

Working with parents to support children's learning

Introduction and background

This guidance report from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) aims to help both primary and secondary schools to work effectively with parents and carers to improve pupils' learning. Although there are many ways in which schools and parents can work together, this report focuses on activities designed specifically to improve academic outcomes. In making its recommendations, it draws on a recent review of the evidence about parental engagement. In addition to the evidence review, the EEF commissioned a survey of what schools in England are currently doing to engage parents in children's learning. This information provides a context for the recommendations made and shows where there are gaps between the evidence and current practice.

The EEF intends to develop resources to support the implementation of the recommendations. Subject-specific guidance which has already been produced by the EEF may also prove helpful.

The recommendations

Critically review how you work with parents

- Parental engagement in children's learning and the quality of the home learning environment are associated with improved academic outcomes at all stages of a pupil's school career. However, the evidence on exactly what schools can do to influence parents in a way which improves pupils' learning is weaker.
- Delivering parental engagement initiatives effectively can be challenging, mainly due to parents' time constraints. Schools must therefore carefully plan and monitor how they work with parents.
- Children need to develop particular skills at different ages; parental engagement strategies need to target these skills at the appropriate times. In the early years, there should be a focus on the development of oral language and self-regulation. At the early primary stage, activities which target reading and numeracy should be the priority. For later primary, there should be a move towards activities which promote reading comprehension, such as shared book reading. At secondary level, the focus should shift to strategies which support independent learning.
- Schools should start by: developing a clear plan for what they wish to achieve; auditing current practice to identify which activities are successful and which are not; listening to what less involved parents would find helpful; and stopping activities without clear benefits.
- Any plans implemented should be informed by a clear understanding of what facilitates or impedes parental engagement.
- Schools should be clear about which activities are specifically aimed at improving academic outcomes and which have other goals, such as improving attendance.
- A written plan or strategy may help to give parental engagement a more central role in the school's culture. Evaluation should be included in the plan. i.e. it should look at the current picture and ask how staff will know whether changes are having the desired impact.
- Research shows the need for a whole school approach which is embedded over the long term. There should be a member of staff who ensures that parental engagement is integrated into school planning.
- Just 28 per cent of school leaders report that they currently provide staff with any training on parental engagement. Fewer than 10 per cent of teachers report that they have received any training on parental engagement. Any plan for how a school will work with parents needs to consider exactly what is expected of all staff and to outline the support and resources which they will receive in order to fulfil the expectations. For example, staff need to be clear about what is and is not expected of different staff members.
- Given the limitations of the current evidence base, monitoring of activities is essential. However, research shows that 76 per cent of schools in England do not have monitoring measures in place for parental engagement. Monitoring should aim to assess whether learning outcomes are improving as a result of existing measures. It does not have to be onerous, but could include: reviewing whether particular groups of parents find communications from school helpful; whether they feel that they have a role in the decision-making process; and whether they attend parent meetings.

Providing practical strategies to support learning at home

- For young children, the promotion of shared reading is a central component of work with parents, since the parent-child interactions which it generates have been shown to be key to success.
- There are a number of ways in which parents can support early reading. They can ask questions about the book, using the '5 Ws' (who, what, when, where and why). They should use a mixture of closed questions, requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer and open questions which demand a more

extended response. Children might also be asked to summarise what has happened in a book so far and predict what might happen next.

- Parents can make a book more interesting by drawing parallels with real life. For example, when reading about Cinderella, they might talk about the similarities between a ball and a birthday party.
- Schools may wish to consider introducing an established early reading programme such as Parents and Children Together (PACT). In this programme, parents are provided with storybooks and structured activities and deliver the programme to their child at home every day for 20 minutes (five sessions per week) over 30 weeks. There are 3 key components to the programme, namely shared reading, vocabulary instruction and narrative (sequencing, summarising and re-telling stories).
- A randomised controlled trial of the PACT approach in 22 children's centres found positive impacts on language and narrative at the end of the programme, and positive effects on language and emergent literacy at six-month follow-up.
- Children who regularly complete homework have better academic outcomes than those who do not. It is important not only that parents help with homework, but it is also important how they do so. Evidence suggests that schools should encourage parents to understand the nature of homework better. They should support their children to do it rather than getting directly involved in the assignments themselves.
- Parental support for homework can promote the self-regulation necessary to achieve academic goals including goal-setting, planning and perseverance. It is likely to be these capabilities rather than direct involvement in the academic content that parents can most usefully support.
- Schools should be cautious about encouraging direct parental involvement with homework tasks, particularly at secondary level where the parents may not have the knowledge and skills to provide the right support.

Tailor school communications to encourage positive dialogue about learning

- School communications with parents are likely to be more effective if they are personalised, linked to learning, and framed positively (e.g. celebrating success). If there are important messages for parents who are less involved, face-to-face conversations, phone calls, or text messages are likely to be more effective than generic emails or letters home. Texting as a means of communication has proved effective in previous evaluations.
- A texting programme was trialled in U.K. secondary schools involving 15,000 students. Parents received weekly messages over the course of a year (30 texts in total). Texts informed parents about dates of upcoming tests, whether homework was submitted on time, and what their children were learning at school. Children whose parents received texts made one month's additional progress in maths and had reduced absenteeism.
- If using a texting approach, it is important for schools to consider the timing and frequency of messages. Schools could gather perceptions about what parents find useful or could chart how many messages are going out in order to avoid overload.
- In the early years and primary school, messages to parents should have a greater focus on things which parents and children can do together. Messages might focus on facts or tips or activities.
- In secondary school, the evidence is strongest for

providing parents with more factual information related to children's progress (such as homework completion and grades) and upcoming tasks (such as tests). Schools, should, however, avoid asking parents to discuss detailed curriculum content with their child. Instead, more generic conversations about study skills should be encouraged.

- Schools should review their approach to communications and ask themselves a number of questions. They should ask: how parents view the school's communication with them; whether there are currently any time-consuming communications which may not be having the desired impact; how they support parents who do not speak or read English well; and which channels parents have for contacting the school.

Offer more sustained and intensive support where needed

- Some children will benefit from more sustained or intensive support interventions for parents. However, targeting must be done sensitively in order to avoid parents feeling stigmatised or blamed. One approach is to provide a universal offer but give extra support and encouragement to those parents with greater needs so that they are more likely to take up the opportunity.
- Barriers to participation, particularly for the 'hard to reach' parents often relate to; where and when the support is delivered (e.g. clashing with childcare commitments); and how an offer is communicated (e.g. lack of clarity or use of jargon).
- Responses to the above barriers may involve flexible location and timing of services. Schools could also look at ways of making services welcoming and less intimidating. They may, for example, consider employing parents who can relate to their peers and making repeated attempts to engage the families targeted. Services should be advertised in places frequented by families.
- Home visit programmes which provide one or more home visits a month and involve active learning (e.g. visitors modelling activities) have been associated with larger positive impacts. A programme in Sheffield involved parents of nursery-aged children receiving an average of 10 home visits focused on literacy development. This intervention had low drop-out rates and positive effects in literacy. It had greater benefits for the children of mothers with low educational qualifications.
- It is known that children's behaviour is linked to academic outcomes. Strategies which enable parents and teachers to take a unified approach to behaviour can be beneficial and there is evidence for structured interventions to help parents improve the social, emotional and behavioural outcomes of their children.
- One example of an effective intervention focused on behaviour is the Incredible Years Programme which is a group-based parenting course lasting between 12 and 18 weeks. It involves parents viewing video clips which show parents and children interacting in different ways. Parents then discuss the videos with trained facilitators and practice techniques through role play.
- For young children under 7, analysis has identified 4 main components which are important in improving children's behaviour. These are: parents having the opportunity to practice skills with their child; teaching skills in communicating emotions (e.g. active listening and reflecting back what the child says); supporting parents to interact on the child's level during a play activity; and disciplinary consistency.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/new-guidance-for-schools-on-engaging-parents/>