

SUPPORTING VULNERABLE FAMILIES

Children growing up in poorer families tend to leave school with lower levels of educational attainment. This can have a significant impact on social mobility and poverty.

This exemplar will increase the knowledge, skills and understanding of practitioners working with vulnerable families. This will be most relevant for practitioners delivering family learning and parental engagement outcomes such as those working in schools, CLD, The Third Sector, early years etc.

WHAT DOES THE EVIDENCE SAY?

Differential access to material resources, differing attitudes towards schools and education as well as varying levels of educational aspirations within vulnerable families can result in lower educational attainment for vulnerable children. Different social classes, cultures, ethnicities, and family circumstances inform how parents engage with their children's schooling and the different resources they are able to offer when facilitating their children's educational trajectories. **School policies and programmes should emphasise parental engagement as an ongoing, continuous state of working (Altschul 2011).** Often families who face challenges from low-incomes or marginalisation are time pressed and have multiple sources of worry, so that parents may only assist with learning at home when children struggle academically or socially (Altschul 2011; Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). Children from poor or challenging backgrounds are less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off backgrounds (Goodman and Gregg 2010). Schools need to be aware that material conditions and challenging circumstances affect social relationships and educational processes (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). **Perceptions as to the roles and responsibilities of schools and families may depend on the socio-economic position and ethnic background of parents, with differing perspectives as to what the school-family relationship should look like (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010; Kim 2009).** Some parents feel excluded because of the expectations that they be involved both in programmes in which they have no expertise or are geared towards other children (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). **Parental aspirations and attitudes to education vary strongly by socio-economic position, with more advantaged parents expecting their children to achieve high educational attainments than the most disadvantaged parents (Brown et al 2009).** Expectations and patterns of achievement can also be influenced at the community level, making school-family-community relationships an ideal towards which to work (Brown et al 2009).

Some parents experience barriers to engagement with schools, and these groups of parents are most often those who do not share the social and cultural capital of the school and community (Goodall 2013; Kim 2009). Such barriers, including language, ethnicity, low parental educational attainment, and socio-economic status, can also work to obscure the parents' engagement with their

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children's learning if it is unfamiliar to the school (Goodall 2013; Kim 2009). Evidence suggests that vulnerable families would benefit from services that build social capital by facilitating access to information about the available options and appropriate support and advice (Grayson 2013). Building parents' confidence in themselves is integral to children's learning; a parent's sense of self-efficacy and belief in their ability to help their children's learning is central to whether or not they engage in their children's schooling (Emerson et al 2012).

WHAT SEEMS TO BE WORKING?

Specifically focusing on building parents' expectations of their children and creating positive attitudes towards education and schools can help address transmission mechanisms between socio-economic and adverse circumstances and low educational attainment (Goodman and Gregg 2010). Informal opportunities for communication and contact between parents and school can help build fruitful relationships, particularly when school leaders are perceived to display openness and an appreciation for different socio-cultural home lives (Campbell 2011). **Helping to supply learning resources and support materials can help pupils in vulnerable families to meet academic and life challenges (Griffiths 2012; Altschul 2011; Jewitt and Parashart 2011).** By working with the local authority or other community partners to provide resources such as books, computers and internet access, or mathematics games and supplies, schools can make a material impact on closing the attainment gap (Jewitt and Parashart 2011; Goodman and Gregg 2010).

Where possible, the employment of additional staff, such as a youth worker liaison or parental support advisor, to carry out welfare and support work connected to family engagement can make a large difference (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). Home-school liaison officers are good for targeted contact with 'hard to reach' or 'under-served' families, especially when there are limited language or literacy skills in the family (Emerson et al 2012). Sometimes the involvement of community members, such as retired elders, in a volunteering role can also improve the learning capacity of pupils (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010).

Creating physical spaces in which to conduct interventions, services, or interactions outside of the school may soften any existing negative associations parents may have with education and allow a less hierarchical relationship to develop (Blackmore and Hutchinson 2010). However, local context is important. Running a programme out of a school can be a successful engagement option as well, especially when service take-up by referred or targeted families might be made more visible when in a community space (Sylva et al 2008). **Targeting projects at the transition period, both pre-school to primary and primary to secondary, can demonstrate significant benefits for low-income families (Harris and Goodall 2009).** Evidence shows a strong relationship between social exclusion and truancy, and between truancy and low academic attainment, so

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supporting low-income families at critical transition points in their schooling can be a powerful intervention (Goodall 2013; Harris and Goodall 2009).

Activities and events that allow parents to see their children in the school setting can help parents better understand their children's education (Campbell 2011). Strategies such as 'drop-in' workshops, 'stay and play' sessions, or 'come and see my best work' all contribute to building a parent's positive association with school, both on a personal level and the level of their child's accomplishments (Campbell 2011).

Family learning opportunities, from after-school clubs to parent-child homework sessions, can engage vulnerable families in their children's education while building both parents' and pupils' learning capacities (Campbell 2011). Poor literacy is an intergenerational phenomenon (Swain et al 2009), and children of parents who have the poorest grasp of literacy and numeracy are at substantial disadvantage in relation to their own reading and maths development compared to children who have parents with good literacy and numeracy (DCSF 2008). Programmes focusing on family learning should also incorporate a digital technology element, as being able to engage with the digital 'participatory culture' is crucial to wider participation in current society – without the skills and attitudes to do so, vulnerable families may find themselves further disadvantaged (Grant 2009).

WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

A study examining the differential experiences of parents from different social class backgrounds and their use of technology in the home for learning found that parents with no home internet access tended to talk more about the stresses and anxieties of finding convenient and sustainable internet access for their children (Hollingworth et al 2011). In contrast, families with broadband access talked often, extensively, and positively about their child's learning with technology (Hollingworth et al 2011). A lack of PC and internet access presented particular difficulties for children's schoolwork, and if their strategies to provide access fail (e.g. not logging enough hours on a school's online learning platform), the child may be threatened with disciplinary action (Hollingworth et al 2011).

A UK-based intervention study assessing the impact of family literacy programmes looked at both short courses (30-49 hours) and standard (72-96). 56% of parents achieved a qualification on short courses and 71% achieved a qualification on a standard course (Swain et al 2009). Following on from that impact, 65% of all 583 participating parents reported that the family literacy courses led them to be more involved in their child's pre-school or primary school (Swain et al 2009).

One UK secondary school put concerted effort into engaging its more vulnerable parents through judicious and sensitive use of email, meetings, telephone calls and letters, while also ensuring sympathetic and quick communication with parents was

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constant (Ofsted 2011). This successful engagement of parents enabled students in difficult circumstances to stay 'on track' academically and improved their attendance (Ofsted 2011).

Case Study

An English local authority has pockets of multiple deprivations in each of its towns and significant numbers of people in rural areas living with "medium" deprivation. The local authority perceived a low level of aspiration and engagement with children's learning among some parents, and in 2009 consulted them about their needs to inform the development of its Parenting and Family Support Strategy. Parents reported difficulty in accessing advice and support services. This problem influenced the development of the Parent Support Workers (PSW) project.

PSWs receive an initial induction programme and ongoing CPD opportunities. Their role involves responding to early indications that children and families could benefit from additional help. The focus is on prevention and early intervention activities, where presenting needs are below the thresholds that trigger the involvement of specialist services and other agencies. Each Parent Support Worker provides parenting support courses and classes and one-to-one parenting support for parents across a cluster of primary and/or secondary schools. Where a need for outside help is identified, the Parent Support Worker provides signposting and access to the relevant specialist services.

73% of referrals to the project come directly from schools, with the main reasons for initial referral being non-attendance at school, child behaviour, and parenting skills.

The project defined its anticipated outcomes:

- improving the engagement of parents and carers with schools
- increasing multi-agency family support work
- supporting learning at home
- improving children's settling into school routines
- raising expectations.

Impact analysis was embedded into the development of the new roles from the outset, with outcomes continuously monitored through reflective working and review of practice and service delivery.

An evaluation conducted with parents and carers in 2010 found that 95% were "very satisfied" with the input received from their Parent Support Worker, and the remaining 5% were "satisfied". 96% reported positive change including increased parental confidence, self-esteem and a greater overall understanding of their child; better awareness of available support; and improved child behaviour (Grayson 2013).

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Using these reflective questions will support you to consider your own approach to engaging and supporting children and their families:

- How effectively do we use current available data about levels of poverty in our community to help us target our interventions?
- To what extent do staff understand GIRFEC, the wellbeing indicators and how these can have a positive impact on children and families?

Documents: -

How Good is Our Third Sector (2015)

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Pages/frwk3hgiothirdsector.aspx>

How Good is Our Schools 4 (2015)

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Pages/frwk2hgios.aspx>

How good is the learning and development in our community? (2016)

<https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Pages/frwk4hgiocommunitylearning.aspx>