Review of research on family engagement in education:
Addressing the achievement gap

Report

A partnership between CRFR and Children in Scotland
Commissioned by the Scottish Government
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1. Introduction

The introduction of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006 aimed to not only increase parents’ participation in their own children’s educational experiences but to also become invested in the wider educational community. It has been suggested that we need to progress from parental involvement in schools to parental engagement in children’s learning (Goodall and Montgomery 2013). Parental engagement in children’s learning is only one factor of many that influences their educational attainment; however, it is particularly significant, and evidence suggests that among the non-school factors of school achievement like socio-economic background, parents’ educational attainment, family structure, ethnicity and parental engagement, it is the latter which is the most strongly connected to achievement and attainment (Harris and Goodall 2008). This review therefore concentrates on effective engagement strategies that will help to reduce the attainment gap between children and young people from more and less advantages backgrounds.

Key points:

- Forming a school-family partnership, particularly one that is effectively situated within the context of community agents of children’s wellbeing, requires shared goals, shared contributions, and shared accountability between parents and schools.
- Parental engagement is not confined to the visible presence and actions of parents and family within the physical space of schools – for many families may find direct engagement with schools intimidating or difficult – but still participate extensively in their children’s learning at home and in the community.
- Considering the educational experiences and outcomes of children as a shared endeavour between families and schools requires better understanding the models, mechanisms, and services that can help narrow the attainment gap amongst Scottish children and young people. This gap in achievement is experienced asymmetrically, with disadvantaged pupils more commonly assessed as at the lower levels of attainment.
- There is no singular model or programme of family engagement guaranteed to narrow the achievement gap and increase the involvement of all children’s parents. Every school must adapt the strategies and interventions included in this report to the needs of their own community, school, pupils, and parents and carers.

This review aimed to produce a high quality, accessible evidence review of educational intervention research on family engagement. The outputs from this review are focused on providing support to teachers and schools on how they can use their existing assets to improve the attainment and achievement of disadvantaged pupils. This report consists of a methodology section followed by six thematic sections which formed the website content

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1 Please note: parental engagement here refers to engagement of a parent or carer of either gender. The positive effects of this type of engagement are not affected by family structure.
2. Methodology
This review and resulting website content and supporting guidance materials resulted from a partnership between the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) and Children in Scotland. Scottish Government commissioned both organisations to undertake a purposive review of parental engagement in education, with a particular focus on closing gaps in attainment for disadvantaged pupils. Two key starting points for this review was a literature review of best practice in parental engagement in education recently completed for the Department for Education (Goodall and Vorhaus 2011) and a rapid review of parental engagement and narrowing the attainment gap produced by the National Foundation of Educational Research (Grayson 2013).

Review Phase 1
It was decided that this review would focus on studies of interventions, services, strategies, and determinant of parental engagement in education that were published between 2008 and 2014. This ensured that the evidence would be relatively recent while also allowing a broad enough time period in order to locate enough sources from which to collate useful findings. The first phase of the search strategy was carried out via the University of Edinburgh ‘Searcher’ Discovery Service which searches across all the University’s library resources, including the Library catalogue, e-books, e-journals, library databases and theses to identify literature for the review. Various combinations of the following terms were entered to obtain results:

- parent*
- famil*
- engage*
- school*
- learn*
- attain*
- achiev*
- disparit*
- inequ*
- involve*
- home-school*

A total of eighteen separate search combinations were run with the same parameters of publication dates between 2008 and 2014, and result sources to be included were academic journals, electronic resources, books, e-books, theses/dissertations, conference papers, and reviews. The different combinations yielded a wide-range of results equalling approximately 3750 results.

Review Phase 2
The next step was to review the first round of results and actively choose results according to their title and key words. A total of 248 entries were chosen from this first step. Next the reviewer screened all the selected literature and excluded those items that did not meet the review parameters based on their abstracts. This yielded 138 search results that passed on to the final
inclusion stage, consideration of the remaining items’ quality and relevance to the review, determined by appraising the full text of each result.

Exclusions were applied for a variety of reasons, including a lack of rigour or applicability to the reviews’ aims. When there was any question as to whether or not a study should be included, as this was a collaborative project, partners’ input was obtained. A summary of the reasons for excluding results in the second round of reviewing are that the studies focused on:

- Preschool children or programmes focusing on Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)
- Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Children with ADD/ADHD, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, or chronic illness
- Post-school transitions
- School engagement of children (unless it was considered in conjunction with parental engagement)
- Parental involvement in terms of governance
- Geographical areas or cultural orientations that are too particular for applicability

Studies focusing on these issues were excluded given the very constrained timescale of the project and the need for a relatively sharply defined profile.

Geographically, the review used both UK based studies and evaluations as well as those of an international nature. Although the US produces a comparatively large amount of research on family engagement and children’s academic outcomes, some these studies were too culturally or demographically specific to be generalizable to the Scottish context. Likewise, many of the international results were excluded because of the lack of transferability.

**Meta-Analysis**

All included articles were examined for primary data which could be included in a meta-analysis of findings. Of the initial 27 articles pulled with some primary data, 15 were secondary data analyses of longitudinal or large education datasets and only five studies included measures of educational outcomes related specifically to a parental engagement intervention. These five interventions were diverse in terms of scope and size of the study but also the intervention type and outcomes measured. Based on the low number of studies with outcomes data and the lack of homogeneity between types of interventions, a meta-analysis was not conducted. It is recommended that future studies on parental engagement interventions should endeavour to include educational outcomes data.

**Other Sources**

Lastly, the review process included limited web-based searches that were typically focused on specific research centres or other sources identified with an investment in education research. These websites included:

- Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO)
- National Literacy Trust
- National Foundation for Educational Research
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
All searching and assessing exercises yielded 80 sources of evidence to include in the review. These included somewhat diverse types of information, from primary data intervention studies to policy and practices reviews. All sources of evidence were then analysed to draw out emerging themes and key messages, but with the primary focus on strategies, practices, services, and interventions that would be possible for teachers and other school staff to consider, access, and utilise.
3. Themed chunks: what can we do?

3.1. Engaging Vulnerable Families

Children growing up in poorer families tend to emerge from school with substantially lower levels of educational attainment. This is a major contributing factor to patterns of social mobility and poverty. Differential access to material resources, differing attitudes towards schools and education as well as varying levels of educational aspirations within vulnerable families can result in lower educational attainment for vulnerable children. Different social classes, cultures, ethnicities, and family circumstances inform how parents engage with their children’s schooling and the different resources they are able to bring to bear in facilitating their children’s educational trajectories.

What does the evidence say?

School policies and programmes should emphasise parental engagement as an ongoing, continuous state of working (Altschul 2011). Often families who face challenges from low-incomes or marginalisation are time pressed and have multiple sources of worry, so that parents may only assist with learning at home when children struggle academically or socially (Altschul 2011; Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). Children from poor or challenging backgrounds are less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off backgrounds (Goodman and Gregg 2010). Schools need to be aware that material conditions and challenging circumstances affect social relationships and educational processes (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010).

Perceptions as to the roles and responsibilities of schools and families may depend on the socio-economic position and ethnic background of parents, with differing perspectives as to what the school-family relationship should look like (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010; Kim 2009). Some parents feel excluded because of the expectations that they be involved both in programmes in which they have no expertise or are geared towards other children (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010).

Parental aspirations and attitudes to education vary strongly by socio-economic position, with more advantaged parents expecting their children to achieve high educational attainments than the most disadvantaged parents (Brown et al 2009). Expectations and patterns of achievement can also be influenced at the community level, making school-family-community relationships an ideal towards which to work (Brown et al 2009).

Some parents experience barriers to engagement with schools, and these groups of parents are most often those who do not share the social and cultural capital of the school and community (Goodall 2013; Kim 2009). Such barriers, including language, ethnicity, low parental educational attainment, and socioeconomic status, can also work to obscure the parents’ engagement with their children’s learning if it is unfamiliar to the school (Goodall 2013; Kim 2009). Evidence suggests that vulnerable families would benefit from services that build social capital by facilitating access to information about the available options and appropriate support and advice (Grayson 2013). Building parents’ confidence in themselves is integral to children’s learning; a parent’s sense of self-
efficacy and belief in their ability to help their children’s learning is central to whether or not they engage in their children’s schooling (Emerson et al 2012).

**What seems to be working?**

Specifically focusing on building parents’ expectations of their children and creating positive attitudes towards education and schools can help address transmission mechanisms between socioeconomic and adverse circumstances and low educational attainment (Goodman and Gregg 2010). Informal opportunities for communication and contact between parents and school can help build fruitful relationships, particularly when school leaders are perceived to display openness and an appreciation for different socio-cultural home lives (Riley 2009).

Helping to supply learning resources and support materials can help pupils in vulnerable families to meet academic and life challenges (Griffiths 2012; Altschul 2011; Jewitt and Parashart 2011). By working with the local authority or other community partners to provide resources such as books, computers and internet access, or mathematics games and supplies, schools can make a material impact on closing the attainment gap (Jewitt and Parashart 2011; Goodman and Gregg 2010).

Where possible, the employment of additional staff, such as a youth worker liaison or parental support advisor, to carry out welfare and support work connected to family engagement can make a large difference (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). Home-school liaison officers are good for targeted contact with ‘hard to reach’ or ‘under-served’ families, especially when there are limited language or literacy skills in the family (Emerson et al 2012). Sometimes the involvement of community members, such as retired elders, in a volunteering role can also improve the learning capacity of pupils (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010).

Creating physical spaces in which to conduct interventions, services, or interactions outside of the school may soften any existing negative associations parents may with education and allow a less hierarchical relationship to develop (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). However, local context is important. Running a programme out of a school can be a successful engagement option as well, especially when service take-up by referred or targeted families might be made more visible when in a community space (Sylva et al 2008).

Targeting projects at the transition period, both pre-school to primary and primary to secondary, can demonstrate significant benefits for low-income families (Save the Children 2009). Evidence shows a strong relationship between social exclusion and truancy, and between truancy and low academic attainment, so supporting low-income families at critical transition points in their schooling can be a powerful intervention (Goodall 2013; Save the Children 2009).

Activities and events that allow parents to see their children in the school setting can help parents better understand their children’s education (Riley 2009). Strategies such as ‘drop-in’ workshops, ‘stay and play’ sessions, or ‘come and see my best work’ all contribute to building a parent’s positive association with school, both on a personal level and the level of their child’s accomplishments (Riley 2009).

Family learning opportunities, from after-school clubs to parent-child homework sessions, can engage vulnerable families in their children’s education while building both parents’ and pupils’ learning capacities (Riley 2009). Poor literacy is an intergenerational phenomenon (Swain et al
2009), and children of parents who have the poorest grasp of literacy and numeracy are at substantial disadvantage in relation to their own reading and maths development compared to children who have parents with good literacy and numeracy (DCSF 2008). Programmes focusing on family learning should also incorporate a digital technology element, as being able to engage with the digital ‘participatory culture’ is crucial to wider participation in current society – without the skills and attitudes to do so, vulnerable families may find themselves further disadvantaged (Grant 2009).

**What is the impact?**

A study examining the differential experiences of parents from different social class backgrounds and their use of technology in the home for learning found that parents with no home internet access tended to talk more about the stresses and anxieties of finding convenient and sustainable internet access for their children (Hollingworth et al 2011). In contrast, families with broadband access talked often, extensively, and positively about their child’s learning with technology (Hollingworth et al 2011). A lack of PC and internet access presented particular difficulties for children’s schoolwork, and if their strategies to provide access fail (e.g. not logging enough hours on a school’s online learning platform), the child may be threatened with disciplinary action (Hollingworth et al 2011).

A UK-based intervention study assessing the impact of family literacy programmes looked at both short courses (30-49 hours) and standard (72-96). 56% of parents achieved a qualification on short courses and 71% achieved a qualification on a standard course (Swain et al 2009). Following on from that impact, 65% of all 583 participating parents reported that the family literacy courses led them to be more involved in their child’s pre-school or primary school (Swain et al 2009).

One UK secondary school put concerted effort into engaging its more vulnerable parents through judicious and sensitive use of email, meetings, telephone calls and letters, while also ensuring sympathetic and quick communication with parents was constant (Ofsted 2011). This successful engagement of parents enabled students in difficult circumstances to stay ‘on track’ academically and improved their attendance (Ofsted 2011).

**Case Study**

An English local authority has pockets of multiple deprivations in each of its towns and significant numbers of people in rural areas living with “medium” deprivation. The local authority perceived a low level of aspiration and engagement with children’s learning among some parents, and in 2009 consulted them about their needs to inform the development of its Parenting and Family Support Strategy. Parents reported difficulty in accessing advice and support services. This problem influenced the development of the Parent Support Workers (PSW) project.

PSWs receive an initial induction programme and ongoing CPD opportunities. Their role involves responding to early indications that children and families could benefit from additional help. The focus is on prevention and early intervention activities, where presenting needs are below the thresholds that trigger the involvement of specialist services and other agencies. Each PSW
provides parenting support courses and classes and one-to-one parenting support for parents across a cluster of primary and/or secondary schools. Where a need for outside help is identified, the PSW provides signposting and access to the relevant specialist services.

73% of referrals to the project come directly from schools, with the main reasons for initial referral being non-attendance at school, child behaviour, and parenting skills.

The project defined its anticipated outcomes:

- improving the engagement of parents and carers with schools
- increasing multi-agency family support work
- supporting learning at home
- improving children’s settling into school routines
- raising expectations

Impact analysis was embedded into the development of the new roles from the outset, with outcomes continuously monitored through reflective working and review of practice and service delivery.

An evaluation conducted with parents and carers in 2010 found that 95% were “very satisfied” with the input received from their PSW, and the remaining 5% were “satisfied”. 96% reported positive change including increased parental confidence, self-esteem and a greater overall understanding of their child; better awareness of available support; and improved child behaviour (Grayson 2013).

**Questions and Considerations**

Do we show sensitivity to different cultural norms and practices, to lack of material resources, and to possible past negative experiences of school within families?

Is there an assumption that if parents are not visible at school then they must be disengaged?

Do we operate a flexible, open-door environment to encourage all parents’ engagement?

Can we develop and offer a family learning project that helps both parents and pupils to achieve learning outcomes?

Do we have connections with other community and local groups in order to signpost services and support mechanisms for vulnerable families?
### 3.2. Supporting the Home Learning Environment

Parents play a critical role in promoting academic success through parent-school involvement, stimulation of cognitive growth at home, and promotion of values consistent with academic achievement, and this is another area where the gap between the most and least advantaged may be obvious. Even mealtime conversations about a child’s day at school or a specific activity can have a positive impact on their educational attainment, and regular interactive learning within the home can be both in conjunction with and independent from the formal school system. Children from less advantaged households are less likely to experience a wide range of ‘home learning’ activities than children from more advantaged households (Growing Up in Scotland). Therefore efforts to improve effective communication between all parents and school, creating shared goals and strategies with parents to reinforce children’s out-of-school learning can be ways of addressing the attainment gap.

**What does the evidence say?**

**Parental engagement in their children’s learning in the home has a greater effect on their achievement than parental involvement in school-based activities (Goodall 2013; Altschul 2011).** However, maximising children’s learning is best facilitated by parents engaging in learning activities in the home in tandem with similar critical instructions being received at school (Crosnoe 2012). The likelihood of educational attainment is increases when the child perceives continuity of values between school and family (Blanch et al 2013).

**School initiated engagement can make up some of the disadvantage faced by children of less engaged parents by facilitating the flow of school-related information (about protocols, practices, norms, expectations) to those parents (Crosnoe 2012).** As long as some of the basic information relating to the child’s educational process reaches the parents, the home-school relationship can be improved (Crosnoe 2012). To raise achievement, dialogue between parents and their children is extremely important, and this dialogue is best facilitated when the parent is informed about the curriculum, activities, and expectations in the child’s school (Goodall 2013; Goodall and Vorhaus 2011).

**Communication between parents and teachers helps teachers to understand their needs, which can be quite varied (Egbert and Salsbury 2009).** Two-directional communication helps to solidify both teachers’ and parents’ understanding of context; this is especially important for teachers and school staff as they need to be sensitive to the various status and family characteristics of their pupils and the pupils’ families (Reschly and Christenson 2012). The more regular and frequent the communication between schools and families, the more likely it is that parents will be viewed not as a threat but as a willing and capable partners (Reglin et al 2012; Save the Children 2009).

**Parental engagement with their children is particularly important at times of transition (Goodall 2013; Save the Children 2009).** Evidence has shown that concerted efforts for parental engagement during periods of transition, especially the transition from primary to secondary school, prevent any gains in achievement prior to a transition from being lost (Save the Children 2009). With effective partnership working between families and schools, the likelihood of truancy, exclusion, or disengagement is lessened (Save the Children 2009).
Despite adolescents’ growing need for autonomy, parental engagement in secondary school pupils’ learning remains a strong predictor of academic achievement (Grayson 2013; Patrikakou 2008). Parents often feel that they are more welcome to engage in their children’s learning during primary school compared to the complexity and size of secondary school (Goodall 2013; DCSF 2008; Harris and Goodall 2008). Encouraging more parental engagement within home in the form of supporting children’s educational aspirations and goals is important as children mature and become more independent (Goodall 2013; Patall et al 2008). Help with homework is something many parents feel they cannot assist with once pupils progress in school and their studies become more specialised (different content and methods of teaching) (Goodall 2013). Lastly, when secondary schools do not maintain the levels of communication and engagement often found in primary schools, parents reported lower levels of trust (Reschly and Christenson 2012).

Parents become involved in schools in different ways – the degree to which families match the culture of the school can go some way to explaining these differences (Goodall 2013; Kim 2009). The expectations from school, in terms of how parents are expected to engage in learning, tend to embody the skills and resources characteristic of white, middle-class families. Parents from this group often share the social and cultural capital of (or are socially and culturally similar to) the teachers with whom they interact (Goodall 2013; Kim 2009). This also means some of the ways that parents engage with their children’s learning, especially when it may refer to different social and cultural norms, may go unnoticed by the school despite the fact that the engagement is still of value to the child’s attainment (Goodall 2013).

Parental engagement with homework can be both positively and negatively associated with achievement (Altschul 2011; Van Voorhis 2010; Xu et al 2009). The reasons why a parent participates can affect the association, for instance, if it is only to hasten the completion of the task or if it is used as an opportunity to interact and talk with the child (Van Voorhis 2010). One review found that parental support for children’s autonomy in homework was associated with higher scores, however, their direct involvement with assignments that are not meant to be interactive or collaborative – particularly when the child is struggling – is associated with lower scores (DCSF 2008).

What seems to be working?

Building parents’ confidence in supporting children’s learning in the home (Blanch et al 2013; Goodall 2013. For instance, in a Spanish paired reading intervention study, findings suggested that families successfully following the programme’s recommendations largely because of the confidence promoted by the teachers and schools regarding the family’s ability to support and mediate the pupils’ learning (Blanch et al 2013).

Collaborative working between parents and children that is mediated or facilitated by teachers and schools (Crosnoe 2012; Scanlan 2012). Part of the Home-School Knowledge Project in the South-west of England devised a method of parents and pupils collaboratively selecting and talking about artefacts in the home to help inspire and improve pupils’ creative writing skills (Scanlon 2012). This type of partnership working allows parents’ knowledge and experience to become relevant to the educational process, and schools can build on knowledge from the home with the child acting as a key agent of this process (Scanlon 2012). Similarly, homework designed or sourced by teachers
that is interactive and interesting can foster positive communications between home and school (Van Voorhis 2010).

Schools should tailor their school-family practices to the level of school and the pupils’ developmental stages (Reschly and Christenson 2012). Partnerships for younger students may focus on school readiness, mastery of basic skills, and motivation; partnerships for older pupils may want to focus on facilitating transitions, pupils’ growing need for autonomy, and decision-making (Reschly and Christenson 2012).

Using a range of activities and communication styles can support the home learning environment (Ofsted 2011). Input directly from parents should be incorporated into setting pupils’ academic targets, and explaining plainly what each academic and subject level meant in practice to parents helped them to visualise where their support could fit (Ofsted 2011). One primary school had parents come to school for part of an afternoon once a week to learn the strategies and methods that were being used in school (Ofsted 2011).

For literacy and tutoring interventions, a highly structured format helps family members to feel knowledgeable and able (Blanch et al 2013; Egbert and Salsbury 2009). In a literacy programme in the US focused on involving parents in interactive homework assignments in which they had a small but crucial role. Feedback suggested that parents were eager to participate because they did not have to invent new activities but simply share their lives, interests, and values with their children (Egbert and Salsbury 2009). Another study found that practical, easy-to-implement ideas with printed and emailed instructions were successful for engaging parents in at-home education (Doyle and Zhang 2011).

What is the impact?

One study found that schools with strong family engagement were four times more likely to improve student reading over time, and ten times more likely to improve student learning gains in mathematics (Bryk et al 2010 in Emerson et al 2012). Another Australian study found that children aged 9-13 whose homes offered a more stimulating learning environment (measured at age 8) had a higher intrinsic motivation for academic studies – suggesting the long-reaching effects of effective home learning (Duckworth et al 2009 in Emerson et al 2012).

National Child Development Study data found that parental engagement in children’s education at age 7 could independently predict educational attainment at age 20 (Flouri and Buchanan 2004 in DCSF 2008). A meta-analysis of 51 studies shows that initiatives involving parents and children reading together, interactive homework, and regular parent-teacher communication all have a noteworthy relationship with academic outcomes (Jeynes 2010).

A US-based intervention study examined the effectiveness of a parent support reading (PSR) intervention to increase the reading comprehension scores of seventh grade pupils (Reglin et al 2012). Parents participated in PSR workshops twice a week for weeks or once a week for 24 weeks and were encouraged to help their children with reading homework in the evening. The PSR activities resulted in a statistically significant increase in the intervention group’s end-of-grade reading comprehension scores.
**Another intervention study in the US focused on the Teachers Include Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) interactive mathematics programme (Van Voorhis 2010).** TIPS homework assignments are interactive and include clear objectives for learning, instructions for completion, and explicitly state that pupils are to involve family members. TIPS is teacher-led and it is incorporated into the overall curriculum, ideally for a minimum of one year (some pupils were enrolled in the programme for two years in this study). According to family and pupil surveys, being in the TIPS group positively predicted pupil and family attitudes about the math homework experience, and pupils in TIPS had significantly higher standardised mathematics achievement scores than control pupils. TIPS students and families also reported higher levels of family engagement in maths homework than did control pupils and families (Van Voorhis 2010).

**Case Study**

The Oceans Mathematics Project aims to help pupils in disadvantaged areas of England to address underachievement in mathematics by changing attitudes and practices of schools, parents, and children specifically through involving their parents in the children’s maths learning process. Children in Years 1-9 can participate and families are encouraged to have more than one member participate – either both parents, grandparents, or siblings.

Workshops are run from schools with family members to help teach mathematics learning strategies, how children are being taught mathematics today, and to improve family members’ understanding of mathematics. These are led by maths teachers, who also make assignments that require family participation are also given, and maths based games are distributed.

Not every school who has implemented the Oceans Mathematics Project demonstrates statistically significant positive impacts, but two schools who originally implemented the intervention perhaps best demonstrate the impact that is possible. Before the project, both school had minimal to non-existent parental engagement as judged by Ofsted; however, their latest Ofsted reports praised both schools for their parental engagement efforts. In terms of improvements in the standards in mathematics, one school increased its number of KS3 pupils achieving level 5 or above by nearly 20% and moved from being in ‘special measures’ (when Ofsted considers that they fail to supply an acceptable level of education) to now being a Maths and Computing Specialist College (Bernie and Lall 2011).

**Questions and Considerations**

Do we consult all our pupils, parents, and staff about educational needs, plans, and gaps?

Does our school recognise that parents have different needs and different ways of engaging in their children’s education?

Can we think of new interactive homework assignments that emphasise parent-pupil communication mediated by the school?
How can our staff be encouraged to reach out more to families and feel confident in initiating new forms of engagement?

Are there any ways to increase families’ access to educational materials to be used at home?
3.3. Social, Emotional, and Behavioural Support

The important role of social-emotional learning in school success is an expanding body of educational and psychological research. Parental engagement and family-focused competency building are the primary means by which to support children’s social, emotional, and behavioural well-being. Risk factors associated with psychological and emotional problems and conduct disorder behaviours include conflict in the family, family breakdown, poverty and low income, abuse, and caregivers who may be struggling with mental illness or drug or alcohol misuse (Geddes 2008). For these reasons working with parents on these issues is a key dimension of parental engagement to reduce the attainment gap. Understanding how social competencies positively influence academic attainment is the aim for many studies that examine either, in broad terms, ‘family functioning’ or ‘cognitive improvement’. However, recently more intervention studies have found that addressing academic and cognitive development alongside social, emotional, and behavioural support is more effective for improving children’s overall outcomes.

What does the evidence say?

There is evidence that the integration of social and emotional programmes into the broader school curriculum can have a positive effect on academic achievement and wellbeing (Emerson et al 2012; Patrikakou 2008). Social and emotional types of learning can improve pupils’ understanding of academic subject matter, reduce anxiety, and increase their motivation to learn (Patrikakou 2008). Focusing on the social and emotional wellbeing of children early in their development, rather than waiting until some pupils begin to exhibit problems, may help to prevent any potential achievement gap (Scott et al 2009). Using parental engagement in education as a tool to enhance pupil wellbeing rather than solely to promote academic achievement, can also reduce the risk of parents placing excessive pressure on students to excel (Emerson et al 2008).

The relationship between poor reading ability and a range of academic, social, emotional and behavioural problems is complicated and it is difficult to disentangle cause and effect. One study associates poor reading with poor outcomes - academic and social and emotional - for children (Scott et al 2009). Low levels of literacy and high levels of behaviour problems, particularly in older children and those transitioning into adolescence, often co-occur (Sylva et al 2008). The link between poor literacy or cognitive abilities and socio-emotional difficulties was also found in the analysis of the Growing Up in Scotland longitudinal study; children with higher mean scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire total difficulties scale were more likely to have lower cognitive development scores indicating both lower problem solving and vocabulary ability (Bradshaw et al 2012).

When children and adolescents participate in an intervention or programme aimed to improve their socio-emotional and academic outcomes, those whose families are actively engaged display much less delinquent behaviour later in life than those children whose families were not involved (Grayson 2013; Patrikakou 2008). When parents became engaged in their children’s learning as
well as forming positive ways of managing children’s behaviour, children’s achievement improved (Beckett et al 2012 and Kiernan and Mensah 2011, both cited in Grayson 2013).

What seems to be working?

Effective school-family partnerships include establishing an inviting and participatory relationship with families of pupils – a positive parental attitude towards school will influence the children’s socio-emotional association with the school (Patrikakou 2008; Sylva et al 2008). One possible way to facilitate this partnership is to deliver a community programme at school, with many families experiencing this as less stigmatising than attending a group of ‘referred’ families (Sylva et al 2008). Similarly, effective partnership between the school and family requires unified messages regarding behaviour – when the home reinforces behaviour expected at school it influences the way children respond to learning and the school environment (Harris and Goodall 2008).

The development of a family resource centre in schools can provide parents with brief in-person consultations, telephone consultations, feedback regarding their children, and access to intervention or educational materials (Stormshak et al 2009). These family resource centres also become a means of signposting and linking intervention services, with an emphasis on mental health services for families. It is especially important in areas of high deprivation and disadvantage to link intervention services in the school and community; this facilitates both uptake by families and promotes self-selection into the most appropriate interventions services (Stormshak et al 2009).

Combining support for children’s behaviour while also delivering literacy interventions (Scott et al 2009; Sylva et al 2008). Maximisation of behaviour and learning interventions requires active family engagement and a teacher component to address the classroom context (Scott et al 2009). An example of such an intervention is Supporting Parents on Kids Education in Schools (SPOKES), which was used in several intervention studies (Scott et al 2009; Sylva et al 2008). SPOKES integrates the Incredible Years parent-training programme for managing children’s behaviour with a literacy programme for the children (which varies).

What is the impact?

An intervention trial carried out in 8 primary schools in London over 28 weeks, all located in areas of high disadvantage, included components that addressed parenting behaviour, child behaviour, and child literacy. Because all intervention children rated above average for anti-social behaviours, the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire assessment was completed by both parents and teachers both pre- and post-intervention. Intervention children moved from the 80th percentile to the 61st while control children did not change (Scott et al 2009). The rate of children displaying oppositional defiant behaviours also halved. For literacy, intervention children gained a reading age advantage of 6 months, from below average to the top quarter of the population (using the British Ability Scale) (Scott et al 2009).

A Family Check-Up intervention in the US is 3-4 collaborative decision-making sessions with parents in the family resource centre; the intervention included a comprehensive family assessment, support for family management skills, and interventions targeted at helping parents
reduce youth high-risk behaviour (Stormshak et al 2009). High-risk youth whose families received the intervention showed a GPA (grade point average) that remained stable during the transition to high school, while high-risk youth in the control group demonstrated a decline in GPA. Similarly, the control group showed a substantial growth in absence rates from middle school to high school, while the absence rate among the intervention group remained static (Stormshak et al 2009).

A UK-based randomised control trial on the SPOKES behaviour and literacy intervention demonstrated both a significant reduction in children’s emotional and conduct problems as well as a gain of 6 months of reading age over 3 school terms (Sylva et al 2008). Additionally, parents in the intervention group reported using more strategies associated with successful literacy learning at home with their children.

An US implementation study of the Family and Schools Together (FAST) programme, in which entire families participate in program activities designed to build parental respect in children, improve intra-family bonds, and enhance the family–school relationship (Ackley and Cullen 2010). This preventative programme for at-risk youth demonstrated statistically significant results for enhanced family relationships and parent-school engagement (Ackley and Cullen 2010), and parents reported significant gains in their school involvement, parent-to-school contact, school-to-parent contact, and total parent engagement (Crozier et al 2010).

Case Study

‘Sparking the Imagination’ was a small scale project aimed at enhancing the educational opportunities of young children from disadvantaged backgrounds in Northern Ireland. One of the primary means of achieving this goal was to enabling children and their parents to thrive in the formal school setting, particularly through building their self-confidence and self-esteem, which for children can help raise educational aspirations through positive attitudes to school.

The project operated in 3 primary schools and brought together parents, children, teachers, and creative experts from the community for workshops. Teachers were encouraged to enhance their professional development and follow up on creative ideas that may not fit the regular curriculum, parents were introduced to innovative approaches to parental engagement, and children’s creativity was fostered. All participants planned the workshops together and worked collaboratively.

The area highlighted by all parties in which significant gains were clearly evident was self-esteem. The raising of self-esteem in the children taking part in the study was remarked upon by teachers, parents and the creative experts alike. Teachers claimed that self-esteem was nourished because the creative tasks allowed expression of skill and knowledge in more diverse ways.

Many of the parents reported positive changes in their children’s attitudes to school and commented on how the children wanted to continue creative activities at home. Some felt that they had benefited from the affirmation that their contribution to their child’s education was of value, and that they were in the privileged position of actually seeing their children work in the school environment.
There also appeared to be a growing confidence in parent–teacher interactions and relationships as parents became more comfortable in their participation in the creative workshops and teachers became less fearful of their ability to organise and manage the active learning environment.

**Questions and Considerations**

Do we strive to work with parents to support our pupil’s social, emotional, and behavioural needs?

Do we assess possible connections between a pupil’s conduct problems and their literacy and cognitive development?

How does our relationship with pupil’s families encourage and facilitate their social and emotional wellbeing?

If your school decides to implement an intervention to improve children’s academic outcomes, perhaps an element that focuses on the family engagement on socio-emotional aspects can be integrated?
3.4. Communication and action to increase engagement

Improving the level and quality of parental engagement is often a priority on the agenda of schools. Despite the benefits and rewards of moving beyond the more formal school-parent relationship that revolves around bi-annual parent-teacher meetings and recruiting parents to help staff at a school event, active parental engagement can be challenging, particularly with the most disengaged parents where the biggest gains may be achieved. Interactions between the school and family are maximised when each views the other as educational partners striving towards the common goal of improving children’s learning and outcomes.

What does the evidence say?

Parental engagement needs to be proactive rather than reactive (Olmstead 2013). Developing multiple ways in which parents can be engaged in their children’s education avoids parents shying away from engagement because they cannot see appropriate and constant entry points for that engagement (McKenna and Millen 2013). Creating both a physical and relational ‘shared knowledge’ space is an essential component of successfully working with parents to assist in children’s educational development (Mousoulides 2013; Campbell 2011).

In order to take advantage of opportunities for home-school-community relationships, the parents’ ideas and opinions about their children must be heard and educators must be receptive to this parental voice and presence (McKenna and Millen 2013). Successful communication with parents must be multidirectional, and their engagement in their children’s education must be understood as fluid and specific to culture and context (McKenna and Millen 2013). Conversely, open, multidirectional communication also allows parents to examine and better understand any preconceived notions they might have regarding teachers and school (McKenna and Millen 2013).

Positive teachers’ beliefs and attitudes are needed to maintain the best possible parental engagement, and to build mutual understandings and collaboration (Mousoulides 2013; Emerson et al 2012). Educators need to be careful that they do not slip into a ‘deficit’ thinking style in which parents are thought of in strict terms specific to the educational system (McKenna and Millen 2013). By encouraging an educational partnership as opposed to a formal or social partnership, the learning process of children is best facilitated (Oostdam and Hooge 2013).

Using technology to increase parental engagement is crucial for the future of children’s learning (Olmstead 2013; ). School’s need to maximise emerging technological tools to promote better communication between teachers and parents, and this can include voice-calling systems, school websites, class-parent portals, emails, and e-newsletters (Olmstead 2013). If schools can use technology to allow parents to view their children’s assignments grades as well as upcoming events or tests, some of the time pressures around when parents and teachers can communicate may be relieved (Olmstead 2013;)

What seems to be working?
Developing shared learning goals for children so that parents and teachers reinforce each other’s efforts (Emerson et al 2012). This is best achieved by plain and direct communication that uses no jargon—or explains it clearly—that is conducted via the parents’ preferred medium (Emerson et al 2012). Many parents express a preference for more feedback from school about children’s performance and their role in improving their child’s learning (Grant 2009).

Schools and parents taking account of each other’s needs. Although parents and schools may have differing expectations and opinions as to what is optimum for their educational partnership, each partner brings competencies and expertise to the relationship (Oostdam and Hooge 2013). An important way to address any perceived or actual power differentials between schools and parents is to include parents’ knowledge and input feed into the decision-making process (Yoder and Lopez 2013).

Allowing pupils to become an active agent in the school-family relationship. By participating in progress discussions and developing their own portfolio of progress and results, in conjunction with teachers, pupils can also be involved in explaining progress to their parents (Oostdam and Hooge 2013). In this way, parents and pupils become more familiar and conversant in the language of education while the teachers become more knowledgeable about the families’ needs and contexts (Emerson et al 2012).

Using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) learning platforms for communication and engagement between schools and families (Selwyn et al 2011). By using digital technology to make the school learning more visible, parents’ understanding of the curriculum, expectations, and pupils’ progress can be built upon (Selwyn et al 2011). Digital tools such as online gradebooks give parents and students 24 hour access and help to avoid any surprises when progress reports are distributed (Zeiger and Tan 2012). However, it will be beneficial to provide parents with information and instructions about how to use the technology via printed materials and/or workshops (Zeiger and Tan 2012).

Participation and persistence in a parental engagement project (Dyson et al 2008). Over time, parents and teachers alike can build confidence and change their attitudes, with parents becoming more comfortable interacting with the school and teachers becoming more comfortable working in engaging ways (e.g. home visits and workshops) (Dyson et al 2008).

Collaboration between families, schools, and communities can more easily identify pupils’ needs and pre-empt problems (Timm 2014; Grayson 2013). Schools can play a key role as the coordinators and deliverers of services to improve educational outcomes and information-sharing between schools can help develop engagement practices (Grayson 2013). One critical factor in this partnership working is to get the local authority involved for support with provision, staff, development, and targeting of families and pupils (Swain et al 2009).

What is the impact?

The ‘Connecting Parents with Learning Project’ strengthens parent-student-school relations by facilitating a flexible programme where children teach their parents. (Townsend 2010). In one primary school it was applied to music and culture. Feedback from the end-of-project surveys
showed that nearly all parents agreed that their relationship with the school and teachers was strengthened through the project, and that their understanding of both children's learning and teachers’ methods was improved. The teachers unanimously agreed that they felt they could communicate with parents more openly after the project, and teachers and parents alike agreed that the approach should be continued with other subjects (Townsend 2010).

**Giving parents access to information encourages many of them to initiate contact with their child’s school (Zeiger and Tan 2012).** A case study survey of parents of first year high school students found that 58% had initiated contact with a teacher because of a grade posted on the school’s online gradebook system (Zeiger and Tan 2012).

**A UK pilot project, the Home Access Programme (HAP), found that new conversations can emerge around shareable digital communication when a computer and internet connectivity is provided to families.** Participating teachers and ICT coordinators all agreed that HAP had improved parental engagement with students’ learning and the school (Jewitt and Parashart 2011). Some 85% of 183 surveyed parents agreed that HAP had made them feel more involved with their child’s learning (Jewitt and Parashart 2011).

**Case Study**

In August 2012, eight schools in Scotland participated in the iPad Scotland pilot project in which the schools adopted mobile technology in one of three ways: with the digital tablets being retained in the school and issued to students for particular lessons; with the tablets allocated to each student for use across the lessons but to be kept at the school; and with the tablets being given to students to ‘own’ individually for use at school and at home.

The tablet devices were found to facilitate the achievement of many of the core elements required within the Curriculum for Excellence framework, and the significant transformation in access to and use of technology by pupils affected various educational factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, and increased school engagement. A major finding was that parents also appeared to become more engaged with the school and their child’s learning when the iPad was taken home.

The majority of parents reported that their children gained significant positive dispositions towards learning as a result of access to the iPad – over 80% considered the pilot project to have been valuable for their child and say it significantly changed their child’s enjoyment of and attitude towards school. 75% of parents felt that their children were now more willing to complete homework, and over 90% of students believed that the iPad helped them to learn more and learn more difficult concepts better.

Perhaps more importantly, many parents reported noticing that their children were more willing to talk to them about the school work when they brought the iPad home. The ‘full ownership’ model of the project, where pupils could take the tablet home, became the recommended model based on the conclusions of strengthening parental engagement (Burden et al 2012).

**Questions and Considerations**
Has our school developed a parental engagement strategy that considers the needs of different parents and made it a priority of our school agenda?

Do we provide ways for parents to be included in the decision-making process regarding their children’s learning and progress?

In our school, is it clear to parents how they can approach the school? Can they telephone/e-mail/interact physically and digitally?

Do we do our best to accommodate parents’ schedules and communication preferences in order to ensure they feel welcomed and valued?

Can we develop/improve our school’s use of Information and Communication Technologies in order to maximise parents’ engagement?
3.5. Engaging with Fathers and non-resident parents

The more recent surge in interest in father involvement in children’s outcomes clearly extends to fathers’ engagement in children’s learning. However, there continues to be a relative scarcity of father-specific evaluations, reviews, and services, as most of the programmes and literature specifies ‘parents’. Within the evidence, the term ‘father’ is almost always used to include biological fathers, father-figures, step-fathers, or a significant male carer or role model. It is difficult to isolate the effect of father engagement from other types of parental engagement, and the evidence suggests that engagement of a parent/carer is more significant than gender or family structure. Therefore engagement of fathers may be critical in the absence of any other parent/carer in the family.

What does the evidence tell us?

The presence and engagement of fathers is positively associated with children’s intellectual development, social competence, and emotional well-being (Clark 2009; Geddes 2008). A lack of recognition of their significance and of effort to include them in their children’s education, both at school and at home, can have negative implications for children’s learning, mental, and emotional well-being (Clark 2009; Tan and Goldberg 2009; Geddes 2008). However, there is little equivalent evidence for the involvement of mothers and it is hard to isolate the impact of fathers’ involvement from parental involvement more generally.

Fathers reported the following as barriers to involvement in parenting support services and parental/family engagement in learning programmes: work commitments; a lack of awareness of services offered; a lack of organisational support; and concerns over the content of the services (Passey 2012; Goodall and Vorhausl 2011; Bayley et al 2009). Fathers are less likely to get involved with their children’s education than mothers, with one Ipsos MORI family learning survey revealing 68% of mothers read with children compared to 54% of fathers (Grant 2009).

When looking at the influence of father involvement on child outcomes it is often difficult to disentangle father involvement from the effects of social class and family structure, as well as access to resources and the general socio-economic context that shape children’s well-being (Clark 2009). For instance, the findings from an England-based study of the REAL (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) family literacy project suggest that fathers who were indicated as having little or no involvement with their children’s literacy were more likely to be on a low income than fathers who were reported to engage in literacy activities with their children (Morgan et al 2009).

Fathers’ engagement in children’s learning may be less visible than mothers’ (Morgan et al 2009). Morgan et al found that while fathers were reportedly highly involved with recognising children’s literacy achievements and engaging in informal reading and writing activities with them at home, they were much less likely to be the providers of literacy opportunities (providing supplies, access, and space to engage in literacy) (2009).

Fathers need to be involved in their children’s learning and development from the beginning (Potter et al 2012). Fathers’ involvement in the early years correlates with the later academic achievement of their children. Fathers’ involvement in their children’s early schooling, particularly their more direct and interpersonal involvement, was shown to increase children’s enjoyment of school and reduce their school-related anxiety (McBride et al 2009; Tan and Goldberg 2009).
The motivation for fathers’ later school involvement affects whether or not the engagement impacts on children’s achievement positively or negatively (McBride 2009; Tan and Goldberg 2009). When fathers play an ‘additive’ role in their children’s later education – becoming involved because their children are perceived to be struggling academically by either the school or family – children’s performance and attainment could actually suffer.

What seems to be working?

Best practice for recruiting and engaging fathers includes:

- **Active targeted promotion and prioritising fathers within organisations and school** – For example, the Father’s Transition Project in England demonstrated that a gender-differentiated approach, which did not exclude mothers’ participation but did focus on involving fathers, was effective in appealing to and engaging fathers in the pilot project (Potter et al 2012; Bayley et al 2009).

- **Alternative forms of provision** – The use of more ‘hands-on’ activities and scheduling interventions for evenings and weekends both worked to engage more fathers (O’Mara et al 201; Passey 2012).

- **Inclusion of varied ethnic or cultural perspectives** – In the Father’s Transition Project, the project attributed the success of engagement in large part to using a worker who came from a similar background to the participants (Potter et al 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus et al 2011).

Engagement programmes aimed at fathers should provide opportunities for them to become more involved in and responsible for children’s learning in the home and wider world (Lipscomb 2011; Geddes 2008). Results from an exploratory study suggest that fathers’ early parenting may have a direct impact on their later involvement in school, but it is never too late to strive for increasing fathers’ confidence in their parenting competency as well as in their learning support (Passey 2012; McBride et al 2009).

Fathers often engage with their children’s literacy by using alternative literary forms and practices (Passey 2012; Morgan et al 2009). By expanding and encouraging literacy forms beyond the traditional book based modes to include magazines, newspapers, television guides, and even maps, the lived experiences and knowledge of fathers from lower socio-economic means may be built upon within literacy programmes (Passey 2012; Morgan et al 2009).

Fathers should be specifically targeted in communications from the school regarding parents’ events and meetings (Goodall and Vorhaus et al 2011; Lipscomb 2011). When communication from schools address ‘parents’, evidence suggests that fathers are unlikely to assume it means them, so that direct notification increases the likelihood of their attendance (Lipscomb 2011).

Services and programmes for engaging the family in children’s learning should specifically target fathers in recruitment and communication (Passey 2012; Goodall and Vorhaus et al 2011; Bayley 2009; Grant 2009). With many fathers perceiving parent services, support, and programmes to be aimed at mothers, recruitment is more successful through various channels (post, email, text, telephone, and the internet) and in non-traditional venues, such as pubs, sports facilities, workplaces, and job centres (Bayley 2009).
Case Study

Research that examined what happened when a group of fathers were recruited to access the Wider Family Learning Project in a town in England focused on exploring the factors that are influential in enabling and motivating more fathers to participate in their children’s learning (Passey 2012). Through questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, and observations, the findings from this project tell us:

- Past poor learning experiences discouraged fathers’ commitment → when programmes aid fathers in developing coping strategies and increase their awareness of children’s capacities, the impact of past negative learning experiences is reduced
- The discounting of fathers’ own sociocultural experiences and knowledge can lead to disengagement → by valuing the skills related to individual fathers’ interests and accepting and integrating their prior knowledge and experiences, a programme curriculum can build on fathers’ transferable skills and provide a solid foundation
- Curriculums need to build on lived experiences of families and not be externally dictated → when fathers and professionals share and recognise skills equally, a positive environment is quickly established
- Paternal motivations for involvement flourish when they are left in sole charge → plenty of opportunities for further bonding with their children can increase fathers’ self-efficacy
- A curriculum built around hierarchical relationships will lead to poor working relationships → clear curriculum structure, good planning, and the familiarity and convenience of project setting instils confidence and encourages attendance

What is the impact?

There is consistent evidence that fathers’ interest and engagement with their children’s learning is statistically associated with better educational outcomes, including better exam results, higher levels of educational qualifications, higher educational expectations, more positive attitudes and better behaviours (Goldman 2005 cited in DCSF 2008). Furthermore, these positive associations exist across different family types, including two-parent families, single-parent families, and children with non-resident fathers (Goldman 2005 in DCSF 2008).

Family literacy programmes need to acknowledge that they are building on families’ existing knowledge, skills, and culture (Morgan et al 2009). When taking into consideration fathers’ alternative forms of literacy practices, the mixed methods REAL study found that almost two-thirds (65%) of fathers reportedly read to their children, almost half (45%) helped children with writing, and almost two-thirds (63%) modelled reading behaviour at home (Morgan et al 2009).

Questions and considerations

Do we specifically target our information about school expectations, activities, and event invitations to the children’s fathers, especially when we are aware of their role in the child’s family (i.e. as lone parent or primary caregiver)?
Do we begin any specific targeting for paternal engagement from day one of (primary, secondary) school or do we wait until there appears to be a problem or struggle with the student’s achievements?

Do we gather and listen to fathers’ experiences, views, and knowledge in order to integrate them with our educational services and programmes?

Are fathers’ contributions to their children’s learning fully understood, including alternative forms of involvement that are not traditional or typically associated with mothers’ activities?
3.6. Looked After Children and Their Carers

The well-being of children in care can present particular difficulties, as a significant number of children come from deprived and disadvantaged backgrounds compounded by neglect, maltreatment and domestic violence. Children who are in public care in the UK typically achieve lower educational standards than their peers who are not in public care (Fernandez 2008). Children’s psychological needs are particularly relevant to the educational context, as they impact on educational achievement and engagement with schooling. Among the factors related to looked-after children’s lower educational achievement are low educational attainment, poor attendance, overrepresentation in school exclusion, suspension, frequent school changes as a consequence of placement breakdown, low completion rates and high unemployment among those who age out of the system.

What does the evidence tell us?

Research suggests that one of the factors needed in order for a child in care to succeed academically is a supportive home environment that encourages studying (Osborne et al 2010). This can be made difficult by limited contact between the key adults involved in supporting education of looked after children (e.g. carers, teachers, and social workers). Therefore, all carers should be encouraged to take a direct role in supporting their child’s education (Osborne 2010).

Teachers and carers need to focus on looked after children within a framework of high expectations and good teaching and learning for all students (Ofsted 2008). Support for looked after children should be rooted in good practice for all children (Ofsted 2008). One strand of a longitudinal study in Australia found that looked after children want an adult to take interest and encourage them to do well in their school work (Fernandez 2008). Finally, a review of 11 interventions aimed at improving the educational attainment of looked after children concluded that if provided with adequate support, they seem to be able to improve in school (Forsman and Vinnerljung 2012).

A strong home-school partnership is critical to narrowing the attainment gap for looked after children, and this partnership must often include the state as parent too (Wigley 2011; Fernandez 2008). Because looked after children’s lives often lack stability, carers, educators, and any agency workers must all work together strategically to support their learning (Zetlin et al 2010). Additionally, when a pupil’s experience of learning is positive, the school environment and the educational process can offer structure, boundaries and security to looked after children (Wigley 2011; Zetlin et al 2010).

The development of structures and organisation that will help to identify any problems hindering school success for looked after children at early stages is needed (Zetlin 2010). The use of some form of data-tracking system between carers, educators, and agencies can facilitate strategic communication.

Caregivers often seek outside help to address the children’s learning, social, emotional, and behavioural needs (Zetlin et al 2010). Looked after children may need more intensive support, and
inter-related service delivery, co-ordinated strategy, and integrated responses to looked after children’s psychological and educational needs should be implemented and practiced (Fernandez 2008).

**What seems to be working?**

The recognition that caregivers are an important source for improving educational outcomes for looked after children (Cheung et al 2012; Flynn et al 2012). Caregiver engagement, particularly in the home setting, predicted greater probabilities of academic success for youth in care (Cheung et al 2012). Higher educational aspirations on the part of the of the caregivers were associated with better outcomes, and caregiver involvement in a greater number of school activities predicted significant improvement in the youth’s average marks (Flynn et al 2012).

Continuous and regular communications and multiple opportunities for self-evaluation and sharing of ideas (Ofsted 2008). Looked after children’s carers value being involved in the pupil’s learning plan, receiving written communications regularly, and advice about to support learning in the care facility or home (Ofsted 2008).

Close monitoring and communication of academic, social and emotional progress from an early stage (Ofsted 2008). Parents and carers appreciated being involved in the pupil’s learning and development, and a sense of trust was instilled when schools took time to discuss issues when they arose instead of waiting until the possibility of harsher disciplinary measures were needed (Ofsted 2008).

Delivering support and services for looked after children in a low profile manner (Ofsted 2008). Schools need to employ flexibility and make some allowances for the effects of a history of traumatic events without making looked after children feel marginalised (Wigley 2011).

Projects which provide materials to support and develop learning demonstrate improvement in looked after children’s attitudes towards learning as well as their actual attainment (Griffiths 2012). The Letterbox Club project in England sent parcels of literacy materials directly to the where looked after children were staying, not only to encourage learning with their carers but to also focus their energy on engaging with and owning educational materials (Dymoke and Griffiths 2010).

**What is the impact?**

The Letterbox Club, which sends literacy materials (e.g. books, stationary, and maths games) to looked-after children every 6 weeks with the aim of engaging carers, demonstrated a significant improvement in reading and maths ability (Osborne 2010; Griffiths et al 2010). For example, at the end of the programme, the maths test results were converted into National Curriculum levels for each child; for two years running, the percentage of intervention pupils increasing their National Curriculum level score by at least one level equalled or surpassed the average rate of their non-looked after peers (Griffiths et al 2010).

An English paired reading literacy programme for looked-after children and their foster carers that required weekly liaising between teachers and foster carers demonstrated an average improvement of each child making a year’s progress in just over four months (Osborne 2010).
Additionally, the average amount of progress made for each month the child participated in the intervention resulted in a reading age increase by just shy of three months (Osborne 2010).

**Literacy interventions’ impact may extend beyond literacy skills alone – there were reported increases in the children’s confidence and interest in reading (Osborne 2010; Griffiths 2012).** Not only do children get to spend one-on-one time with their carer, but reportedly the interventions also facilitated partnership working, building the trust and confidence in the relationship between carers, teachers, and social workers (Osborne 2010; Dymoke and Griffiths 2010).

**Case Study**

An English literacy intervention aimed at improving foster children’s education and their carers’ engagement in their learning used a paired reading approach. Training workshops for foster carers, school staff and social workers were undertaken to address the use and delivery of paired reading. Over a 16 week period, 35 carers and children read together several times a week, the average being 3 times. Schools liaised with carers on a weekly basis to discuss progress and issues.

At each weekly meeting between the school staff and carers, monitoring forms were completed. For each pupil schools collected a baseline measures of reading age using the Salford test, and again immediately after the completion of the intervention.

The results of the paired reading study were encouraging and demonstrated a marked increase in the reading age of the looked after children who participated. On average, reading age improved by 3 months during each month in the project – meaning that over the 4 months of the intervention, each child made an average of one year’s progress.

Findings also suggested positive impact beyond literacy skills. Feedback from carers suggested that for many of the looked after children, their confidence and enthusiasm for reading increased, as well as an improvement in the relationship between carer and child (Osborne et al 2010).

**Questions and Considerations**

Do we provide extra support and services for looked after children’s educational and psychological wellbeing?

Is our communication with carers and agency workers regular and do we all exchange relevant information about the progress and possible problems of our looked after children?

Do we deliver any support or services in a ‘low profile’ manner in order to not make looked after children feel marginalised or stigmatised in comparison to other children?

Do we encourage looked after children, their carers, and our staff to possess high educational expectations and aspirations for their achievement and attainment?

Do we provide advice and support to carers on strategies and methods to best engage in learning in the home setting?
Resources
The following resources have been developed to support the implementation of findings from this review:

A: Self Evaluation on parental engagement
B: Parental Needs Assessment Guide
C: Using Community Assets Guide
Evaluating your parental engagement strategy

A robust evaluation will let you know whether your strategy is making a difference. Evaluation is an ongoing process, allowing you to assess as you go whether the strategy is being effective and whether it needs to be refined.

From the beginning, be clear about what impact you want to achieve.

Children and young people who have at least one parent or carer engaged in their schooling do better at school in many areas including: assessment scores; attendance; behaviour; transitions; and post-16 destinations.

The outcome you are seeking is that children will do better educationally, with the gap between the highest and lowest achieving being reduced. Your overall aim, therefore, may be to:

‘Increase family engagement with the school and their children’s learning in order to help close the attainment gap’.

The overall objectives for your strategy may sit in the following six dimensions of parental engagement.

**Parenting:** Increase opportunities for parents to get support with parenting and understand their child’s education and developmental needs

**Communication:** Communicate and listen effectively to all parents about their role in their child’s education

**Volunteering:** Increase opportunities and encouragement for all parents to come into school at different times.

**Learning at home:** Improve information and advice on the content of the curriculum and how parents can help their children.

**Decision-Making:** Increase the number and variety of parents involved in parent organisations and committees

**Collaboration with the community:** Strengthen links with businesses and agencies in the community

What are you going to do to achieve your aim and objectives?

There are many activities that make it easier for families to be more involved and help them develop a more positive relationship with the school. The activities that you organise will depend on what your objectives are. Some sample activities are below:
• An ‘open door’ policy that makes clear parents are welcome to contact the school, or drop in, at any time to discuss any issues they have relating to their child or child’s education.

• Hold information events about how parental engagement with a child’s learning can improve their educational outcomes.

• Hold family learning events in the school to help build parental capacity e.g. ‘how to help your child with maths’.

• Hold information events in association with local community services (i.e. library service, local college that holds evening classes, other community education groups)

• Find out parents’ preferred means of communication, and, using this, send explanatory notes home to accompany homework.

Decide what data you need to collect to measure how effective your strategy is

It is important to continuously record and measure the impact of your activities. You will need to record quantitative information, but qualitative information can also provide valuable insight into the impact that your strategy is having.

**Quantitative information**

You might collect the following data in relation to any family events you organise:

• Numbers of parents attending
• Percentage of school roll whose parents attended
• Number of parents attending who had not previously attended a school event
• Number of parents attending whose children are in the bottom attainment quintile
• A follow-up survey of parents who attended to find out how useful they found the event and whether it has had a positive impact on their understanding of the subject area i.e. the importance of getting involved with their child’s education.
• Impact on children’s performance – attainment, behaviour, attendance, punctuality

You might collect the following data in relation to a new ‘Open door’ policy that you have introduced:

• How many parents know about the policy
• Whether the policy is making a difference to parent contact (all parents)
• Whether the policy is making a difference to parent contact (parents whose children are doing less well educationally)

**Qualitative information**
Your sense of whether your strategy is working and family engagement is improving will also come from subtle changes that are less easy measure. For example, subtle changes in how parents interact with the school, anecdotal conversations that you have with parents, or a survey or focus group in which you ask parents to describe how they feel about something.

**Decide whether your strategy has been successful.**

**Decide whether to continue your strategy and whether it needs to be improved**
Closing the attainment gap

ASSESSING PARENTAL NEED

We know that children and young people who have at least one parent or carer engaged in their schooling do better at school. You will get to know most parents by creating an inclusive, vibrant and connected school community – developing a two-way relationship with a strong parental engagement strategy.

Who are you assessing?

Some parents find it more difficult to engage with their child’s school and their child’s education. You may need to target particular groups of parents or individual parents in order to understand what their specific needs are.

What are you assessing?

Confidence
How confident are parents in their ability to support their child educationally? Are they comfortable in the school setting and in dealing with teachers and other professionals?

Capacity
What capacity do parents have to support their child’s education and optimise outcomes? Are there any issues with literacy and numeracy? Do they have needs in terms of personal and emotional support, resilience, motivation and commitment?

Accessibility
What are the barriers that prevent parents from engaging with the school and their child’s education? For example, parents whose first language is not English or where engagement with schools may not be a cultural norm; parents who have disabilities, or illnesses that affect their capacity to be involved; logistical issues in terms of transport, distance or caring responsibilities; or limited access to their household to resources which support learning such as books, computers and knowledge of how to use them effectively.

What parents already do
What do parents currently do - in terms of type of activity and quality? For example, parents may read to a child but for how long? How frequently? What type of material do they discuss what they are reading and do they use it to spark off dialogue about other things?

How you assess

Your aim is to give parents an opportunity to describe their needs as a family in relation to the above. There are a number of approaches your school can use. In many cases it will be a combination of the following:

Survey
Surveys are an effective way of finding out what parents think in a structured way that enables you to analyse the results. Take into account any accessibility issues and ensure each question uses clear, concise language, avoids jargon and relates directly to the purpose of your survey.

Focus group
Focus groups involve small groups of parents (no more than 6-8 people). A facilitator encourages open discussion, which can give a deeper insight into parents’ views than a survey.

Face-to-face meetings
Some parents may feel uncomfortable in school so using a neutral venue such as a cafe or community centre can help. Relationships between schools and parents can be greatly enhanced by contact outwith the school. Home visits may also be considered.

Informal
Simply talking to parents can help build relationships that may lead to more formal methods of engagement. For example, a school ran a breakfast club for families experiencing difficulties. The families were comfortable in this setting and the headteacher used this as an opportunity to open up a dialogue with them.

Enlisting the support of partner agencies
Other agencies can provide helpful information to help inform engagement approaches.

Document parent contact so that all relevant school staff have an understanding of how best to support the family. This will be of value when a child moves from one teacher to another.

Interpret parents’ feedback and plan future action
Closing the attainment gap

USING COMMUNITY ASSETS

Community assets are:
resources, strengths, capacities and knowledge outwith the school that can support and enhance children's school experience and their educational outcomes.

LOCAL PEOPLE: use the knowledge, skills, creativity and enthusiasm of the people around you

LOCAL SERVICES: be part of a network of local services to support better educational outcomes

LOCAL ENVIRONMENT: benefit from the buildings, parks and open spaces on your doorstep

Local people

Parents
Parents have knowledge of their own child that will complement teachers' skills and expertise. If parents feel more involved in their child's education, this will help their child achieve more and do better at school. The Parents as partners in their children's learning toolkit includes examples of how to encourage parents to get more involved.

Don't forget dads:
Dads are less likely to have contact with school than mothers, particularly in early years and primary education. They represent a substantial untapped resource. Make specific efforts to welcome and include dads. There are many examples of good practice having 'dads’ days' at school; inviting them to undertake voluntary activity; such as paired reading and helping with outings; ensuring that non-resident dads are treated equally in communication and involvement opportunities.

The wider family
Older siblings, grandparents and other relatives can also contribute positively to child's educational outcomes.

Others in the community
In every community there are people who have the time, skills and knowledge to support their local school. They can also be instrumental in reaching out to families who have not voluntarily engaged with the school. Encourage their voluntary involvement through active recruitment and develop clear plans for their deployment and support.

Local services

In almost every community there exists a range of services that can support better educational outcomes. Get to know what services exist in your local area and understand how these services might contribute to families being better engaged and to achieving better learning outcomes.

Other schools
Other schools and teachers can be a great source of information as to what has and hasn't worked.

Other agencies
Other agencies/ includes police, social work, housing, transport, early years provision, voluntary agencies, and health services. If a family has involvement from a social worker, health visitor, or voluntary agency; these workers can provide helpful information to help inform engagement approaches. They may also be able to support parents directly in becoming more actively involved in the learning process.
Community Learning and Development staff have specialised knowledge of family learning methods and can give expert advice on what works best.

Community groups and businesses
Local clubs and groups such as sports clubs and hobby groups can offer learning experiences for children and parents both within and outwith school. Businesses can offer financial support, but can also provide equipment and expertise as well as work experience opportunities.

Local environment

Use your local space to help learning. Buildings, parks and other open spaces can offer a wealth of learning opportunities. They can also be used as venues for family contact. Some parents may find schools unwelcoming or intimidating so using a neutral venue such as a café for meeting or a community centre for parent events may make it easier for them to engage with school staff. Relationships between schools and parents can be greatly enhanced by contact outwith the school.


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