

Working Together

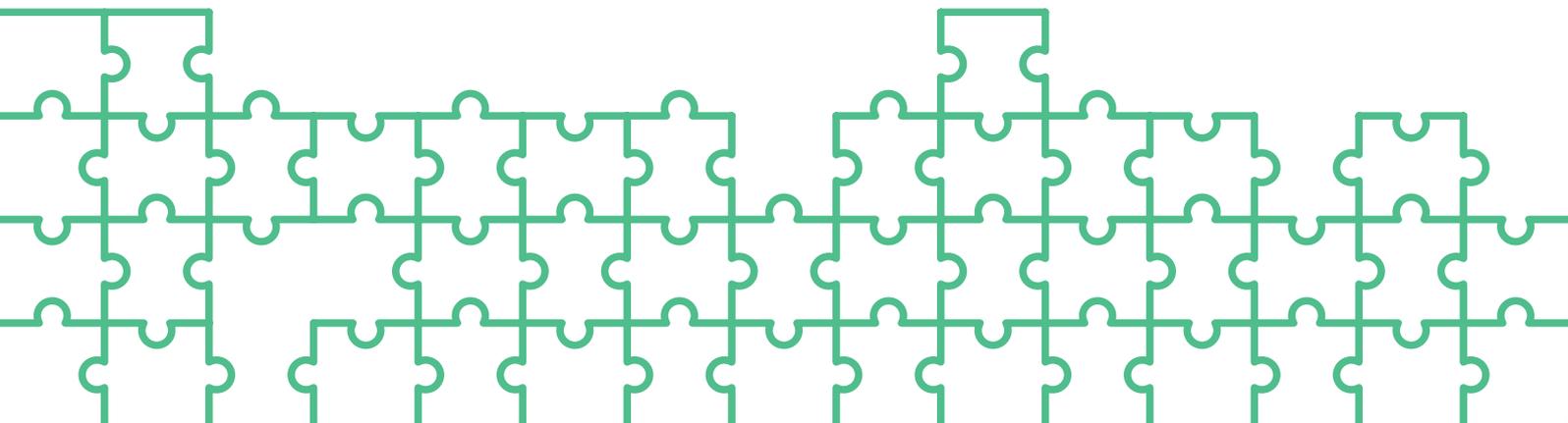
Supporting positive communication between education professionals and parents and carers of children with additional support needs



Module 3

Listening to families and understanding their views and experiences

This module will explore the value of understanding parents' views and consider practical ways to gain their perspectives and gather evidence





“When teachers REALLY listen it makes a huge difference”

Parent

“...[education professionals] should ask, listen and act on what the young people say about the support that works best for them”

Part of the Inclusion Ambassadors' vision statement

The importance of listening

Listening to and understanding the views and experiences of parents of children with additional support needs can foster good relationships, encourage parental engagement and support children's learning.

Effective listening can help you to determine what is working well and where improvements can be made. It can also help you to identify where parents may need support to engage or communicate.

Most importantly, effective listening helps to create trust and builds respect between families and professionals. If families know you are listening to them and taking their views into account, it helps parents to be active partners and you can work together as a team to support their child's learning.

Listening to parents helps to create an evidence base to inform your professional decision making and ensure that the interventions you and your setting or school put in place are impactful.



The practicalities and challenges

Listening is a key skill for all education staff and a natural part of most professionals' everyday interactions with children and parents. This module will support you to think about how you are listening, who you are listening to and, how your setting or school shows parents it is listening and taking account of their views. The module will also explore some of the practical challenges that education professionals experience including workload pressures and lack of time or resources.



Listening to parents brings many benefits. It is also important to remember that children and parents have the right to have their voices and opinions heard. This right is included in many different areas of national policy and legislation including the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** and the **Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004**, as amended.



Evidence & information

What parents report

Parents tell us that most education professionals are very good at listening to pupils, parents and the school community on a regular basis. However, workload pressures, a lack of resources and training can mean that the voices and parents of children with additional support needs sometimes appear to be overlooked.

In many cases, professionals and education settings are listening to what parents of children with additional support needs are telling them. They may not always effectively demonstrate this to parents though. If parents feel their views haven't been properly heard, understood or considered, this can be a significant barrier to building effective relationships.

A range of evidence shows some of the main issues identified by parents are:

- > Frustration with lack of information and restricted communication
- > Hurt and anger at views being ignored or dismissed
- > Not feeling like equal partners in their child's education journey
- > Loss of confidence and trust in the school or education setting
- > Language heard from parents and carers often refers to "fighting" and "battles".



1. Does the above evidence from the Additional Support for Learning Review chime with the experiences at your school or education setting?
2. Do any of these issues surprise you?
3. How do these issues make you feel and why?
4. Do you know what parents of children with additional support needs say about your setting?





Read these two **case studies** highlighting parents' experiences:



Kieran's story

Jo is a part-time nurse and works shifts. Her partner Alan works full time in retail. Their son Kieran has recently had a diagnosis of dyslexia. Jo and Alan feel they have had to "battle" to get this diagnosis. They feel their son has developed negative views about school and has lost confidence. Jo feels that time has been wasted because professionals didn't take their concerns seriously. Jo says: *"I knew there were reasons for Keiran's not reading but when I spoke to teachers at parents evenings, they just didn't listen ... It's taken ages to get a diagnosis but maybe Kieran can get the support he needs now, but it took so long for someone to listen to what we were saying."*

Consider **Kieran's** case study:



What opportunities did parents have to be listened to?

What issues have you identified?

The staff at Kieran's school may have been working through their staged intervention process and gathering evidence about his condition from what they could see at school, but they missed discussing this with and gaining information from his family. This may have delayed a diagnosis and potentially resulted in a lack of support for Keiran and has impaired the relationship between school and Keiran's family.





Aki's story

Gary is a single parent and looks after his son Aki several days a week. Aki receives additional support with his reading and writing at school, but Gary hasn't been involved in any of the planning discussions with the school. Gary wants to help his son, but he often feels left out. Gary drops his son off at school most mornings but doesn't have an opportunity to speak to the teachers. Most of the information he receives comes from his ex-partner rather than from the school.



Consider [Aki's](#) case study:



How could education staff engage with Gary and listen to how he is feeling?

What opportunities might exist to support Gary to be more involved in planning for Aki?

Can you think of similar situations where parents do not live together and there needs to be careful consideration of how a setting listens to and shares information with parents?

Staff may have been discussing Aki's progress with his mum, but may not have had the opportunity to speak to Gary. Although Gary is the secondary carer, he has an equal right to be included in his son's education. Staff should consider how they are sharing Aki's progress with both parents and getting their input. This could include meetings at school, photo diaries, regular progress updates and parents' evenings. Supporting both parents to be involved will improve the home support Aki receives.

Other examples where parents do not live together include when a parent is a member of the armed forces or in prison.



Understanding parents' views and experiences

There are a range of factors that may influence how parents feel about or respond to education staff.

- > Parents' circumstances are unique, and some may be dealing with additional factors in their own lives (for example, they may be a single parent, English may be their second language, or they may have been impacted by bereavement).
- > Parents may be coming to terms with their child's support needs. Unfortunately, disability and difference are often viewed negatively in our culture which can have an adverse impact on families.
- > Parents may have become knowledgeable very quickly about their child's additional support needs.
- > Parents may have professional knowledge you don't know about.
- > Parents of a child with additional support needs may be dealing with a range of issues – anxiety, lack of sleep, worries about respite care or other issues related to support.
- > Parents may be dealing with issues they would never have expected to deal with – such as learning disabilities, health conditions, medical procedures – without any specialist training.
- > Some parents will have work commitments and could already be juggling multiple priorities.
- > Parents may have faced discrimination because of their family circumstances or their child's additional support needs and be anxious about engaging with education staff.
- > Parents may have heard from other families that they faced a battle for support.

It is important to remember that parents of children with additional support needs are like any other parents – they have skills and strengths but may also lack confidence, have had a poor experience of school themselves, or face other life challenges.

All parents want their children to be happy, healthy, safe, have positive friendships and relationships and to achieve their potential. These principles apply whether a child has additional support needs or not.





Film: Watch this film of a parent talking about their child receiving an autism diagnosis and how they worked with education staff



Duration:
5 mins 24 secs



Practice reflection

There are many different ways of 'listening' to families – these include face-to-face conversations and meetings, consultations, parent surveys, action research and practitioner enquiries.

Consider the list of ways in which education settings communicate with and listen to parents (see below).

- What procedures are in place at your setting or school to communicate with and listen to parents?
- What is working well for parents and how do you know this?
- Based on accessibility needs identified by parents, are the existing communication methods suitable? If not, what procedures can be put into place?

Examples of reporting and communicating with parents

- | | |
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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters • Parents evenings • Home-link resources • Blogs / class blogs • School shows / showcase events • Assemblies • School website / Social media • Online / learning journey folders / e-portfolios • Homework diaries • Daily feedback sessions/diaries/conversations • Phone calls, texts • Using films to communicate and share the learning • Letters, emails | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open door policy • Noticeboards • Classroom visits / open days • Digital online learning journals • Meetings - key workers / planned meetings • Transition meetings • Digital technologies e.g. school app which translates newsletters and information into different languages • Profiles. |
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This list is from the Education Scotland's **Engaging parents and families – A toolkit for practitioners (Section 11: Reporting and communicating with parents and children)**



Evidence & information

Listening to children

Although these modules are focused on building better relationships between parents and educators, it is important that educational professionals and settings do not overlook the views and experiences of children.

It is a child's right for their opinions to be heard and taken seriously. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) states that children must have opportunities to share their views, and their opinions should be considered and taken into account when adults make decisions affecting them.

Children's opinions and experiences are central to how relationships with families develop. Their views are also essential in ensuring they have the right support at the right time. This is much more likely to work if children are involved in decisions about how it is provided.

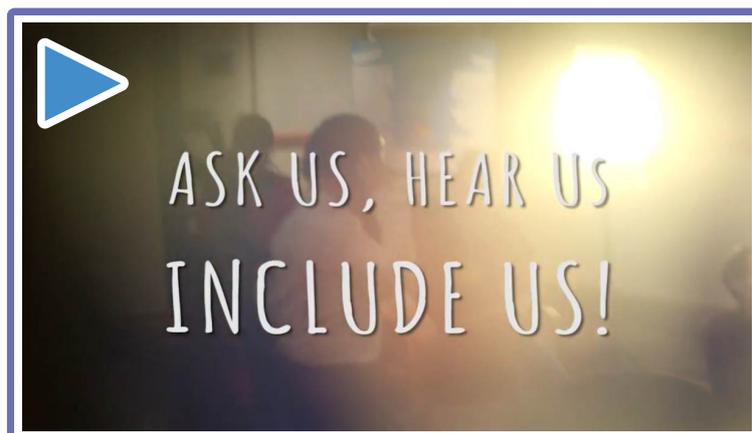


Exercise



Film: Watch this film created by the Young Ambassadors for Inclusion which explains why pupils' voices and experiences matter

What stands out to you, and why?



Duration:
8 mins 13 secs



Evidence & information

Through its engagement work with children, the Additional Support for Learning Review identified several key points that education professionals should consider. Children told the Review:

- > Meaningful relationships between children and staff are important for learning.
- > A willingness to adapt teaching methods to children's learning styles, needs and varying pace and challenge, helps them to learn.
- > School needs to be a safe place.
- > All school staff need to have more knowledge and understanding of additional support needs so they can meet everyone's needs.
- > Children with additional support needs don't want their ability or capability to be underestimated.
- > More understanding and empathy from peers would improve their learning experience.
- > Timely responses to bullying were important.
- > Support for children with additional support needs must be consistent.
- > Communication between primary and secondary schools needs to improve. There also needs to be more communication between schools, other organisations that provide support and young people.
- > Children need to feel they have involvement in information sharing as part of decision-making.
- > Additional Support for Learning needs to be adequately funded to ensure everyone gets the support they need, when they need it.

The Scottish Government has committed to supporting the Inclusion Ambassadors, a group of secondary-aged pupils from across Scotland, who are sharing their views and working to make education in Scotland better for young people with additional support needs. You can find out more about their work [here](#).



**Inclusion
Ambassadors**



Practice reflection

Reflective questions

1. Consider the experience of one child with additional support needs in your setting or school:
 - What do you know about the child's situation and the support they require?
 - How did you find this out? Have you listened to the child and the child's parents' views?
 - Is there any information you feel you are missing in order to provide the best possible support for the child?
 - How does the child's parents view their relationship with your setting or school?
2. Do the parents at your education setting know about their child's right to be involved in decisions relating to the support they receive at school?



Next steps

- Children in Scotland has created a **suggested template survey** for engaging with parents about meeting additional support needs based on the Education Scotland How good is our school? (4th edition). Consider sharing this with your school community.
- My Rights, My Say has developed a short, free **eLearning module** for practitioners working with children with additional support needs aged 12-15 years. The module is designed to help you to reflect on and develop the way that you listen to and involve children and young people with additional support needs.