will help to break down the barriers between the school or nursery and the parents and enable more open and regular communication.

Clear information

There is an appetite for more simple information about complaints policies and processes amongst both parents and practitioners. Indeed, many parents suggest that they would feel more confident about complaining if they could find out how on the school website. The information provided should include a description of the new independent body, if it is established, which is clear and simple. Though there is difference of opinion about the exclusion of some complaints which are considered time-wasting for consideration by any external bodies, if this does occur it will be important to include this information on schools' websites too.

Although schools are required by law to publicise their complaints policy the DCSF may wish to consider providing guidance where this information should be published and on how it should be presented to ensure that it is clear and easily understood. If the new independent body is established, the DCSF should consider looking into revising its principles to make them easier to understand and to ensure there is no confusion over what the body does and what its powers are.

Independence

The principle of independence is very important for both the new independent body and mediators. Parents and practitioners are clear that both of these services should be independent of the school as well as government, thus many question whether the independent body can be local and whether PSAs can have a role in mediation.

This principle of independence leads into separate recommendations for the new independent body and mediators. In terms of the new body, DCSF should look into ways to ensure that it is independent from schools as well as government and communicate this to parents and teachers. The question over whether it is local or national should be careful considered to ensure its independence is not compromised. In terms of mediators, if DCSF wishes to allocate this role to PSAs they may wish to consider ways to ensuring that both parents and teachers are convinced of their independence. If other mediators are preferred DCSF should careful consider their independence before engaging them in any mediation work.

7. Overarching conclusions

Time to Talk 3 is the third in a series of consultations with practitioners, parents and policy makers. The first Time to Talk consultation fed into the development of the Children's Plan. The second Time to Talk consultation evaluated some of the key aspects of the children's plan and made recommendations about how some of the policy areas could be put into practice. The third consultation focused on how to develop parents as partners in their child's learning.

There is one overarching message which was articulated across all of the Time To Talk consultations which relates to accessing information and support services. Many parents do not feel that they are aware of the range of support services available which can help them with their parenting role. Many also feel that the amount of information and guidance which they receive across a whole raft of areas relating to parenting e.g. health and wellbeing, education, leisure activities is insufficient to enable them to fully support their child in all aspects of their life. In the third Time to Talk event some parents did not feel that they had sufficient information or help from schools or nurseries to enable them to support their child's learning. The support for online reporting and personal tutors also revealed parents desire for increased information and support from schools.

There are a number of crosscutting issues which are common to several of the policy areas discussed at the third Time to Talk event:

- There is a desire for increased levels of and better communication between schools/childcare settings and parents in order to create a greater sense of partnership between parents and these learning environments. This is particularly desired by parents regarding information their child's progress (e.g. via online reporting) and how they can support them in their learning (e.g. via personal tutors). Having a better sense of partnership working between parents and schools may also result in fewer complaints and quicker resolution of complaints since there will be better empathy and communication between parents and schools.

- Parental lack of confidence is an issue which has implications for a number of policy areas discussed. Some parents lack confidence in their ability to help their children with learning activities and particularly some areas of the curriculum e.g. numeracy and science. Lack of confidence is also an issue which prevents some parents from making a complaint against a school or nursery

- Parents cite the lack of flexible working arrangements as an issue which affects their ability to engage sufficiently

department for
children, schools and families