

PARENT COUNCIL RESOURCE

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Section 7 – Encouraging involvement

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7. Encouraging involvement

Helping parents to get involved in their children's learning is one of the most important ways of making a difference for children and young people. Encouraging more parents to become involved in the wider life of the setting or school is one of the main opportunities for every Parent Council. It is important to remember that involvement and engagement can take many different forms. Parents need opportunities to get involved and engaged in ways that suit them best. Parent Councils will only know what these are by asking them and by trying new approaches. Additionally, parental involvement and parental engagement can be very different in primary and secondary schools. For example, the physical interaction between parents and staff in primary schools change once a child moves to secondary school. There is no longer the familiar meeting at the school gate or the casual conversation where a parent can ask after their child's progress. Additionally, the focus of a Parent Council at primary and secondary can look very different.

Every parent wants the best for their child, but they may have good reason for not being able to take part in some activities run by the setting or school or the Parent Council. The reasons will be different for every parent and family so the Parent Council will need to ask them if there is anything they can do to support them to get involved.

There are numerous ways of encouraging parents to get involved in the life of the setting or school. All types of involvement make a difference. Involving parents in the wider setting or school learning community may also give them the confidence, and make it easier, to feed in their views on issues that matter to them.

While many parents may feel that membership of a formal body such as the Parent Council is not for them, they may feel more comfortable and/or willing to get involved in a one-off or short-term activity which utilises their existing skills. Creating a culture across the setting or school for parents to feel welcome is important.

One of the ways to help understand the wide variety of skills that parents have is to undertake a skills audit and to keep this stored securely in a database or spreadsheet which is managed by the setting or school. Staff may use the information to invite parents to enhance/enrich the curriculum through classroom events or special activities. Parent Council members could use it to identify parents to help with other activities to support children's learning which require diverse

skills, interests and knowledge e.g. Developing the Young Workforce. An example of a Parent Volunteering Skills Audit is provided in Appendix 4.

Parents should know that the setting or school and their Parent Council are committed to ensuring they feel welcome. To help build a relationship with parents based on trust, asking for their views should be incorporated into everything that the Parent Council does. Below are examples of different opportunities for Parent Councils to engage with parents.

- *Class and/or Area Representatives* - Parent Council representatives are more likely to know and meet parents of children in the same class as their own child or living in the same area. This exchange of information can provide important opportunities for feeding parents' views into the Parent Council.
- *Email* - A useful, no-cost way of communicating regularly with parents. Use this as an opportunity to encourage parents to feed in their views by including an invitation in your standard email signature. For the purposes of continuity, Parent Councils may wish to consider setting up a generic email address. Whenever the Chair of the Parent Council changes, the password should then be reset. This will allow the new Chair to have access to previous email correspondence.
- *In person contact* - Talking to people in person can help them feel valued and break down barriers. Identify key events throughout the year that are well attended by parents and provide opportunities for members of the Parent Council to speak directly with parents. These may include parent evenings, school concerts and Christmas and summer fairs. Consider having a Parent Council stand and/or presence at such events to recruit new members, and to raise the profile of the Parent Council and generate interest. Informal opportunities such as tea/coffee gatherings can be very helpful.
- *Newsletters* - Useful for providing regular and concise information about a range of issues. They can be used to make parents aware of issues, meeting dates and also to ask parents what they think. Newsletters could be electronic, on the setting or school or Parent Council website and/or hard copy via the school bag. Ask for parental preferences.
- *Parent Council meetings* - Provide important opportunities for parents to discuss issues and put forward their views and ideas. Ensure all parents are invited and that they feel welcome to attend. If turnout is poor, try and reflect on why this may be. Set the meeting

room up in a way that will encourage discussion. Some parents may find sitting around a long table intimidating so arrange seats into an oval or circular shape. Or use the staff room where chairs are likely to be more comfortable. Consider holding meetings on different days or times so that more parents have an opportunity to attend. During meetings the Chair should encourage all those attending to contribute to the discussion. Informal drop-in sessions with a rota of Parent Council members, perhaps just before the end of the school day, or just after the start of the day, might also be an option that works for some parents or Parent Councils.

- *Promotional literature* - The Parent Council's basic contact details should always be available on all Parent Council literature and communications, with signposting to other resources such as webpages. Some common phrases and subheadings on all communications could be included which would encourage parents to feed in their views.
- *School Handbook* - should include information about the Parent Council.
- *School noticeboards* - are an opportunity to showcase the work of the Parent Council. Put up photos of Parent Council members to give the Parent Council a 'human face' and invite parents to feed in their views.
- *Social media platforms* - are a way of communicating with parents and can be useful for letting parents know about Parent Council activities, and for enabling parents to get in touch with the Parent Council. It is important to promote responsible use of social media and to be aware that not all parents use social media.
- *Sub-groups or short-life working groups* - can be set up to focus on a particular issue. They provide opportunities to involve parents and can help channel parents' enthusiasm, commitment and expertise into areas they are interested in.
- *Suggestion Boxes* – can be placed in the reception area(s) of the setting or school. Make sure to publicise their existence and encourage parents to leave contact details so they can be involved in exploring any suggestions further.

- *Websites* - Not all Parent Councils have the resources to develop their own website but they can ask the setting or school for their own page on the setting or school's website. Some websites use online forms to allow parents to send views directly to a Parent Council email address. Some also have links to social media sites and/or have their own social media facilities.
- *Welcome packs* - develop a standard letter of welcome, or a welcome 'pack' to introduce the Parent Council and explain what it does to parents of children just starting at the school - for both Primary 1 and Secondary 1 parents, and those new to the area.

A note on contact lists - many of the communication methods above rely on having an up-to-date contact list. Some Parent Councils choose to send out information via the setting or school but if your Parent Council decides to maintain its own list, keep information safe and ensure it is only used for the purpose for which it was given and not shared with others. More information on Data Protection can be found on the Information Commissioner's Office website⁴⁷. It is important to be clear with parents about the purpose of your database and to develop protocols for its appropriate usage. See Connect's Data Protection Pack⁴⁸.

7.1 Knowing your community

'Community is an attitude and feeling of connectedness. When educators, parents, other citizens, and organisations work together to help students succeed, they strengthen the sense of community in and beyond the school'⁴⁹. Scotland has experienced an increased effort and drive towards achieving greater community engagement through new and innovative methods of participation. These have included social media campaigns, online surveys, focus groups, public meetings and discussions, participatory budgeting and community action research⁵⁰. Settings and schools do not exist in isolation but rather they are a key part of a network of statutory, private sector and voluntary organisations which support and serve the local community⁵¹.

⁴⁷ <https://ico.org.uk/>

⁴⁸ <https://connect.scot/news/essential-information-parent-councils-bout-general-data-protection-regulation>

⁴⁹ Epstein, 2016, p611

⁵⁰ Lightbody, 2017

⁵¹ Welsh Government, 2015

Given that learning does not start nor stop at the school gates, some of the factors that can influence a child's outcomes can be in the family, community or in society⁵². Engaging with the wider community can bring positive influences across a range of areas. Settings and schools which 'actively engage the community in the life of the school and the school in the life of the community have positive impacts on educational outcomes. Community engagement contextualises learning, improves adult basic skills and provides positive role models'⁵³. Settings and schools have a number of opportunities to tap into a considerable source of support to help strengthen their work as opposed to trying to shoulder it alone.

People can work together more easily when the factors below are all present:

- **Issues:** People are working together on matters which they think are important.
- **Ways of working:** Respect and value each person's contribution. Being realistic in terms of the time and effort it takes. The process welcomes and encourages people who have less experience or confidence, as well as including the children and young people.
- **Getting results:** Working together gets results. People can see their effort has been worthwhile and that they have been listened to.
- **Involving the community:** Working with people outwith the school to contribute knowledge, skills and experiences.

Reflective questions

- Do you have sufficient knowledge about the school population and local community to help you support parents?
- Do you have information about the ways parents are already involved with the setting or school?
- Are there partners in your community who could help deliver the setting or school Improvement Plan?
- Which potential partnerships do you wish to develop and build upon?
- How can you best utilise the services of your community partners to help take forward the Improvement Plan?
- Is there a community representative on the Parent Council?

⁵² Cummings et al, 2011

⁵³ Welsh Government, 2015, p4

- Are local shops and businesses supporting fundraising initiatives or are they able to volunteer their time to help the setting or school?
- Are community representatives involved in developing, reviewing and evaluating the Improvement Plan?
- Do you participate in community events to help establish relationships with community groups including faith groups?

7.2 Building relationships

There are lots of ways to build relationships with parents.

- Parent Councils may be made up of year representatives but if not, having a link parent for each year group is one way of building relationships with more parents.
- Use every opportunity to chat to parents – at the setting or school gate, at a parents' evening, over tea and coffee at a setting or school event, or in the local neighbourhood.
- Social events can be a good way for parents and staff to get together and meet each other and share views and opinions as well as having a good time and build relationships.
- Remember the “3 F's” – Fun, Food and Families. Events that cater for all family members, provide refreshments and are enjoyable are most successful.
- Choosing the right kind of event can be important – a fashion evening can be successful in secondary schools and Quiz Nights with parents and children are also popular.
- Snowballing – where one parent agrees to bring along or introduce another – can be effective in getting people involved and building relationships.
- Make links with parents who already help in the setting or school in other ways, e.g. running clubs, helping with the library. Giving consideration to holding an annual event to celebrate the parent and community volunteers in your school is a good reason.
- Utilising a Family Learning approach to engaging families in a fun, needs led universal programme can support increased involvement and build positive collaborative relationships with parents. Family Learning can be a conduit to increasing parental engagement in their child's learning.

7.3 Working together as Parent Council members

Making your meetings interesting and enjoyable will help make your Parent Council a success. Parent Council meetings will be more effective when there is agreement over what is expected of members and everyone works together.

Working together as a team is essential and can be summed up as:

T – Together

E – Everyone

A – Achieves

M – More

7.4 Where else can I get information?

There are a number of key national parenting organisations across Scotland who work with Parent Councils, policymakers, practitioners, settings, schools, parents, pupils and communities on engaging parents and families. Two key national organisations are listed below and a more extensive list is provided in Appendix 5. Many local authority websites and social media pages also have useful information for Parent Councils.

Connect

Connect is a membership organisation and charity for parents with children at settings and schools in Scotland. Connect offers information and advice to parent groups and parents/carers to support parental engagement in children's learning and school lives, for the benefit of children and young people. Connect is led by a volunteer [Board of Director/Trustees](#) and has a dedicated [staff team](#). Further information can be found on Connect's website⁵⁴.

Scottish Assembly of Parents and Carers

The Assembly is a unique way of hearing the views and experiences of parents and carers. It brings together a diverse cross-section of parents and carers from all over Scotland to discuss

⁵⁴ <https://connect.scot/>

education and issues of shared interest. Further information can be found on the Scottish Assembly of Parents and Carers' [website](#).

National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS)

The National Parent Forum of Scotland⁵⁵ helps to ensure the voice of parents in Scotland are heard. The Forum is made up of parent volunteer representatives from each local authority area in Scotland. It represents parents across Scotland and works in partnership with Scottish Government, local government and other organisations involved in education and child wellbeing issues to ensure that parents have a voice in education.

Parents voices can be heard through:

- focus groups and online surveys
- attending national and local events
- access to information about educational policy and legislation
- parent friendly information through the 'in a nutshell' series of information leaflets and links

You can contact the National Parent Forum of Scotland direct to find out the name of your local area representative.

⁵⁵ <https://www.npfs.org.uk/>