Engaging parents and families

A toolkit for practitioners

Section 5: Home-School Partnerships

March 2019

(Updated July 2025)

f   EducationScot

🐦   @EducationScot

For Scotland's learners, with Scotland's educators

Contents

1. Background

'Shared responsibilities multiply the messages that children receive about the importance of the work they do'.

(Epstein, 2016, p78)

This section provides guidance for educators and practitioners on developing and establishing home-school partnerships as well as ensuring effective communications with parents and families. Developing relationships with parents and families is a key first step in this process. However, it should be recognised that sometimes parents and families may require an intervention or approach to help reduce barriers and build capacity and confidence in their own abilities.

The reflective questions will help practitioners with their self-evaluation process to identify where they are in their journey towards effective home-school partnerships with parents and families and where they would like to be.

The Scottish education system is based on trusting the professional judgement of teachers and practitioners. However, engaging and communicating with children and young people as well as parents and families is crucial to ensure that the learning undertaken at school is supported at home. 'Children want to have their voice heard in decisions that affect them' and so the reflective questions challenge thinking on pupil participation (Governance Review, 2017, p27).

1.1 Home-school partnerships
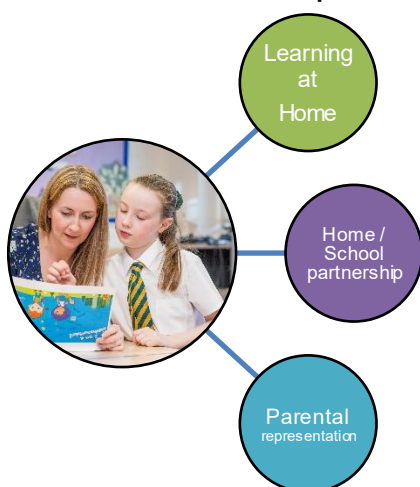
'We want to ensure that Scotland's parents have the skills, knowledge and respect to provide that support with confidence'.

(National Parenting Strategy, 2012, p13)

Home-school partnership is the second of the three strands of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006. The Act reflects the shared role and responsibility that schools, parents, families and the community have in working together to educate children. Within the Act, effective home-school partnerships are essential to ensure that children get the

most out of their school and their education. Working together allows Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) settings and schools to identify potential opportunities and difficulties at an early stage.

ELC settings, schools and communities must be open to the involvement of parents and families in the work they do and they should develop ways to create effective partnerships.   They should consider ways of providing information, practical support and developing strategies for supporting parents and families that helps them engage with the ELC setting, school or community, their child's and their own learning (Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Guidance, 2006).

Children have the right to be supported by their parents as they grow and develop (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)) and this places a responsibility on families to ensure that these rights are met. Parents and families may need practical support which is easy to access in order to help meet their child's needs and aspirations as they grow and develop.

Moving towards a culture where parents and families feel encouraged to seek support, reassured that by doing so they will be treated fairly and their parenting responsibilities and rights will be respected, is the Scottish Government's aspiration for all parents (National Parenting Strategy, 2012). Despite this, the role of parents and families continues to evolve along with care-giving arrangements, the number of parents and families in employment, family structures and a growing culturally diverse population.

Research shows that 'positive parenting experiences, especially a more stimulating home learning environment when children were young, helped to promote better long term outcomes' (Sammons, Toth and Sylva, 2015). Highlighting to parents and families the positive impact that they can have on their child's learning is crucial.

There may be support for ELC settings, schools, communities, parents and families from a range of practitioners and partner organisations such as home-school link workers, family support teams, practitioners delivering community learning and development or other third sector organisations who are or plan to take home-school partnerships forward.

Further information is available on the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations website.

2. Effective partnerships

Home-school partnerships are about 'reflecting the shared role and responsibility that schools, parents and the community have in working together to educate children'.

(National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017, p10)

Successful partnership working depends on the development of mutual trust and respect between educators, practitioners, parents and families. The skills, knowledge and experiences that all parents, families, educators and practitioners contribute should be used to support children's learning.

The development of trust and relationships between parents, families, educators and practitioners are the foundation stones to effective partnership working. There are many opportunities for educators and practitioners to contact parents and families informally. These can include:

- day-to-day contact in the playroom, at the school gate, in the playground or out in the community
- breakfast clubs or after school clubs
- fundraising events
- social events, sports day, concerts, assemblies, community activities
- introductory home visits, enrolment days, family learning opportunities

Working in partnership with parents, families and the wider school community may be new to some educators and practitioners who have possibly just joined the profession and they may need support to make this work effectively. Local authorities may want to consider what development opportunities are available to support educators and practitioners in their communications and partnerships with parents and families. For example, workshops on 'Making the most of one-to-one meetings with parents' or 'How to engage parents in their children's learning', can help develop ideas and skills.

Improvement planning should be part of a regular on-going cycle of rigorous self-evaluation and improvement which involves parents, families, children and young people, partners and the wider ELC setting or school community. As part of this process, consideration should be given to how ELC settings and schools work with parents to improve outcomes for children which help to close the poverty related attainment gap.

2.1   What it looks like when things go well

- Parents and families feel welcome in the ELC setting or school and that educators and practitioners are approachable.
- There are lots of opportunities for parents and families to get involved in different activities.
- The ELC setting or school understands the needs of parents, families, the local community and develops ways of working which are supportive and inclusive.
- Parents, families, educators and practitioners are asked about what is important to them, what they would like to see happening and the actions taken as a result.
- Children and young people contribute their ideas about what is important to them and how their parents and families can become involved.
- Parents and families are motivated and encouraged to be engaged in their children's learning but also to continue their own lifelong learning.
- Educators and practitioners recognise and take account of the diversity in family structures as well as other competing priorities, commitments and responsibilities.
- Parents and families are able to become involved in one-off short term projects as and when their circumstances permit, without being committed to a longer term arrangement.
- Parents and families have confidence in their own abilities to take part and their skills are recognised and utilised within the ELC setting or school.
- Practitioners and educators engage with parents and families in a variety of ways to help build positive relationships and capacity.
- The ELC setting or school recognises cultural diversities amongst parents and families, and is inclusive. For example, there is information about the ways parents and families can take part in the life of the ELC setting or school in different formats and languages. Interpreters and signers are provided when necessary to ensure that all parents have access to information. Facilities and venues are accessible by all.
- The ELC setting or school recognises the concerns of parents resulting from their own experiences of education and provides positive or alternative ways for those parents to

become engaged in their child's learning. Where necessary, ELC settings and schools should work with other practitioners or partner organisations to help parents become involved and engaged.

- Support and development opportunities are offered to everyone who is taking on a new role such as membership of the Parent Council, parent group, volunteering to help practitioners with activities or leading a group.
- The school improvement plan identifies priority areas in which parents and the wider community can become involved to raise attainment for all across children's learning.
- Parents are involved in co-developing and reviewing ELC setting and school policies and procedures.

Activity 1: Promoting parental engagement in children's learning

Purpose

To work with partners and/or other practitioners to increase parental engagement in children's learning.

Parents have creative ideas about school education and what can be done to improve the standards and quality of their child's learning. Collaborative approaches in partnership with parents and the wider learning community can make a positive contribution to how ELC settings/schools/local authorities determine their ambitions/priorities and plan improvements to meet these. Questions from this activity could be shared with parents to gather their views. The activity could be carried out again to evaluate and measure the changes and impact of partnerships with parents.

Reflective questions

- How welcoming is your ELC setting or school to parents in terms of how it looks when parents come in and the way staff and practitioners greet them? How often do you ask parents and pupils for their ideas to improve and enhance the ELC setting or school? How is the information used and fed back to parents?

- Have you considered the possibility of creating an area specifically for parents within the ELC setting or school and including them in the process of developing the space?

- Identify the range of ways parents and practitioners are able to meet to share ideas about supporting your ELC setting or school. How could you improve this to increase parental engagement?

- How flexible and accommodating are activities for parents?

- How are parents, the local community or other practitioners informed of and involved in new initiatives? How effective is communication about new initiatives and how do you know?

- As well as the ongoing tasks and roles that parents can fulfil, what opportunities are there for parents to do one-off tasks with no long-term commitment?

- In what ways are parents enabled to get to know each other outside the ELC setting or school (e.g. barbeque in the summer, ceilidhs, family nights)?

- Is the information for parents provided in different formats and through channels that reach everyone? Consider if there are any groups of parents who could be missed out e.g. parents who do not live together, service families, young parents, partners of parents who are in prison.

- What practical support is there to help parents become involved? For example, on a parents' evening or curricular night, does the ELC setting or school organise transport for those who are unable to get to the ELC setting or school after hours?

- Are parents aware that extended family such as grandparents or other relatives are welcome to be involved?

- How is information about adult learning and family learning classes made accessible to parents and families? Do you have a referral system set up with partner agencies?

- How are parents guided through the respective roles and responsibilities both they and practitioners fulfil when volunteering and working with other children and young people, as well as their own?

- Do you have the information you need on matters such as the Protection of Vulnerable Groups (PVG) requirements for people working alongside children and young people?

What systems are in place to support parents through the process should they require some assistance?

- Are there families in your ELC setting or school that would benefit from targeted support due to singular or multiple needs that are impacting on their health and wellbeing, development and/or learning?

- Are parents involved in deciding the priorities for the Pupil Equity Funding?

Further information is available in the How good is our early learning and childcare? and How Good is our School? (Fourth edition) self-evaluation frameworks.

3. Communications and positive relationships

The basis for developing relationships based on trust, mutual respect and collaboration is good communication. Some local authorities, ELC settings and schools have developed communication strategies which outline the principles of good communication and the various ways it will be undertaken. The language used in all communications with parents should be free of educational jargon or terms, easy to read and understand, using colour and pictures where appropriate and possible.

Below are a few of the ideas that practitioners and parents have suggested:

- Reach out to parents at places they already visit: shops, post offices, supermarkets, libraries, doctors' surgeries, nail bars and ensure that information is available there and a positive image of the ELC setting or school is presented. Make use of face-to-face contact and visual materials. Utilise children and young people as ambassadors.
- Use local media channels e.g. radio, newspapers, magazines, posters etc., to let parents know what is happening in the ELC setting or school and share 'good news' stories about what children and young people are learning or involved in.
- Have one-to-one direct conversations and communications with parents. Personally invite them to attend an event or get involved.
- Use digital methods such as text messages, emails, blogs or social media where possible or relevant.
- Build relationships through contact with parents at drama, music and sport events, parents' nights, other social/community events.
- Make use of parent-to-parent contacts such as 'snowballing' (where one parent agrees to bring along or introduce another), meeting at the gate, parents' nights, information sessions led by parents.
- Make use of existing opportunities, for example transition phases (early learning to primary, primary to secondary, community groups).
- Share key facts such as the research findings on the difference parents make.
- Know your local community and adapt communications accordingly. Add in your own ideas and approaches.
- Use your Parent Council as a focus group to make sure that communications sent to parents are written in a user-friendly way.
- Work with partner organisations and the wider community.

3.1   Top tips for improving engagement with parents

The example below has been reproduced with permission from Aberdeenshire Council.

Parental involvement and parental engagement

What does parental involvement and engagement mean in your setting/school?

What does parental involvement and engagement look like in your setting/school?

'Do Parents Know they Matter?'

Children spend 85% of their time at home or in the community

Parents are the main educators in a child's life and the most influential

---

Building relationships with parents

- Take the time to meet at least once a year face-to-face

- Introduce yourself, smile, thank them for coming

- Invite parents to regularly share what their child likes, their achievements, strengths

- Be clear about expectations, roles, responsibilities and how you can work together

- Regular communication – but talk to parents to find out what is the best way to do this

Talking with parents

- Find out what they know and/or want to know

- Ensure you both learn from every opportunity, interaction and communication

Writing to parents

- Be clear of the purpose

- Be positive and constructive

- Specify how it effects the parent and their child

- What you need them to do

- Avoid jargon!

Events and activities for parents

- Talk to parents and ask them what they would like to know about *topic*

- Purpose – what will parents learn from attending the event?

- What you call it – don't use jargon, relate it to how they will be able to support their child

- Arrangements – when is the most appropriate time? Can it be repeated/recorded/shared in a number of ways?

- Structure – make activities interactive, talking with parents, not at parents. If possible organise into smaller groups to facilitate discussion and questions

- What will attending the event enable them to do?

Transition and moving on

Parents have many anxieties around change and how that might affect their child. How do you find out what their questions are? Could you invite parents and children to share this with you? Don't assume you know.

Every year as children move to a new stage and a new teacher, parents will want to know if their child's needs are known and what support will be available. Do you explain to parents the systems in place to ensure progression in learning?

Activity 2: Effective communications

Purpose

To create effective methods of communicating with parents and families in a way that is meaningful to them.

Write down the various methods that you currently communicate with parents and consider the reflective questions below. Your Parent Council or parent group could ask the wider parent forum for their views.

Reflective questions

- What are your most successful methods of communicating with parents? What makes them successful?
- Does digital communication exclude parents in your ELC setting or school? If so, how can this be addressed?
- How does your ELC setting or school overcome the challenge of letters and other information remaining in school bags?
- How regularly do you consider the quality and variety of communication methods with your parents? What is the process for this?
- What guidelines are in place in your ELC setting or school for parents and staff regarding communication? How are these devised? How regularly are they reviewed? Who is involved in the review?
- How do you keep parents informed so that they understand why and how Scottish education is changing? Consider the National Improvement Framework, Scottish Attainment Challenge, Developing the Young Workforce.
- How do you communicate with parents about the progress, achievement and attainment of their children and young people?
- How do you measure the quality of relationships with parents? What evidence do you have for this?

Activity 3: Building relationships with parents and families

Purpose

To help build relationships with parents and families.

Think about a particular case or situation where the outcome was successful and contrast it with a case which was not successful. Review both cases and identify what you would do differently to bring about a better outcome.

Reflective questions

- How did you support the family to understand the purpose and impact of their engagement in their children's learning?
- What methods of communication were used?
- How often did you communicate with the family?
- What other approaches did you use to influence a change in the relationship?
- How do you judge the quality of the relationships you have with parents and families?

How can children and young people be more involved in the process?

Children and young people often know what would work best for their parents and their families. ELC settings and schools are encouraged to develop pupil discussion groups as part of their work on Citizenship and Enterprise Education. There may be committees or groups considering equality issues in the ELC setting or school, a Hungry for Success Committee, or an Eco Group. All of these groups could be asked to consider how parents and the wider community and partners could be involved or engaged and support their learning in these areas.

Ways for local authorities, ELC settings, schools and parents to involve children and young people include:

- ELC settings and school pupil councils
- An authority-wide young person's forum
- Through community learning and development dedicated youth work staff
- An authority-wide consultation forum for all in line with the Disability Equality Duty looking at support issues
- A representative on the Parent Council
- Circle time/golden time – where practitioners and children have a chance to talk together and share news and information informally
- Youth involvement in locality planning and community planning networks
- The use of suggestion or ideas boxes or perhaps through the local Dialogue Youth Team

- Graffiti/notice boards which act as permanent comment boards
- Joint work or projects between staff, parents and children and young people representatives. Including children and young people in formal and informal consultation processes when new ideas are being developed
- Being part of social events
- Helping in practical ways with activities at the ELC setting or school

4. Resolving disagreements

No matter how good communications are, there will be times when there are disagreements or misunderstandings.   Using some of the ideas in these guidelines can be a way of helping parents to communicate their concerns.

4.1   Guidelines you may provide to parents

If your concerns are in connection with an individual child:

- Raise the matter with a member of staff in the way that is easiest for you, by talking, emailing, phoning, or in writing. Concerns are more easily resolved by talking about them at the earliest possible stage. The ELC setting or school will want to know if you have a concern. The sooner you tell them about it the better the outcome is likely to be.

- If your concern is urgent make sure you let staff know this.

- Complaints/concerns are usually resolved by people coming together, talking and agreeing a suitable way forward or action plan. However, there are some situations where a complaint will have to be investigated and a decision made at a later stage.

- If you are going to a meeting in the ELC setting or school you may want to take someone with you for support.

- Sometimes it helps to write things down in advance of a meeting or talk things through with someone else.

- Try to stick to facts and feelings. Expressing how you feel is very important and it will help staff.

- Decide whether it would be helpful to have your child with you at the meeting or whether an initial meeting with staff would be better.

- If you feel you are not being heard or taken seriously, you can ask to speak to another member of staff, have someone from the local authority to support you, or an independent advocate or mediator.

- The headteacher should be made aware of any unresolved concerns, but if the complaint is about the headteacher and it cannot be resolved, you should contact someone from your local authority. Your local authority will have a complaints procedure.

If your concerns are about something else:

The same applies as in a concern about an individual child or young person and you should start by talking to staff. However, you can also raise your concerns with the Parent Council (if you are in a primary or secondary setting). If, after discussion with the school and local authority, the Parent Council is unable to reach a satisfactory outcome for these concerns, they are able to make representation to Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education at Education Scotland.

Further information about parental representation and managing complaints can be found in Section 6 of the toolkit.

5. Assessment and reporting

Assessment is an integral part of learning and teaching. Knowing what has been learned and understood provides a picture of a child or young person's progress and achievements. It also helps to identify next steps in learning.

As with all aspects of Curriculum for Excellence, assessment practices should be seen from the perspective of the learner. Learners should be engaged in all aspects of assessment processes and be afforded an element of choice and personalisation in showing that they have achieved the intended outcomes.

As learners move through the curriculum, they will experience a range of approaches to assessment appropriate to their learning and stage of development.

Building the Curriculum 5: a framework for assessment outlines the key purposes and features of reporting within Curriculum for Excellence. Reporting has two main purposes. 'Firstly, it provides clear, positive and constructive feedback about children and young people's learning and progress, looking back on what has been achieved against standards and expectations. Secondly, it creates an agenda for discussions between learners and those teaching and supporting them about their next steps in learning' (p42).

Reporting allows information to be shared and exchanged among children and young people, parents and staff. Informed discussions between teachers and parents on their child's learning are at the centre of reporting. Reporting focuses on what information is needed to ensure that parents know what their child has achieved and how well he/she is doing against expectations. It provides a summary of what the learner has aimed for; describes progress in terms of what the learner has achieved so far; and sets out for the learner, parents and staff what needs to be done to ensure continued progress and improved standards of achievement.

Reporting makes the child or young person's learning and achievement explicit to all and helps engage parents actively in their child's learning. It encourages active parental engagement as well as providing information and feedback to them on their child's progress and achievements.

Activity 4: Purpose of assessment and reporting

Purpose

To help parents understand the purpose and methods of assessment and reporting.

Reflective questions

- How are parents being supported to understand the purpose of your assessment approaches to support their child's learning and to plan for next steps?
- How are you demonstrating to parents that they can support their child's learning as part of the assessment process and help plan for next steps?
- How effective is your ELC setting or school's approach to the above two questions? Do you need to make changes which would lead to improving parents' understanding and involvement/engagement in assessment and reporting?

Activity 5: Assessment evidence

Purpose

To ascertain how useful parents find the information given to them about their child's learning and progress.

Information on reporting to parents and children can be found in Section 11 of the toolkit.

Reflective questions

- How is information shared with parents so that they understand the relevance of the wide range of evidence gathered to assess their child's progress?
- Are parents aware of the range of evidence gathered to assess children's progress? If not, how can this be changed?
- How useful have parents found the range of evidence to help them understand how their child is progressing and the next steps in their learning?

- How do you demonstrate assessment and reporting so that parents have a better understanding of the different approaches used by the ELC setting or school? For example, what would parents understand by peer evaluation and/or self-evaluation? How effective is the ELC setting or school at doing self-evaluation and how do you know?

Activity 6: Assessment information

Purpose

To consider how information is shared with parents and how effective this is.

Reflective questions

- How do you share assessment information with parents e.g. are there a range of reporting approaches? Is this an ongoing basis, periodically or at key transitions?
- How effective are each of these reporting approaches in describing to parents how their child or young person is progressing? How do you know?
- How effective are these approaches in providing opportunities for dialogue between staff, parents and pupils about progress and achievement?
- How could parents' consultation nights (parents' evenings, meetings) be more productive in taking account of parents' views and in supporting learning?

Activity 7: Involving parents in transitions

Purpose

To consider how parents are involved in transitions.

Children and young people are entitled to support to help them prepare for and deal with transitions from stage to stage, class to class and between sectors and establishments. Recognising the vital role of parents in supporting their child at these key transitions is

important. Transition stages are also a time of change for parents who may also need support and reassurance themselves.

Reflective questions

- How do you currently communicate and involve parents in transition arrangements?
- What makes a positive or negative transition experience?
- How are parental views (from the Parent Council and wider parent forum) and knowledge taken into consideration to support children and young people through transitions?
- How are parents helped to understand how their involvement and support can best continue after the transition?

Reading list

Education Scotland (2015), 'How good is our school? (Fourth edition)'. Livingston. https://education.gov.scot/inspection-and-review/inspection-frameworks/how-good-is-our-school-fourth-edition-hgios-4/

Epstein, J.L. (2016), '*School, family, and community partnerships*'. Philadelphia. Westview Press.

National Parent Forum of Scotland (2017), '*Review of the impact of the Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006*'. https://www.npfs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/edd/2017/07/Final-E-versionpdf.pdf

Sammons, P., Toth, K. and Sylva K. (2015), '*Pre-school and early home learning effects on A-level outcomes*'. Effective Pre-School, Primary & Secondary Education Project (EPPSE). University of Oxford. Department for Education.

The Scottish Government (2012), '*National Parenting Strategy*'. Edinburgh. APS Group Scotland. http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0040/00403769.pdf

The Scottish Government (2017), 'Education Governance Next Steps'. Edinburgh. APS Group Scotland. https://www.gov.scot/publications/education-governance-next-steps-empowering-teachers-parents-communities-deliver-excellence-9781788510431/

Further information

Family Learning Framework (2018)

Parentzone Scotland

Review of Family Learning (2016)

Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations

Education Scotland
Denholm House
Almondvale Business Park
Almondvale Way
Livingston
EH54 6GA

T   +44 (0)131 244 4330
E   enquiries@educationscotland.gov.scot

https://education.gov.scot/

© Crown Copyright, 2025.

You may re-use this information (excluding images and logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence providing that it is reproduced accurately and not in a misleading context. The material must be acknowledged as Education Scotland copyright and the document title specified.

To view this licence, visit http://nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence or Email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk

Where we have identified any third-party copyright information you will need to obtain permission from the copyright holders concerned.