

# Supporting mental health & wellbeing in schools:



## Engaging with all parents and carers



**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families

# Why engaging with parents and carers is important

School leaders and teachers are experts at working with parents and carers, providing valuable opportunities to engage with them every day. Research tells us that if parents and carers are actively involved in their children's learning and activities at school, they will be more likely to thrive both in terms of academic performance and also in their general wellbeing. When a systemic approach is taken, which is where families, teachers and support staff work together, children can be supported more effectively to reach their full potential and to get back on track when problems arise.

Addressing emotional, behavioural and mental health difficulties in this way benefits the individual child and their family and also has a wider positive impact on other children and staff in the class and the school community.

For some parents and carers, engaging with school staff can be challenging, for example those parents who themselves have had a difficult relationship with education during their time at school. 'Universal' methods of engagement may not be appropriate in these instances, as one approach may not always work for all individuals, and it may be helpful to think about using more targeted or specialist methods of engagement.

This booklet has been developed by teachers, clinicians and parents and carers to explore a range of innovative ways that schools are successfully engaging with parents and carers. It also offers some practical guidance around parental engagement, particularly where relationships between school staff and parents or carers may have become strained.

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# Examples of parental engagement in schools

It may be useful for schools to think in terms of a differentiated approach to parental engagement and to have a strategy for how they engage and work with families and children with more complex needs. The diagram below outlines examples of some of these strategies.

## Specialist Engagement

- Therapeutic interventions e.g. school-based therapist
- The Family School model
- Multi-Family Groups

## Targeted Engagement

- 1:1 meetings
- Parent forums
- Parent/carer outreach
- Parent/child bonding initiatives
- Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs)
- Parent/carer workshops on topics such as separation anxiety, managing behavioural difficulties, sleep difficulties
- Completing requests for additional support together

## Universal Engagement

- Online engagement, e.g. Tapestry for Early Years
- Key stage information evenings, e.g. SATs, options, Year 6 transition
- Options evening
- Pupil reports
- Social opportunities, e.g. school fetes, parent/carer assemblies
- Parent/carer workshops on managing exam stress, managing access to technology

# What can support engagement with parents and carers?

Schools and parents or carers are the two main educators that children have in their lives. Both have crucial roles to play in a child's engagement and achievement in school, and the impact is greater when they work in partnership. Therefore it is important that the school ethos is one that values the importance of a child's environment, family situation and key relationships.

Adopting a **whole-school approach** towards engaging with parents and carers can be effective, and part of that means making the mental health and wellbeing of pupils, staff and parents and carers 'everybody's business'. It involves all parts of the school working together and being committed. It requires partnership working between governors, senior leaders, and all school staff as well as parents, carers and the wider community.



## ■ Leadership and management

What is the school's approach to parental engagement? How are senior leaders in the school engaging with parents and carers? How does the board of governors approach parental engagement? Are parents and carers represented in decision making?

## ■ School curriculum

Are there opportunities for parents and carers to come into school and attend events alongside their children? Are parents and carers aware of how they can best support their child's learning, both in school and at home? Are there opportunities for parents and carers to talk about mental health and wellbeing?

## ■ Continuing professional development

Are staff and parents and carers given the opportunity to learn about mental health and wellbeing? Is there an awareness of and engagement with local partnerships who could support parents and families?

## ■ Stakeholders

Are there any other stakeholders that you could engage with in order to support parents and carers more effectively e.g. local education authority, faith groups, community organisations, or national helplines and websites?

## Meetings and Communication

It is important for school leaders and school staff to be seen as approachable by parents and carers. It can help to have an open door policy which sends a message to parents and carers that they can speak to school staff about any concerns they have. It also encourages frequent and regular contact if it is needed or wanted. A headteacher or senior leader being visible in the playground at the beginning or end of the day can also be useful in encouraging informal conversation and building relationships.

A variety of methods of communication (both formal and informal) can be helpful for parents and carers. For example newsletters, face to face, via the website, by text, and perhaps official social media.

It is also helpful to ensure that any meetings or initiatives are scheduled at times that parents and carers are likely to be available, and to make sure that they are in culturally and linguistically appropriate environments.



# Thinking about the experience of parents and carers

All parents and carers have their own experiences of going to school, and these can impact heavily on how they interact with their children's school. What was education like for them? Was it a challenging environment for them? Were they bullied at school? Did the adults around them have low expectations for them?

If a parent or carer hasn't had a positive relationship with a trusted adult at school, it may be hard for them to feel that they will be understood by their child's school. Many parents and carers will not share their personal difficulties with an educational professional as they may worry that it will impact on how their child is viewed at school and within the classroom.

Family background, academic ability and personal and cultural beliefs about education may all impact on how parents and carers view school staff. Difficult experiences with other services such as social care or the NHS may make parents and carers feel as though they are constantly scrutinised for their parenting. It's vital to hold in mind that they want the best for their child, but because of these factors may feel very anxious about having a conversation with a teacher.

In addition, one in four people experience a mental health difficulty at some point in their lives, so it may be helpful to bear in mind that some of the parents and carers you interact with could be struggling with their own mental health.

## Building rapport

Building positive relationships with parents and carers, and other people involved with the children you teach, can help you to make sense of the child's context and ensure that you can enable additional support if needed.

Maintaining a good rapport with parents and carers of children who present with challenging behaviour can be difficult at times. The interactions they have with the school can become focused on negative situations, behaviour and sanctions. A strategy for working with these parents and carers which builds in regular opportunity for positive feedback is key. Some schools have identified their ten most challenging pupils and put in a strategy for senior leaders to text positive feedback to parents and carers once a week. This doesn't change the need for regular challenging conversations, but it may help to maintain a more positive rapport.

## Key tips:

- **Invite parents and carers in to school** to celebrate achievements. This can be a good way to encourage parental engagement, especially as pupils get older and opportunities to attend the school decrease.
- **Have an awareness of and be sensitive** to a child and family's social context and the difficulties that may stem from this, e.g. discrimination based on race/class/religion/disabilities etc.
- **Help parents and carers and their child feel a sense of belonging and teamwork.** You can ensure that your communication signals: 'we want you here, let's work together to make this work'.



## Case Example: Natalia Londoño, AFNCCF Parent Champion

Following a series of traumatic events, my sons - aged 8 and 11 at the time - experienced acute emotional distress. We were lucky that both schools attended by the boys provided a great deal of well thought out support, deep empathy, understanding and practical help to them and myself.

As a parent, what helped me was that both schools had a culture of acceptance and a desire to help and work with parents for the good of the pupils. This made it easier to approach staff when the problems started.

The school staff involved were approachable, non-judgmental and available. For example, the boys were able to speak to them at any point during the school day and if they were busy, there was a back-up person for them to go to. They were incredibly kind. One shared with me the difficulties that she had had with her son. This made me feel that maybe I wasn't a failure because of what had happened to us. These staff members ended up forming close relationships with the boys, which helped provide them with stability during that time.

The primary school gave my son permission to play on the computers during break time as he found this time particularly distressing. He was allowed to invite up to two friends with him. This helped to sustain his friendships and keep him connected with others but provided him with a safer emotional environment.

Both schools attended the meetings with social services and provided detailed reports. They were very proactive at making referrals to the Single Point of Access team and fighting for the boys to be given help and support.

Without the help and support provided by my sons' schools, I believe things would've worked out very differently for them.

# Having difficult conversations with parents and carers

If you know a conversation is going to be difficult, make sure you set aside adequate time, and locate a place where you won't be disturbed. Be sensitive to the parent or carers' emotional state as this may be a distressing conversation for them. If they do become upset or angry it can help to give them time to express their emotions. Sometimes it can help to suggest a parent or carer brings a friend to a meeting, which can allow you to bring a colleague too. This can be really helpful if any party is feeling anxious about the meeting, but it is vital that the role of your colleague is to be a calming presence and not a boundary setter.

## Key tips:

- **Be clear about the problem.** Don't minimise or exaggerate – be specific and perhaps use an example of something that has happened. Try to illustrate to the parent or carer what is happening at school as it may be difficult for them to know. Explain why you are concerned e.g. 'if this continues it will impact on X's learning and achievement'. Think about the language you are using and avoid terms which could make the parent or carer feel that they or their child are being blamed.
- **Position the parent or carer as the expert.** They know their child best. Invite their opinion and be appreciative of their ideas. Show an interest in their perspective. Try to listen non-judgementally and remain curious. Ask parents and carers to help you to understand what works best for their child. They may have a different perspective of the child, and this can help to build a picture of the child's overall needs.
- **Highlight strengths.** It can sometimes be difficult for a parent or carer to feel their child is a 'problem', so it can be helpful to highlight a child's strengths as well as the things they are finding more difficult when having these conversations.

- **Have a two way-conversation.** Make sure you hear from the parent or carer as well as letting them know your concerns. If you can, try to attempt reflective listening – for example – ‘I can hear that X is really struggling at the moment’. Listen to how they are coping and what their ideas are about the difficulties. This way it will be easier for the parent or carer to listen and take in what you are saying. Make sure that you check back in with them to ensure you have understood exactly what they meant. For example, ‘Tell me if I’ve got this right but I think what you are worried about is...’
- **Amplify opportunities for collaboration in addressing the problem.** Collaborative working with the family can help to build trust over time. This can also help the parent or carer to feel a part of the decision making process to feel more empowered. Share power, authority, resources and responsibility to help families make decisions.
- **Try to imagine what it might be like for the parent or carer and the child right now.** What might they be thinking and feeling? What might they be thinking and feeling? Are they cross, frustrated, sad etc.? Try to avoid a critical stance even though it might be easy to feel critical. Occasionally look for opportunities to voice what it might be like to be one of them. For example, ‘I can imagine that you might feel really fed up about this and don’t really want to talk about it’.



## Case Example: Crestwood Community school

We have a variety of strategies to support pupils and engage with parents and carers around mental health and wellbeing.

All staff have up to date training on how and where to refer a pupil they feel has an additional need. Any member of staff noticing a concern will in the first instance notify the relevant Head of Year who can then refer to our internal pastoral team, school counsellor or outside agency as deemed necessary.

We are successfully engaging parents and carers through various means. All staff are actively encouraged to make regular phone calls home sharing positives and negatives of their child’s day in school. This helps to build a positive relationship so when we have any concerns we wish to share it is easier.

We are also lucky to have a headteacher who understands the importance of supporting the whole family. With this in mind we have a Home School Link worker who offers parenting courses, 1:1 support and is able to signpost or refer to other agencies when needed.

Crestwood offers good all round support for students and their families and this involves taking pupils and their family to appointments when transportation is difficult. We are happy to, and often do, go that extra mile.



# How can school staff manage their feelings?

It's important to acknowledge that although working with parents and carers can be rewarding, it is not always easy and can be stressful for school staff.

School staff may find it helpful to prepare for a meeting or conversation with a parent or carer by getting into the right 'emotional range'; a bit like on a thermometer. If you aren't too switched off (or cold) or too stressed (too hot) then you will be in the most helpful range to listen and reflect on the parent or carers worries. Using physical strategies such as open hands and dropped shoulders, and gentle breathing may be beneficial.

If you feel distressed following a conversation with a parent or carer, it can be helpful to debrief with a colleague before you leave school. Although challenging, it can also be helpful to try and reflect on what might be most difficult for a parent or carer in having this conversation; in doing so we may gain a wider understanding that guides us in supporting the child.



# Specialist engagement

As previously mentioned, it may be useful for schools to think in terms of a differentiated approach to parental engagement and to have a strategy for how they engage and work with families and children with more complex needs.

A differentiated approach requires a plan for how parents and carers who are harder to engage are reached. Often this becomes the work of an educational welfare officer or family outreach team, but many schools have set up targeted provision from within the school.



Training on how to set up and run multi-family groups in schools is available from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families.



## Case Example: The Family School

At the Family School London, a pioneering Alternative Provision, parents and other significant family members are involved in the school at all times in relation to their child's attendance and difficulties. The vision of the school is to create a learning context for all with integrated mental health delivery provided by frontline staff in all areas of the school day.

The weekly Parent Learning Programme is regularly attended by approximately 60% of the school's parent population. The remaining 40% meet regularly in school at other times of the week in relation to their other commitments of work or family life.

The school practice is therefore consistent with research findings that parental involvement with their child's difficulties will have the best chance of providing change and positive outcome.

One crucial component of the Family School's practice is to work with groups of parents together at various stages of the week. This has the effect of helping parents with the sense of isolation, stigma and blame that is commonly experienced when their child has been excluded from school.

Once parents know and feel that they are not alone and that others are experiencing the same or similar difficulties with their children they invariably report a huge sense of relief, recognising that they are all 'in the same boat' and can therefore make progress with the support of their peers.

Following the success of the Parent Learning Programme, key components of the model have been replicated and rolled out in several Alternative Provision settings across the country.

## The multi-family approach

The **multi-family groups in schools** approach brings parents and carers, teachers, children and mental health professionals together in schools settings, with the aim of helping to change and improve the children and young people's emotional wellbeing and behaviour. This helps them to be more settled and better able to engage with teaching and learning opportunities. A family group allows parents and carers to share experiences and ideas with others who may have struggled with or suffered from similar difficulties to their own.

### What is a multi-family group and how is it run?

- **Multi-family groups** are set up and run by a member of school staff and a suitably qualified psychologist, social worker or mental health professional.
- **Six to eight families** meet weekly in school with the two group leaders.
- **Children and young people's progress** is monitored daily against emotional wellbeing or behavioural targets and every six weeks overall progress is measured against goals, such as improved attendance, behaviour and independent learning.
- **A family group has a clear structure** based on targets, planning, action, reflection and transfer.



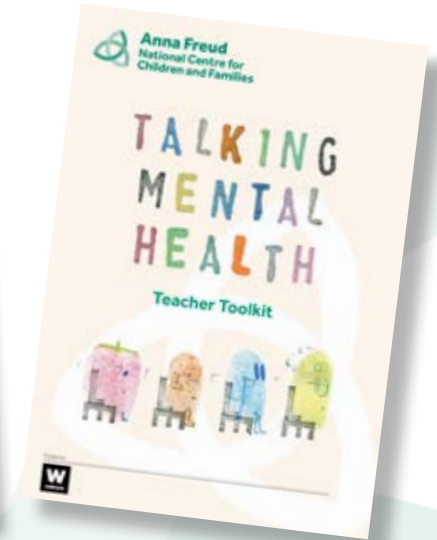
# Where can I find advice and guidance?

- [Schools in Mind](#)
- [onmymind.info](http://onmymind.info)
- [Multi-Family Groups in Schools training](#)
- [www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk](http://www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk)
- [www.mindfulteachers.org](http://www.mindfulteachers.org)
- [www.educationsupportpartnership.org](http://www.educationsupportpartnership.org)
- [www.mindEd.org.uk](http://www.mindEd.org.uk)



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**The network shares academic and clinical expertise regarding wellbeing and mental health issues for schools.**

**By joining you can access a range of events, training, consultation and resources to support the mental health and wellbeing of your school community.**

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