

Beyond the school gate



How schools and families
can work better together



teacher support network



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Executive Summary

The importance of good schooling and parenting is well recognised, but the importance of how schools and families relate is much less understood. Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network - two leading charities with expertise in parent and teacher wellbeing respectively - have collaborated to research how schools and families can work better together.

As this report shows, the impact of the relationship between schools and families reaches far and wide; affecting wellbeing, behaviour and attainment to name a few. If we are to harness the potential of this relationship, much more must be done to overcome the barriers that exist between teachers and parents¹ today.

Previous studies have convincingly shown that parental engagement in a child's learning, rather than simple involvement in school activities, is the most effective way for parents to improve their child's attainment, behaviour and attendance. Sadly, surveys of parents and teachers by Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network have told us that poor parental engagement is having an adverse effect; also taking its toll on pupil, parent and teacher wellbeing. Whilst the majority of parents and teachers said that parent-teacher relations are 'good' or 'very good', there is considerable scope for improvement. Many parents said they had felt patronised, sidelined or ignored by their child's school, and an equally worrying number of teachers said they had been verbally or physically abused by a pupil's parent.

Parents and teachers must work as a team to enable parents to connect where it is most important - beyond the school gate, as active agents in the learning of their children in the home. Taking an interest in their child's education, helping with homework, backing school disciplinary practice in the home and being a source of moral, motivational support are all ways in which parents can effectively engage in education, but such engagement is much easier said than done. If school communities want to see better engagement, multiple barriers must be overcome.

Poverty can severely limit the extent to which parents can engage in their child's education. Parents who are not in poverty can still find engagement difficult, namely because of a lack of time. Inevitably, engagement suffers when money or family and work commitments come into the equation. Of course, teachers' time is under strain too. In a profession that works 50 hours a week on average, there is little opportunity to help parents to engage in their child's learning.

Teachers and parents recognise the difficulties that each other face, but they also recognise that relations must improve. Teachers and parents both recognise that more should be done for families that have a chaotic, disordered home environment which can significantly impact on a pupil's performance and behaviour in school, but they agree that teachers are not best placed to intervene. Teachers and parents both recognise that parents with a negative attitude to education may have been affected by a negative experience in their own upbringing, but they agree that existing structures cannot address this issue adequately. Teachers and parents both agree that teachers need increased training in order to appropriately and effectively engage with parents. And most of all, both recognise that home-school communications need to improve significantly.

Parents, teachers and pupils must have the right resources to overcome these barriers, meet each other's expectations and benefit education overall. In this report, Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network recommend that:

- Every school should consult the whole school community fully to create and implement a meaningful Home School Agreement which can be recognised on all sides. The Government should critically assess the effectiveness of existing Home School Agreements and implement improvements at a local level.
- Every school should have adequate access to a parent support worker who is trained to deal with a spectrum of family and emotional issues. Parent support workers should be a visible member of the school community, ensuring that all parents, teachers and other staff understand their role and remit and are a named contact, available when required.
- All school staff should be trained about the best ways to engage parents in education. This will help to develop positive relationships between schools and families and ultimately help pupils to succeed. Parent support workers are ideally positioned to play a positive role in the delivery and tailoring of such training.
- Overall, there must be a step-change in communication between schools and parents. Home School Agreements should set out clear expectations regarding the frequency, method and content of communications, which should accurately appraise a child's progress rather than reporting just the positives or negatives.
- Communications must detail how parents can help their child's education in the home. Teachers must be given adequate time to undertake this work, which will not be as time-consuming for teachers or parents if new technologies can be used to their potential.

As the evidence and the case studies in this report show, there is a clear need for these changes in our school communities. Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network call on stakeholders to implement our recommendations and enable schools and families to work better together, benefiting them, their children and education overall.



Julian Stanley, Teacher Support Network Chief Executive



Jeremy Todd, Parentline Plus Chief Executive

¹ In this report, "parent" includes step-parents, kinship carers, non-resident parents and those with caring responsibilities.

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been an increased awareness of the important role that parents play in the education of their child. At the same time, the role of teachers and schools has evolved with a greater focus on the wellbeing of the child and their family. This has led to a number of welcome policy initiatives to try to improve the quality of relationships between schools and families in order to boost outcomes for pupils. However, the work of Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network has shown that barriers between teachers and parents still exist and can lead to stress and anxiety on both sides. This can have a negative impact on children. The charities have collaborated on this report, working with teachers and parents in order to further inform the debate and make recommendations for change.

Parentline Plus is a leading national charity providing parenting support to over 700,000 families a year in order to improve the lives of over a million children. The charity offers support in a number of different forms, including a free 24 hour helpline, a website, personalised email support, leaflets, group support, one-to-one support and extended telephone counselling. In 2009, seven per cent of calls to Parentline Plus' helpline related to concerns over their child's education.

Teacher Support Network is an independent charity dedicated to improving the wellbeing and effectiveness of training, serving and retired teachers. Through coaching, counselling, information, money advice and financial support, the charity helps tens of thousands of teachers tackle personal and work-related issues each year, on the phone and online. Teacher Support Network uses the knowledge gained from these free and confidential services to raise awareness of the issues affecting teachers with the aim of improving education policies and practices which impact teacher wellbeing.

Our two charities see an enormous amount of scope for improving policy and practice in this area. We are concerned that some policies have the potential to inadvertently deepen the divide between parents and teachers. However, given that teachers and parents inherently have a shared aim of raising and educating successful young people, we believe that positive relationships do exist and barriers can be overcome.

In this report we review the extensive literature and many studies examining the link between parental engagement and pupil attainment, behaviour and attendance. Having gathered evidence from parents and from teachers, including case studies of good practice, we draw out a number of recommendations for policy makers.

What is parental engagement?

Researchers have found that when talking to teachers, students and parents about parental engagement there is no commonly understood definition of the term. American researcher, Joyce Epstein, drew up a typology of different forms of parental involvement, basing her ideas on the kind of support she felt parents could offer.²

TYPE OF INVOLVEMENT	DEFINITION
Parenting	Providing housing, health, nutrition, safety; parenting skills in parent-child interactions; home conditions to support study; information to help schools know child
Communicating	School-home/home-school communication
Volunteering	In school help in classrooms/events
Teaching at home	Help with homework, help with educational choices/options
Decision making	Membership of PTA/governors
Collaborating with the community	Contributions to school

Harris and Goodall³ found that "School staff felt that parental engagement was particularly useful in supporting school policies. Conversely, parents reported that they saw it as support with homework, while students responded that what they valued most about the engagement of their parents was moral support". In addition to the activities on Epstein's typology, Desforges identified parent-child discussions and high parental aspirations regarding educational achievement as key.⁴

Interestingly, all these forms of engagement are more about the interaction between parent and child in the home than about the parent's involvement in the school environment.

Researchers agree that Epstein's forms of parental involvement do not have equal value in terms of their impact on improving attainment. Harris and Goodall draw a distinction between *parental involvement* and *parental engagement*. They assert that "what makes a difference to student achievement is not parental involvement in *schooling* but parental engagement in *learning* in the home".⁵

² School, family and community partnerships: preparing educators and improving schools; Epstein, J. (2001), Boulder, CO: Westview Press in The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review. Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A. (2003). London: Department for Education and Skills (p18)

³ Engaging parents in raising achievement. Do parents know they matter? Harris, A., Goodall, J. (2007); DCSF, Department for Children, Schools and Families (p40)

⁴ The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review. Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A. (2003). London: Department for Education and Skills

⁵ Engaging parents in raising achievement. Do parents know they matter? Harris, A., Goodall, J. (2007); DCSF, Department for Children, Schools and Families (p38)

Parental involvement with their child's school may include the activities in bold on Epstein's typography; attending parents' evenings, signing student diaries, responding to reply slips, membership of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or parent governor status. Parental engagement may take the form of the activities listed in italics on the typography and include providing a stable home environment which supports learning.

It is clear that parental engagement in the form of supporting learning and reinforcing discipline in the home is key to improving outcomes for children. Other forms of parental involvement, which may be beneficial for the school environment, may not improve outcomes and raise standards in the same way. Schools should therefore focus efforts and resources to engage parents in supporting their child's learning beyond the school gates.

Harris and Goodall identify an essential element of parental engagement that they say is absent from parental involvement. They found phrases throughout their case studies of schools undertaking activities to involve parents which suggest that schools see parents as the passive receptors of information "rather than active agents in the learning of their children"⁶. They identify the provision of information as a useful first step, but show that schools who are the most successful in engaging parents to improve pupil attainment are the ones who go further to engage parents with the learning of the pupil.

The impact of parental engagement

Researchers agree that there is strong evidence that parental engagement in the education of their child has a positive effect on improving attainment, attendance and behaviour. In his research review, Desforges found that parental engagement "in the form of 'at-home good parenting' has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation."⁷ A substantial body of evidence shows that the engagement of parents in their child's learning is even more important than income or socio-economic status.⁸

Desforges argued that parental engagement is effective at improving educational outcomes for children because parents give children the skills and desire to succeed in a school environment. He found that transferring the skills to learn were more important in younger children, and the motivation more important for older children.

There is also convincing evidence that parents can significantly affect teacher wellbeing. While the majority of teachers enjoy a positive relationship with pupils' parents, when difficulties do occur they can have a significant impact on the mental health of the teachers concerned. A PricewaterhouseCoopers survey of over 11,000 teachers showed that "lack of parental support on discipline" was a common cause of unwanted stress.⁹ Research by teacher unions and Teacher Support Network also showed that parental behaviour was a key cause of common mental health problems among teachers.¹⁰

To build on existing research, Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network surveyed parents and teachers via our websites.¹¹ It was clear from these surveys that the absence of parental engagement, particularly a collaborative approach to discipline, caused difficulties for the child and for teachers involved:

"Some parents...are a significant barrier to their children's success... to some we (teachers) are punchbags for parents' anger and a softer target than dealing with their own shortcomings as parents (lack of basic care, establishing values and respect for others, disinterest in school and their offspring). Examples in recent weeks include a parent complaining that we thought that throwing objects at a teacher was unacceptable - they felt we should 'get real' - how are we to teach this child that assault is unacceptable...?" (teacher)

There can be no doubt that improved parent-teacher relations would benefit teachers and pupils alike.



⁶ Engaging parents in raising achievement. Do parents know they matter? Harris, A., Goodall, J. (2007); DCSF, Department for Children, Schools and Families (p37)

⁷ The impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment: A literature review. Desforges, C. & Abouchaar, A. (2003). London: Department for Education and Skills (p4)

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Final report on the Northern Ireland teachers' health and wellbeing survey. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2002). In the survey's random sample of 11,787 teachers in Northern Ireland, 35 per cent said 'lack of parental support on discipline' was a cause of unwanted stress.

¹⁰ Workload, working conditions and work/life balance: a survey of teachers in Wales. National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT) (2005). In the survey's sample of 2,162 teachers, 26 per cent said 'parental behaviour' was a source of stress. The 2008 wellbeing survey by Teacher Support Network also showed that 'problems with pupils' parents' was the main cause of stress, anxiety or depression for 16 per cent of the 777 respondents.

¹¹ Parentline Plus conducted its parent-teacher relations survey of 200 parents online in 2009/10. Teacher Support Network conducted its parent-teacher relations survey of 241 teachers online in 2009/10.

What are the barriers to effective parental engagement?

Parental experience of education

Desforges believes that differences between parents' levels of engagement with their child's education can be partly attributed to whether or not they see themselves as having a role in educating their child, and if so their level of confidence in fulfilling this role. Teachers were clear in their responses to Teacher Support Network's survey¹² that they felt that some parents did not wish to engage with the school and their child's education:

"Some parents...see us as a free babysitting service and no matter what you do you will never win them over - poor kids!" (teacher)

"The trouble is there is always a minority of parents who despite trying many strategies to engage do not want to have a relationship with school/teachers." (teacher)

This could be because of the parent's own experience of education which was confined to the school environment, with little engagement from home, leading them to replicate this pattern with their own children. In addition to this, some parents may have had a poor school experience themselves, with lower levels of educational attainment which means that they lack the skills and confidence needed to positively engage with their child's schooling.

"Parents often need support themselves and have bad memories of school that influence the way they interact with teachers." (teacher)

Parents too, felt that a negative experience of school may undermine their efforts to work with their child's school:

"Some parents feel very intimidated just being in a school environment due to their own terrible experiences when attending school themselves and their children suffer greatly because these parents do not feel able to fight their child's corner" (parent)

Parents who do not see themselves as responsible for educating their child, who do not have the confidence to actively engage in their child's learning, or have children who are not achieving in school may be amongst the families who need the most support. Their inability or unwillingness to engage presents a significant barrier to raising achievement in schools.



"Parents often need support themselves and have bad memories of school that influence the way they interact with teachers." (teacher)

A chaotic or disordered home environment

When children display behavioural problems in school, disrupting the class and making it difficult for the teacher to teach, there is often an underlying problem in the child's family life. Parenting support programmes have been shown to be very helpful in engaging the family and boosting achievement, behaviour and attendance.

Both teachers and parents responding to our surveys¹³ felt that if parents' home lives were chaotic and disordered and their child's education was suffering, some form of external support would be vital:

"Teaching parents about the important role of education on the future welfare of their child. Make sure that parents push, motivate and support their children at home with homework...Run parenting classes so parents are taught about how to behave and how to bring their children up." (teacher)

"I think it is key not to vilify and to offer practical solutions if there is a problem. My son was accused of bullying another boy at the school, and it seemed like they were more interested in punitive measures, as opposed to anything more supportive." (parent)

In a report looking at parenting style and its impact on outcomes, Demos found that "children with disengaged parents are around three times more likely to be in the bottom 20 per cent of outcome scores as children with tough love parents."¹⁴ Disengaged parents are neglectful and abusive at the extreme end, but may in a more moderate form be unable to cope, low in warmth or discipline.

Sadly it was clear in the survey responses overall that some teachers did not feel that they had the skills or the resources to deal adequately with the family problems that they identify through the children in their class.

"I think it is key not to vilify and to offer practical solutions if there is a problem." (parent)

¹² Teacher Support Network 2009/10 parent-teacher relations survey

¹³ Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network 2009/10 parent-teacher relations surveys

¹⁴ Parents are the principal architects of a fairer society: Building Character (2009), Lexmond, J & Reeves, R, Demos (p49)

Family structures

Families in Britain are becoming more diverse, with marriage rates falling and blended families and kinship carers becoming more visible. Schools are challenged to take this into account, ensuring that they are not inadvertently preventing family engagement in education. Some parents may face particular barriers to engaging in their child's education, including disabled parents, fathers, grandparents or other kinship carers, non-resident parents and parents for whom English is a second language.

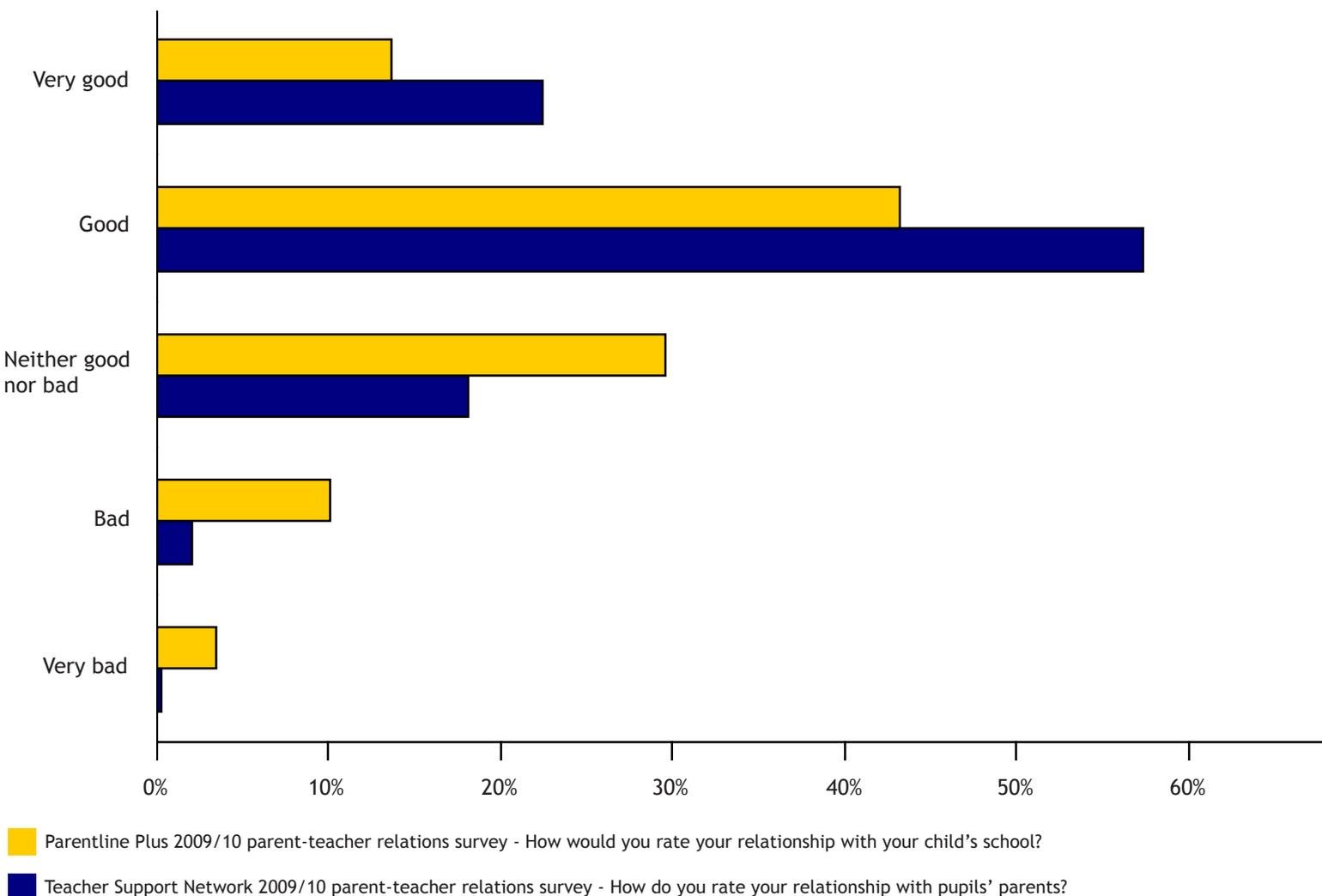
Family breakdown can have an enormous impact on a child's wellbeing. Their attendance, behaviour, and ability to concentrate in class may all be affected by disruption at home. In particularly acrimonious family break-ups, where custody is an issue, schools may be faced with difficulties in engaging both parents. Keeping non-resident parents engaged and active in their child's life can improve the outcomes for that child. Schools need to navigate through difficult circumstances to ensure that both parents are engaged in their child's education where possible.

Whilst it is enshrined in law that both resident and non-resident parents have an equal right to participate in decisions about their child's education and receive information about that child, in practice this does not always happen. In a survey of non-resident parents, Families Need Fathers found that 44 per cent of respondents had not received any correspondence from their child's school and 49 per cent had never been invited to a parents' evening at their child's school.¹⁵ Non-resident parents are more likely to be fathers, and there is strong evidence of the benefits of engaging fathers in a child's education.¹⁶

Ineffective home-school communications

Almost 80 per cent of teachers responding to the Teacher Support Network survey¹⁷ felt that their relationship with pupils' parents was good or very good (shown below). Of parents who responded to Parentline Plus' survey¹⁸, 57 per cent reported their relationship with their child's school as being good or very good (also shown below). This evidence shows that in the majority of cases, relationships are positive. However, teachers overwhelmingly reported that those parents who do not engage, or with whom there is a bad or difficult relationship, have an enormous impact on the teacher's wellbeing and on their work.

How would you rate your relationship with your child's school/with pupils' parents?



¹⁵ The things that matter! Are you kept informed? (2008), Families Need Fathers

¹⁶ Fathers' Involvement in their Children's Education. Goldman, R. (2005); London: National Family and Parenting Institute

¹⁷ Teacher Support Network 2009/10 parent-teacher relations survey

¹⁸ Parentline Plus 2009/10 parent-teacher relations survey

Communication between families and schools was a strong theme in our surveys.¹⁹ 62 per cent of parents who responded to the Parentline Plus survey had felt patronised, sidelined or ignored when trying to deal with an issue in their child's school. This was an alarming statistic particularly when viewed alongside the fact that 64 per cent of teachers responding to the Teacher Support Network survey said that they had been subjected to verbal or physical abuse by a pupil's parent. It is clear that steps need to be taken to improve understanding and strengthen relationships between families and schools.

Parents, in their comments to us, regularly made reference to shortcomings they perceived in the way the school communicates with them. These shortcomings fell into three categories; (i) parents wanted more communication, particularly in the form of a named contact; (ii) parents wanted more informal contact; (iii) parents wanted more personalised contact - more information that was specific to their child. These findings were consistent with the research from Harris and Goodall²⁰, who found that school-parent communication can be a significant source of tension and frustration for both parents and school staff. They identified issues with the timing, frequency and effectiveness of communications.

"I'd like a contact number and email for a teacher I can talk to about my child's progress or any problems she is having. It would be good to feel that approaching the teacher would be welcomed and is actively encouraged." (parent)

There was a feeling amongst some parents that in order to contact the teacher there would need to be a problem with their child's progress to instigate the contact:

"My child is at a good school and I am very happy with it, but I never come across her teacher - in the playground after school, for instance - from one year to the next. I'd have to request an appointment to deal with a 'problem' as the culture in school seems to be that you only have contact if something is wrong." (parent)

Lack of personalised communications

Whilst many parents were very keen on email communications and being kept updated on their child's progress via online methods, there was a feeling from many that communications such as text messages, emails, and even school reports were not specific to their child or tailored to their circumstances:

"It would help if reports could be clearer and more personal - I don't understand what the figures mean and they are written in a very impersonal, conveyor belt style using standard sentences only." (parent)

In addition to the non-personalised report, there is evidence that parents are confused by jargon and terminology used in communications. Schools must take care to ensure that they do not alienate parents by using educational jargon that means nothing to the average parent.

Pressure on teachers' time

Teachers are still working on average 50 hours a week²¹ and workload is a contributory factor to the high levels of stress among teachers which can ultimately lead to talented teachers leaving the profession.²²

Whilst the appetite for more communication and more individual attention was an overwhelming message from parents completing Parentline Plus' survey²³, there was a clear understanding from some parents that teachers have an intense workload:

"Staff don't really have the time to get to know each family sufficiently." (parent)

"I think better staffing levels would help...Staff don't really have the time to get to know each family sufficiently." (parent)

Teachers' opinion in the Teacher Support Network²⁴ survey was divided. Some clearly felt that time pressure was hampering their real desire to engage more closely with parents:

"Remove the excessive workload and give us more time to talk to parents" (teacher)

"It would help if reports could be clearer and more personal." (parent)

¹⁹ Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network 2009/10 parent-teacher relations surveys

²⁰ Engaging parents in raising achievement. Do parents know they matter? Harris, A., Goodall, J. (2007); DCSF, Department for Children, Schools and Families (p63)

²¹ The School Teachers' Review Body 2008 survey showed that Primary teachers in England and Wales work 52.2 hours per week on average, and Secondary teachers work 49.9 hours. The School Teachers' Pay and Conditions Document states that teachers should not work more than 1265 hours per annum.

²² Recruitment and Retention on Initial Teacher Training: a Systematic Review. Final Report. Bielby, G, Sharp, C., Shuayb, M., Teeman, D., Keys, W., Benefield, P (2007), Training and Development Agency for Schools. The report showed that excessive workload and job-related stress were the most common reasons for giving up a career in teaching

²³ Parentline Plus 2009/10 parent-teacher relations survey

²⁴ Teacher Support Network 2009/10 parent-teacher relations survey

However there was also a feeling that, with large class sizes there was the potential for all a teacher's time to be spent engaging parents, leaving little time to teach the children:

“Parents should be made aware that their child is not the only child in the class and that in the day you are teaching 31 children (especially young children) then you will not always have the time to fill out lots of individual home school communication books, type up letters to go home etc but it does not mean that you are not aware of their child - just that if a teacher spends time writing down lots of individual things 31 times then who are they expecting to be teaching the rest of the class?” (teacher)

It is clear that the tension between the extremely heavy workload and the demands from parents for more time-consuming forms of communication must be eased if engagement is to improve.

Pressures on parents' time

In addition to the pressures on teachers' time, parents often need to juggle a range of family and work responsibilities and engagement with the school can suffer.

“Flexibility on both parent and teachers' part regarding timings of meetings. Too many schools arrange meetings at their own convenience, not taking in the needs of parents to balance their home and work responsibilities.” (parent)

“(relations could be improved) by having parents' evenings in the evenings like they used to be so more parents can attend.” (parent)

In addition to the lack of physical time to engage, there was a feeling amongst parents that the perceived lack of flexibility from some schools was a sign of hostility, with parents talking about being “summoned” to parents' evenings. There was some evidence of good practice, with late night openings at some schools, for example. However, the need for flexibility for parents must be balanced with the need to respect teachers' work-life balance.

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Pupils

Children themselves can be a significant barrier to successful engagement between schools and families, particularly as they get older. Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) found that teenagers saw their parents' involvement in their education as a private matter, and did not want them mixing with their peers or their teachers. Pupils felt that they had a right to privacy as they grew older, making communications more difficult as pupils would not pass notes to parents or show them their homework. Parents cited this as a barrier:

“As they get older, my eldest is 16, you are un-involved, as they expect the child to do it, but then we have no information. This should be addressed.” (parent)

Poverty

Material deprivation has a profound effect on a family's ability to support their child's education. The effects of poverty manifest themselves in numerous ways, from long working hours and shift patterns preventing families from supporting homework, to lack of money for travel preventing families from taking part in cultural activities or visiting historical sites or museums. According to the End Child Poverty coalition “the stress that living in poverty places on a family (includes) social exclusion, poor housing, or a lack of books or a computer at home.... Families struggling to meet the basic needs of food, housing and utilities simply can't afford the added costs of educational opportunities outside school. They often can't take advantage of extra curricular activities such as music lessons, sports clubs, family outings and holidays. As a result, poor children often miss out on the developmental benefits these experiences can provide.”²⁵

According to the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, a taskforce headed by Alan Milburn under the auspices of the Cabinet Office: “Today the chances of a child who is eligible for free school meals - roughly the poorest 15 per cent by family income - getting good school qualifications by the age of 16 are less than one-third of those for better-off classmates. Attainment at age 16 is key to children's future life chances. Without it, the likelihood of a professional career or progression to university diminishes.”²⁶ The Panel identifies social capital, a set of values and networks passed down from parents, as a significant barrier to access to the professions. They find that: “This social capital gap has an important impact on outcomes. Those with less-developed social networks are much less likely to stay in school after the age of 16 than are those with more-developed social network”²⁷. Poorer pupils are less likely to end up with a professional job such as becoming Doctors or Lawyers because of a lack of social mobility which the Panel identifies as becoming more entrenched.

Poverty impacts on children's outcomes in many overt and less obvious ways. There have been a number of excellent initiatives by successive governments to try to address the gap in attainment. Although it has narrowed it has persisted. Parental engagement has been shown to be a more significant predictor of educational outcomes than socio-economic status. However, there is also a need to maintain momentum on initiatives to raise families out of poverty.

²⁵ Child Poverty and Education, www.endchildpoverty.org.uk

²⁶ Unleashing Aspiration: The final report of the Panel on Fair access to the Professions, Cabinet Office (2009) (p65)

²⁷ Ibid, p30

Case studies

Parentline Plus received funding from the Department for Children Schools and Families for a trained parent support worker to work for 14 hours per week covering two schools in Stevenage; a Secondary School - The Barclay School - and a Primary School - Fairlands Primary School & Nursery.

The parent support worker, Sara Hassell, works particularly with the families of children who display challenging behaviour or bully. Many of the families Sara works with are extremely disengaged and have little relationship with the school when she begins the work. They may have had difficult experiences of school themselves, and many are so anxious in the school environment that they take in little of what is being asked of them or told to them by teachers.

Fairlands Primary School have taken many positive steps to involve parents, including having a termly open parent forum where parents share concerns. The headteacher has given parents their own room in the school where they can come and feel comfortable, and parents hold coffee mornings every Friday to offer support to each other. They have also set up regular after-school direct contact between class teachers and parents of children who are struggling. The school also holds an evening parents' forum session until 9pm to allow parents with full-time jobs the opportunity to engage.

Despite the school's efforts to be open to parental engagement, many of the parents Sara has worked with would not have been in a position to engage without her intervention. Sara worked with a single mother with a son in Year three. The mother had been in several care placements as a child and had moved schools often, resulting in a poor and unfulfilling education. The family were struggling with a chaotic life at home and the child was not attending school regularly. When he was at school his behaviour was disruptive and he was on the point of exclusion.

The effect of the parent support worker on the School has been dramatic.

After working with Sara, the mother managed to restore a sense of order into the home and her relationship with her son improved. The school saw a marked improvement in his behaviour too. This led to better relations between the mother and the school and they managed to

successfully work together. The boy is now in school full-time and his mother volunteers at the school.

Sometimes, the parent support worker role is a more practical one, acting as an intermediary for a parent who is unable to identify or explain to the school where things may be going wrong. In another example, Sara worked with a mother who had a chaotic home life and her child displayed very challenging behaviour at school. After talking to Sara, they realised that one of the reasons her relationship with her son, and in turn his behaviour, was deteriorating was in part due to a system of discipline that the teacher had in place.

If a child was late for school, the teacher would deduct some "golden time" from the whole class, giving them less time to play. As the boy was consistently late, his peers had started to shun him and tease him because of the impact they saw him having on their play time. Having identified this, Sara supported the mother to speak to the teacher about changing the rule so that if her son was late, his peers weren't punished. The teacher had not realised the reasons for the boy's lateness, or understood the impact the rule was having, and when Sara and the mother explained it she was happy to change it. Both teacher and mother saw a marked improvement in the boy's behaviour. Before working with a parent support worker, the mother did not have the confidence to speak to her son about why he was misbehaving or take any steps to work with the school to improve things.

The headteacher at Fairlands believes that the effect of the parent support worker on the School has been dramatic, reducing incidences of bullying and challenging behaviour, improving attendance and raising attainment.

Teacher Support Network provides round-the-clock support to teachers on a range of practical and emotional issues, including parent-teacher relations. In one recent call, the relationship between a teacher and a parent had deteriorated so much that the teacher's wellbeing, classroom performance and professional relationship with the school's headteacher was beginning to suffer.

Paul²⁸ - an experienced secondary school teacher - phoned the Teacher Support Line after a series of worrying incidents in the classroom. A pupil's parent had repeatedly visited the school to complain about Paul, eventually interrupting his class to vent their frustration at him. It had become apparent that the parent's frustrations were founded on untruths, which Paul suspected were being said by the parent's child - a pupil in his class - outside school.

Paul was finding it impossible to improve relations with the parent. The parent was understandably antagonised by the serious accusations that their child was making, but their threatening behaviour was intimidating Paul and he was finding it difficult to communicate with them. He approached the headteacher for help, but they were new to the school and seemed reluctant to support him. Unsure what to do, Paul phoned the Support Line.



²⁸ Name and some details changed to protect anonymity

Every encounter with the parent was taking its toll on Paul. It was clear to Teacher Support Network's coach that Paul was becoming increasingly anxious about the situation; worried that the headteacher could side with the parent if they came to the school to complain again. Paul was also worried that the incidents would damage his reputation at the school, undermine his authority in the classroom and affect his ability to teach at his best.

Ultimately, he was worried that the situation could escalate out of control if it was not addressed soon. He feared that other disruptive pupils could feel encouraged to make misleading or false allegations, and other parents could feel inclined to make similar disruptive visits to school during lesson time.

Teacher Support Network's coach listened carefully to Paul's concerns. Together with Paul, the coach worked out what steps could be taken to improve the situation.

Paul realised that he may be able to improve the way that he communicated with the parent and dealt with their pupil's disruptive behaviour, so he agreed to try out the advice given in Teacher Support Network's relevant online factsheets. He also agreed to discuss his concerns with the headteacher again, this time making pro-active suggestions about the support that he would like to receive. Teacher Support Network's coach also encouraged Paul to look at the school's relevant policies and procedures - such as the Home School Agreement - in case they contained any support guarantees that could help Paul. Finally, the coach suggested that Paul should contact his union if he continued to be concerned about his employment at the school, or wanted advice on any other legal issues.

By planning out how to tackle the situation, Paul felt much more confident that it could be resolved. Through speaking confidentially to a coach, Paul was able to fully express how he was feeling and discuss all of the relevant details in his own time. He felt more at ease about the problems as a result. By the end of the call, Paul felt reassured by the conversation with the coach and was optimistic that his relationship with the parent would improve.

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Solutions and recommendations

In order for children to excel, parents and schools need to have a positive relationship and understanding. It is essential for parents and teachers to have a common understanding of their roles in a child's education. Parents, teachers and pupils must be equipped with the right resources to meet each other's expectations and benefit education overall. Recommendations on how this can be achieved are set out below.

Home School Agreements

Home School Agreements can help make clear what parents should reasonably expect from schools and teachers, and what schools should expect from parents.

However, drawing up a Home School Agreement must be a collaborative process to which parents, pupils and teachers feel able to contribute. Otherwise the 'agreement' will lack its fundamental meaning and a parent may be less likely to understand and respect their side of the deal. Home School Agreements must be flexible and regularly reviewed to ensure that they reflect the changing nature of the school community. By setting clear and realistic expectations, the potential for frustration and misunderstanding on both sides should be alleviated. There must be clear procedures in place to deal with any persistent breach of the agreement on either side.

Where behaviour and low achievement continue to be an issue, parent support workers could play a vital role in ensuring that a family's individual circumstances are taken into account.

Recommendation: Every school should consult the whole school community fully to create and implement a meaningful Home School Agreement which can be recognised on all sides. The Government should critically assess the effectiveness of existing Home School Agreements and implement improvements at a local level.

Parent support workers

Parent support workers have a critical role to play in being the first port of call for teachers that have concerns about a particular child. They are a unique resource, as trained professionals with the skills to reach out to families and ensure that all relevant agencies are involved in giving support. With the potential to ease time pressures on schools and families too, parent support workers can perform a vital role in supporting positive relationships between parents and teachers.

Recommendation: Every school should have adequate access to a parent support worker who is trained to deal with a spectrum of family and emotional issues. Special focus should be given to families living in poverty or families who have chaotic and disordered home circumstances. Parent support workers should be a visible member of the school community, ensuring that all parents, teachers and other staff understand their role and remit and are a named contact, available when required.

Communication between schools and parents

There needs to be a step-change in understanding from parents and teachers. The emphasis of parent-teacher communications needs to shift so it is focussed on how parents can best support their children's learning in the home.

Increased use of technology has opened up opportunities for better communication between schools and home. However, parents are keen to see communication that is personalised to them and their child. For teachers, providing personalised communications is a huge burden on their already excessive workload. Increasing the frequency of communication will not necessarily make parents feel more engaged. Less frequent, more personalised and relevant communication which highlights both the negatives and positives about a pupil's performance is important. These communications need to include explicit recommendations for how the parent can support the child's learning and development at home. This approach should be jointly agreed within the Home Support Agreement.

Recommendation: Overall there must be a step-change in communication between schools and parents. Home School Agreements should set clear expectations about the frequency, method and content of communications between teachers and parents that is considerate to both parties' workloads. Further exploration around the benefits of schools using new technology to engage with parents is needed. Schools should consider making provisions to engage parents who may work full-time or shift patterns. Developments such as live chat or virtual parents' evenings could enable more parents to speak to teachers without increasing teachers' workload. Teachers must be given adequate time to engage with families, which will not be as time-consuming for teachers or parents if new technologies can be used to their potential.

Training

Teachers' responses in the Teacher Support Network survey²⁹ contained some very clear messages about the difficulties of working with some parents. Teachers told us that they would like more training in order to undertake this work successfully.

"I think that some teachers naturally have confidence and good interpersonal skills. For others, experience and training helps to build the necessary confidence." (teacher)

"There definitely needs to be some sort of training to help younger teachers learn to interact positively with upset parents." (teacher)

Overall, 69 per cent of respondents to Teacher Support Network's survey said that 'specific training for teachers on parent-teacher relations' would be 'effective' or 'very effective'. Parents agreed:

"Teachers need training on how to address parents properly." (parent)

Training would help to overcome the challenge of engaging those who face barriers, such as fathers and non-resident parents.

Recommendation: All school staff should be trained about the best ways to engage parents in education. This will help to develop positive relationships between schools and families and ultimately help pupils to succeed. Parent support workers are ideally positioned to play a positive role in the delivery and tailoring of such training.



Conclusion

Parentline Plus and Teacher Support Network urge schools, families and other stakeholders to play their part in implementing the above recommendations. Relations between parents and teachers must improve. The case studies and comments in this report - positive and negative - prove how powerful and important the relationship between school and the home can be. The body of other research, alongside our survey findings, show convincingly that parental engagement in learning is crucial to wellbeing, behaviour, attendance and attainment, for example. Whilst the majority of relationships are said to be 'good' or 'very good', this alone is not good enough.

No parent, teacher or pupil should have to be part of a relationship between school and the home that is anything other than excellent. Schools and families can and should work better together, but achieving this demands a new way of thinking about parent-teacher engagement that goes beyond good relationships. With the interests of pupils at heart, parents and teachers should be on the same side. Parental engagement in a child's learning at home can complement teaching at school as long as parents and teachers have the means and the will to understand and support each other better. Beyond the school gate, parents and teachers can relate in new and improved ways to achieve better outcomes for all.

²⁹ Teacher Support Network 2009/10 parent-teacher relations survey

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