

Improving the partnership between parents and teachers

Summary note: roundtable event, 11:30 – 12:45 on Wednesday 2nd December

Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced a new way of working upon teachers, pupils, and parents alike. Widespread school closures and a shift to home learning has brought a need for teachers and parents to adapt and find ways to ensure that children can continue to learn remotely. The role and involvement of parents in their child's learning has been placed under a microscope, with parents expected to assist in the teaching or manage the learning of their children. The key to successful relationships will be ensuring that teachers' already substantial workloads are not increased by the demands of more individualised delivery of lessons, feedback or task-setting.

The benefits of successful partnerships can be significant: research has shown that strong parental engagement has a positive impact on academic attainment, regardless of age or socio-economic status. It is vital that schools and families work together to ensure that pupils receive a high-quality and consistent education in the face of possible further closures. Parental engagement and improved partnerships between teachers and home environments is particularly important if pupils are in and out of school for the remainder of the school year, as is proving likely for many pupils in the UK, with 46% of secondary schools and 16% of primary schools having pupils working from home because of COVID-19 outbreaks.

This roundtable was intended to highlight best practice for the school: home relationship, focusing on why the relationship is important, examples of best practice and how all schools can improve these vital relationships.

The discussion was divided into three sections:

- Why is parental/carers engagement important in the wake of COVID-19?
- What worked well and not so well during the school closures? What does an effective and efficient relationship between parents and teachers look like?
- How can we improve the way parents and teachers work together to make sure children continue to make progress?

Why is parental/carers engagement important in the wake of COVID-19?

Speakers emphasised that it must be easy to share information between school and the home. Parents should be able to support their children, but it is important that they do not add to the workload of teachers. Learning should be considered a team effort - the ability to provide learning continuity in the home is a key driver of successful schools. The pandemic has changed the relationship between schools and homes: teachers are now delivering lessons in varied settings and styles, depending on the technology available and the needs of the pupil groups.

Due to greater transparency, parent expectations have grown. Firefly Learning noticed changes in parental behaviour on its platform, with 8 x more parental engagement across the platform during parts of the summer term when all children were learning remotely. This could be a permanent shift in the school/home relationship. Approaches to parental engagement vary by the age of the child – programmes like Surestart have demonstrated how early intervention and working with families (particularly with expecting mothers) can have significant benefits on the health and learning outcomes of children. Similar programmes have also demonstrated the importance of learning through play.

Speakers noted that approaches with parents at primary level are often more developed than at secondary level. This is partially due to changes in the content or lesson delivery and the more autonomous learning of the child. This held true during lockdown, when there was typically more engagement with parents of primary children than with parents of secondary children.

Speakers highlighted that parents' engagement with schools might be shaped by their own experiences in school. If parents did not 'succeed' in or enjoy their own education or have good experiences of the system, it may have impacted the way they trust and support their own children and their teachers. This may materialise in the form of disparities between parental attitudes and ethics towards homework. Similarly, attitudes may vary if the digital divide affects access to content and regular contact with teachers: internet, devices, and appropriate workspaces are all required for effective home learning. Schools should have a good understanding of the types of access pupils have so that they can support them appropriately. One speaker coined this period the 'biggest parental engagement pilot ever'.

Referring to surveys that have taken place, speakers noted that parents have generally been pleased with the level of support they have received from their child's school, but many do still consider there to be a gap between the level of engagement they would like and the level they are receiving, particularly in cases where schools' expectations of parents are high and where parents may benefit from more guidance.

According to surveys, there is an appetite for this increased parental engagement to be continued once children fully return to classrooms. However, there is a desire for more guidance on how to support their child, specific to the age and phase of their children. Parents would like this guidance to cover how to monitor and improve the mental health and wellbeing of the child as well as further detail on core curriculum concepts by subject.

It is important to acknowledge that there are varied ways parents can be involved in the education of their child, such as supervising their work and activities, reading to and with them, attending activities, supporting their interests and communicating with the school to create a positive and supportive home learning environment.

A comprehensive international literature review has been undertaken on effective parental engagement, to answer two questions:

1. What does the evidence say around the impact of parental engagement on learning outcomes? Does high quality parental engagement have an impact?

The piece found solid evidence that if parents are more involved, it benefits the attainment and related learning outcomes of children. This appears to be the case across age ranges, as well as whether provided by fathers or mothers. The evidence suggested that high parental expectations were strongly linked to positive learning outcomes. Some activities were also highlighted as particularly advantageous: reading to children in early years, enrichment outings for children of primary age and an active interest in class and course work for secondary age children.

2. What is the effectiveness of interventions designed to increase engagement? How can we improve engagement?

The evidence on this is weaker as there are fewer studies. The studies are of lower quality, so it is difficult to attribute cause. However, there is evidence of benefit of summer learning programmes in reducing learning loss and some evidence of the benefit of teachers communicating with parents via text messages or other more informal communications. The evidence also suggests that schools should be cautious of offering general information to parents. Schools should only communicate targeted messages.

Several speakers described the importance of providing a holistic approach to parental engagement and that it becomes a core part of school's 'DNA', rather than being an add-on. The biggest gains can be made by communicating with hard-to-reach parents, so schools should persist with these relationships.

To improve these approaches, it is important to provide training for teachers on how to engage successfully and meaningfully with parents. Teacher training courses do not tend to cover this in detail. This should be rectified, especially if technology is enabling more individualised relationships with parents, tailored to the style of communications that reaps the desired positive, engaged relationship. Several speakers noted the importance of an 'optimistic culture' in schools.

What worked well and not so well during the school closures? What does an effective and efficient relationship between parents and teachers look like?

Many schools have faced difficulties, but there have been many opportunities to boost parental engagement and improve relationships. However, approaches vary significantly between schools so it may be preferable to avoid these approaches being developed organically as this may lead to attainment gap widening rather than narrowing. There are opportunities and real dangers in allowing significant variation and more guidance should be provided on the optimal relationship approaches.

One speaker noted that the focus of their group's engagement is parents of pupils qualifying for the pupil premium. For many parents, the changing relationship of recent months has shown them how dedicated teachers are to their children. There has also been an improvement in the understanding of parental expectations regarding teachers' working hours and when they are likely to be able to respond to queries. Groups have also seen improved engagement with parents at parents' evenings, given improved and more frequent engagement and reframing of the relationship as partners, as mentioned above.

Teachers may feel uneasy about facing up to parents, particularly if they are delivering uncomfortable feedback. However, some schools' approaches have been framed around the idea that many parents will feel a degree of fear and anxiety when speaking with teachers, due to their own experiences at school. The most effective relationships are typically where the emotion is taken out of the discussion and there is a mutual understanding of a more collaborative relationship with clearer roles for parent and teacher.

Schools have sought clarification from parents regarding their child's device access which can help inform efficient procurement and resourcing approaches, as well as teachers' expectations of children's working patterns. While some schools are prioritising investments in technology, others are opting to prioritise investing as much as possible in people - this includes tutoring and employing additional young graduates, rather than purchasing devices and internet access. Some schools have taken decisions to invest in technology because of the rising proportions of their pupils qualifying for free school meals this year compared to the 2019/20 academic year, suggesting device and internet access may be an issue for a significant number of their pupils. Due to this, schools are aware of the digital divide that exists between their pupils. Whilst a significant financial outlay and investment, there are many benefits of having devices in the remote learning situation, including being better able to communicate with parents.

Effective use of devices enables parents and teachers to keep a close on what is working and not working for individual children while learning remotely. Devices and use of learning platforms can provide ongoing visibility through more continuous reporting, informing smaller course corrections and helping parents direct their support.

One speaker noted that relationships with parents of pupils in their secondary schools are typically boosted by visits to the homes of their new year 7s. This is similar to the approaches of many primary schools but demonstrates how approaches to parental engagement at primary can be applied to secondary. In the current context, these meetings and visits have needed to take place virtually, but this approach does typically start relationships on a positive footing.

How can we improve the way parents and teachers work together to make sure children continue to make progress?

We should:

- work to enhance the sense of a wider community supporting the learning of a child, forging effective partnerships between parents and teachers.
- reduce friction between parents and teachers- if parents would prefer to meet virtually, then this should be facilitated.
- target communications effectively and avoid communications fatigue. Communications should be more tailored to the phase and focuses of individual learners.
- consider what we do well at primary level when there is typically more effective parental engagement (likely to be partially due to children spending more time with an individual teacher) and review what should be continued and transferred to secondary level.
- think creatively about what lessons from lockdown can be applied moving forward. For instance, some children in the early years have developed more independence during periods when parents were not able to take them directly to and settle them in to classes.
- ensure that schools and parents access and share guidance documents formed by the EEF on the parent and teacher relationship to minimise variation in approaches to parental engagement: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/school-themes/parental-engagement/>
- consider how we can utilise tailored text or other communications messaging with parents, given the success and impact of this trialled intervention.
- improve the quality of training for teachers on the teacher/parent relationship.
- consider how we can build appropriate parental access to schools' virtual curricula and course content to help them guide their child's learning.