

Renfrewshire Council

Parental Engagement Strategy

Part 2

Parental Engagement in learning

Research has consistently shown that one of the most important factors in supporting children's achievement and attainment is parental engagement with learning. Parents and carers can make an enormous difference to a child's chances of success. Parental engagement can happen in an early learning and childcare setting (ELC), at school, at home and throughout life. Getting involved and working in partnership with a child's ELC, school or community group can help them succeed. The greatest impact comes from a child learning from their parent/carer's actions, reactions, attitude towards and engagement in their learning, and in their own learning as adults.

Our vision for parental involvement and engagement

As parents, carers and families are by far the most important influences in a child's life, their support can play a vital role at all stages of their child's education. Our vision for all education establishments is that they meaningfully engage parents/carers in their child's learning and life at ELC or school, whilst also enhancing parents' own educational skills and employment opportunities. Supporting effective parental engagement with learning needs to be embedded within our establishments, as a holistic and essential part of their practice.

School staff and early years staff often refer to 'parental involvement' or 'parental engagement'. These terms can often be confused and in fact some educators use them interchangeably.

What is parental involvement and engagement in terms of their child's education?

Parental involvement is mandated by law in Scotland, through the Parental Involvement Act, (2016) and quite literally means parents getting involved in the life and work of the school or early years setting. This could be through joining the parent council or fundraising committee, accompanying their child's class on a trip or enriching the curriculum with their skills and talents. There are many, many ways for parents to be involved in all of Renfrewshire's education establishments and they are actively encouraged to do so in a variety of creative ways.

Parental engagement most often refers to parents' engagement in their child's learning at home, at school/ELC, and in the wider community. It is supported by discussion between parents and teachers/practitioners and focuses on how families can build on what they already do to help their children's learning and provide a supportive home learning environment. Parents are seen as actively engaged in supporting learning, as partners. Our education establishments encourage parental engagement in a range of ways including through stay and play sessions, home learning videos, curricular learning clubs for parents and children and online padlets which explore and explain the curriculum.

Impact of the covid pandemic

As a result of periods of lockdown and the introduction of home learning, and then restricted visitor access to establishments, almost all schools and ELCs were unable to carry out parent and family engagement work as planned.

However, the pandemic forced schools and early years establishments to re-evaluate their understanding of the home learning environment as well as how to monitor children and young people's well-being and development during periods when they were not in the building. It provided a unique opportunity for parents to see their child's learning and teaching and experience it in new and direct ways. Creativity flourished through effective use

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of online learning platforms and wellbeing supports were provided through one-to-one calls and virtual meetings with children, young people and parents.

Despite the many challenges around the home learning experience, the majority of feedback received from parents was positive and focused on the commitment and high level of support that teachers and early years practitioners provided to children. Parents noted that they played a positive role in not only supporting learning but also the health and wellbeing of the children.

Due to the increase in online learning, the vast majority of teachers, early years practitioners, pupils and their parents have also acquired enhanced digital skills. If built upon by establishments, these developments will pave the way for more positive movements toward authentic parental engagement in learning.

Key features of successful parental engagement

- A **common understanding** of what parental engagement is/is not and its value amongst all staff
- **Strong relationships** as the basis for parental engagement and supporting engagement out with the formal learning environment
- Parental engagement should not only be an ELC or school wide initiative but also **'led from the top'**, with senior leaders taking an active role in supporting parental engagement with learning
- **Partnerships** which go beyond the boundaries of the establishment; schools and ELCs should see themselves as, or aspire to be, at the **heart of their wider communities**
- The planning of support for parents is decided in **consultation** with parents

Renfrewshire Parental Engagement Project (Feb 2022 – Oct 2022)

Throughout the above period, Renfrewshire worked in partnership with Professor Janet Goodall and Dr Patrizio De Rossi, from Swansea University, to look at how we could further support all parents to engage in learning, and to enhance staff understanding of the value of parental engagement. This work included staff surveys, training events and case studies of good practice – Appendices 1 & 2. The following recommendations were made to support Renfrewshire in its ongoing work with parents:

- provide ongoing professional development for staff, particularly those who are serving as mentors for newly qualified and early career teachers. This should include supporting staff to understand and overcome barriers to parental engagement in their child's learning, understanding the nature and value of effective, home based parental engagement in learning and building trusting relationships with parents and families
- work with ELCs and schools to engage parents and young people in discussion about the processes for transition which are in place as, without discussions from parents and young people, it is difficult to gauge success or understand what else might be useful to families
- share project case studies and create further studies, in a wide range of settings for dissemination to all

This work will be discussed with all Heads and taken forward within establishment's Improvement Plans 2023-24.

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Learning Together as we move forward

Currently, all of Renfrewshire's education establishments work with parents to engage them in learning in a variety of ways to ensure the best outcomes for children and young people. As we move into more settled times, we are: building on what worked well pre-pandemic; using lessons learned from the enhanced digital focus during the pandemic; and looking outwards at good practice in other establishments across Renfrewshire and beyond.

We will also implement the recommendations from the Parental Engagement Project with Janet Goodall detailed above. We will engage the services of Education Scotland to support us to ensure greater consistency across establishments in successfully engaging parents in their child's learning. We will also consult with parents to find out what they want so that they can make a positive difference in their child's life.

Monitoring and Governance

Renfrewshire's Parenting Support and Parental Engagement Strategy will be delivered by Renfrewshire Children's Services Partnership and educational establishments. The strategy and operational plan will be overseen by the Families and Communities Portfolio Group within Children's Services and updated regularly as the support for parents and families continues to evolve and improve.

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Appendix 1 (May 2022)

Case Study School 1 (secondary)

When asked about their definition of parental engagement, their response was: 'It's supporting parents to support their children... Parents and carers support their children, not through tutoring, but through conversation. It involves anything where family members interact with young people to support their learning'.

Case study school 1 considers parental engagement in learning fundamental in their school life and in their approach- this has been given more time and focus in session 2022-23 in terms of strategic planning and implementation. Senior staff members note that parental engagement is still 'a bit confused with parental involvement', so they are making this distinction clear during internal professional learning meetings with Faculty Heads and other staff members. This distinction was relayed to parents/carers at extra 'Supporting your Child' information evenings at the beginning of the current session as part of the process of providing universal support.

Staff stressed the value of continuous communication with parents and building relationships 'based on trust'. They noted that even simple things, for example 'when you end a letter from a school with Mrs., or Mr., - we thought long and hard and we decided to end it with first names'. Using first names is helping to 'break down that barrier' and encourages parents to 'speak more openly'. School staff recognise the different approaches between primary and secondary school towards parental engagement in learning 'because secondary is so different from primary school and many parents get involved with their children at primary, and they know how to support them, or they help them with homework, which is not what we find as the work gets harder in secondary and parents can struggle to help'. The school's aim is 'to dispel any of the myths about what secondaries are like and how they can support'. Staff recognise that some parents feel they don't have enough knowledge to support their children, but the message they are sending to parents is that research (Goodall) has indicated that in the secondary setting it is parental conversations rather than direct help with work that is most effective so we have focussed on the importance of 'having an understanding of how secondary school works, which then helps them to have conversations at home'.

The school started a programme a few years ago called 'Parents in Partnership' to encourage parental engagement in learning. The parents of all first-year students were invited into the school for two hours a day for six weeks. They divided into groups and each group attended classes which were delivered to them as they would be delivered to their children by subject staff. This is followed by a half hour information session about the working of school life. The aim of this programme is to enable parents 'to have conversations with their children at home about what's going on in classes'. Although the staff understand that not everybody can attend the 'Parents in Partnership' programme, they feel it has a positive impact because 'if you can get a core of parents involved, you can then use them and others as focus groups'. They noted that 'the positivity that the parents experience then goes out into the wider community... so whilst it might not be huge numbers, the positivity spreads out'. However, because the school 'needed to go more universal', they moved forward and developed a system 'where all parents can access materials and resources that allow them to support their children at home and that's where the Padlet idea came from'. Each year group has a Padlet which each department has created subject guides for- which are straightforward to access and use, they provide concise but in depth content and year plans which parents can use. For example, parents and carers can now access all aspects

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of their child's school life and have a conversation with them about it, which in turn we would hope improves attainment and engagement while facilitating a more proactive approach to parental contact and engagement with school.

The school website and Padlets have a section dedicated to supporting parents with home learning, with material related to academic subjects as well as mental health and wellbeing. The mental health and wellbeing sections 'have grown because parents gave feedback' and it all started because parents said 'if only that was a guide that would help me'. The school organise different workshops for parents and some of these workshops are run by the students themselves. For example, students 'have been trained in safe talk... and anti-bullying'. Pupils 'explaining the building pledge' to parents is 'a different level of engagement to work on'. Senior staff stressed the importance of continuous work around the transition process to the school and at the end of S6. They work with their cluster primaries P6 classes, supporting them with 'English, maths, art and we've got a STEM project going on', They are also 'meeting parents, ... talking to parents, and ... reassuring them so that they're ready for the next step. And we also have an induction week programme for the primary 7s. This involves a parents' evening as well'. The school organise a programme based on personal and social education for the students who are leaving the school. It is a mix of classroom-based activities and assemblies where the students work on CV building, personal statements and developing leadership and management skills. They invite former students to talk to them about their experiences. For example, they 'had a pupil who's now working for an international company. He left school five years ago, but he's coming in to deliver CV training to S5 and S6 pupils.

The school have created a Parental Engagement strategy which highlights our short-, medium- and long-term improvement planning to build upon the foundations of our universal support with more targeted approaches. We have linked with Education Scotland who have suggested the creation of the overall strategy document and provided advice on how to evaluate our performance to inform future planning.

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Appendix 2 (May 2022)

Case Study School 2

(primary & early learning & childcare)

'It's bringing that connection from the classroom to what's needed at home and in the community. It's about looking at everything together ensuring a needs based approach for the entire school community.'

The staff at Case Study School 2 (CS2) were clear about the importance of parental engagement with learning, *'for us, it's very different from parental involvement'*; senior staff remarked that it was important that all staff in the school understood this difference, as well as parents sharing this understanding, and that the value placed on parental engagement with learning was shown by senior staff.

Parental involvement is more directed, and teacher led and this was the situation throughout most of CS2 some years ago. The school staff made a deliberate choice to strike a balance between parental involvement such as parents' meetings, parent council and school events and parental engagement such as learning together and family learning events. Using tools such as SWAT and PESTLE analysis (Perera 2017) these activities included analysis not only of the needs within the school but within the wider community also, *'ensuring a robust focus on needs-based approaches and interventions.'* This re-envisioning of work with parents needed to be collaborative and include all staff. Parental engagement in learning is a whole-school vision for CS2 with staff commenting that early learning and childcare staff *'do parental engagement very well'* and that senior staff had worked with those staff to learn from this well-established practice.

Working on this analysis, the school also included information from all stakeholders, information about socio-economic issues in the area and used materials from the National Improvement Hub such as the Engaging Parents Toolkit (Education Scotland 2019 (2022)). This led to a strategic whole school plan and rationale to take forward a parental engagement strategy. Staff reiterated the term, *'needs based approach'* on a number of occasions – and highlighted that the discernment of these needs was not down to the staff alone, but also included parents and work with the wider community. Staff also highlighted the importance of being flexible, and responding to local, national, and global needs and events. The school worked with the community which had suffered the loss of a local library – in the wake of this loss, the school worked with other local schools to ensure that a mobile library visited the community. This linked with the school's curricular emphasis on reading for enjoyment amongst the children and with families. The school initiated family reading cafés, to allow parents, staff, and children to read together in an informal setting. This reading café then developed into digital cafés, in response to parental and family needs in this area.

Staff at this school made the interesting point that their criteria for success in working in the area of parental engagement was not entirely focused on the number of parents who attended, but rather on the impact of the interventions both universal and targeted. *'If you can have an impact on one family, then it's been successful so we don't really go purely by the number of people that attend'*.

The school also had a focus on health and wellbeing, beginning in the early learning class; to primary 7, the school built up a community walking group for parents and their children to attend local landmarks, parks, and events. To support parental engagement in numeracy and maths activities, staff worked to ensure that parents would feel more comfortable not only with the work their children were completing at home but also with coming into the school to support their own needs. The school ran workshops on mental maths strategies for parents which were led by the children rather than by school staff. CS2 staff felt that parents were more likely to come into school to see their children and, with such child led activities, parents would have less fear of being asked to participate in this type of learning experience.

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During lockdown, these types of activities continued online with the impact described as 'very powerful' by staff. The school hoped, once restrictions due to lockdown were removed, to move some of their activities out of the school environment and into the community, using the local community centre, seeing parental engagement in learning as 'a community project'. Staff spoke of working with parents to help them to be 'comfortable coming into the school again', staff also commented that they hoped to build on what they had learned digitally from during lock down, such as the value parents placed on the short video tutorials produced by children and staff. The school has its own YouTube channel and intends to continue building on what they have learned.

Looking to the future, CS2 is working with another local school, and have consulted with parents regarding what support they would like; ideas so far include support around behaviour, sleep routines and mental health. It is clear that CS2 considers itself as a community school and a theme that runs throughout the data from CS2 is a sense of a desire for connection with the local community.