

Improving Communication with Hard-to-Reach Parents



A Guide for Improved School-Family Partnership

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Engagement and management suite

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Introduction - Epstein and the “3 spheres of influence”

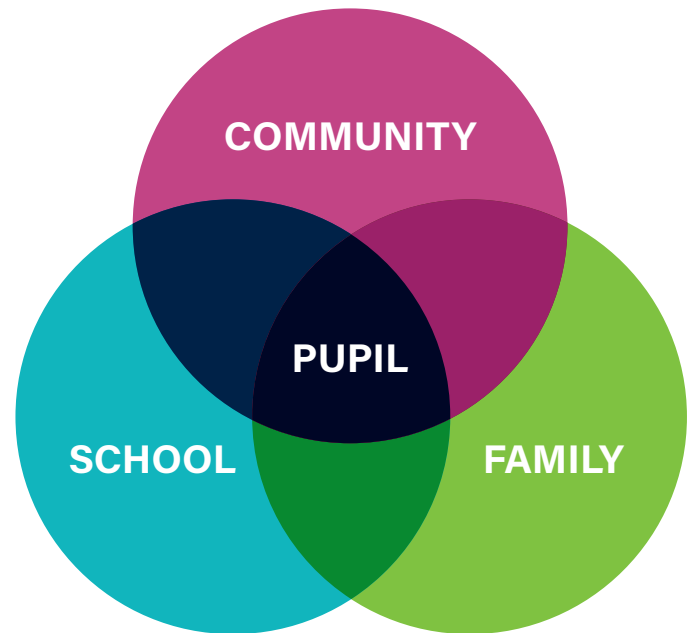
In 2001, a notable academic on the subject of school-home partnership, Joyce Epstein, introduced the concept of “the overlapping spheres of influence”, which identifies the three major contexts in which children learn and develop.

Epstein states that while pupils are primarily responsible for their own educational achievements, school, family and community influences can help engage, energise, guide and motivate students to succeed.

This document summarises some of the subsequent research on school-family-community relationships, with specific reference to so-called ‘hard-to-reach’ families. It has been written to help support practitioners in primary and secondary schools, including senior leaders, teachers, teaching assistants and trainee teachers, with a view to improving outcomes through improved parental involvement and engagement.

Whilst the terms ‘parental involvement’ and ‘parental engagement’ may appear to be interchangeable, they have been conceptualised by Goodall and Montgomery (2014) as part of a continuum, with ‘parental involvement’ at one end focused on parents’ participation in school-based activities and ‘parental engagement’ at the other end being focused on the children’s learning that takes place away from school.

Parental involvement would therefore include attending parents’ evenings, meetings with teachers, workshops, and social events, volunteering in the classroom, and communication between parents and teachers.



Parental engagement refers to activities where parents directly engage in and support their child’s learning, for example, reading together, helping with homework, and taking children on cultural outings, and to clubs, groups, and other activities. It also encompasses a general positive attitude towards learning and education, a supportive home learning environment, and high expectations for children’s academic achievement.

Parental involvement, in alignment with the school, is a stepping stone to wider parental engagement in learning, with the ultimate objective being the improvement of outcomes.

The question is, how can schools better shape their everyday practices to support the emergence of strong parental involvement *and* engagement?

The need for greater inclusion

It’s safe to assume that parents of ‘middle class’ families are less likely than those from more disadvantaged backgrounds to be disengaged from their children’s education. Generally speaking, these parents have fewer money worries, are less likely to work shifts, may have had a more positive experience in the education system and are more likely to have benefitted from an extended educational experience.

So, in order to make material improvements to the level that parents are involved and engaged in the school’s

teachings, it follows that we’d probably be better to focus more effort on those who may feel marginalised by their own experience, the system or even the school itself. These are often termed ‘hard to reach’ families.

There are multiple reasons why some parents are harder to engage in interventions (Axford et al. 2012; Boag-Munroe and Evangelou 2012; Pote et al. 2019), which are summarised below.

Factors hindering engagement

Barriers to engagement have been categorised as being either 'system', 'school' or family level factors:

System level factors

The NASUWT's Teacher Wellbeing Survey (2022) sought opinions from almost 12,000 education professionals, 90% of whom had experienced more work-related stress in the previous 12 months.

This increase was attributed to: untenable workload (52%); the consequences of the pandemic (34%), worries about pupil behaviour (24%), pupil wellbeing (24%), pupil academic performance (22%) and finances (11%).

In this environment it becomes more difficult for many teachers to be able to devote the time and energy necessary to support better parental engagement. This invariably impacts on those who are 'harder-to-reach' - the most vulnerable families.

Whilst it may be unrealistic for schools to change systemic issues such as teacher pay, or to expect an individual teacher to materially change pupil wellbeing or long-term academic performance, individual workplaces should seek, assess and consider solutions to mitigate the mental and physical stress and anxiety linked to work.

School level factors

From a leadership perspective, schools should adopt a more holistic and sustained approach to parental engagement, so that it is integrated into school improvement plans and considered within a wider community context (Epstein et al. 2018; Goodall 2018).

Above we pointed to the workload crisis and an inherent lack of time in the system. This is one significant barrier to improving parental involvement, because teachers need time to communicate with parents. Schools should find and adopt tools and systems to help make more time and make the process of communication easier.

For example, what could be done to minimise time-consuming clerical and administrative tasks, such as inputting information into requisite systems that in reality only deflect staff from more critical tasks that can make a real difference?

Schools need to provide parents with knowledge and skills on how to best engage with them for the benefit of their children. However, could it be that schools, as well as some parents, are hard to reach? Pushor and Amendt (2018) suggest that schools have a responsibility to look within to evaluate if barriers to improved parental engagement could possibly be related to internal issues or processes.

Bierman et al. (2015) assert that practitioners involved in implementing interventions for parents need strong communication skills and an ability to form positive working alliances. It shouldn't be assumed that teachers innately have the necessary skills to communicate with parents and families effectively, particularly those 'hard to reach' ones.

It may actually be necessary to change the behaviour of school staff and develop a collaborative and supportive school context (Goldman and Burke 2017).

Training should be put in place to reiterate the importance of refraining from using professional jargon, for example. But it should go beyond these functional aspects to address the wider factors that affect family life generally and parents' ability to support their children's learning specifically. This is even more significant when it comes to supporting teachers in understanding the cultural nuances of non-native families or specifics relating to students' SEND.



Family level factors

Modern day life has a habit of getting in the way. Everyone's inbox is overflowing, we are all suffering from information overload, and there's always too much to do. Even with the best will in the world, sometimes it's all too easy to miss, or even completely forget, something that's important to us. This is a common reality that can affect all parents' ability to engage – and a reminder that we must ensure the systems that we use to communicate, not just our communications themselves, must be as simple as possible to access.

The 'Independent Family Review' by the Children's Commissioner in the UK (September 2022), found that almost half of all UK children are now growing up outside of a 'traditional' family. That means that our communications also have to be sensitive to the additional pressures of lone-parent families, split families, extended families, stepfamilies and grandparent families, to name but a few varieties.

'Disadvantaged' families can have additional layers of complexity that hinder them from more effective involvement in school life, and why they are deserving of greater attention when it comes to efforts to improve parental engagement.



Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) parents

If parents consider their own time in education to have been unsuccessful or fruitless, they may very well suffer from a lack of aspiration for their offspring. Or they may wish for their child to benefit from a better education than they had, but lack the knowledge, know-how, learning strategies, skills and confidence to support their child effectively.

These children are often likely to attend the most challenging schools, perpetuating a lack of engagement and failure. In the most deprived schools, busy parents often work long and unsociable hours, working shifts and/or holding down multiple jobs. There may be social care issues such as addiction, domestic abuse and poor mental health, which all make it even more difficult to engage parents in their child's learning.

Schools with a higher proportion of low SES parents clearly have to work hard to support parents' involvement with the school in general, let alone engagement, as well as with specific learning activities.

Schools increasingly appear to be employing a dedicated, full-time, non-teaching 'key worker'. A variety of terms are used to name this role such as 'family liaison', 'family support worker', 'pupil premium coordinator', 'school counsellor', 'school outreach worker' and 'parent ambassador'. This individual provides one-to-one bespoke support for these families, which involves direct contact (face-to-face or phone conversations) as many do not have access to email and may be less likely to routinely use the school's online communication channels.

SEND pupils

Some academic research has indicated that the challenges of parenting children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) can negatively impact a parent's ability to engage (Lendrum, Barlow and Humphrey 2015; Rogers et al. 2009).

For example, Rogers et al. (2009) found that parents of children with ADHD in mainstream schools felt less able to help their children academically, and had less time and energy for involvement in their children's academic lives, compared to parents of children without ADHD.

Parents of children with SEND often have to contend with time-consuming bureaucracy in community, social care, and school systems, and often feel they have insufficient information to effectively care for their child.

Mainstream education focuses on subject-specific learning, whereas in special education, schools support pupils' development in the broader areas of cognition and learning, communication and interaction, social, emotional and mental health, and sensory and physical development.

In a study by Blackman and Mahon (2016) teachers in SEND settings maintained that parents found it difficult to cope with their child's disability and were unsure how they could assist their child.

Burke (2012) notes that parent-teacher meetings about children with SEND's Individual Education Plans (IEPs) are designed to involve parents in their child's education, but that it can be difficult for parents to be active participants in these meetings and contribute to decision making, whilst also listening to the school's perspective and not appearing aggressive.

In light of these challenges, and also given that children with SEND are at higher risk of experiencing poor outcomes in a range of areas (Department for Education 2011), encouraging parental engagement of children with additional needs requires particular focus, also on account of the fact that it can be more challenging.

English as an additional language (EAL)

Research commissioned by The Bell Foundation (Evans et al, 2016) shows that parents who have limited language proficiency in English often have a lack of knowledge and understanding of important areas concerning school life. This may be because education systems are very different in families' home countries.

It's likely that the parents of EAL learners may also lack the English language skills to support with homework or curriculum content.

These findings suggest that EAL families may need more sustained and intensive support in helping them to engage, including practical strategies to support home learning and more tailored, accessible communications to encourage a positive dialogue about learning.

Make an effort to ensure you are a culturally inclusive organisation, by reflecting on and celebrating the cultural, religious and linguistic diversity in the school and the wider community.

Be sure, also, to translate promotional materials into relevant languages, ensuring that they are linguistically and culturally appropriate.



6 steps to better parental involvement and engagement

A 'toolbox' of strategies, bespoke to both the school and individual children and families, is necessary to improve the level of parents' involvement with both their child's education and the wider school community. Here we consider 6 considerations to help achieve just that...

1 - Pursue face-to-face contact

There's no substitute for face-to-face contact, something which became blatantly apparent during the Covid pandemic.

We've already stressed the importance of staff training and how to ensure parent interactions are as positive as possible. This is particularly important in schools with a high number of socially and economically disadvantaged children as well as those with a high proportion EAL families.

Remember that some parents may be anxious about the thought of school as an institution due to their own negative experience of being a pupil. From the very first touchpoint and in every interaction, parents must be made to feel comfortable to come into school. It's imperative to always provide a warm welcome and avoid educational acronyms. It's also of pivotal importance to dedicate time to those who may appear to be withdrawn, and not be overly attentive to the vociferous ones!

Improved engagement with learning activities will depend upon how these activities are promoted and the manner in which they are delivered.

Whilst 'parents evenings' remain an important opportunity to further parental interaction, informal face-to-face interactions between teacher and parent as well as between parents should be encouraged – and they do not always have to focus on a specific aspect of learning as these can help build and develop engagement for more formal activities, as well as provide an opportunity to promote engagement with them.

One key development that took place during the pandemic was the normalisation of a more blended learning approach and the introduction of tools that facilitated online communication, such as 'virtual parents' evenings! Whilst online parent interactions are a useful stepping-stone to connecting with certain harder to reach groups, meeting in person whenever possible helps build the parent-school relationship.

Remember to remain flexible about the location and timing of services to accommodate families' needs. This might even mean offering home visits or providing

transport for families who lack means of travel. And always ensure you make services welcoming, convenient and less intimidating (possibly even providing food and childcare). Some schools have even seen greater success by incentivising attendance at events (by allocating a budget for gift cards, for example, or running raffles).

2 - Build positive perceptions of the school

Poor Ofsted results or other previous negative situations, such as complaints about a newly introduced school policy, or poorly executed communications or events, can have a long-lasting negative impact on parental perceptions of the school.

To mitigate this, schools should use a range of techniques to show parents what the school offers and to instil child and parent aspiration.

We've highlighted the importance of getting parents into school with regularity so they can understand its culture, feel its values and be inspired by the great work you do for the children.

Beyond that it's about continually building, embedding and developing a relationship with parents based on mutual trust.

'Marketing' is a word that suffers from a negative connotation in many settings, however your mission and values must be clear within the fabric of the school building and be replicated consistently across every communications touchpoint.

3 - Link with the Community

The third sphere of influence beyond the school and the family is the local community. The more a school supports community transformation, the more that community will be likely, in turn, to support education.

Whilst we've talked about the importance of getting parents into school, it's also important for the school to be represented in creative off-site: it could be by fundraising to support the homeless, a performance by the school's dance troupe at a community event, year 6 pupils reading to younger children at the local pre-school, or helping elderly community members with computer skills.

Consider holding events at venues other than the school, such as the village hall or community centre. This can help those who feel uncomfortable about going into the school to make connections and begin to feel more comfortable about joining events in school in the future.

4 - Appoint parental engagement 'key-workers'

We've already mentioned that some schools are turning to 'key-workers' to help fast-track parental involvement and engagement and foster increased community liaison. These could be engaged parents from similar cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, or male staff to better reach fathers.

The important thing is that they should be non-teaching members of the community. As such they have time to build relationships and follow up on actions, but also understand the issues faced by parents and so are relatable and provide a neutral and non-threatening point of contact.

Whilst a dedicated staff member would obviously come with an associated cost, alternative options may be worthy of consideration. For example, you might entertain appointing parent ambassadors, or encouraging already engaged parents to foster 'snowball' referral of certain initiatives or events.

5 - Foster a culture of celebration

Some schools fall into the trap of misjudging the balance of communication, with parents being informed about behaviour points or attendance shortcomings with greater regularity than any positives.

This can be demoralising and counter-productive to parents who feel they are doing their best when the odds are stacked against them.

It's fundamentally important to celebrate success. Take some time to identify, measure, recognise, and reward meaningful efforts and achievements and celebrate often with those involved.

This could involve sending a brief message to parents when things are going well, not just when there is a problem, and celebrating evidence of learning beyond the completion of specific homework tasks.

If a parent is told their child has done something positive, they are more likely to demonstrate pride and show positive encouragement for that behaviour. We are, after all, in this together and the carrot usually works better than the stick.

6 - Streamline communications

A host of published research points to the effectiveness of well-thought through school communications for improving engagement, attainment and a range of other outcomes, such as attendance in all age groups (e.g. York et al. 2014; Kraft and Rogers 2015; Miller et al. 2016; Bergman and Chan 2017; Doss et al. 2017).

Schools' approach to communications may be particularly important for engaging parents who could play an important role but often have less contact with school (McWayne et al. 2013). Hurwitz et al. (2015) and Kraft et al. (2017) found text messaging had particularly positive effects on involving other family members besides the primary contact, who might not be engaged (such as fathers).

School communications are likely to be more effective if they are personalised, linked to learning and focused on promoting positive interactions, such as celebrating success (Doss et al. 2017).

Many schools use text-messaging (or push notifications to an app) to prompt conversations about learning at home, highlight the importance of particular skills, provide tips for short and simple activities for parents to do with their children or simply to encourage and reinforce best practice. Parents generally also find information about upcoming tests, homework assignments and grades useful reminders and prompts.

However careful thought needs to be given to the frequency, timing and targeting of messages to ensure that your communications programme doesn't in any way irritate parents.

It's also important for your school to standardise on a single communications tool. Remember that only a percentage of your community will be active on social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, and expecting parents to interact on diverse applications is only likely to result in confusion and the likelihood of certain messages getting 'lost'

Critical elements for communications success

An excellent level of parental engagement is underpinned by great, two-way communications between the senior leadership team (SLT) and teachers, between the school and families and between the school and its wider community. Below we highlight four further considerations to ensure success.

1 - Time

Like all of us, parents are time poor. The last thing they want to be doing is wasting their evenings trawling through e-mails, text messages or newsletters to find specific information they know they saw at some undetermined time in the past.

Ideally, you should ensure that everything they need is in one place. No matter if a parent wants to see the school calendar, confirm their parents' evening slot, view their child's dinner money balance, monitor upcoming homework assignments, send a direct message to a teacher, submit a permission slip or check behaviour points – they know exactly where to look and have the information that they need at their fingertips.

The system your school uses can have a massive impact on parents' perception of the school's competence.

2 - Resource

We're in the midst of a workload crisis and all school staff are under pressure. You should be aiming to improve parental engagement, at the same time as reducing the administrative burden on teachers, the leadership team and support staff. Not only can the right system help your team to be more efficient, it can also help them to be more effective.

Less time spent on admin means that greater effort can be dedicated to tasks that are more likely to make a difference to outcomes.

Something as simple as a parents' evening scheduling system or automated update of parent contact information straight back into your MIS can save literally days of unnecessary administration time.

3 - Simplicity

The system you choose to manage daily school life needs to be as user-friendly and as simple as possible for all concerned.

For teachers, this could be updating a marksheet, taking the register or sending a message to club members in seconds. For office staff this could quickly and easily updating pupil and parent data online or obtaining trip permissions. For the SLT this could be accessing analytical information on SEND pupil attendance to share with your Ofsted inspector.

You need to ensure such tasks are intuitive and straightforward to execute with little or no required training.

Quite simply, if a system is easy to use, it will be adopted more widely.

4 - Cost

Why print your school newsletter and send it home in book bags when you can archive them in your system? Why send expensive text messages when you can broadcast push notifications free of charge?

All too often, schools invest in multiple disparate apps to handle communications, engagement and administration. These systems may all have different interfaces, require different log-on credentials and have over-engineered functionality, much of which is rarely or never used.

This can be a very costly approach. Consider retiring multiple existing systems and introducing an all-in-one system with savings potentially amounting to thousands of pounds.



Conclusion

The link between good parental engagement and improved outcomes is well documented.

In this guide we've referenced 'parental involvement' as it relates to parents' participation in school-based activities and 'parental engagement' being about children's learning that takes place away from school.

Whilst 'improved parental involvement' is a worthy objective for all schools, it shouldn't really be seen as the end goal – rather a 'stepping-stone' to engagement in wider learning.

We considered numerous barriers to parental engagement, and categorised them as 'systemic', 'school' or 'family' level factors – each of which should be given careful consideration.

Whilst systemic issues such as teacher remuneration or workload issues are unlikely to be able to be completely resolved, schools should find and adopt tools and systems which can help minimise work stress and anxiety – think about those which can 'make' time and simplify processes.

Schools should also ensure that they look *within* to evaluate if barriers to improved parental engagement are not being caused by existing internal issues or processes.

In actual fact, to make material improvements to parental involvement and engagement, most effort should be channelled into those who may be marginalised by their situation. In particular we're referring to low Socio-Economic Status (SES) parents, SEND pupils or families with English as an additional language (EAL).

It should not be assumed that staff are naturally adept at parent liaison. Teacher training should be in place to make sure standards are high. This should include specific content relating to these disadvantaged groups.

We recommended schools follow 6 key steps to improve parental involvement and engagement, as follows:

1 - Pursue face-to-face contact

2 - Build positive perceptions of the school

3 - Link with the Community

4 - Appoint parental engagement 'key-workers'

5 - Foster a culture of celebration

6 - Streamline communications

Finally, we stressed how great parental engagement is always underpinned by great, two-way communications between the school and its stakeholders. This is particularly important when considering improving engagement with hard-to-reach groups.

We highlighted and discussed four key considerations to ensure success, namely: time; resource; simplicity and cost.



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Overnet Data is the developer of Edulink One, the all-in-one engagement and management application that supports parents, staff and students in and out of the classroom.

For more information about how we can help your school improve parental engagement, please contact:

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