



# Parental Involvement with Schools & Learning: An Exploration of Five Key Aspects

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### Abstract

This briefing presents research findings related to parental views on the following: their involvement with home learning and homework, parental involvement with school learning and the larger school setting, the transition to secondary school, and parental role needs within the home. Secondly, it presents suggestions from research with regard to the role of schools in supporting parents in each of these areas.

### Keywords

Parental involvement, home learning, homework, school, transition, parenting role

### Background

Parental involvement with schools and learning is widely acknowledged to be an essential cornerstone of children's education, from pre-kindergarten right through secondary school. Increased interest in this topic over recent years from schools, policy makers and the charity sector has spurred a wide range of research in the area, followed by a number of expert reviews of the literature, some explicitly intended to inform government action, as evidenced by the Scottish Government's (2018) 'national action plan on parental involvement'.

This briefing reflects the conclusions of several reviews that have covered the literature relating to parental involvement in home learning, homework, school learning and the larger school setting, as well as general parental roles within the home. More specifically, the briefing presents research findings related to what parents have to say about each aspect, and what schools can do to support parental involvement. An additional aim of the briefing is to provide a basis for guidelines to

increased involvement that will be made available to parents and schools in Leith, Edinburgh.

### Findings and suggestions for further action

#### *1. Parental involvement in home learning and homework*

Parents can participate in their children's learning via normal family activities or more intentional educational activities at home (home learning). This is generally distinct from parental involvement with tasks set by class teachers to be completed at home (homework).

What parents say about home learning:

In a report for the Scottish Executive on improving parental involvement, Russell and Granville (2005) gathered views from a wide sample of Scottish parents. This was particularly significant as the sample included what they termed 'the silent majority' - parents who were less actively involved in school activities. They found that, on the whole, parents did feel that

their support at home for learning was important for their children's academic achievement, although they were less aware of how critical this effect could be.

The authors also found a general willingness in parents to support home learning. Parents mentioned support in the form of providing books and other materials such as kits and games, as well as access to digital media for educational purposes. Parents also used teachable moments at home, exploiting day-to-day activities such as cooking to encourage learning. Further, in some homes, there was felt to be a need to supplement school learning in terms of supporting specific cultural (usually minority) values.

However, parents sometimes felt unable to be more involved in home learning, for example due to time or financial constraints or simply not knowing what to do. In some cases, children's resistance made it difficult to initiate learning activities at home.

What schools can do to foster parental involvement in home learning:

A guidance report from the Education Endowment Foundation (van Poortvliet, Axford and Lloyd, 2018), based on an extensive review of the literature plus a survey of current practice in English schools, encouraged schools to work with parents to capitalise on findings that showed a positive relationship between support at home for learning and academic achievement in school. The report offered a number of evidence-based suggestions for schools, stressing the need for active planning and proactive leadership to get results.

According to the authors, schools first

need to determine, with reference to parental input, where help and support would be most appreciated. Parents should be given practical tips (which could include materials such as 'curiosity kits' as suggested by Russell and Granville, 2005) on how to establish and improve home learning, with individualised support where needed, for instance, in the form of home visits. In general, school resources should be focused on strategies that were found to have the most impact.

In addition, tips for parents should be age-appropriate to be most effective. For younger children the focus should be on reading together and related activities (e.g., question and answers), plus letter and number play. For older children, the value of parental support was related to the management of the child's learning and the development of study skills, as opposed to direct help with subject content, for instance in revision.

What parents say about homework:

Russell and Granville (2005) found that most parents viewed homework as important, and felt a responsibility to supervise and assist at the primary level. However, parents also felt diffident about assisting when they were faced with unfamiliar methods of learning such as phonetics. At secondary level parental involvement tailed off, as subject content seemed to go beyond what parents knew themselves, and some parents also felt that it was now up to the children to manage themselves. Parents also felt it hard to track the homework in terms of what was required and whether it was being completed satisfactorily.

In a countrywide survey of Ofsted's

Parent Panel (Ofsted, 2017) to determine their views on homework, a majority of parents felt that homework in general was 'helpful' for their children, and also allowed the parents to participate in their children's learning. However, it was also felt by some to be a source of stress, for example when the number of tasks was overwhelming, and for children with SEND. Further, parents wanted the homework to be 'meaningful', and for the task requirements to be clear.

What schools can do to foster parental involvement in homework:

Van Poortvliet, Axford and Lloyd (2018) suggested that secondary schools should advise parents that instead of helping with the assignments themselves, it was more beneficial to simply support homework completion and learning. Apart from establishing a routine and helping with time management, parents should be encouraged to find out what homework has been set, and assist in the monitoring of task completion. A large-scale study in English secondary schools (Miller, Davison, Yohanis, Sloan, Gildea and Thurston, 2016) found positive attainment results when schools texted parents to keep them informed about test and homework deadlines.

## **2. Parental involvement in school learning**

This can range from occasional help during sports event or field trips to a more regular commitment, e.g., as a volunteer teacher's aide (Russell and Granville, 2005).

What parents feel:

Russell and Granville (2005) found that while some parents feel it is simply

not their responsibility, many are happy to be involved directly in school learning. Involvement was seemingly more common at primary school level, where there were deemed to be more opportunities.

But the authors also found that parents perceived a number of barriers to being involved. One of the major ones was the necessity to obtain disclosure checks to be able to work with children. Other barriers included time constraints, and for some, the necessity to make alternative provisions for childcare while they were engaged with school work. Further, some parents felt that their presence at school could cause overdependence in their own children (primary age) or resistance (secondary age). Parents were also discouraged by perceptions that teachers wouldn't want parents 'interfering', and in fact, perhaps they had nothing useful to offer the school.

What schools can do to foster parental involvement in school learning:

Russell and Granville (2005) offered a number of suggestions for schools on how to address parental concerns and perceptions of barriers to involvement in school learning. They recommended that schools offer a range of opportunities for parents to be involved in learning, not only within the classroom, but also within the school more generally (e.g., in the library or playground). Schools should be open to occasional or partial commitments from parents, who might find it easier to volunteer once or twice a month, or share a commitment with other parents. Parents should be kept informed about available opportunities, which should also be clearly related to skills that parents may already have. It is also important to clarify which

opportunities would require disclosure checks, and what that would entail.

### **3. Parental involvement in the larger school setting**

Parental involvement in the larger school setting is a way to make parents feel part of the school community in a non-threatening way, e.g., attending a coffee morning at the school. According to Van Poortvliet, Axford and Lloyd (2018), this type of involvement is especially important in establishing and maintaining positive relationships and trust between school and parents, with possible knock-on effects of increasing future parental involvement in children's learning.

What parents say:

Russell and Granville (2005) found that parents valued the chance to be welcomed into the school setting for less formal events such as shows or sports days, using these times to socialise with teachers and other parents. This can be particularly significant for minority or marginalised groups who might already feel isolated in the community, and can therefore have effects beyond the purely pedagogical.

The authors also found that more parents were likely to attend informal events like coffee mornings or fairs/fundraisers than Council or PTA meetings. They were also more likely to attend events when their children were in primary school, when schools were perceived to be more welcoming to parents.

What schools can do to foster parental involvement in the larger school setting:

Russell and Granville (2005) suggested that schools offer more frequent social events and activities such as concerts. Further, if not already a designated 'community school', schools could offer a place for community activities in the evenings or on weekends. Schools could also make particular efforts to reach out to minority or otherwise marginalised parents, for example by providing invitations and information in several languages.

### **4. The transition from primary to secondary/high school**

The transition from primary to secondary school is a significant developmental step for most children, and can be challenging for both families and schools.

What parents say:

In a large-scale School Transition and Adjustment Research Study conducted in England, Rice, Frederickson, Shelton, McManus, Riglin and Ng-Knight (2015) examined transition concerns of parents as well the effects of parenting style on transition. It was found that parental concerns centred around academics (e.g., homework) and peer relationships (e.g., making friends and being bullied), which also reflected the main transition concerns of their children. The study also found that parental warmth was an important factor in transition success, via the effect of warmth on children's self-control, itself a predictor of positive transition.

As part of a longitudinal study in England, Evangelou, Taggart, Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons and Siraj-Blatchford (2008) surveyed over 500 parents of children making the primary to

secondary school transition. Most parents had no problem with the mechanics of transition (e.g., completing application forms, attending preparatory meetings and open-days), but as in the Rice et al (2015) study, had concerns around academics and peer relationships. Additionally, more than half mentioned concerns about the child safety and travel to the new school, as well as the financial cost involved in the transition to secondary school.

What schools can do to enable a smooth transition:

Rice et al (2015) suggested that as parent and child concerns overlapped, parents should be encouraged to share their concerns with their children to make them feel understood and supported. They could also be encouraged to help children with the management of homework demands and deadlines.

Evangelou et al (2008) found better transitions when secondary schools provided a lot of support, for example in helping the new students settle into the new routine and relaxing rules for a while. Parental recommendations in this study for better transitions included increased academic preparation for children in the last year of primary school, as well as more induction activities and opportunities by both primary and secondary schools.

### ***5. Support for parents in parental roles within the home***

Effective parenting in a child's first years has powerful positive effects on cognitive development and language acquisition, both essential for future achievement at school (Axford, Sonthalia, Wrigley,

Goodwin, Ohlson, Bjornstad, Barlow, Schrader-McMillan, Coad and Toft, 2015). Effective parenting is also needed to meet the challenges of late childhood and adolescence. Therefore it would seem to be in every schools' best interests to support the parental role wherever possible.

Parental needs:

Axford et al (2015), in a review of over a hundred early childhood interventions in the UK, found that the overwhelming majority of mothers in their study agreed that early skills are crucial for their children's future. However, when parents wanted help or guidance, around a fifth found it hard to get information.

O'Mara, Jamal, Llewellyn, Lehmann and Cooper (2010) conducted a systematic review of the best evidence relating to support for parents of children and young people over six years of age. They found that important parental needs related to information and advice (e.g., on practical home skills such as cooking, or guidance related to child behaviour) as well as emotional support (e.g., a sympathetic ear). The authors also noted the paucity of information on the concerns of fathers as well as those of parents from minority groups.

What schools can do to support parents:

Support for parents in the parenting role might occur indirectly in a number of ways. For example, support focused on home learning can also help in improving wider aspects of the general parenting role, such as establishing routines within the home. But it is also possible for schools to offer direct and targeted support for the parenting role, for example, through involvement



with formal interventions such as the Incredible Years Parenting Programmes that support parents who have children with behavioural difficulties.

In their review of research, O'Mara et al (2010) found that schools can be effective providers of support to parents by being a convenient one-stop shop for a number of parental services (e.g., health, adult education, welfare). This allows for a sharing of information between component services and a more joined-up provision of support. Service delivery via schools might also ease parental perceptions of stigma associated with the access of specialist programmes. Further, as schools also generally have long-term relationships with students, parents can be tracked and invited back for 'maintenance' sessions.

O'Mara et al also noted that one of most important factors to facilitate parental engagement is that the support service should be highly approachable, especially in terms of being non-judgemental about what parents might feel to be their own inadequacies in the parenting role. Easy access is also important to attract and retain parents, who might prefer evening or weekend contact, for example, or the provision of childcare.

### Limitations

This report has presented only general guidelines and indications for schools in supporting parental involvement. Individual schools would have to do a needs assessment to determine specific action points most relevant to their own parent body.

Further, this briefing did not provide any indication of costing for the suggested school initiatives, which would be a critical factor in implementation.

Lastly, suggestions for schools were limited to addressing the selected 'key aspects'. Space constraints did not allow for the discussion of equally important but more general factors such as establishing effective modes of two-way communication between school and parents, which could have significant positive effects across all the key aspects discussed here.

### Conclusion

This briefing covered five key aspects of parental involvement in schools and learning. It is clear from the expert reviews covering these areas that schools need to work in partnership with parents to achieve the best educational outcome for their children. While the research indicates a range of evidence-based strategies for schools, it is up to the individual schools to determine how best to engage their particular set of parents as partners in the school and learning experience. Luckily, they can draw on the parents themselves for indications of where gaps are perceived in the educational provision, which can help schools decide how best to target their resources.

### Recommendations for schools

*(after van Poortvliet et al, 2018, and Russell and Granville, 2005)*

Schools need to proactively plan for increasing parental involvement, and be prepared to train staff in the

implementation of chosen strategies.

Parental input is vital, especially from the 'silent majority', in order to increase the involvement of all parents.

Upgraded communication (clear, individualised, positive) with parents needs to be a priority to improve all aspects of parental involvement.

Parental contact via workshops, meetings, etc., needs to be genuinely welcoming, and flexible as regards location and time to allow wider participation.

Plan implementation needs to be monitored at all stages in order to evaluate the impact of the interventions. Cost benefit analyses allow for a clearer picture of which programmes should be continued in the future.

The Scottish Executive (Russell and Granville, 2005) provide a number of 'best practice' examples of effective measures implemented by a range of Scottish schools to increase parental involvement, which could serve as immediately accessible guides for action.



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