





# DEVELOPING GOOD PRACTICE

A school's guide to engaging parents  
in their children's education

**RENEWING  
COMMUNITIES**



**Health  
Action**  
North & West Belfast



“Imagine an education system where none of the educators are trained. Indeed, where training is seen as a sign of weakness. There is no curriculum, but the amount to be learnt is vast and it is assumed everyone knows what it is. There is no assessment, but if people fail the penalties are severe. This is not any old education system, but the foundation for every course, job, and profession in the country. It is, of course the family. Parents are the most important educators in any person’s life, yet they get most of the blame when things go wrong and little support or training to ensure that every child gets the best possible start in life”.

Titus Alexander

## Foreword

For children to achieve their fullest potential, parental involvement in education is essential. In pursuit of this, the Belfast Education and Library Board (BELB) has been promoting work with parents for many years and specifically since 2000 through the Parent Support Programme. Working with nursery, primary and special schools and in partnership with a range of voluntary and statutory organisations, a number of successful Parent Support Programmes have been developed. These programmes require time, energy and commitment of everyone - principals, teachers, parents and external agencies.

Many schools wish to promote effective parental involvement. This guide, produced by the BELB and Health Action Zone, is based upon the shared learning and experiences from the current programmes and it is hoped will assist schools in developing their own programmes.

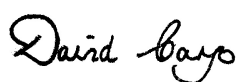
The guide is intended to:

- support, share and celebrate existing good practice;
- act as a route planner to guide schools on a journey from expressing a desire to involve parents in education through to sustaining their involvement on a long term basis;
- show what can be achieved when people are prepared to try new things, work together and learn from each other;
- address some of the problems you are likely to encounter in developing work with parents.

This guide has also been informed through a consultation process with school principals, teachers, parent support workers, representatives from organisations who work with parents as well as parents themselves. A full summary of consultation responses can be viewed on BELB website [www.belb.co.uk](http://www.belb.co.uk)

Achieving successful parental involvement is not easy. In understanding the positive impact parents have on their children's education, teachers must be supported and equipped with the skills and resources to work effectively with them. Similarly parents will be challenged to commit more of their time and energy in supporting their children's learning.

It is hoped that this booklet assists schools and parents in bringing about the changes which are necessary to establish dynamic and effective partnerships in the interests of the children and young people of the city.



David Cargo  
Chief Executive



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# Acknowledgements

Developing Good Practice Guide – A school’s guide to engaging parents in their children’s education could not have been written without the assistance of many people.

In developing the guide a consultation process was undertaken with school principals, parent support staff, outside agencies, BELB and parents, who willingly gave of their time to share their knowledge and experience by participating in focus groups, one to one interviews and providing written submissions. We would like to thank them for their valuable contribution.

We would also like to acknowledge the contribution made by the Parent Support Steering Group, which consisted of members from HAZ, BELB, Belfast Metropolitan College, East Belfast Partnership Board, NSPCC, Edenderry Nursery School and Euston Street Primary School.

A list of participants can be found in Appendix 1. A full summary of the consultation responses can be found on BELB website [www.belb.co.uk](http://www.belb.co.uk).

Marian McKinney, Parent Support Co-ordinator  
Caroline Magowan, SEWO Parent Support Programme

# 1 INTRODUCTION

**“It is essential that parents and the wider community play their part in supporting the work of the school, raising the aspirations and expectations of pupils and valuing education”.**

**Every School A Good School**

## Background to this Guide

The importance of parents in the education of their children is not a new concept. Schools have long recognised parents as children’s first educators and already use traditional mechanisms for engaging parents e.g. PTA’s and parents as volunteers. Historically partnerships have been built around short-term projects focussed on developing work with parents in schools, such as multi-agency SHAPE Project, funded by Making Belfast Work (Schools; Homes, and Agencies in Partnership in Education) and the Making Belfast Work CATER Programme in 1990s.

More recently BELB and HAZ have worked in partnership to promote parental involvement in schools and developed a model of practice which was piloted in St Josephs and Holy Family Primary Schools. Renewing Communities funding secured by HAZ in 2006 made further development of this work possible.

Through this partnership and with the support of our multi agency Steering Group we were able to develop Parent Support Programmes for a one year period in 10 primary schools, 4 nursery schools and 2 special schools.

Although funding for this particular initiative was short term, BELB and HAZ have been supporting schools to engage with parents for a substantial period of time. This guide is based upon our collective experience of working with schools over many years.

While we recognise that our experience has been outside of the post primary sector, which may require different mechanisms to engage parents, we feel that this guide is a valuable resource for all schools who wish to extend parental involvement beyond traditional activities.

## Why work with Parents?

### The Policy Context

Support for parents, children and young people is a strong feature of current government policy to address social inclusion enshrined in the priority given to early years and the Children and Young Peoples Strategy which has as its aim:

*“To reduce underachievement and improve life chances of children by enhancing their educational development and fostering their health well being and social inclusion through the integrated delivery of other support services to ensure every child has the best start in life”.*

The Health Action Zone recognised the importance of parents’ participation in a range of work programmes over the years, which focused on clearly connecting the school to broader developments within communities.

The importance of parental and wider community involvement is recognised in the Department of Education Extended Schools Policy which encourages schools to maintain and develop links with parents and their local community.

This ethos is further supported through the Governments Renewing Communities Strategy which states that Government *“will endeavour to improve the life chances of all people living in our most disadvantaged communities”*. More recently the Department of Education’s ‘Every School a Good School’ emphasises the role of parents in education:

*“It is essential that parents and the wider community play their part in supporting the work of the school, raising the aspirations and expectations of pupils and valuing education”.*

With such strong support it is appropriate and pertinent to promote parental involvement in schools.

### The Parent and Child Perspective

The impact of parental involvement cannot be underestimated. Children have two main educators in their lives – their parents and their teachers. Parents are the prime educators until the child attends nursery or starts school and remain a major influence on their children’s learning throughout school and beyond. The benefits of parental involvement are well documented with respect to how they contribute to children’s education and physical and emotional health. Summary of Research findings can be found in Appendix 6. The Building Successful Partnerships document identifies the main benefits of working with parents as follows:

## Social, Emotional and Health Benefits

- Parents show more sensitivity to children's social, emotional and intellectual development needs.
- Parents become more accepting of their children.
- Parents become more affectionate, use less punishment, and more often praise their children.

## Problem Solving Abilities

- Parents use more complex language with their children, encourage their children to verbalise more, and have more positive communication with their children's teachers.
- Parents reason more with children, place less emphasis on authority as grounds for desired behaviours, praise children's initiative more, and encourage more exploratory behaviours.
- Parents are more aware of the causes of children's distress and more skilful in comforting children.

## Personal Rewards

- Parents experience higher self esteem and feel less restricted by child rearing and homemaking tasks. They find children more interesting and enjoyable.
- Parents feel more confident in their decision making skills.
- Parents more often pursue their own educational development.
- Parents more skilfully use community agencies to meet family and child needs.

## The Teachers' Perspective

- Teachers and principals experience improvements in self esteem and a higher morale.
- Teachers and principals feel more respect for their profession.
- Job satisfaction increases among teachers and principals.
- Consistent parent involvement improves communication and relations among parents and teachers.
- Teachers experience improvements in community support of school.

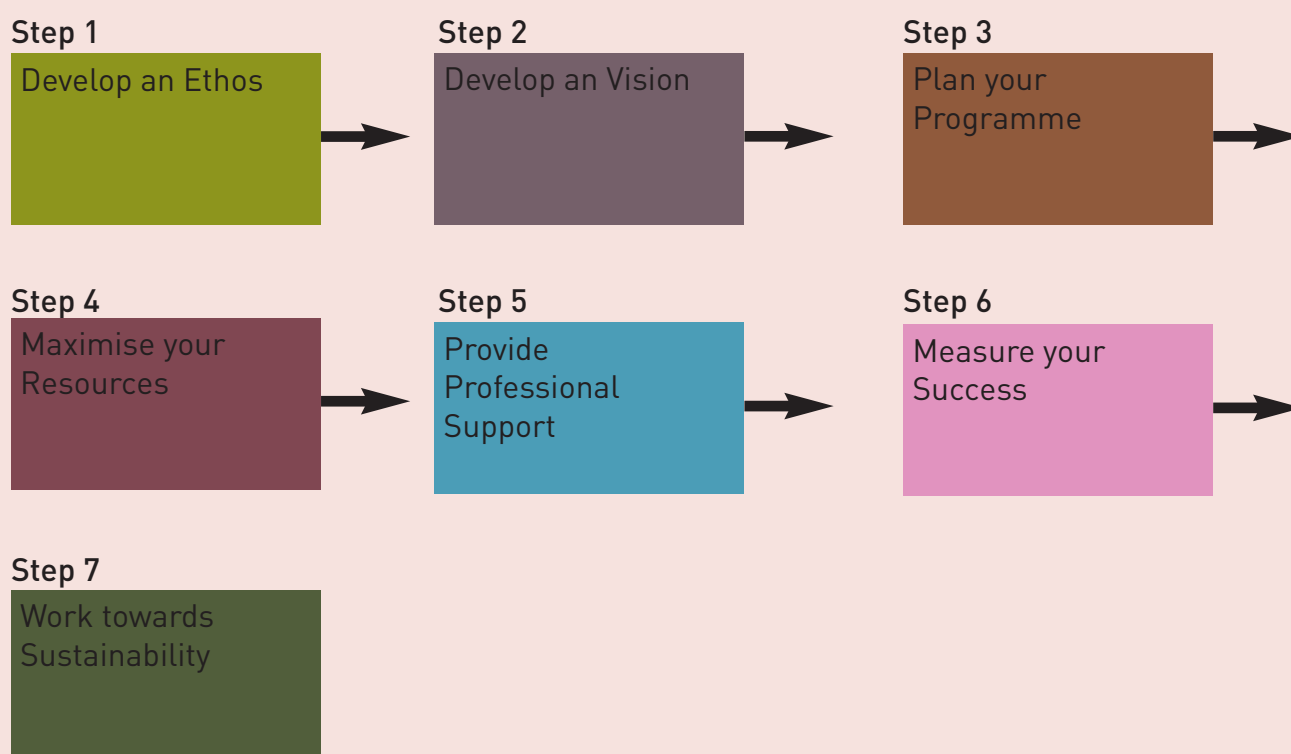
## Benefits for School

- Schools have more support from families and better reputations in the community.
- Schools where children are failing improve dramatically when parents are enabled to become partners in their children's education.
- The schools' practices to inform and involve parents are stronger determinants of whether inner city parents will be involved with their children's education than parent education, family size, marital status, and even student grade level.

The above evidence gives prominence to the need for parents and teachers to work together. In order for this to happen there is a need to create the structures and environment that encourage parents to engage with schools as valued partners. Similarly there is a need to support and equip teachers with the vision and skills necessary to enable this to happen.

# 2 STEP BY STEP GUIDE

## Steps to Parental Involvement





## 3 ETHOS

**“A school ethos centres on the school culture, spirit and its value system. It is to do with people and how they are treated, how they treat others and the values and expectations that underpin these relationships”**

Mintlaw Academy

The success of any parental involvement activity is heavily dependent upon the school ethos. The ethos is evident not only to the staff and pupils but to all who enter its doors. Given that many parents may feel uncomfortable within school settings, it is absolutely vital that schools are seen to develop and promote a positive ethos towards parents. Indeed the ethos will be self evident through the actions and interactions that occur on a daily basis. It is the initial impression and welcome that a parent receives that will in most instances dictate the degree to which they wish to be involved in the school.

The ethos is the first and perhaps most important building block that needs to be set in place if we are to develop meaningful and ongoing work with parents. Time spent developing this is undoubtedly time well spent. Staff can be encouraged to work as a team in order to develop a positive and visible school ethos conducive to parental involvement through INSET. A school audit to explore the schools relationship with parents can be found in Appendix 2.

It is also useful to provide opportunities to develop the professional value base of the staff team. Values are beliefs that may be firmly held and it is important to explore them in a non-threatening environment. The exercise on values in Appendix 3 can be used with a staff team to develop a sound value base.



# 4 VISION

**“Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world”.**

Joel Barker

In order to be successful in promoting parental involvement it is important for the school principal to develop a vision. The vision helps to clarify what is hoped to be achieved and how to achieve it. While a principal may be convinced of the value of parental involvement, others may need a little persuasion. It is important to share the vision with other partners in the parental involvement process. This is important as:

- **colleagues** may need to be convinced of the value of the effort required in order to come on board;
  - they may need to be persuaded to change existing practice;
  - they may need to be persuaded engage more or differently with parents;
  - they will need to feel it is worthwhile making this change.
- 
- **parents** may be reluctant to become involved due to their own negative experience of education;
  - they may need to be convinced that there is any benefit to their children by increasing their involvement in the educational process;
  - they may need to be convinced that there is any personal benefit to them and that their views are taken seriously;
  - they may be unsure of what is expected of them.

## Types of Parental Involvement

In developing the vision a good starting point is to consider the type of parental involvement you wish to promote. You may wish to consider the following types of parental involvement:

### Support for Children’s Learning

Parental involvement includes supporting their children’s learning, working as a co-educator and, from the schools perspective, in a manner to complement work at school. There is also scope also for parents to act as co-learners with their child, for example family learning activities.

## Parents as Learners

Opportunities for accreditation of parents learning will be encouraged. This can occur through the provision of accredited literacy, numeracy, first aid, and ICT courses.

## Parents as Teachers

Parents bring an enormous amount of experience and expertise to any school. How this experience is shared will vary in schools – it could be through after schools activities and clubs or participating more formally in school assembly, fun days, sports events and so forth.

## Parents as Volunteers

Parental Involvement can extend to parents acting as volunteers to support the school in a range of activities.

None of these types of parental involvement are mutually exclusive. A good family learning programme can encompass all four types.

## Support for Parents

Schools and other education providers can act as a resource and support for parents. Developing interagency working for example through Sure Start and extended schools can develop the practice of schools becoming more directly involved in the support and provision for children, parents and families.

Although each type of parental involvement may yield different results for children, parents and schools, all are equally valuable. Experience has shown us that parental involvement in schools is more likely to succeed when a vision is developed in conjunction with the staff team. INSET affords an opportunity for this to happen as staff can be encouraged to discuss the concept of parental involvement and subsequently have an input into the direction of the work.

Investing time in developing a vision will provide a solid foundation from which parental involvement can evolve.

# 5 PLANNING

**“Planning is about more than finding out what parents want. You need to have some idea about what it is you want parents to achieve. No-one will ask for a challenge”.**

**Mathilde Stevens - Family and Schools Worker Edenbrooke Primary School**

Having worked on a vision, it is now possible to start making it a reality. At this stage it is helpful to determine where a school is in relation to parental involvement, as this will give a comprehensive picture of the current situation and identify areas to focus on.

## School Audit

An effective means of getting the overall picture is to undertake an audit of how a school currently engages with and involves parents. An audit might cover:

- The means of communication currently used with parents.
- How parents are currently involved in the life of the school.
- How a school is currently working to involve parents in children’s education.
- How schools currently find out what parents want / need.
- Programmes offered to parents.
- Facilities provided for parents.
- Staffing – is there a designated member of staff with responsibility for working with parents?
- If there is a written policy on parental involvement.
- The support needed to develop work with parents.
- The barriers to parental involvement and how these may be reduced.

## Parent Audit

Having undertaken a school audit, it is now possible to plan the programme to be delivered with parents. It is important to note that whilst the school may already have a view on what parents need, it is more likely that the work will succeed if parents are consulted at an early stage. As part of the planning process, it is a good idea to ask the parents what they want. There are various ways to consult with parents, for example:

- informal meetings/coffee morning/social event. Make some suggestions, listen to their ideas, ask them to sign up for things;
- a simple written audit. This may get feedback of greater numbers than a one off school event. An example of a Parent audit can be found in Appendix 4;
- annual events e.g. the end of year/start of year interviews.

A mix of what parents are asking for and what the school would like them to do is a good basis for the programme. When planning a programme, it is advisable to take time to consider the type of programme you wish to deliver.

## The Programme

A list of ideas for working with parents can be found in Appendix 3. Before deciding on activities, it is important to be clear about aims. A parent support programme might have any of the following aims:

- engaging parents in the school curriculum;
- promoting joint parent / child activities;
- developing the literacy / numeracy skills of parents;
- promoting positive parenting;
- providing awareness of child development;
- enhancing the personal and social development of parents;
- developing confidence and raising aspirations of parents and children.

All of the above aims are valid. This list is not exhaustive and there may be other aims to consider.

It is important that the aims are clearly communicated to the parents. It is important to be clear about the aims of the programme, so that it can be properly monitored and evaluated.

## Participants

It is advisable to consider which parents you wish to engage with as this will provide a definite focus for the work.

It is important to be clear about who the programme is aimed at. Is it for all parents or for a specific group such as:

- Parents of a specific year group?
- Parents of children who have special needs?
- Mothers, fathers, grandparents, or others?

Identifying the parents you wish to engage with will enable you to provide a programme that meets their particular needs and those of their children.

## Engaging Parents

Irrespective of the programme being offered, engaging parents and sustaining their interest is a process that takes effort, time and patience. The process is dependent upon the building of positive relationships between school and parents, which should ultimately lead to an effective working partnership.

Programmes focusing upon engaging parents often fail because they are initially either too ambitious or too threatening for parents. This may be the case when schools offer accredited courses to parents. While these are valuable courses to offer and may be retained as part of a long term objective, many parents may not be at a point where they have the confidence to participate in such courses. They may lack confidence to return to a school setting as a learner. It is therefore important to start with where the parents are at and in many cases this may mean building their personal and social confidence before encouraging them to participate in courses. It is also the case that programmes may fail because they fail to take sufficient account of the views and needs of parents. When parents and schools commit to bringing about change, a partnership approach can empower rather than patronise parents.

## Starting Points

Informal activities that are social in nature can be offered as a starting point in confidence building. This allows for a positive relationship to be formed between school and parents. One-off events such as a 'pampering' day, parent and child breakfast, dads and lads' day, or a taster session of adult education courses can act as an effective means by which the process of engaging parents can begin. As the relationship between parents and school develops, the programme offered can then become more ambitious and focused.

## Current Models of Good Practice

Just as there are various types of parental involvement, there are also various models of work that may be implemented. The following models have been implemented in BELB schools and may be useful in providing ideas of how parent support programmes could be developed in any school.

### Model A – Full Time Parent Support Officer

In this model a full time Parent Support Officer is employed by the school and is responsible for developing a parent support programme. The advantage of this model is that there is more opportunity to work with parents on a broader programme and more parents may be reached. The disadvantage of this model is that it is expensive due to salary costs and it may be time-limited if dependent on short-term funding.

## Model B – Teacher has responsibility to develop work with parents

In this model a teacher is designated time to work with parents. The advantage of this model is the designated teacher will be familiar with the curriculum and should therefore be in a good position to involve parents in the children's learning. The disadvantage of this model is that it can lead to difficulties with time tabling and requires good organisational skills on behalf of the designated teacher. There may also be resource implications.

## Model C – Classroom / Nursery Assistant develops work with parents

In this model a classroom / nursery assistant may be seconded to work with parents. The advantage of this model is the classroom/nursery assistant often has the opportunity to build a good relationship with parents. The disadvantage of this model is that this may require additional staffing which could have resource implications.

## Model D – Principal co-ordinates and oversees work with parents

In this model the principal develops the work and implements the programme. The advantages of this model are:

- the principal has an overview of the work;
- the principal has an opportunity to get all staff involved;
- it encourages a whole school approach;
- it raises the profile of the work;
- it increases the likelihood of the work becoming sustainable;
- it is cost effective as no extra staffing is required.

The disadvantage of this model is that it gives additional responsibility and requires a large time commitment on the part of the principal.

This model may work well in small schools with a non teaching principal.

All of these models have had a positive impact in engaging parents. The key to the success of all of these models is selecting the model that is appropriate to your school. It is also important to allow time for the chosen model to have an impact and to monitor and review it on a regular basis.

Whichever model you chose will be well worth the effort as the rewards to the children, parents and school will be plentiful.

# 6 RESOURCES

**“What you seek, exists within you. Every resource you need is available to you”.**

Marcia Weider

## Who and what have you got?

When developing a Parent Support Programme in schools, it is inevitable and understandable that the issue of funding is raised. Undoubtedly funding is important, but the extent of the funding required may be much less than initially anticipated. There already exists within schools a wealth of resources, which if used appropriately can minimise the need for funding.

## People

### A. Principal

A principal has the ability to influence both the direction of the work and the priority it is given in school. Used positively, sensitively and inclusively this influence can generate an energy and interest amongst colleagues. A staff team which see the benefits of parental involvement and which are willing to engage positively with parents will add momentum to the work. In many respects your colleagues are your greatest asset in relation to promoting parental involvement.

### B. Teachers

Teachers within your school have a genuine interest in helping children to learn, have skills in imparting information and hold a broad knowledge base in relation to education. They are perfectly placed to transfer their interest, skills and knowledge to working with parents. They may be willing to:

- run parent workshops on child development;
- run parent workshops on the curriculum;
- support parents to assist with homework;
- provide literacy / numeracy / computer courses for parents;
- organise parent and child events that show how learning can take place outside of the school setting e.g. a trip to the beach for parents and children;
- organise fun events for parents to take part in with their children such as a Halloween disco.

In many instances the above activities can be one off events or planned on a termly basis. The advantage of this is that responsibility for promoting parental involvement can be shared amongst staff, all staff can be offered opportunities to develop skills in working with parents and a greater variety of activities can be offered. There is also a greater likelihood that the work will be ongoing and embedded in the school in the long term.

### C. Non Teaching Staff

It is important to note that all staff irrespective of role have a part to play in relation to working with parents. Classroom assistants play a major role in providing a valuable link to parents. Secretaries are often the first point of contact parents have with schools and caretakers also have informal contact with parents. Given the range of people within school who come into contact with parents, it is vital that a school has a consistent approach to communicating with parents and that all staff undertake training on the concept of involving and supporting parents.

### Opportunities for INSET

Any school intending to develop work with parents may wish to consider whole-staff training on this topic. This may be possible through INSET days and it is worth noting the following:

- in order for work with parents to become successfully embedded in school, it is important that the principal is seen to believe in it and either leads or participates in relevant INSET;
- training can be delivered in-house by a school principal, senior management team or member of staff with responsibility for working with parents. Examples of exercises in the appendices can be used to develop training on school ethos, culture and value-base. Alternatively, schools can bring in expertise from BELB and other providers from the community and voluntary sector.

### Staff with specific responsibility for working with parents

Staff with specific responsibility for developing or co-ordinating work with parents in school may come from a range of backgrounds including school principal, teacher, classroom assistant, nursery assistant, lunch-time supervisor and secretary.

### Professional Development

A vast pool of knowledge and skills is being drawn upon in work with parents and the pool has many sources.

There are a number of well recognised courses which can support staff in developing knowledge, skills and values to work with parents in schools, some of which are cited below. The following list includes courses which are suitable for both students and qualified teachers, as well as those from other backgrounds who already are working with parents or wish to be

working with parents in the future. For student teachers there may be opportunities to take modules on involving parents at teacher training college, whilst as part of professional development, teachers may have opportunities through INSET and PQH to develop their knowledge and skills. There are also specific courses available such as parent facilitation training, working with fathers and other issue-based training from external agencies. These courses may be suitable for both teaching and non-teaching staff.

The following list is intended to give an indication of the range of courses available.

### **Initial Teacher Education**

- Parental Involvement in Early Years, Stranmillis University College. (An option for 4th Year students who are studying for a B.Ed in primary teaching.)

### **Professional Development For Teachers**

- Professional Qualification for Headship includes a section on working with parents

### **Current Practice**

It is most likely that you already promote parental involvement to some degree. To ensure that it remains effective it may be a worthwhile exercise to revisit your current position:

- what are its strengths?
- how it could be improved?
- who is involved? Who else would you like to be involved?
- what support do you need to sustain it?

Reflecting upon and responding to the above questions can ensure that your work with parents remains purposeful and appropriate to meet the needs of children, parents and school.

### **Local Resources**

Other resources are available to you from a range of community, voluntary and statutory organisations. Get to know your area and you will be amazed at the resources available to you. The following are examples of organisations who work with parents.

Organisation	Contact No	Provision
Barnardos	028 90491081	Parent Facilitator Training Parenting courses
Sure Start	Contact local provision	Creche workers /Links to programmes
Belfast Metropolitan College	028 90265210	Family Learning Programmes
Parents Advice Centre	028 90310891	Kickstart (training on work with fathers) Parenting courses Helpline for family difficulties
Healthy Living Centres	Contact local provision	Provide programmes and links to other services centres
Belfast Education and Library Board	028 90564000	Support to develop parent support work in schools

These are just a few of the organisations who may be able to help you. It is a worthwhile activity to spend time researching the groups and organisations who may be of help to you as this will extend the provision you can offer. Additionally this will enable you to build a supportive network that will give fresh ideas and impetus to the work. Good links with other organisations can lead to the development of a successful multidisciplinary approach to meeting the needs of parents, children and schools. This approach can support vulnerable children and parents, providing access to additional support and referral agencies.

## Space

In an ideal situation it is beneficial to provide parents with their own designated space within or close to school. This designated space enables parents to feel welcome, valued and more comfortable within the school setting. It also allows for a more conducive environment for learning and gives parents a greater sense of belonging to the school and a sense of ownership over the space. In operational terms, it avoids problems regarding access, toilet facilities and crèche facilities.

When considering adapting a space for parents the following questions may be useful:

- Is there a free classroom that could be adapted for work with parents?
- Is there a mobile that could be used? Parents prefer their own space adjacent to the school.
- Could some activities be run in the evenings when there would be a greater availability of space and perhaps at a time that is more suitable for parents?

It is advisable to consider all of the above issues in relation to the use of space before embarking upon programme delivery.

## Funding

It is worth noting that chasing funding can become a distraction and may result in the work losing focus and energy. A lack of funding may be used to justify the absence of parental participation and support in the school.

Experience has shown that specific funding for parent support programmes is often adhoc and short term in nature. If the consequences of short term funding are not thought through, a lot of time and energy can be put into developing programmes that often have to stop just as they are having their greatest impact. The morale of both staff and parents can become adversely affected with the frustration that comes from chasing funding.

A small amount of funding used wisely and with a long term view can often have more impact than a larger sum spent in a shorter period of time. As this is the case, it is advisable to consider how you hope to use your funding most effectively.

### **Do you wish to use funding to employ someone to work with parents in the short term?**

If so, keep in mind that staff and parents need to be very aware from the outset that the funding is short term. Otherwise the expectations of staff and parents are inappropriately raised. There is a need to have an exit strategy from the start.

### **Do you wish to use funding for programme costs?**

If this is the case give time to considering the type of programme that would be most effective in relation to the amount of money you have. Would it be better to use the funding for one major activity or several smaller activities?

## **Do you have an exit strategy in place to prepare staff and parents for the cessation of funding for staff employment?**

This is absolutely crucial and should in fact be part of your initial planning process as it will ensure that this particular part of your programme is concluded professionally. A strategy for sustainability needs to be developed which will indicate to staff, parents and other key stakeholders how the parent support work will continue once the current phase of funding has finished.

## **How do you ensure that the experience gained in the funding period is shared and remains in the school following the end of funding?**

To prevent the experience being lost, it is essential that parental involvement is on the agenda at staff meetings and management meetings. Further opportunities could also be provided for staff to develop skills in this area. This may be achieved on INSET days and could also be offered to staff as part of their professional development.

## **Do you wish to use funding for capital costs?**

Using money on items that will remain in the school beyond the life of the funding can leave a more permanent legacy to the work. One off funding opportunities may allow for a room to be refurbished, parents notice boards to be purchased or an entrance to be decorated. Similarly funding may be used to purchase equipment that promotes learning such as Family Learning Packs, Computers, Equipment for a Toy Library, Story Sacks and Flying Start materials.

Given the unpredictable and short term nature of funding for work with parents, it is strongly recommended that time is spent giving serious thought to how funding of any amount can be most effectively used.

In summary, there are many resources available to you, human, practical and financial. The key to maximising their effectiveness is to consider in advance what you want/need and plan appropriately. You may be surprised at how much you can achieve with careful planning and a creative use of readily available resources!

# 7 PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

**“It is important to give staff opportunities to enhance their skills. For example, whole-school events involving all staff”.**

Margaret McQuillan  
Principal St Joseph’s Primary School

## Supporting Staff

All staff working with parents will benefit from ongoing support and supervision. This prevents the role being an isolated one, provides opportunities for issues to be raised, creates opportunities for good practice to be shared with all staff and ensures the work stays within a professional framework.

Supervision may be provided by the principal or by an appropriate person in an external agency.

## Working within Boundaries

As mentioned throughout this guide relationship building is a vital foundation of the work. Relationships should be professional and within clear boundaries to ensure that a worker does not, albeit inadvertently, create an unhealthy dependency in their relationships with parents. Parent support staff should avoid:

- giving personal mobile phone numbers to parents.
- making themselves available outside of normal working hours.

Parent support staff often invest a great deal of themselves in their work. Whilst they may derive a lot of satisfaction from the work, the focus at all times must remain on meeting the needs of the parents. The worker’s role is to assess and meet the parents’ needs. The parents are not there to meet the workers’ needs. Good forward planning will, particularly in a situation of short-term contracts, prevent a situation where the worker expresses the following sentiment; **“I don’t know how they are going to manage without me”**. Such a situation will be avoided by having an exit strategy in place from the outset. The exit strategy will indicate to staff and parents:

- how and to whom the work will be “handed over” when the parent support worker moves on;
- the support structures in place to support parents;
- the next stage of the programme.

An exit strategy will be easier to implement if the planning process has focused upon building the capacity of the school to work with parents in the long term.

When this is clarified from the outset the transition to the next stage of the programme will be much easier.

# 8

## MEASURING SUCCESS

**“Evaluation strategies help family support programmes prove they make a difference”.**

**Melia Franklin, Children’s Advocate, Action Alliance for Children**

Measuring the impact of programmes provides important feedback for all involved in this work and is intrinsic to developing good practice. In addition, within a context of public accountability, it is necessary to be able to demonstrate the impact parent support programmes have made. Ideally programmes should be evaluated. As stated in *Evaluating Community Projects* “evaluation allows participants, funders and others to learn what works and what does not. Sharing this learning enables the improvement of services provided and will inform the development of future programmes”.

You can use your audit information to establish baselines so you can be clear about where you are starting from. From this starting point you can then evaluate how the programme has progressed.

### Evaluation

Evaluation can help you to:

- learn from experience;
- record what you have learnt;
- check your progress;
- check whether what you are doing is still what parents want or need;
- identify strengths and weaknesses in your project;
- create a basis for future planning;
- demonstrate whether you have used your resources – time and money effectively;
- explain to funders, and others involved, what you have achieved and how successful it is.

### Evidence

Keeping evidence of the work being undertaken is important. Evidence may be provided through:

- a questionnaire survey;
- in depth interviews;
- feedback forms;

- focus Groups;
- diaries;
- photographs.

Indicators of your success can be quantitative and qualitative and ideally a mixture of both.

### **Quantitative (Parents)**

In relation to parents quantitative evidence may used to indicate:

- the number of parents participating in whole school events;
- the number of parents participating in courses / workshops for parents;
- fewer parents are engaged in conflict with the school;
- more informal engagement between parents and teachers;
- more parents are involved in actively supporting the school (e.g. fundraising, volunteering);
- more parents attending parent – teacher meetings.

### **Quantitative (Children)**

In relation to children quantitative evidence may indicate:

- an improvement in attendance figures;
- an improvement in punctuality;
- an improvement in results;
- a decrease in disruptive behaviour;
- a drop in suspensions and expulsions;
- literacy/numeracy.

### **Qualitative (Parents)**

Qualitative evidence in relation to parents may indicate:

- feedback from parents describing the difference it has made to their lives;
- parents have higher expectations of school;
- there is a demand for more courses;
- parents have a change in attitude towards school;
- parents have a better support network.

## Qualitative (Children)

Qualitative evidence in this instance may indicate:

- children are happier in school;
- children are better able to concentrate;
- children have an improved attitude to school.

Although evaluation may seem like a burdensome task, in the long term it can save you both time and resources by keeping participants focused on, and working towards, the ultimate goal of the project.



# 9 SUSTAINABILITY

**“Sustainable processes are ways of working and organising that are inclusive, participatory, flexible, persistent and adaptable”.**

Liz Orr

Sustaining parent support programmes is not easy. *“Sustainability is about retaining what we have and building services and structures that will be available to community members for a long period of time”.* The process of keeping the programme going on a day to day basis can in itself be demanding and challenging.

Even the most successful parent support programmes have their ups and downs. There are occasions when parents do not turn up for events, funding is non-existent, the future is uncertain and staff and parent morale is low. But somehow they not only survive but thrive. It is important to make firm foundations so that the programme can withstand these challenges. Why is it that some programmes become embedded in school while others do not?

Sustainability is most likely to occur when principals, teachers, and parents:

- reach a shared vision, which is regularly reviewed;
- involve more and more participants;
- promote a positive ethos towards working with parents;
- are flexible and adapt to changing circumstances;
- see parental involvement as an integral part of the school provision.

In addition to this parent support programmes are more likely to be sustained when:

- a key member of staff is appointed to co-ordinate work with parents;
- funding is attracted from a variety of sources;
- space is allocated for parents;
- a long term developmental approach to the work is undertaken;
- principals develop a strong support network.

While principals need to be the lead motivators in ensuring these actions are undertaken, they need to be supported by other key stakeholders. This reinforces that parental involvement is a shared responsibility. Sustainable programmes are most apparent in those schools where teachers and parents are motivated by the clear goal of helping children to achieve their true potential and work in partnership to make this happen.



# 10 REFLECTIONS

**“Follow effective action with quiet reflection. From the quiet reflection will come even more effective action”.**

Peter Drucker

In developing this guide we have consulted with principals, teachers, parent support staff and other agencies about their experiences of working with parents. The consultations provided us with an opportunity to hear about some of the real issues, challenges and successes they each experience on the journey to successful parental involvement. The following reflections have been shared with us.

## Parents Reflections

“I got so much out of coming here. It removes you from the house and the isolation. We are all in the same boat. It makes you feel normal”.

“The life coaching course gave me more confidence. I try not to let things snowball into arguments. I don't worry about little things any more.”

“We measured our confidence on a scale at the beginning and the end of the course and we were able to show the difference”.

“You feel like it's your own room and your own course. You are allowed to get up and get a cup of tea if you want one”.

“Every course you do, you meet someone new”.

“The tutor was very good.....very down to earth”.

“I used to be scared to speak to the teachers at this school, because they are trained, I thought they were above me. Then we got a new parent co-ordinator. She encouraged me to go and see the teacher myself and not to let it build up. I know now that the teachers aren't higher than me. I am just as good as them. Before I wouldn't approach the teacher and now we are equals”

“I grew up thinking negatively.....”I can’t do that”. Thinking positively helps your child”  
“My son had been coming home with lines. He had been off the wall. Now I’m able to go and see the teacher about it”.

“When we were at school you got a slap. You went home and told your ma. She said well you never got it for nothing. Now the teachers are more laid back and we can talk to them”.  
“The teachers seem to be keener to involve the parents now. They are showing us that they value the parents. You feel as if you really are important.”

“It is good to work together with the teachers on behaviour”.

“Some parents took time off work to come and do the phonics course”.

“Every parent wants the best for their child”.

“The children think it’s great. They are on their best behaviour in school. They don’t know when I’m going to appear next.”

“In school I’m helping the children who are having trouble reading. The children on the reading programme seem to like the one to one attention from a parent volunteer and are making progress”.

“If we wanted to involve more parents, we would encourage them to come for a taster session or call in for an afternoon when there are no classes going on to get a feel for the place”.

“In this school we feel equal to the teachers. A lot of this is down to how the principal treats us”.

“The principal here recognises that education is a partnership. It’s not just about academic success, it is about seeing the whole picture. The principal knows that the social part of a person’s life is important “.

“When we go through life we can be someone’s girlfriend or wife or somebody’s mummy. But when we come here we are made to feel important. We become someone in this place”.

“We need to keep the parents room going. In this room we support each other”.

“It’s not just about what we get out of it, we give back to the school as well, through fund raising and helping the teachers”.

*These reflections are provided by parents from Euston Street Primary School and schools involved in the New Lodge Schools Cluster which consists of Edmund Rice Primary School, St Mary’s Star of the Sea Primary School, Victoria Nursery School and New Lodge Nursery School.*

## School Reflections

“It has been useful to spend time with parents and get to know them on a more personal level. This has helped me to see their needs and focus on how to help them”

“It is hard work building relationships and it takes time”

“I assist and support families that are experiencing difficulties”

“I attempt to enhance and build on resilience factors within the family unit”

“Planning is about more than finding out what parents want. It’s about assessing parent’s needs, rather than a wish list. You need to have some idea about what it is you want parents to achieve. No-one will ask for a challenge”

“When planning the whole-school event, I explained the rationale and asked the staff to give it a go”

“They may well say that they will attend and not turn up on the day. I was disappointed when they didn’t turn up”

“The school has many parents who know about the group and what classes are available or workshops being run, but still don’t come. Having said that there are approximately 15 parents who come regularly”

“When we reached the venue, it was disappointing. In planning future trips, I would go personally to the venue to check out what is on offer”

“You need to find a way of talking about family life in an informal way. Parents have anxieties and need an opportunity to express them. These conversations happen best when you are doing something else”

“I introduced the “Top Tips For Parents” booklet along with the nursery teacher. We were able to use our personal and professional experience with a small, informal group. They are interested in having more meetings about parenting skills. It helped to have the nursery teacher with me to speak to parents about their concerns. The small group meant that parents could talk freely and they didn’t feel intimidated”

“The craft afternoon brought male relatives into the school (many for the first time) to participate with their children’s fun activity. The excitement of the children at having their families in school was tangible”

“I feel that pieces of work that benefited the children and were that bit different were guaranteed to be well supported”

“Having the opportunity to raise awareness with staff about involving and supporting parents paid off with the commitment and support the staff and principal gave to the whole-school literacy event which was held in the evening”

“We have recognition of parent education being vital to their children’s education”

“You have to have a tutor that the parents can relate to, someone who can be on their level, not someone who thinks they are in a classroom”

“I was encouraged by their willingness to go to the next level”.

“Our parent co-ordinator had a solid background in classroom practice. She was mature and sensible and could remain detached from emotional issues. The big issue was that she understood how learning happens in the classroom and joined this to parent learning and understanding.”

## Agency Reflections

“It can be the person standing at the gate welcoming parents that can make all the difference”

“We regard families as key to any family’s happy and effective engagement with education”

“We ensure that supports are there to make everyone equal”

“We don’t provide solutions, but the mechanism for the parents to come up with their own process”

“Our work is needs-led. We also target resources at gaps in provision”

“We focus on early intervention and prevention”

“We know we have been successful when the group becomes self-sustaining”

“I prepare resources which can be adapted at different levels without anyone feeling “less able”. I encourage “paired learning” to allow parents to tap into each others talents and learn from each other. I often make my own resources, trying to keep them relevant and current and accessible to parents. I invite parents to borrow books and CDs and report back on how effective they considered them to be”

“When I came to this school as a worker the overwhelming feeling I had when I started was the feeling of care to other parents by other parents. There’s something about it. If you took away the parents room, it would take away from the school”.

“We have tried to ensure a wide range of responses to the needs of parents along the continuum. In order to do this, we listen to the needs of parents about what it is they feel they need to help them move on”.

“Some parents are totally disengaged from school life, and are overwhelmed by pressures of daily life. Some are isolated and experiencing difficulty in parenting”.

*The above school and agency reflections were provided during our consultation process. The contributors are acknowledged in Appendix 1.*



# 11 APPENDICES

Appendix 1	Consultation list
Appendix 2	School audit
Appendix 3	INSET:Values
Appendix 4	Parent audit
Appendix 5	Ideas for working with parents
Appendix 6	Research

## Consultation List

## Appendix 1

The following people participated in the consultation process. A full summary of the consultation responses can be found on BELB website [www.belb.co.uk](http://www.belb.co.uk)

SCHOOLS	
Alison Hutchinson	Harmony Primary School
Beverly Beattie	Euston Street Primary School
Karen Killops	Euston Street Primary School
Siobhan McQuade	Holy Family Primary School
Dinah McManus	Holy Family Primary School
Ian Gourlie	Avoniel Primary School
Joseph Maguinness	St Matthew's Primary School
Geraldine Donnelly	St Matthew's Primary School
Julie Thomas	Sydenham Infants' Primary School
Jean Cogger	Sydenham Infants' Primary School
Margaret McQuillan	St Joseph's Primary School, Slate Street
Terry Leatham	Glenwood Primary School
Anne McLaren	Edenderry Nursery School
Nancy McGrath	Edenderry Nursery School
Siobhan McIntaggart	St Gerard's Education Resource Centre
Leigh Braden	Belfast Model School for Girls
Janice Clarke	Belfast Model School for Girls
Johnny Smith	Belfast Model School for Boys
Caroline McCarthy	Glenveagh School
Asleigh Galway	Currie Primary School
Joanne Irwin	Blythefield Primary School
Orla Leonard	New Lodge Schools Cluster
Maire Hughes	St Gerard's Education Resource Centre
May Adamson	Grove Primary School
Linda Higginson	Black Mountain Primary School
Billy McAuley	Black Mountain Primary School
Mathilde Stevens	Edenbrooke Primary School
Sandra Andrews	Hope Nursery School
Kevin McArevey	Holy Cross Boys' School
Terry Latimer	Holy Cross Boys' School

<b>AGENCIES</b>	
Joan Carberry	Belfast Metropolitan College
Kathleen McKee	Belfast Metropolitan College
Brenda Martin	Belfast Metropolitan College
Geraldine Loughran	Save the Children
Sharon Pinkerton	Stakeholders Development
Helen Dunn	Barnardos
Becca Vaughan	Education Guidance Service for Adults
Donna Hamilton	Extern
<b>BELB</b>	
Kathleen Monaghan	Literacy Officer
Maureen Woods	School Liaison Worker
Nicola Dixon	Education Welfare Service Project Team
Peter Dornan	Extended Schools Co-ordinator
Lisa McNamee	Education Welfare Officer

## School Audit

## Appendix 2

Each person in the school team answers the following questions individually.

When each person has completed the survey, the team members discuss their answers together, seeking ways to improve the school culture for welcoming parents as partners.

### Self Assessment Survey

1. Which type of school organisation best describes our school culture?

a. An institution      b. A foreboding place      c. A friendly place

2. What do parents see as they enter the building  
(Tick that all apply).

A list of rules for pupils.

A command to sign in for visitors.

A "Welcome Parents" sign at the front door.

A map of the school.

Signs in dual languages.

A place for parents to meet other parents.

An information centre or table for parents to  
pick up school newsletters.

Other parent – friendly visuals.

Where can we improve?

### 3. What do parents experience as they enter the school?

- A friendly greeting from a teacher, secretary or other staff person
- A friendly greeting from a parent
- A place to sit or meet other parents
- A sense that pupils and teachers are happy to be in this school
- A sense that the school staff are happy to see any and every parent in the school

#### Where can we improve?

### 4. What are parents asked to do to be involved in the education of their child?

- Expect their child to behave properly?
- Come in and make photocopies for the teacher?
- Come in and visit their child's classroom?
- Come in and meet other parents?
- Come in and meet teachers and other staff?
- Take part in workshops on the curriculum?
- Fund raise?
- Participate in school improvement plans?
- Participate in planning school community events?
- Other educational activities?

#### Where can we improve?

## INSET Values

## Appendix 3

The statements overleaf can be used with school staff as part of in-house INSET. They offer an opportunity for the staff team to share their value-base, explore and understand differences and to work towards a consensus. The exercises below offer some ideas on how to use them.

### Exercise 1

This is a safe and controlled way for different points of view to be expressed and explored.

- Two pages/cards, one with the word **AGREE** and the other with the word **DISAGREE** are placed at each side of the room.
- One of the value statements is read out by a facilitator.
- People position themselves in the room according to their response to the statement.
- If they strongly agree, beside the **AGREE** sign; if they are not sure, in the middle of the room; if they disagree, near the **DISAGREE** sign.
- The facilitator reflects back on what s/he sees and asks one or two people to verbalise their response, and to explain why they agree or disagree. This should allow for some healthy debate. The statements are read out and responded to one at a time.

### Exercise 2

An alternative and way to conduct this exercise is to have each of the statements on card, all of which are placed on the wall.

- Everyone is encouraged to read the statements.
- There is a traffic light system of dots or coloured pens.
- **Red** = I don't agree **Orange**= I'm not sure **Green**= I agree.
- Everyone places their responses on the statements at the same time.
- This will create a visible overview of opinion, without there having to have been any discussion.
- The facilitator should focus on the areas where opinion is divided and ask for more explanation. *'Would the person who didn't agree tell us a little more about that' OR 'I see some people weren't sure about that one. What is it you are not sure about?'* This should lead naturally into discussion.

## VALUE STATEMENTS

*A CHILD'S ATTAINMENT IS MORE LIKELY TO BE INFLUENCED BY THE EXTENT OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT THAN BY SOCIAL CLASS.*

*SOME PARENTS DON'T BECOME INVOLVED IN THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION BECAUSE THEY JUST AREN'T INTERESTED.*

*THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER IS QUITE SIMPLY TO TEACH IN THE CLASSROOM.*

*A TEACHER'S PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT SHOULD CARRY MORE WEIGHT THAN THE PARENT'S JUDGEMENT ON WHAT IS BEST FOR THE CHILD.*

*A TEACHER NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND THE NEEDS OF THE PARENTS.*

*PARENTS HAVE THE RIGHT TO BE CONSULTED ON SCHOOL POLICY.*

## PARENT AUDIT

## Appendix 4

Please tick the boxes relevant to you:

### 1. As a parent I would like to know more about:

- How the school is organised
- How my child's classroom is organised
- How my child spends his/her day
- How the school teaches reading
- How the school teaches number
- Ways in which I can help my child with reading, writing and number
- Suitable books I can choose for my child
- The transition for my child from nursery school to primary school or primary school to secondary school

### 2. As a parent I find the things that concern me most are:

- Keeping my child occupied
- Getting my child to focus on an activity
- Getting my child to obey me
- Knowing how to play constructively with my child
- Knowing how best to help with my child's learning

### 3. As a parent I would like to be involved in:

- Fundraising activities
- Social/ Recreational activities
- Craft activities to support school art activities

### 4. I would be interested in courses about:

- Arts and Crafts
- Healthy lifestyle (alternative therapies, diet etc.)
- Computer skills
- Number
- Language/reading skills
- Cookery classes
- Accredited Courses
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. The best times for me to be available for courses or meetings are

- Mornings
- Afternoons
- Evenings
- Any particular days? \_\_\_\_\_

## Ideas For Working With Parents

## Appendix 5

The following list provides a series of activities that have been successful in promoting positive and sustained parental involvement. While this is not an exhaustive list of activities, the ideas presented may kick start and inspire your Parent Support Programme

Parents Social Events	Parent & Child Educational Activities
<p>Pampering Day</p> <p>Coffee Morning</p> <p>Relaxation Morning</p> <p>Health Day</p> <p>Mothers Day Event</p> <p>Fathers Day Event</p> <p>Craft Club</p> <p>Book Club</p> <p>Keep Fit Class</p> <p>Certificate Presentations</p> <p>Walking Club</p> <p>Gardening Club</p> <p>Colour Me Beautiful</p> <p>Indian Head Massage</p>	<p>Nurture Groups (Parents &amp; Teachers provide support for children who are struggling)</p> <p>Accelerated Learning Group (Parents, children &amp; teachers sign learning agreement committing them to work at school and home.)</p> <p>Art Project</p> <p>Trip to Library</p> <p>Parent &amp; child Mosaic Project</p> <p>Story Time with Liz Weir</p> <p>Folder Support Days (Parents of Nursery School children work on the curriculum with children)</p> <p>Trip to W5</p> <p>Trip to Zoo</p>

Courses for Parents	Information Sessions	Parent and Child Social Events
<p>Basic maths course            Basic Literacy Course            History Course            Better Reading Partnership            IT Course            Cook – It            Flying Start Course            Jolly Phonics &amp; Jolly            Grammar Courses            Skills, Work and You            Emergency First Aid            Parenting Programme            Reading Partners            Driving Theory            Internet Safety</p>	<p>Curriculum Workshops            Benefits Advice            Healthy Eating            Workshops on supporting learning</p>	<p>Nature Walk up Slemish Mountain            Film Club(parent &amp; child watch films and write reviews)            Craft Project with Dads and Lads            Fun day to Ark Farm            Halloween Disco, Fancy Dress and Fun Days            P1 child and parent lunch            Breakfast with Dads and Lads            Mother and Toddler Group</p>

## KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS


## Appendix 6

- The evidence is beyond dispute. When families are involved, children do better in school. (Henderson and Berla 1997).
- Most parents across all social classes want to be actively involved in their child's education (Dyson and Robson 1999).
- Parental involvement in their child's education has a positive effect on a child's development (Ball 1998).
- Parents are the most important influence on a child's self esteem (Emler 2001).
- Parenting factors have a significant impact on children's behaviour, accounting for a variance of as much as 30%- 40 % (Gibbs et al 2003).
- Children with high educational attainment are more likely to have high levels of parental involvement. (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003)
- Children can learn coping strategies in school to help in periods of emotional distress due to family change. At these times children need someone to trust and schools can be a positive resource (Wade and Smart 2002).
- Children whose parents work to the same rules as the school are least likely to need help (Edwards and Warin 1999).
- Parental involvement diminishes as children progress through school and children were found to be the mediators between school and home. (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003).
- Parents are less likely to be involved in their child's education if they feel 'put down' by the school. (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003).
- Children are further disadvantaged if barriers between school and home remain high. (Edwards and Warin 1999).

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## Websites

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[www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentsaspartnersinlearning](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/parentsaspartnersinlearning)  
[www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)  
[www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/parentalinvolvement)  
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[www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy](http://www.jrf.org.uk/knowledge/findings/socialpolicy)  
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