



Engaging parents and families

Introduction to the case study practice illustrations

This practice example is aimed at school staff and policy-makers wanting to understand how schools and colleges engaged parents and families to support pupils' mental health. It is part of a series of five practice examples focused on mental health provision in schools. The other four practice examples are:

- Developing a whole organisational approach;
- Developing a preventative approach;
- Identification and assessment of needs; and
- Working in partnership.

They draw on learning from case studies which formed part of research on support for mental health and character education in schools, colleges and alternative provision across England^{1,2,3,4}. The case study schools were selected based on their reported active engagement in provision for mental health and character development. The case study settings included mainstream (both LA maintained and academy) primary and secondary schools and further education colleges. Where there was transferable learning for mainstream settings, the practice examples also contain findings from special schools and Pupil Referral Units (PRUs).

This practice example provides a brief of why schools and colleges felt it was important to engage parents and families, and what facilitators and challenges case study schools encountered when developing the engagement process. The paper also discusses the benefits of this engagement and the resources the school or college needed to development the engagement. Finally, some top tips and key learning points about ways to engage with parents and carers, drawing on the experiences of the case study schools and colleges are provided, as well as a short resources section of further reading.

Overview

Schools and colleges acknowledged the vital role they played in promoting good mental health; not just in children, but in families as a whole. Given the link between parental mental health problems and mental health problems in childhood/adolescence, schools and colleges were keen to promote positive mental health for the whole family, to signpost to support and (in some cases) to support parents directly.

Subsequently, schools and colleges worked hard to engage parents and families in issues around mental health through various communication approaches. Parents were also encouraged to support their child to access more tailored interventions aimed at improving mental health. In other settings, parents themselves were provided with support for their own mental health needs, including signposting to organisations that provide help and counselling.

Facilitators

Engaging parents was felt to be a central aspect of the role of pastoral staff, falling within their everyday remit as a part of the school or colleges' holistic offer. The key facilitators for engaging families were:

- **Various communication approaches:** Several different communication approaches were taken by schools to engage parents, including newsletters, apps and face to face events such as parent evenings or coffee mornings. Schools and colleges found it effective to implement several different routes of communication. In addition to the more standard communication approaches such as phone calls, emails and newsletters, one secondary school set up a parent portal on their website with a section devoted to mental health and wellbeing with downloadable resources and up to date information on making NHS referrals to specialist children and young people's mental health services.
- **Positive and non-judgemental dialogue:** In their communication with parents, staff adopted positive and non-judgemental communication styles with parents and championed pupils' academic, behavioural and socio-emotional progress and achievements, with regular feedback to parents.
- **Dedicated staffing / space for families:** Having committed pastoral staff and/or a dedicated space for families helped to further build positive relationships; this included through employing family support workers or having 'parent rooms' within schools to increase engagement.

Benefits

When the process of engaging families worked well, there were a number of benefits, including improved communication pathways between families and schools/colleges. Designated and accessible staff members, who parents had met and with whom they had developed positive relationships, led to more honesty from parents about their circumstances. Consequently, schools and colleges could support the whole family more appropriately, and refer to other relevant support (both internal and external to the school). This allowed schools to intervene early and more effectively tackle issues which may be impacting upon children's education. This holistic support was felt to be more likely to sustain lasting impact and increase positive long-term outcomes for both children and their families.

Challenges

Schools and colleges identified a number of challenges when it came to engaging parents and families:

- **Type of provision:** Large mainstream secondary schools and colleges did not have such strong relationships with families as, for example, primary schools where the school gate served as a useful engagement location. Secondary schools and colleges sometimes implemented induction programmes or specific initiatives to increase contact with parents.
- **Parents' views of the school:** Parents may have a negative view of school based on their own experience or past communication from the school around their child's behaviour. This could influence parents' view of schools/colleges and result in a decreased likelihood of them positively engaging. Some of the strategies schools and colleges put in place to

address this and encourage positive communication included schools sending home postcards for children's good behaviour.

- **Stigma:** Parents often did not want to acknowledge or label potential mental health problems, which could make it hard to gain their permission to put in place specialist support or referrals. This could also damage relationships with parents and result in disengagement, so required careful and sensitive communication approaches from school staff. Additionally, it was important to promote a whole organisation approach to mental health and wellbeing to reduce any associated stigma (see practice example [Developing a whole organisational approach](#)).
- **Confidentiality:** Staff had to balance what they could and could not tell parents with regard to the confidentiality of the pupil, which could be frustrating for parents where there had previously been an open dialogue. To minimise frustration, staff sought to be upfront with parents about confidentiality and information sharing.

Resourcing

Staff time was the main resource needed to engage parents and families. It took time to build up relationships with parents and required staff to have time to invest in this process, through being accessible and available. Training was also felt to be beneficial to equip staff with the skills to effectively communicate and engage with parents.

Key learning

Schools and colleges that were successfully engaging parents and families had a number of 'top tips' for others:

- **Promote an open door policy:** Promoting an inclusive and welcoming atmosphere helps break down barriers and encourages parents to seek help from the school if their child is having any issues at home or at school.
- **Have respect and be non-judgemental:** Recognise that parents are the experts in their own children and actively listen to what they have to say; their concerns and anxieties.
- **Take advantage of all communication methods:** Parents have busy schedules and schools and colleges were aware that one approach did not suit all. Subsequently, to maximise the number of parents who have seen information, settings used several different communication methods simultaneously including text messages, phone calls, emails, post cards, newsletters, social media posts and website/app content as well as opportunities for face to face contact.
- **Communicate positive information and successes:** Schools and colleges thought it was important to contact parents about positive things their child had achieved through phone calls or postcards home to promote a positive view of the setting.

References

1. Marshall, L; Rooney, K; Dunatchik, A and Smith, N. (2017) *Survey of Character Education in Schools in England*. London: DfE
2. Marshall, L; Wishart, R; Dunatchik, A and Smith, N. (2017) *Supporting Mental Health in Schools and Colleges – Quantitative survey*. London: DfE

3. White, C, Gibb, J, Lea, J and Street, C. (2017) *Developing Character Skills in Schools. Qualitative case studies*. London: DfE
4. White, C, Lea, J, Gibb, J and Street, C. (2017) *Supporting Mental Health in Schools and Colleges – Qualitative case studies*. London: DfE

Resources and further reading

Campbell, C. (2011) How to involve hard-to-reach parents: encouraging meaningful parental involvement with schools. Full research report. National College for School Leadership. www.dera.ioe.ac.uk. This report explores practice in the field of parental engagement with the aim of producing a toolkit of creative ideas and strategies to support school leaders who seek to involve parents from hard-to-reach groups more effectively.

British Council: <https://eal.britishcouncil.org/teachers/parental-engagement>. A useful website providing advice and guidance about engaging parents who have English as a second language.

Teaching Times (2017) Ofsted and Parents www.teachingtimes.com. Guidance on the importance of involving parents to improve a settings teaching, students learning and the setting's Ofsted rating.

Education Endowment Foundation toolkit:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/resources/teaching-learning-toolkit/parental-involvement/>. The parental involvement toolkit covers the active engagement of parents in supporting their children's learning at school. This includes programmes focused on parents and their skills, general approaches to encourage parents to support their children to read or do mathematics, and more intensive programmes for families in crisis.

One organisation recommended by a case study school was the Ministry of Parenting:

<http://www.theministryofparenting.com>. They provide various training sessions for professionals, including the STOP training which aims to train professionals, such as teachers, to enable parents to have a greater understanding about the development process of their teenage child.

Another resource recommended by a primary school was the the Family Child Care Assessment tool developed in the US. It allows settings to assess how successfully they engage families and listen to parents: <http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengtheningfamilies/2014/FAMILY-CHILD-CARE-PROGRAM-SELF-ASSESSMENT.pdf>

MindEd: www.minded.org.uk – is a free resource on children and young people's mental health written for all professionals working with children and young people. The online portal provides over 200 e-learning modules including a session 'Communicating with Families' which provides an overview of the basic principles for engaging families, information about listening skills and ideas for questions that can aid effective communication with families.

MindEd for families: <https://www.minded.org.uk/families/index.html#/> - online advice and support for for parents and carers who are concerned about a child with ill mental health.