About ENABLE:

ENABLE Scotland is the largest voluntary organisation in Scotland of and for children and adults who have learning disabilities and their families. We have a strong voluntary network with around 5000 members in 44 local branches and via individual membership.

Around a third of our members have a learning disability. ENABLE Scotland campaigns to improve the lives of people who have learning disabilities and their families and carers. ENABLE Scotland provides social care services to more than 2,000 people across Scotland who have learning disabilities or mental health problems.

ENABLE Scotland believe that getting it right for all children during their school years is crucial to their future quality of life and opportunities. Our Bridging the Training Gap highlighted the need for better education for student and qualified education staff on additional support needs, equalities and inclusion. This issue persists, highlighted in both the Doran Report (review of education for children with complex needs) and Donaldson Report (review of teacher education). One of the consequences of this is the disproportionate rates of exclusions among children with additional support needs (ASN) and/or disabilities.

- The exclusion rate per 1,000 pupils, for pupils with ASN is more than 4 times higher than those who have no ASN.
- The exclusion rate per 1,000 pupils, for pupils assessed or declared as having a disability is twice as high as for those without ASN.
- Rates of exclusion among pupils attending special schools is high at 148 per 1,000 compared to 58 per 1,000 in secondary and 10 per 1,000 in primary.
- So-called ‘informal exclusions’ continue to be common practice despite being unlawful. The Children’s Commissioner in England produced a report on exclusions (They Never Give Up On You, 2012) that suggested the practice is widespread in England. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in Scotland the situation is no better.

50% of families surveyed by Contact a Family (in England) said that they were unable to work because of constant informal exclusions. Other effects of this practice included: children becoming depressed, falling behind with school work and feeling isolated; conflict between parents and school; changing schools.
ENABLE Scotland believes therefore that truly inclusive education is not a reality for many children with ASN and still needs to be tackled.

ENABLE delivers a range of programmes in schools and colleges across Scotland to support young people with additional support needs to make a successful post-school transition to a positive destination, for example our Stepping Up programme which is highlighted in the Wood report as an example of best practice.

ENABLE Scotland has a Young Families Support Committee, made up largely of parents and family carers of children and young people with a learning disability. We regularly consult with this group to keep us informed of issues impacting on families with disabled children. Parent members of the Young Families Support Committee have informed our response to the Committee.

Our response is informed by ENABLE Scotland’s Getting it Right from the Start research due to be published in May 2015.

Questions:

1. Whether schools always explain clearly to parents how children learn throughout their school years and how parents could help their development (e.g. with reading and wider literacy approaches):

ENABLE Scotland would like to share with the Committee the views of one parent member of the Young Families Support Committee as an example of the experience of parents of children with learning disabilities:

“We had various planning and transition meetings with Educational psychologist, school etc. but little was said about the process of learning or how that could / should / would be adapted to allow J to access the curriculum and achieve the best learning outcome for him. Focus was on helping him be settled and managing his behaviour (Which wasn’t bad) and helping him learn social skills. I don’t remember any focus on strategies for us as parents to support learning at home. J is on split placement between communication unit and mainstream school.”

The Committee should be aware that in regards to the experience of parents of children with learning disabilities, this comment is, unfortunately, fairly typical.

ENABLE Scotland would highlight to the Committee that children with learning disabilities face additional challenges in education. For parents too this can be an extremely difficult time. One parent that participated in research by ENABLE Scotland used the following words to describe their feelings:

“It’s hard to put your child into an environment that you know doesn’t get it, and it’s like putting your child into the lion’s den, knowing that, there’s a good chance he’s going to get hurt, because he doesn’t understand the hidden social curriculum, he doesn’t understand about what you should and shouldn’t do to be a friend, and things like that/”

Research conducted by ENABLE Scotland highlighted a clear feeling that parents and professionals should be working together collaboratively to meet the educational needs of the child. Parent experiences, shared in this research, suggested that the professionals should be interacting and communicating better with parents; that parents’ opinions need to be valued and not treated as an inconvenience.
“Changes need to happen, professionals need to respect parents – all professionals need to respect parents, and listen to them, and not dismiss them as, you don’t know what you’re talking about, I’m the professional here. And I was hoping that GIRFEC would do that, but it’s taking a while to filter down.”

ENABLE Scotland would highlight that a child’s learning experience would be enhanced if schools were able to help parents to support their child’s learning and development at home. However, it is our experience that for many teachers and pupil support assistants there is training gap in their own understanding of how the learning and development of a child with a learning disability differs from their non-disabled peers.

2. **Whether schools are always flexible enough to allow parents to be involved in their child’s education (given parents’ work commitments, for example):**

In response to this question ENABLE Scotland would draw on the experience of one parent member:

“We get invited to 3 x ½ hour meetings a year to discuss J’s STINT (Staged Intervention Plan) and look at how things are going. Typically attendees will include a teacher from schools, Education psychologist, and special needs coordinator from mainstream school. We talked about J but little said to support learning style etc. and how to make it accessible for him. All strategies tend to focus on things that do not require equipment or staffing presumably due to resource constraints.”

“Meetings are short (30 mins) and therefore can only cover a short agenda with little or no time to discuss anything outwith J’s STINT plan.”

Parents tell us that they would like to be more involved in their child’s education, particularly with regard to supporting their child’s learning needs by sharing effective strategies with the teacher to ensure consistency between home and school. However the perception is often that teachers don’t always take the time to listen to parents and don’t treat parents as partners in their child’s education.

3. **The extent to which schools offer particular support to the parents of pupils from the most disadvantaged communities, in order to improve the attainment of those pupils:**

ENABLE Scotland would suggest to the Committee that particular support should be offered to families where either the child or the parents have a disability, in order to improve the attainment of those pupils.

Families with disabled members are more likely to experience poverty. Welfare reforms have hit households with disabled adults and children with an average reduction of £1,900 per year in annual income. This is three times the reduction experienced by non-disabled households. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has calculated that the cumulative impacts of welfare reforms has led to 500,000 more children falling into absolute poverty in the UK, 325,000 of them disabled children.

Combined with the cognitive, emotional, physical and sometimes behavioural challenges that impact on their educational outcomes, children with disabilities are often also affected by poverty for a number of reasons.
Families with disabled children are more likely to be living in poverty due to the considerable additional costs of raising a disabled child (e.g. aids and adaptations, treatments, therapies, travelling to hospital and GP appointments or to a special school, special diets, special nappies etc.) In fact it is estimated that it costs 3 times more to raise a disabled child than a non-disabled child.¹ Many parents of disabled children go without essentials themselves in order to pay bills and provide what their children need.² This causes anxiety, worry and stress, impacting upon parents’ own mental and physical wellbeing. The difficulties of combining employment with the responsibility of caring for a disabled child add to the likelihood that this group of families will be disadvantaged financially.

Despite this families with disabled children report that they have to “fight” for the right level of support for their child at school. The perception is that this is often due to scarce resources and budgetary constraints. ENABLE Scotland would link the disproportionate exclusion rates for children with Additional Support Needs and/or a disability with a support deficit. Exclusions impact on both child and parent.

Research by ENABLE Scotland, Getting it Right from the Start 2015, highlights the substantial role school can play in providing support for parents of children with learning disabilities. 70% of parents cited the school/education sector as a source of support. Many parents responding cited teachers and head teachers as the primary source of day to day support for the child and the parents:

“Once he was in school, we kind of lost touch with the professionals (health and social work), so it’s really the school just dealing directly. I would say the deputy head or his teachers at the school, because that’s my main point of contact now for all A’s needs. I don’t really have a professional that comes to the house or deals with A anymore – all that is now being handled at the school.”

4. **Whether there is evidence to demonstrate which approaches used by schools have been most successful and whether these are being used, as appropriate, throughout Scotland:**

ENABLE Scotland’s research, Getting it Right from the Start 2015 identified Child and Parent focussed support as a model of good practise. Most of the professionals interviewed were clear that although the child is the focus of services, supporting parents was a vital part of the big picture.

“It was 50:50...You’re supporting the child in school, but, actually, you’re supporting the parents outwith that.”

Professionals felt that within a child centred education system, their role includes managing support for the parents as well.

ENABLE Scotland would suggest that as the Education Sector is such a significant source of support for parents of children with learning disabilities. Education professionals need to be further equipped with capabilities of supporting both children with learning disabilities and their parents. Ensuring examples of good practise become universal.

¹ Contact a Family (2012), Counting the Cost 2012: the financial reality for families with disabled children across the UK.
² Contact a Family (2014), Counting the Cost 2014: Research into the finances of more than 3,500 families with disabled children across the UK.
Children are all individuals and their support needs should be assessed on an individual basis, however it would be helpful to have a shared database of good practice. The Autism Toolbox and Dyslexia Toolkit are good examples of what can be achieved in this respect but are of course specific to those conditions and therefore limited in scope.³ ⁴

5. Whether greater parental involvement in school education through the Parental Involvement Act (2006) has led to an improvement in pupil attainment:

One parent told us said, on the Parental Involvement Act (2006), that it is: “Not mentioned or discussed. General statements only that parental involvement helps.”

According to Scottish Government statistics⁵, the attainment of pupils with learning disabilities has increased from an average tariff score of 55 in 2009/10 to 78 in 2011/12. Whether this is due to greater parental involvement in their child’s education is impossible to say.

In our experience, when parents are actively engaged with their child’s learning and supported to do so by the school, this can have a positive impact on attainment. However we are aware that the opposite is also true - limiting expectations on the part of parents, schools, or both can have a detrimental impact on attainment. If the child is not encouraged to reach their potential, (whatever that might be), they will not be motivated to learn and will not aspire to achieve their goals in life.

6. Whether there are any new measures that could realistically be taken (for example, by the Scottish Government, local authorities, parents’ forums, the voluntary sector, etc) to help parents raise their child’s attainment.

Any new measures should involve meaningful participation by parents in planning their child’s support for learning and in decisions relating to their child’s education. This participation should be on an individual basis between parent(s) or carer(s) and class teacher AND on a more formal, collective basis through parent forums/councils.

There is already legislation in place to try to ensure that the views of parents are listened to and taken into account; however practice on the ground does not always reflect this. As stated previously, parents need to feel that they are truly valued by schools as partners in supporting their child’s education.

Parents of children with learning disabilities also need to be supported to understand how their child learns and how they might be supported to achieve their goals. Parents and carers should also be fully informed about the range of options available for their young person on leaving school. Attainment in school is currently focussed on discrete academic qualifications that allow pupils to access Higher Education. For young people who have a learning disability, qualifications, whilst important, do not reflect the full breadth of achievement in terms of the range of skills developed in school or readiness to progress beyond school. Implementation of the Wood Report would see the definition of attainment in school fundamentally challenged, broadening it to encompass vocational skills and readiness to progress into industry.

³ http://www.autismtoolbox.co.uk/
⁴ http://www.addressingdyslexia.org/
⁵ Implementation of the Education (ASL) (Scotland) Act 2004 Report to Parliament (April 2014)
“This is a particular concern of mine as 16 is not too far away in the future for L and yet there still seems to be a tendency in education to get ASN kids to 16 with the bare minimum of qualifications and allow them to leave school. A lot of their capabilities are assumed and I still don’t think there is enough done to explore their talents and develop them into a chosen career path. I also don’t think age and stage of development is considered at all, it’s like "oh you’re 16? Off you go then and be an adult!” I certainly know in my case, L will not be ready for the adult world at 16.”

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