

# Family ties

The new term is the ideal time to reevaluate the school's relationship with parents and build better partnerships that will see children flourish, says Sue Dixon...

**A**s a young parent, quite a few years ago now, parental involvement meant turning up for parents' evenings, helping to raise funds, reading with my daughters and keeping out of the classroom as much as possible.

I still vividly remember my four-year-old daughter having her tight grip around my leg prised away by a well meaning teacher and dragged crying into school. It was expected then that parents stayed at the school door and the mantra was very much 'We'll take it from here thank you very much.'

Thankfully, those 'extreme' schools are now a rarity and increasing numbers of headteachers acknowledge that when schools work closely and in true partnership with parents, this can result in positive effects on children's achievements. However, that does still leave huge variations in policy, attitudes and approaches to working with parents. Variations that rightly reflect the uniqueness of each school, but also the extent to which schools will (or won't) 'let go' and invite parents into a deeper learning partnership.

Schools and parents have different but complementary roles and seeking to understand, be realistic and value what each has to offer is at the heart of a successful relationship between home and school.

Sadly, in too many schools,

there still exists miscommunication between parents and school staff. At its worst this manifests as playground gossip by parents and moans in and around staffrooms about parents' lack of support.

For some schools there is still a fear that involving parents more will result in a great deal more work, or that parents will take advantage of a school's openness, resulting in a flood of complaints and criticism about other issues. I have heard it said many times that 'our parents are hard to engage' or there are just too many barriers to overcome: language issues, low educational achievement of parents, coming in to 'be nose-y' or an unwillingness to come into school at all etc. It is easy to fall in to the trap of believing these things to be the norm, and believing that they can't be changed. But changing even deep rooted cultures between the

home and school can be done, albeit not overnight.

A new term can be a good time to re-assess attitudes, policy and practice with regard to parental involvement. How does your school really view the parental role and how, where and when do you work collaboratively with parents and carers?

Tackling this very complex agenda might seem unmanageable at first. So where might you start? Thinking about this in two distinct areas is useful

1. Parents' involvement in the life of the school generally
2. Parental involvement in support of the individual child at home and in school – how they are helped to support learning outcomes

Here are some suggested headings and a few 'big' questions to start with. Each of these headings could be broken down into smaller areas

of enquiry to make it a more manageable task.

## Ethos and culture

- What would you say are the attitudes, ethos and culture of the school towards parents – and vice versa?
- Is there a shared view led by senior staff that demonstrates a commitment to working in partnership with parents?
- Is yours a 'welcoming school'? Do all staff know what that means?
- How many parents come into school without an appointment or come into lessons?

## Staff knowledge

- Is there staff training about parental engagement? Is it provided for everyone?
- What would you say are the current levels of knowledge, attitudes and confidence of staff, particularly newly qualified teachers, when dealing with parents?
- Are there differences between the way staff communicate and engage with parents – for example the way information/homework is given out to parents by different teachers?

## Ways of working

- Do you have clearly understood policies and procedures around working with families? Are these shared with everyone? Were parents involved in writing them?
- Do parents have a real say in shaping any of the policies in school?

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## Parent Power

- > Children only spend 15% of their waking time in school – family influences are very powerful
- > When parents do become more involved, the gains tend to be permanent
- > When similar schools are compared – those with strong home-schools links have better outcomes

- Do you have a parent forum and/or PTA – do they function well?
- What roles do your parent governors take on?
- Do parents receive the information they want and need in the right ways and at the right times?

### Support for learning

What sort of support, resources or training do you provide for

- parents so they are better able to understand and help with what their children are learning?
- How confident do you think your parents are with regard to helping their children at home?
- If you do provide some learning opportunities, how many parents take up your offer?
- Do you have issues around homework – either not being completed or parents not properly understanding what to do? Or even complaints about it?

Decide on the best methods to gather this information in the context of your own school. For example, will people fill in questionnaires? Is face to face better? Do you have existing documents you can look at? Who are the best people to be involved?

A good way to get honest information is to ask someone who isn't involved with the school on a daily basis to help you audit where you are at the moment. The 'outside eye' is very revealing, often seeing aspects of your own school that you can't, simply because you are so close to things. If budgets are tight then it needn't be an independent consultant but perhaps a trusted colleague

from another school. Why not partner up with a school in your area that is also trying to address this issue and to do the same for them? Another way is to have a small working party that has parent representation on it. Whatever you decide, remember that it is the parents' eye view you are seeking and a trusted parent asking other parents directly what they think can provide you with that candid parent perspective. It's a matter of planning for the right questions, asked by the 'right people' in the right way, to build as truthful a picture as is possible. Some of the answers might prove a bit painful, but unless you build a true picture of the current situation then any planned improvements won't make sense.

So, are you ready to truly look and listen to your parents?

## i ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Dixon is a freelance consultant based in Northamptonshire. She will be launching a new website in the coming weeks ([thinkingchild.org.uk](http://thinkingchild.org.uk)) which will explore the vital relationship between home and school.

