Effective parental engagement
A handbook for schools
Foreword

United Learning schools are incredibly effective places, with everyone working their hardest towards achieving the best outcome for every child. But children spend more of their lives out of our schools than inside them, and research has shown that their parents are the most powerful influence on their learning at home. This handbook brings together a summary of the academic research in this area with a detailed look at what various United Learning schools are doing to create and support effective parental engagement in learning. All of us leading schools should reflect on how to best build partnership with parents, and whether altering how we do things might bring about positive changes to learning. This handbook is designed to facilitate that thinking. We hope you find it useful.

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Parental Engagement: what does the evidence tell us?

There is a well-established body of evidence that illustrates the powerful impact parent engagement has on a child’s education, aspirations and, ultimately, on their outcomes. The effect is greater than schooling itself and there are very few factors that have more impact and which are open to our influence (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

This handbook summarises a review of current literature and research, and provides a summary on how powerful parental engagement can be as a lever for improving outcomes. It also outlines, through the case studies that follow, how we can change the way we are working with parents to target the types of activities that make the most difference.

Definition of terms

Across the research and literature the term ‘parental engagement’ is often used interchangeably with ‘parental involvement’, obfuscating the meaning between the two. A number of researchers take care to distinguish a difference to ensure that the right kinds of activities are being targeted for the greatest impact. We have followed their lead throughout this handbook.

We have applied the following definitions:

By ‘parental engagement’ we mean meaningful engagement in their child’s education, including engagement in learning at home, e.g. encouragement, support, reading with their children, parent-child discussions, and making explicit how much they value education through their own behaviour and modelling.

By ‘parental involvement’, we mean involvement in school-based activities, e.g. attending parents’ evenings, reading at school, helping the teacher, sitting on governing bodies and participating in school events such as summer fairs.

We have also used the term ‘parents’ throughout for simplicity and clarity. ‘Parents’ should be read as indicating all forms of parental responsibility, including that of carers.
What the evidence tells us

The impact of parental engagement

Parental engagement in their child’s education is repeatedly found to be one of the most effective levers we have to improve outcomes for all students.

The most recent literature reviews undertaken in England summarise this vividly:

“The more parents are engaged in the education of their children, the more likely their children are to succeed in the education system. School improvement and school effectiveness research consistently shows that parental engagement is one of the key factors in securing higher student achievement. Schools that improve and sustain improvement engage the community and build strong links with parents” (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

“Research consistently shows that what parents do with their children at home through the age range, is much more significant than any other factor open to educational influence” (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

The impact of parental engagement diminishes and changes shape with a child’s age, the evidence however, suggests that this effect is only relative, with parental engagement remaining a strong influence on children and adolescents. It is never too late for a child to benefit from their parent’s engagement (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

While the likelihood of parental engagement is related to, and in some circumstances diminished by, social class, ethnicity, maternal education levels and material deprivation, when these factors are accounted for, it still has a positive effect (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). As one study, of many, found, “high levels of parental expectation, consistent encouragement and actions to enhance learning opportunities in the home were all positively associated with students’ high aspirations and college enrolments – this regardless of students’ SES or ethnic background.” (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Essentially, it is what a parent does with their child, rather than who they are, that makes the difference (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011).

In contrast, across the research it is repeatedly found that activities played out in the school, for instance a parent helping their child’s teacher with reading at school, sitting on a governing body, or joining a class outing, have no impact on student outcomes. These are, of course, all enjoyable and important activities that are helpful in making families feel part of a school’s community (and which can ultimately lead to engagement); they don’t, however, have any evidenced impact on outcomes (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

While research into the impact parental engagement has on outcomes is now well established, research into specific interventions has been reported as technically weak making it difficult to draw any concrete conclusions about how to specifically maximise and enhance parental engagement (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). What the research helpfully points to though, are some shared key practices that schools who are successful in engaging a diverse range of families employ.

The impact of parental engagement on younger and older children

Parental engagement and involvement naturally changes as a child gets older. While its impact is greatest in a child’s early years and during primary school, older children continue to benefit enormously from their parent’s engagement throughout secondary school too.

Parental engagement in the early years and during primary school has its largest impact on the development of literacy and language skills, habits needed for learning, and the ability to organise and communicate thoughts and experiences (OECD, 2012). The types of engagement that have the most impact on the development of these skills are parents listening to their children reading, being taught the skills to teach their children to read, putting words into context through songs and lullabies (instead of games that keep words in isolation), and parents taking a genuine interest in and asking about their child’s days and experiences (Harris and Goodall, 2007; OECD, 2012).

The impact of parental engagement while weaker in secondary school is no less important. The research suggests that while parental engagement in primary school has more impact than school composition, the inverse is true in secondary (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Engagement does however, still have an impact, but rather than this being on the acquisition of skills and measured achievement, it is “more evident in staying on rates and educational aspirations” (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Parents can have the most impact in secondary school by continuing to take an interest in their children’s education and their aspirations, discussing current affairs, films and books with them, and encouraging and supporting them to complete
assignments and homework (rather than necessarily doing this with them) – essentially, activities that promote, independence, time management, and critical thinking skills (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; OECD, 2012).

It is well known that engagement during the primary school years is far more common than in secondary school where this can diminish significantly. The reasons for this are well documented and include, secondary schools being large, and complex places, there being multiple teachers with whom to build relationships, and the content becoming more difficult leaving parents often feeling ill-equipped to help. A study which explored the reasons why parents struggled to engage in secondary found the latter the most frequently cited reason (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

While subject knowledge is a major barrier for many parents during their child’s secondary years, the evidence suggests this is by no means a pre-requisite for engagement – all that is needed is a genuine interest in their child’s education, experiences and aspirations, and the provision of ongoing support and encouragement (OECD, 2012; EEF, 2018). It is also this support that young people value the most, far more than activities that take place in the school, such as their parents attending parents’ evenings and responding to school correspondence (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Moving from parental involvement to parental engagement

The research highlights the many different forms parental involvement and engagement can take. This is often broken into two categories, as noted above. The first is parental ‘involvement’ which takes place in the school and most often entails activities that are led and controlled by the school. The second is parental ‘engagement’ in learning and supporting a child’s aspirations, most of which takes place in the home.

As mentioned earlier, the research is definitive that “parental involvement acted out in the school confers little or no benefit on the individual child. This is a strong finding. It is replicated extensively in the research” (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Activities that generally fall into this category are helping on school trips, reading at school, being on the school governing body, attending parents’ evenings or generally being present at the school for various events and activities. Despite this, it is often ‘involvement’ that we look for to determine whether parents are engaged with their child’s education. The literature suggests this is problematic for several reason.

Firstly, parents can be highly engaged in their child’s education without necessarily being visible at the school, “engagement with children’s learning may not equate to – and should not be judged on the bases of – [involvement] with the school. Many parents – particularly those from ethnic minorities or those facing economic challenge, find [involvement] with schools difficult, but still have a strong desire to be involved in their children’s learning and education” (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). Using presence in the school as the only measure for engagement reduces how we define this and can limit where efforts are targeted.

While involvement with school is an important first step in providing a conduit between the home and school, it shouldn’t be treated as the end point. When parents do come into the school the most impactful use of time is to influence learning in the home and to offer support and guidance to parents on how to support their child’s learning. Equally, interactions between the home and school should be with the aim of building a trusting and equal relationship that makes parents feel like active stakeholders and contributors to their child’s education. Too often interactions between the two parties are school owned and controlled, leaving parents as passive recipients of information who are constantly having to ‘fit in’ with the school’s agenda and timetable (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Schools that have the most developed and effective relationships with parents have managed to establish trust and respect through the joint ownership of the child’s education. They are also those that focus interactions with parents on supporting learning.

A helpful illustration of shared ownership is shown below and highlights how a school can move from single ownership and school controlled activities to a model of shared responsibility and ownership. These ideas are explored further in the case studies that follow.

Barriers to engagement

Within any school there is a spectrum of how involved and engaged parents are in their children’s education, from those who are heavily engaged at home and at school, to those who show little or no engagement in either setting.

There are a range of well-known reasons why parents don’t involve themselves in education from material, through to psychological barriers. Material barriers most often include time, money and logistics, with parents unable to attend school-based
Psychological barriers are inevitably harder to overcome and are far more enduring. They can often be linked to feelings of inadequacy among parents and uncertainty in how best to support learning. While the research does not conclusively suggest ways for schools to support parents to overcome these barriers, the common characteristics of successful strategies that are outlined in the ‘whole school strategy’ case study are a helpful starting point. These include establishing what it is parents would find most useful to be able to support, identifying mutual priorities between the school and home, and evaluating what has worked and what hasn’t to continually improve home-school links (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Alongside this, tenacity on the part of the school and a tailored approach for those families who need it, is also referenced in the research. An Ofsted study supported this following a review of 47 schools, concluding that, "schools that were the most successful in relating to all parents believed that no parent was unreachable. They were very persistent when they needed to be. Sensitive telephone calls, visits to homes or meetings held at neutral non-threatening locations, such as community centres or supermarkets, often helped to make positive connection" (2011).

The importance of a whole-school strategy for parental engagement

Whilst the current research base does not provide any clear conclusions on which specific interventions work to enhance parental engagement, it does point to the principles and characteristics of strategies that schools successful in engaging families from a range of backgrounds have employed.

Common to schools that have been successful in engaging a diverse range of families in education is a focus on building trusting and collaborative relationships between parents and
Small scale studies have suggested that sharing this kind of information can have an impact in different ways. This has included increasing the completion rates of homework, and, findings from a recent EEF study showed small reductions in absenteeism and a small impact on mathematics attainment as a result of increasing the amount of information that parents receive (EEF, 2018).

With developments in digital technology, schools are now well positioned to share even more information of this kind with parents. This brings with it several benefits including parents being able to access real time information about their child and provides the opportunity for them to generally know more about their child’s experience at school and their learning. It also allows schools to share information in a cost effective, timely and flexible way.

Even with the best intentions though, communication between the school and home (whether through text messages or in more traditional formats), “can be a source of tensions and frustrations for both parents and school staff. These tensions and frustrations can be traced to the frequency, timing and effectiveness of communication initiatives” (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

While administrative information shared by the school is important, it should by no means be treated as the end point in a school’s communication with parents. Instead, it should be a platform from which to build a more meaningful relationship between parents and teachers (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Parents also need to have their own channels through which they can communicate and share information with the school, otherwise, they are merely recipients of information rather than contributors. If parents do share information, they need to be confident that in doing so, it will be valued and acted on. This latter point particularly, plays an important role in developing a fuller picture of a student’s learning for the school and, when information from both parties is valued by the other, it has the ability to create much greater trust between the home and the school (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). The most effective partnership is built when both parties feel valued and listened to and where there are no power dynamics present.

Developing effective home and school links through communication

In its simplest form, communication between the school and home is most often school-instigated and contains information about the curriculum, homework, assignments and overall progress. This type of information provides parents with a snapshot of their child’s experience and progress at school.

The research also touches on the extent to which teachers feel equipped to work with parents. This is an area where teachers often lack confidence, particularly when working with families from backgrounds different to their own. Despite this, there is often the assumption that teachers are well equipped for this and that they feel comfortable doing so. Inevitably, as a result, little to no training is provided, even to young and inexperienced teachers new to the profession and with no parenting experience of their own (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). A recent survey found that only 28% of school leaders reported that they provided staff with any training on how to engage parents or that they even had a plan for how they wanted staff to work with parents (EEF, 2018).

Where there is the most success the Headteacher ensures the strategy is understood and embedded across the school, that staff are trained and there is a shared set of expectations.
Supporting learning at home

Above we outlined the different types of activities or engagement that the research suggests make the most difference to younger and older children, all of which take place in the home. Parental engagement in their child’s education is repeatedly found to be one of the most effective levers we have to improve outcomes for all students. While this changes shape as children get older, they continue to benefit enormously from their parent’s engagement throughout the age range.

While the research does not offer specific interventions for how to bring about greater engagement in learning in the home, conclusions from a collection of successful small scale studies offer ideas for schools to consider.

Among these is the finding that parents’ self-perception, specifically the extent to which they feel able to support in their child’s learning, plays a significant part in their level of engagement. The research suggests that parents are more likely to engage when they “perceive a direct positive impact on their child as a consequence of their involvement” (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2010). They are also more likely to support with learning “when they feel that they have the opportunities, skills and knowledge required to help their child” (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Across several studies it was found that in order to most effectively help parents to support learning, specific, detailed and directive information is needed, rather than general information. Parents need to know what it is they are expected to or can do with their children to help. It shouldn’t be assumed that they know this intuitively. In a 2010 BECTA study of 2000 parents, 81% of parents reported that they would welcome more guidance on how to support their child’s learning in the home and 79% of children reported that they wanted their parents to know more about what they were learning at school so that they were able to support them at home.

Alongside specific guidance, parents should also be reassured that subject expertise – particularly at secondary –is not a prerequisite for effectively supporting their child. Rather than direct involvement in the academic content their child is learning, engagement and interest can very usefully be directed towards ensuring there is a routine around homework, study and school work generally, and that time is set aside for this, rewarded and praised. It is this that can “promote the self-regulation in children necessary to achieve academic goals including goal-setting, planning, perseverance, and the management of time, materials, attentiveness and emotions” (EEF, 2018).

Formal opportunities for engagement – parents’ evenings, transition and school reports

Parents’ evening, transition days and written reports all have an important place in the school calendar. They provide opportunities for parents to find out more about their child and their school, and for teachers and parents to engage with one another. While the research acknowledges these activities as having a place in school life it is critical of the form they most often take, suggesting that they can be a source of frustration for both parties, and a means of exacerbating the barriers (particularly psychological ones) that some families face to engagement.

Parents’ evenings are the most drawn upon example in the literature, the commentary for which can also be applied to transition days and school reports.

A key frustration for both parties is often caused by time. For schools these events are collectively hugely time intensive, with, overall, relatively little gain. The parents most needed for discussions often don’t attend, for a range of reasons, and the short slot allocated to each student provides little scope to have a meaningful discussion with any parent. Due to time pressures there is often “little conversation beyond instructions: parents may have the opportunity to say little other than ‘hello’ and ‘thank you’” (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014) and the information shared is often delivered in a formulaic way. For parents, there are limited opportunities to ask questions or probe for more information and even less time for them to share their views and concerns.

This environment is counter-productive for building trusting relationships between parents and the school and as one study summarised, “there [is] not so much as marked antipathy (between parents and teachers), as mutual fear” during parents’ evenings (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). These events are largely school controlled and owned, played out with little to no adaptation year-on-year, and position parents on the receiving end of information, rather than as key contributors. They are the extrusion of the factory model of education into the sphere of stakeholder-management, and it seems that both parties realise this.

Schools are increasingly adopting alternative models to ensure that parents are more actively involved in discussions about their child’s learning. To allow for this, more time is inevitably required but with this, more information can be given to parents beyond just academic performance. Crucially also, information can be given by parents to the school about their child’s life, experiences and learning outside of school (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Conclusion

There is a strong body of evidence that shows the impact of parental engagement on student outcomes — this being firmly linked to the ‘voluntary acts’ of good parenting and support. While there is much less evidence about the specific interventions that can bring this about, the research does point to different practices and principles that schools can employ. These are covered and developed further in the case studies that follow and are complemented and exemplified in the practice we have seen in United Learning schools.
Bibliography


Barriers to engagement

What are the issues?

Schools have for many years grappled with the issue that some parents appear disconnected from their child’s school life and their education. These parents are euphemistically labelled ‘hard to reach’, but it is not really reaching them that is the issue, it is getting them to reciprocate.

There will undoubtedly be many reasons for such non-engagement, which may include lack of time, low trust, anti-authority feelings, a poor personal experience (and resulting anxiety/ fear) of school, and weak literacy, organisational or social skills. These should not be conflated with neglect of the child nor interpreted as a rejection of the school’s work, merely the projection of the parent’s psychological, educational or organisational state.

Judgements about a parent’s engagement are unavoidably filtered through our perspectives, from the viewpoint of our adequately paid jobs, stable lives, and as successful products of the educational system in which we work. We value schools and naturally find it hard to empathise with those who appear not to. This isn’t to say that unengaged parents do not need to be challenged and supported to become more involved in their child’s education, just that approaching this from a position of cultural imperialism is likely to further alienate them.

What does the evidence tell us?

Within any school there is a spectrum of how involved and engaged parents are in their children’s education, from those who are heavily engaged at home and at school, to those who show little or no engagement in either setting.

There is a range of well-known reasons why parents don’t involve themselves in education from material, through to psychological barriers. Material barriers most often include time, money and logistics with parents unable to attend school-based events due to work or childcare commitments, or because of the travel involved to the school. Psychological barriers most frequently
cited in the literature are parents not feeling confident to support with homework or assignments due to being intimidated by the difficulty of what their child is learning, finding the school an overwhelming place, and/or not wanting to engage with it due to their own negative experiences in education.

There are of course relatively simple ways to overcome the material barriers that parents face, these being greater flexibility around the timings of events and where they are held, for instance, this not always being at the school but in locations that provide more flexibility for parents, e.g. at community rooms in local supermarkets. While such arrangements require more from the school, changes such as these can go a long way towards working effectively with parents. While material barriers may impact on a parent’s involvement with the school, they do not necessarily impact on how engaged a parent is at home. The literature suggests that it can be unhelpful to conflate the two as a lack of ‘presence’ is not always a sign of a lack of engagement (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Psychological barriers are inevitably harder to overcome and are far more enduring. They can often be linked to feelings of inadequacy among parents and uncertainty in how best to support learning. While the research does not conclusively suggest ways for schools to support parents to overcome these barriers, the common characteristics of successful strategies that are outlined in the ‘whole school strategy’ case study are a helpful starting point. These include establishing what it is parents would find most useful to be able to support, identifying mutual priorities between the school and home, and evaluating what has worked and what hasn’t to continually improve home-school links (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Alongside this, tenacity on the part of the school and a tailored approach for those families who need it, is also referenced in the research. An Ofsted study supported this following a review of 47 schools, concluding that, “Schools that were the most successful in relating to all parents believed that no parent was unreachable. They were very persistent when they needed to be. Sensitive telephone calls, visits to homes or meetings held at neutral non-threatening locations, such as community centres or supermarkets, often helped to make positive connection” (2011).

What can be done about it?

Simply put, traditional methods of communication have a limited effect with some parents and carers, and schools can ill-afford to personally reach out to more than a small minority. If we accept that parental involvement in our pupils’ education is a pre-requisite for success, alternatives must be explored.

As mentioned already, the research offers some broad principles to apply in this area. Alongside these, giving parents a range of reasons to engage with the school can build a base of trust and familiarity on which partnership is more likely to be established.

There are multiple examples of schools using language-learning, sport or social events to entice reluctant parents into the building and help to place them in a better position to engage in the educational work of the school. While these can provide a conduit between the home and the school and the starting point for further engagement, the research is definitive that they do not impact on student attainment and therefore shouldn’t be treated as the end point.

Where literacy skills, confidence or English as an Additional Language are factors, it is possible that digital methods of engagement will succeed where traditional paper methods have failed. Parents with the facility to give permission, make a payment, be updated on their child’s achievements and progress through their mobile phone will potentially:

- be less affected by issues of transference from their own childhood, e.g. the dreaded letter home or report card;
- feel less exposed to their feelings of inadequacy should they need to write on a paper form which is being returned to a teacher;
- be able to use digital translation services where language is a barrier (perhaps built-in to the school’s app) to better comprehend what is being communicated;
- become informed of what their child is doing at school and better equipped to support them, through conversations with their child;
- be more likely to give permission or engage in other required processes if this can be done instantly;
- find it simpler to navigate the school’s systems, particularly if they did not experience them themselves, e.g. by being able to learn about the curriculum or book a parents’ evening appointment.

What are United Learning schools doing in this area?

Primary – Cravenwood Primary Academy

Cravenwood Primary is a school where the vast majority of the student body is from ethnic minority backgrounds and where English is a second language for almost all of the parents. There is a range of barriers – particularly linguistic and cultural – that could affect the extent to which parents are engaged in their children’s education. Parental engagement is a key priority for the school and they work with all families in a range of ways to raise standards.

One way in which they do this is through the full-time Parent Support Advisor, Faiza, who has been employed at the school for 10 years now. A key focus of the role is to work with the school’s most vulnerable children (socially as well as academically), build home-school links, and to support families to overcome any barriers they may face in relation to their child’s education.

As part of the local community, Faiza is able to empathise with
the families’ experiences and barriers in ways other staff cannot. She knows the school’s families well and has built strong relationships with them over several years. From her position at the school gate every morning and afternoon, she follows up if correspondence hasn’t been responded to, encourages parents to attend workshops and classes, and keeps an eye on lateness and attendance to support families where needed.

A great deal of effort is used to engage parents in their child’s learning which predominantly takes the shape of workshops for parents hosted in the school’s ‘family room’. These include English and phonics lessons to support parents in helping their children read, as well as various different workshops based on needs, e.g. oral hygiene and healthy eating. While activities are fundamentally ‘school-led’, the family room provides a neutral and high-status space where parents and the school can work together.

Another key strand of the school’s parental engagement strategy is working very directly with the families of students at risk of not reaching age related standards and who are not engaged in their child’s learning. The Headteacher and SLT took the decision this year to expect more from families in relation to their child’s education and as a result, teachers have become more assertive in directing what learning is taking place in the home. Once priority students are identified, their teachers decide the most effective way for parents to support them, for instance more talking or reading at home.

This firmer approach has also been integrated into parents’ evenings. This has taken the shape of ‘assertive mentoring’ which involves both students and their parents in target setting and creates joint ownership and a shared understanding of what is needed to move to the next stage of learning – and specifically, what needs to happen in the home to support this. A pro forma, which outlines these goals and individual responsibilities, coupled with a joint discussion between the school and parents, has increased the level of accountability placed on parents in relation to their child’s learning.

**Secondary – Accrington Academy**

Nicola Palmer, now Headteacher at The Hyndburn Academy*, describes working with families at Accrington Academy, as ‘the third leg of the partnership’ between the school, students and parents – it is a central part of the work of the school and no effort is too great to support families.

This starts before transition when information is gathered from a student’s primary school, particularly around attendance and what information is known about their home life. All families are invited in to meet one-on-one with Nicola for half an hour with the aim of getting to know the school and for the school to get to know them. It is during these discussions that families have the opportunity to share information about home life and their challenges, should they want to, along with receiving information about the school and its expectations.

For families and parents who may experience barriers to engaging with education and supporting their children, transition to Accrington is treated as a fresh start and an opportunity to enter into partnership with the school.

Thanking parents is a key part of working with families. If at transition it is agreed that attendance and lateness are going to be tackled together, and this happens, Nicola sends flowers to parents to thank them or invites them in for afternoon tea.

Beyond transition, contact with parents is always direct and personal – written into all of the school’s policies is direct contact with parents by phone or in person. Written messages are rarely sent home so that the school has an ongoing dialogue and conversation with parents, reducing the potential for misinterpretation.

Even for the most disengaged families or those most affected by psychological barriers to engagement, this dialogue and the small act of saying thank you, go a long way to building trust between the home and school and to change the tone of the relationship for families who may have only ever received negative messages from school.

The school’s work engaging all parents in learning is explored further in the ‘supporting learning at home’ case study which includes information on their ‘Purple Pen’ initiative. This provides parents with the opportunity to mark and comment on their children’s work giving them greater exposure to what their children are learning.

*This example is based on the work Nicola did at Accrington Academy where she was the Vice Principal. She is now transferring these practices to The Hyndburn Academy.*

### How can technology help with this?

There are many products which offer a combination of helpful functionalities to break down barriers and which schools in the Group are using with success, including ‘Show My Homework’ (recently rebranded ‘Satchel!’), Class Dojo, the paid-for version of the SIMS parent app and MyEd. Booking systems allow parents to manage their schedules for parent’s evenings, and for schools to intervene earlier where there is a lack of engagement. We have also seen an example of CPOMs being utilised as a mechanism for monitoring and managing a school’s communication with parents (see the ‘developing home and school links through communication’ case study). Similarly, school apps and texting systems (Groupcall Messenger is popular) have made access to information and targeted messaging much more effective and efficient. United Learning’s School Information app is also under development, currently being piloted in four schools with plans to develop MIS-linked messaging functionality in Autumn 2019.
Developing a whole-school strategy on parental engagement

What does the evidence tell us?

Whilst the current research base does not provide any clear conclusions on which specific interventions work to enhance parental engagement, it does point to the principles and characteristics of strategies that schools successful in engaging families from a range of backgrounds have employed.

Common to schools that have been successful in engaging a diverse range of families in education are a focus on building trusting and collaborative relationships between parents and teachers, a recognition of the different needs among all families, and a persistent belief that no families are unreachable. More specifically, the research also draws out the following characteristics (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003):

1. **Parental engagement is treated as a whole school strategy – not as bolt-on activities.** Where there is the most success, the Headteacher leads and champions the strategy and the importance of parental engagement. All staff are expected to own and implement the strategy and this is embedded throughout the school across all policies and practice.

2. **The strategy is based on a comprehensive needs analysis which includes input from parents.** Rather than the school single-handedly writing and owning the strategy, the most successful are those that seek input from parents to define what is needed, what they would value, and what the barriers are to their engagement. The strategy is developed based on this and owned by both the school and parents. Through this shared process, mutual priorities are identified.

3. **Engagement with parents is focused on students’ learning.** While activities and events that bring parents into the school grounds are an important part of school and community life, the most successful strategies are those that concentrate on supporting parents with their child’s learning.

4. **There are regular reviews which involve parents.** These are used to determine what is and isn’t working and build on what is successful.
The research also touches on the extent to which teachers feel equipped to work with parents. This is an area where teachers often lack confidence, particularly when working with families from backgrounds different to their own. Despite this, there is often the assumption that teachers are well equipped for this and that they feel comfortable doing so. Inevitably, as a result, little to no training is provided, even to young and inexperienced teachers new to the profession and with no parenting experience of their own (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2011). A recent survey found that only 28% of school leaders reported that they provided staff with any training on how to engage parents or that they even had a plan for how they wanted staff to work with parents (EEF, 2018).

Where there is the most success the Headteacher ensures the strategy is understood and embedded across the school, that staff are trained and there is a shared set of expectations. On the following pages we provide a series of questions and a possible template as a starting point for developing a parental engagement strategy.

**What are United Learning schools doing in this area?**

**Primary – Cravenwood**

The work with families and parents at Cravenwood is an example of a whole school strategy that covers the features outlined in the above. At the very heart of their strategy is children’s learning and wellbeing and it is around this that any work with parents, whether that be workshops, courses or activities, is based. This includes being directive about what learning and support needs to take place in the home, particularly for those students not on track to reach age related expectations.

One key characteristic of the school’s strategy is the extent to which it is based on a needs analysis and takes account of what has worked in the past. Parents are asked what they need or would find the most useful to support their children’s learning and this is coupled with the Parent Liaison Officer’s own observations and assessments.

This has led to the delivery of workshops on oral and personal hygiene, classes to improve digital skills (at the request of parents), and the ongoing delivery of phonics and English classes to support children’s reading at home. It has also led to sensitive conversations about culturally specific issues, for instance, highlighting the importance of routines for children such as a consistent bedtime despite family visitors late in the evening, and supporting directly with the challenges associated with being in a new country culturally different to one’s country of birth.

Teachers also specifically target the students and families in most need of support and are increasingly directive about the types of activities that are taking place in the home – particularly for the children not on track to reach age related expectations.

Through ‘assertive mentoring’ parents and students set and discuss targets together with their teacher and collectively agree what is needed in order move to the next stage of learning. Joint ownership and responsibility is established between all parties. The Headteacher and SLT have developed and led this approach with clear guidance to and expectations of teachers.

**Possible questions to cover when developing a whole-school strategy on parental engagement**

- Based on our consultation with parents, what are the main areas that they would like further support with in relation to their children’s learning?
- Based on our own observations and knowledge of the school’s families, what are the main areas that we think parents need further support with in relation to their children’s learning?
- Which of these are whole school and which are subject specific – and therefore who are the logical owners?
- What is our strategy/plan for putting this support in place? Do we have a good enough understanding of our families’ needs to put together a clear plan?
- Who are the owners for each area of our plan and are they clear on what is required of them?
- What is the timeframe for putting this plan and support in place, and are the owners aware of this?
- Is this plan sufficient for all families or are there some that require more or tailored support; if so, what else is needed?
- Does this plan take account of the barriers families might face?
- Does this plan focus on learning (particularly in the home) or is it too focused on bringing parents into the school for activities unrelated to learning?
- For every activity that brings parents into school, can we create an element about learning?
- Have we shared this plan back with parents?
- Have we shared this plan with all staff to ensure that they understand our school approach to supporting parents?
- Do staff need training to ensure they are confident to support and work with parents (should this be delivered to all staff or just new staff?)
- What governance do we have in place for monitoring (and are parents included in this)?
- Do we have review points in place to establish what is working and what isn’t?
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Developing effective home and school links through communication

What has this looked like traditionally?

Regular, useful and relevant communication between school and parents can be considered the lubricant keeping the engine of partnership running smoothly. Well-informed, consulted and enfranchised parents will naturally be more closely aligned with the work of the organisation. Schools use many methods to achieve this:

- termly newsletters comprising a summary of events past and future;
- general letters home in bags giving information on specific events/ requesting parental support or permission to participate;
- homework diaries containing (the child’s) records of the homework set, as well as comments about homework completion, punctuality, uniform or behaviour;

- social media, which tends to be a positive stream of news, photos and pupil success stories — this is often as much about marketing as about informing parents;
- school apps and texting systems which are generally aimed at informing the parent body about specific messages the school needs them to know, e.g. upcoming events and school closures;
- calls and postcards home in recognition of something positive a child has done.

What are the perceived limitations of these methods?

It is worth considering the limitations of these methods:

- communications never actually reach the parent, e.g. letters stay in bags. This leads to parents not being engaged, whilst giving the school the illusion that communication has taken place;
EAL parents are hard to cater for in non-digital formats leading to alienation rather than engagement;

- personalised contact creates significant workload for teachers and therefore does not scale;
- communication can be a one-way conversation, with the school giving information to parents but with no opportunity for them to send information back. This limits the opportunity to check understanding or to take feedback, and perpetuates a situation where parents are kept on the fringes of their child’s education;
- limited ability to build a real relationship – it is often institution-to-customer communication and can feel depersonalised and generic;
- communication tends towards informational rather than educational content, e.g. term dates rather than learning targets.

**What does the evidence tell us?**

In its simplest form, communication between the school and home is most often school-instigated and contains information about the curriculum, homework, assignments and overall progress. This type of information provides parents with a snapshot of their child’s experience and progress at school.

Small scale studies have suggested that sharing this kind of information can have an impact in different ways. This has included increasing the completion rates of homework, and, findings from a recent EEF study showed small reductions in absenteeism and a small impact on mathematics attainment as a result of increasing the amount of information that parents receive (EEF, 2018).

With developments in digital technology, schools are now well positioned to share even more information of this kind with parents. This brings with it several benefits including parents being able to access real time information about their child and provides the opportunity for them to generally know more about their child’s experience at school and their learning. It also allows schools to share information in a cost effective, timely and flexible way.

Even with the best intentions though, communication between the school and home (whether through text messages or in more traditional formats), “can be a source of tensions and frustrations for both parents and school staff. These tensions and frustrations can be traced to the frequency, timing and effectiveness of communication initiatives” (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

While administrative information shared by the school is important, it should by no means be treated as the end point in a school’s communication with parents. Instead, it should be treated as a platform from which to build a more meaningful relationship between parents and teachers (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

Parents also need to have their own channels through which they can communicate and share information with the school, otherwise, they are merely recipients of information rather than contributors. If parents do share information, they need to be confident that in doing so, it will be valued and acted on. This latter point particularly, plays an important role in developing a fuller picture of a student’s learning for the school and, when information from both parties is valued by the other, it has the ability to create much greater trust between the home and the school (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014). The most effective partnership is built when both parties feel valued and listened to and where there are no power dynamics present.

**What are United Learning schools doing in this area?**

**Primary – Abbey Hey Primary Academy and Class Dojo**

At Abbey Hey Primary Academy, Class Dojo is the chosen platform for the school and parents to communicate with one another. The Academy uses the platform in three main ways.

Firstly, it has allowed them to have a more positive dialogue with parents. Conscious that there were some parents who predominantly receive negative messages from the school, they wanted to change this. Through Class Dojo, teachers and SLT members are able to award ‘dojos’ (or points) to students for just about anything, from doing well with their reading or writing through to helping others and behaving well during the lunch break. Parents can view what their child has achieved each day and use this as a means to prompt a conversation with them. The platform has also been particularly helpful in sharing information with parents who are more nervous about coming into the school and who would otherwise get much less of this kind of information directly from the child’s teacher.

The school also use the platform to create ‘class stories’. Teachers are able to send quick messages to their parents regarding their class, e.g. a reminder about a school trip the following day or to tell them about something that the class did that week. This limits the need for sending more time-consuming paper newsletters home and through the built in translator messages are accessible to all parents. Perhaps most importantly, Class Dojo provides a mechanism through which parents can be in touch with their child’s teacher directly. This has been particularly helpful for those parents who are not always able to be there for school drop off and pick up or who are nervous about being at the school. The school has also found it useful as a way of diffusing situations when a parent feels particularly frustrated. Parents are now tending to send messages through the platform about an issue they are not happy about which has had the effect of de-escalating situations quickly. Rather than frustrations building overnight, parents are able to get concerns off their chest immediately which has made conversations in person easier and less confrontational.

Overall, the platform has allowed a consistent approach to positive messaging and communication between the school...
and parents to be established across what is a large primary school. This is engaging for students and parents while being low maintenance for teachers.

Secondary – Northampton Academy and CPOMs

CPOMs is a platform used widely by schools, its primary function of course being for the secure storage of child protection data. Northampton Academy however, has extended its function beyond this and now use it across the school as their main mechanism for tracking parental contact and managing their relationship with the Academy’s families.

On taking over as Principal in 2016, Nat Parnell could see that the relationships and trust between the parents and the school were concerning. The school was unresponsive to parental concerns and contact, it didn’t provide them with information in a coherent and consistent way, and upon agreeing actions in conversations with parents, the school consistently failed to deliver on these. As a result, parents felt little faith in the integrity of the Academy as a whole.

Building a partnership with parents and improving the relationship between them and the school was therefore one of Nat’s earliest priorities. Taking CPOMs, he added new categories including ‘parental complaint’ and ‘parent – general correspondence’. Any contact with a parent is put on the system, whether this be a call to reception or a meeting with a parent and their child. The actions required or committed to are logged, assigned a category and are given an owner to take these forward.

Nat and Chris (Deputy Head with responsibility for parents) check CPOMs every single day. Last year they read in the region of 80,000 entries on the system relating to parents and tracked closely those where progress wasn’t being made. As a result they have complete visibility of every interaction the school has with parents and of how teachers and pastoral leaders are interacting with them (what they are committing to and whether they are following through with this). They have successfully systematised their communication with parents and raised expectations of what this looks like across the school, adapting a system already in use to create greater accountability in middle leaders and spearhead the culture of high-integrity that Nat knows is needed to drive parental engagement in education.

While this is obviously a time commitment – although they say this is not as significant as it may seem – the data suggests that complaints have reduced by a third and slowly, but surely, the school’s relationship with parents is changing. The school is increasingly seen as delivering on their word which has developed trust within the community.

Screenshot: CPOMs dashboard
The workload has helped to improve staff retention at the Academies. Another approach the Academies take is to share more rather than less information with parents about what their child is learning. The Academies systematically share with parents a range of information about exams and the curriculum. Subject knowledge organisers cover not just the topics that are being learnt, but the content as well. Parents report that this is extremely helpful to them when supporting homework. The Academies also offer advice and guidance on ‘what to revise’ and ‘how to revise’. Programmes of events are organised by departments targeting Yr 11 students and their parents, whereby weekly evening sessions ostensibly help the children understand themes, common question themes and exam techniques whilst also upskilling parents to support with revision and to understand the detail of what is required to do well in the exam.

Finally, parents are encouraged to visit the Academies whenever they want. While this doesn’t in itself impact on outcomes it has helped to build a greater level of trust and familiarity between teachers and parents – an important foundation for further engagement. Parents are encouraged to come in and ‘catch the school out’ – to see what the Academies look like during a regular day and to raise any concerns if they have them. This open door policy, coupled with specific initiatives such as the Society of Glenmoor and Winton which is aimed at ‘bringing parents and teachers together’, have helped to foster strong links between home and school.

Speaking to one parent directly about their relationship with the school, the overriding feedback was that it has “a culture of treating parents like customers.” They mentioned the personal responsiveness of Stuart and Ben, this being the example that then filters down to all other layers of staff and sets the tone for all of the various but effective communications that take place, e.g. access to timetables and house points, text messages and subject knowledge organisers. The parent also commented that as a result he is much more engaged with his children’s learning at Glenmoor and Winton Academies than he has been at any of their previous schools.
Supporting learning at home

What does the evidence tell us?

Parental engagement in their child’s education is repeatedly found to be one of the most effective levers we have to improve outcomes for all students. While this changes shape as children get older, they continue to benefit enormously from their parent’s engagement throughout the age range.

Parental engagement in the early years and during primary school has its largest impact on the development of literacy and language skills, habits needed for learning, and the ability to organise and communicate thoughts and experiences (OECD, 2012). The types of engagement that have the most impact on the development of these skills are parents listening to their children reading, being taught the skills to teach their children to read, putting words into context through songs and lullabies (instead of games that keep words in isolation), and parents taking a genuine interest in and asking about their child’s days and experiences (Harris and Goodall, 2007; OECD, 2012).

The impact of parental engagement while weaker in secondary school is no less important. The research suggests that while parental engagement in primary school has more impact than school composition, the inverse is true in secondary (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Engagement does however, still have an impact, but rather than this being on the acquisition of skills and measured achievement, it is “more evident in staying on rates and educational aspirations” (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). Parents can have the most impact in secondary by continuing to take an interest in their children’s education and their aspirations, discussing current affairs, films and books with them, encouraging and supporting them to complete assignments and homework (rather than necessarily doing this with them) — essentially, activities that promote, independence, time management, and critical thinking skills.

It is well known that engagement during the primary school years is far more common than in secondary school where this can diminish significantly. The reasons for this are well documented
and include, secondary schools being large, and complex places, there being multiple teachers with whom to build relationships, and the content becoming more difficult leaving parents often feeling ill-equipped to help. A study which explored the reasons why parents struggled to engage during the secondary years found the latter the most frequently cited reason (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

While the research does not offer specific interventions for how to bring about greater engagement in learning in the home, conclusions from a collection of successful small scale studies offer ideas for schools to consider.

Among these is the finding that parents’ self-perception, specifically the extent to which they feel able to support in their child’s learning, plays a significant part in their level of engagement. The research suggests that parents are more likely to engage when they "perceive a direct positive impact on their child as a consequence of their involvement" (Goodall and Vorhaus, 2010). They are also more likely to support with learning "when they feel that they have the opportunities, skills and knowledge required to help their child" (Harris and Goodall, 2007).

Across several studies it was found that in order to most effectively help parents to support learning, specific, detailed and directive information is needed, rather than general information. Parents need to know what it is they are expected to or can do with their children to help. It shouldn’t be assumed that they know this intuitively. In a 2010 BECTA study of 2000 parents, 81% of parents reported that they would welcome more guidance on how to support their child’s learning. The research suggests that a greater level of engagement is often achieved when parents are given this support. Parents were receptive to the programme with feedback including:

"I came into the session feeling anxious. I felt really happy when I left."

"Being inspired by the different things that we can do with our children was great."

"I am really excited to see throughout the weeks what else I learn to make my relationship with my child better."

**What are United Learning schools doing in this area?**

**Primary – Abbey Hey Primary Academy, Parent Gym and Mouse Club**

What is notable about how Abbey Hey works with its parents is the extent to which they focus not just on what happens in school but also on influencing learning in the home. To this end, they run several initiatives to support parents to engage in their child’s learning and to support with developing parenting skills. Some of these are entirely school-led while others are led by external agencies. Two examples that stand out are the school’s use of Parent Gym and Mouse Club.

**Parent Gym**

Parent gym is a parenting skills programme set up by the founder of Mind Gym. The programme is fully funded through Mind Gym and all resources and training are free for schools. Schools put forward a nominee to be trained and to subsequently deliver the programme to their parent body (quality assured by the Parent Gym organisation). The programme entails weekly workshops for parents over six weeks and covers topics including ‘love’, ‘care’, ‘behave’, and ‘discover’. The workshops look at areas such as, how to balance warmth with discipline, how to be consistent with boundaries, and how to communicate effectively. Parents are given tools and techniques to work through with their children each week shaped as ‘missions to complete’ around the different topics.

This is a new programme for Abbey Hey and they have just delivered their first series to a small group of parents. This included a combination of parents already very engaged with their children’s education, but also some who are generally less engaged. Parents were receptive to the programme with feedback including:

"I came into the session feeling anxious. I felt really happy when I left."

"Being inspired by the different things that we can do with our children was great."

"I am really excited to see throughout the weeks what else I learn to make my relationship with my child better."

**Mouse Club**

Mouse Club is a transition programme for parents and their children aimed at preparing for nursery. The programme includes workshops and training for parents alongside games and activities for children. It is largely centred on children helping their toy mouse get ready for nursery. Activities include making play dough to improve fine motor skills, early mark making, and early reading.

While the programme is normally delivered in the lead up to children starting nursery, after speaking to other schools, the staff at Abbey Hey decided to deliver this when children had already settled into nursery in the autumn term. This allowed them to give it a firm push with parents to get them involved. It has now been running successfully at the school for over two years and is held every Friday afternoon for parents and children. Uptake among all parents is high and has remained steady. It has engaged parents who are both more and less involved in their child’s learning.
Secondary – Glenmoor and Winton Academies, parent lectures for GCSE English

Glenmoor and Winton Academies have been running parent lectures for GCSE English for four years now. These were put in place by the Head of English following feedback from parents that they felt unsure how to best support their children with their studies. The main aim of the lectures is to demystify what students are learning and to provide parents with information and tools to be able to support their child at home.

The lectures run over 6-8 weeks in the autumn term, are held on Monday evenings, are sensitively timed to be a little later in the evening allowing parents to get there from work, and are just 45 minutes long. Each week a different topic is covered.

One such session on Macbeth covered:

- An overview of what will be included in the exam and the format and type of questions.
- The historical context and an outline of the play.
- The main themes and characters – including when a student might use each for a different type of exam question.
- Where students often struggle, e.g. ordering of the events in the play.

Ways parents can help their child with their studies, including ensuring they are learning quotes, identifying when to use these across different themes, pointing them in the direction of resources for revision including films that can be followed with the book, and ‘stretch and challenge’ tips such as how to develop a thesis in answer to an exam question.

While the lectures are to a large extent front-led, there are opportunities for parents to ask questions and to speak one-on-one with their child’s teacher at the end of the session. Feedback from the lectures is very positive and they contribute to the extensive breadth of information that parents already receive about learning from the school, as highlighted in the ‘Developing effective home and school links through communication’ case study.

How can technology help with this?

All United Learning students from Year 6 upwards have access to Hegarty Maths and the videos it contains are a useful resource for parents (if they want to upskill/familiarise themselves with new techniques) and could be jointly viewed by parent and child as the starting point for a homework activity.

Many providers of library management software (e.g. Micro Librarian System, now part of Capita) offer additional paid-for eReader services. These tend to be very expensive and reflect the cost of providing traditional hard copies of books rather than passing on the savings which should be associated with digital distribution. There is limited evidence that reading in a digital format has any impact on progress, and less so on parental support for reading development. To date, no enterprise-level option for Kindle has been released outside of the US and the underwhelming RM Books has recently been shuttered. However, many local authority libraries have invested in eReader schemes made available freely to citizens and, where in place, schools should publicise these to parents.
Formal opportunities for engagement with parents – parents’ evenings, school reports and transition

What has this looked like traditionally?

Reporting to parents in writing and through face-to-face meetings is a statutory requirement for schools but the irrefutable mathematics of any mass-education system puts the effectiveness of these processes for building involvement in a child’s learning at risk:

- Parents’ evenings and annual written reports have been part of the English educational landscape for generations and, as such, have become highly ritualised. Their efficacy is often questioned by teachers and parents alike and the effort required to maintain these activities is very high. However, due to their cultural status as pillars of the school year, they remain valuable opportunities to build powerful partnerships between schools and parents.

- Parents’ evenings generally take place out of school hours and follow the format of short appointments with subject teachers (at secondary) or longer appointments covering multiple appointments with class teachers (primary). Appointments vary in length, often in the range of 5 to 15 minutes. The atmosphere can also vary, from buzzy to anxious, as interviews over-run, queues build and difficult issues are raised.

- Written reports are produced once a year, typically, and are complemented by more frequent data-driven reports on attendance and performance. Schools generally make use of systems to reduce the time taken to write reports (some form of digital statement) although many schools still endeavor to write each report individually.

That said, some schools are actively trying to break these conventions and make sure that these activities are learning-led and result in valuable experiences for parents and their children. ‘Academic Review Days’ which offer more time for real discussions and for greater input from the parent and student are becoming more common.

What are the perceived limitations of these methods?

Parents’ evenings:

- In mass events, only a short amount of time can be allowed for each appointment, leading to an inevitable recursion to the mean – most conversations tend to follow a similar
Parents and teachers can find themselves saying almost the same thing to multiple parents. In some cases, the pupil is not present, reducing the impact of feedback given.

Parents experiencing multiple back-to-back negative feedback conversations about their child can feel personally attacked, leading to the erosion rather than the building of partnership. The medium-term effect of this is that the parents who teachers most need to see do not attend future events.

Organisational issues generally require parents to book slots with the teachers they want to see most. Although many schools have a technological solution for this, competition for scarce resources can be an issue, leading to queues or parents who leave without having spoken to certain teachers.

The out-of-hours model produces excessive workload for teachers, particularly those teaching core subjects across multiple year groups. Often the effort required is not perceived to be commensurate with the effort achieved. High effort and low impact.

Annual reports:

- The timelines involved in writing, checking and publishing written reports are considerable, often leading to long lead times (e.g. reports received in April actually being authored in February). This inevitably limits their relevance, impact and actionability by parents.
- The nature of reporting in detail on many tens of pupils can lead the similar problems to those seen at Parents’ Evenings – reports end up being much less ‘individual’ than intended by teachers or demanded by parents. Weak technological systems (e.g. limited statements, inability to personalise) can magnify this.
- The flow of information is all in one direction, with limited opportunity for parents to comment on/respond to targets or advice for their child. The power dynamic thus created is not conducive to the building of partnership.
- The workload associated with report writing is significant, particularly where schools are not using report writing software. Some teachers make use of half-term and Easter holidays for this task, which can be further exacerbated by systems which do not allow staff to work on reports from home. Often the effort required is not perceived to be commensurate with the effect achieved. High effort and low impact!

What does the evidence tell us?

Formal opportunities for engagement – parents’ evenings, transition and school reports

Parents’ evening, transition days and written reports all have an important place in the school calendar. They provide opportunities for parents to find out more about their child and their school, and for teachers and parents to engage with one another. While the research acknowledges these activities as having a place in school life it is critical of the form they most often take, suggesting that they can be a source of frustration for both parties, and a means of exacerbating the barriers (particularly the psychological ones) to parental engagement.

Parents’ evenings are the most drawn upon example in the literature, the commentary for which can also be applied to transition days and school reports.

A key frustration for both parties is often caused by time. For schools these events are collectively hugely time intensive, with, overall, relatively little gain. The parents most needed for discussions often don’t attend, for a range of reasons, and the short slot allocated to each student provides little scope to have a meaningful discussion with any parent. Due to time pressures there is often “little conversation beyond instructions: parents may have the opportunity to say little other than ‘hello’ and ‘thank you’” (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014) and the information shared is often delivered in a formulaic way. For parents, there are limited opportunities to ask questions or probe for more information and even less time for them to share their views and concerns.

This environment is counter-productive for building trusting relationships between parents and the school and as one study summarised, “there [is] not so much as marked antipathy (between parents and teachers), as mutual fear” during parents’ evenings (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003). These events are largely school controlled and owned, played out with little to no adaptation year-on-year, and position parents on the receiving end of information, rather than key contributors. They are the extrusion of the factory model of education into the sphere of stakeholder-management, and it seems that both parties realise this.

Schools are increasingly adopting alternative models to ensure that parents are more actively involved in discussions about their child’s learning. To allow for this, more time is inevitably required but with this, more information can be given to parents beyond just academic performance. Crucially also, information can be given by parents to the school about their child’s life, experiences and learning outside of school (Goodall and Montgomery, 2014).

What are United Learning schools doing in this area?

Secondary – Progress Review Days at Swindon Academy

Swindon Academy is an all-through school serving a traditionally white British population in a deprived area of this Wiltshire town, working in a context where many pupils’ parents and grandparents have themselves been failed by the predecessor schools and have experienced negative and ineffective parents’ evenings. Attendance had previously been low (<60%), with the
missing 40% made up of those families teachers most want to see. The Academy has been using progress review days (PRD) in place of parents’ evenings for seven years now and has evolved a model which creates the space for parents to engage meaningfully in their child’s progress in learning without creating additional workload for teachers.

The basic format of a PRD at Swindon Academy (an all-through school) sees parents and children in all years attend together for around 40-60 minutes at an agreed time between 10am and 7pm, something that is explained as a requirement for the child’s attendance mark to count for that day. Families are greeted by members of support staff and given a pack which contains various pieces of paper, including the child’s latest report, a reflection booklet, and parent survey. With the assistance of a member of teaching staff if needed (which is most common for those who haven’t been through the process before), the parent uses the reflection booklet to structure a ‘learning conversation’ with the child on various aspects of their school life — academic performance, attendance, attitudes and preparedness for learning, extra-curricular involvement all feature. This is both in preparation for the form tutor conversation which follows and also serves to ensure parents have fully engaged with the information in the report and to better equip them to have productive conversations about learning and school with their child in the future. The research is clear about the impact of parental interest in schooling on children’s attitudes and performance.

With this preparation complete, families attend a short (15 minute) meeting with the pupil’s form tutor to go through the reflection booklet, during which time the child is encouraged to identify what is going well, what their targets are and areas for improvement/ of underperformance. The aim is to create accountability, in a supportive conversation which involves rather than merely instructs the parent. Any issues which the form tutor cannot address (probably not being, for example, the child’s English teacher) are recorded in a centralised spreadsheet overseen by the Headteacher and pastoral senior leaders to ensure follow-up. The tone of the meetings observed was conversational, positive and — at their best — three-way exchanges between child, tutor and parent. There was none of the ‘mutual fear’ Desforges describes. The mandatory presence of the child makes this conversation highly effective for setting expectations, creating a united front and changing behaviours.

Teachers were able to contrast the PRDs with their experience of parents’ evenings from other schools in which they had worked and were clear that PRDs were both more effective and less draining. Among the parents spoken to, perceptions of the usefulness of the PRD process were uniformly positive and evidence from the Parent Survey concurs.

PRDs in the primary phase

These more closely reflect a traditional primary parents’ evening. However, all parents are expected to attend with their child. Very high rates of attendance are guaranteed because pupils gain their attendance mark for the day by attending the PRD with their parents. Class teachers use this opportunity to look at books with parents and to enter into a discussion regarding the child’s progress to date and targets for the rest of the academic year. In order to help families, a siblings list is published so that teachers can work together to ensure families get consecutive meeting times for brothers and sisters. The benefit for teachers is that they have more time to meet with families than is the case on a traditional parents’ evening. The day is more relaxed and the quality of the dialogue is stronger.

Other points of note

PRDs take place in January and June, with Y10 and Y11 having subject-focused parents’ evenings in the autumn at teachers’ request. The Headteacher is unconvinced that they deliver impact to match the effort. This links to the slight unease felt by some teachers about holding discussions on subjects about which they had no expert knowledge, despite the mechanism for capturing and addressing these queries. It is perhaps helpful to regard these two activities as fulfilling separate purposes — subject-focused sessions are corrective and academic, PRDs are for building partnership and accountability;

- There is workload created by the PRD process, but it is in the preparation of the packs for parents;
- The (paper) parent surveys are returned as parents leave, and entered into Parent View by admin staff;
- Any parent with whom pastoral staff need to raise a specific concern is informed of this via a sticker on the front of their pack of papers and, in addition, pastoral leaders position themselves in the main thoroughfare with a list of target families and the times they are due to attend;
- Some parents who have been through the process before were observed skipping the ‘learning conversation’ bit to move straight from arrival to interview, and the Academy is considering how to tweak its process to structure this out.

How can technology help with this?

A number of MIS-add-ons exist to at least make these processes more efficient: booking systems such as SchoolBooking.com allow parents to manage their schedules for parents evenings, and for schools to intervene earlier where there is a lack of engagement. Please note that United Learning’s School Information app is also under development, currently being piloted in four schools with plans to develop MIS-linked messaging functionality in 2019.
Nudge advice

Based on our research, we have developed ‘nudges’ — bite-sized pieces of advice that schools can share with parents to raise awareness about what they can do at home in support of their child’s learning. Below are nudges for primary and secondary schools.

Primary nudges

Your role in your child’s education:

“Parents and carers’ interest in their child’s learning has a clear and definite effect on children’s attendance, behaviour and attainment.”


Supporting your child with maths in the early years:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

You can support your child’s maths skills by looking out for numbers on the way to school, such as in signs, licence plates, and on houses.


Supporting your child with maths in the early years:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

You can support your child’s numeracy skills by getting them to add up the items in the trolley while you are doing the shopping.

Some ideas for questions to ask your child:

- Can you count the number of oranges in the trolley?
- Can you count the number of apples?
- How many pieces of fruit do we have?
- We have 4 apples. Should we get 2 more? How many apples do we have now?”

Supporting your child with maths in the early years:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

An effective way to help your child with numbers is to get them to count with their fingers.

One way to do this is:

If you see the number 5, say the number aloud and then using your fingers count out 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

You can look out for numbers with your child on houses or signs or when counting things in the supermarket trolley.

Supporting your child with maths in Key Stage 1:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

An effective way to help your child with numbers is to get them to count with their fingers.

One way to do this is:

If you see a number over 10 use your fingers to count out the numbers aloud. You may need your fingers and your child’s. You could count up to 10 and your child can carry on from there.

You can look out for numbers over 10 with your child on houses or signs or when counting things in the supermarket trolley.

Supporting your child with maths in Key Stage 1:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

You can support your child’s maths skills by doubling the amounts of things when shopping or when getting ready for dinner.

Examples include:

- “I’ve got 5 apples in our trolley. I think we need double these. How many do I need in total?”
- “We need to share this pizza between 2 of us. What do I have to do? Do I need to cut it into 2 equal pieces?”
Supporting your child with maths in Key Stage 2:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

You can support your child’s maths skills by getting them to add up the price of items in the trolley while you are doing the shopping.

Some ideas are asking your child:

- To add up the price of a group of items.
- To estimate the price of a group of items. To do this you can get them to round the prices to the £1 or 10p, - e.g. £3.90 + £2.25 + £1.85 becomes £4 + £2 + £2 = £8 as an estimate.
  - e.g. 38p + 17p + 52p becomes 40p + 20p + 50p


Supporting your child with maths in Key Stage 2:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

You can support your child’s maths skills by doubling the amounts of ingredients in recipes while you are cooking.

One example is:

- “The recipe makes 8 biscuits. I want to double the amount of biscuits and make 16 biscuits. What should we do?
  - The recipe says 2 eggs. How many do I need if we are making 16 biscuits?
  - The recipe says 150 grams of flour. How much do I need now if we are making 16 biscuits?”


Supporting your child with maths:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

You can support your child’s maths skills by asking your child to explain what they are learning or by asking them to teach you something that they are learning.

Supporting your child with maths:

Did you know you don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy?

An effective way to help your child with numbers is to get them to count in 5s and 10s.

- You can use fingers on each hand to count 5s
- You can use both hands to count up in 10s

Supporting your child with maths:

Encouraging your child to count as much as possible is an effective way to help with their numeracy skills. Some ways to do this are:

- When cooking dinner ask your child to count the number of potatoes on each plate. How many are there in total?
- When cooking dinner involve your child in putting food on the plates, “We need 3 carrots on each plate. Have I got 3 carrots on each plate? What is the total number of carrots on all of the plates?” How many eggs are there in the egg box? How many flowers are in the vase?

Supporting your child with their reading:

Asking questions about what your child is reading is a really helpful way to develop their understanding of the ideas in the book and to support their comprehension skills.

You could talk to your child about the links between the book and real life, for example, thinking about whether they have had any experiences that are similar to those of the characters in the book they are reading.


Supporting your child with their reading:

When your child is reading to you a helpful strategy to use when they get to a tricky word is ‘pause, prompt, praise’:

- pause to let your child work out the word they are stuck on;
- prompt them if they need help by giving them a clue or if they are really stuck tell them the answer;
- praise them when they concentrate and get the right word.

The more you praise your child’s effort when reading, the more they will enjoy it.


Supporting your child with their reading:

Reading books to your child that they would not be able to access themselves is a really effective way to advance their reading skills and vocabulary. It also helps them aspire to read more difficult, and more interesting, texts.

Reading stretching texts to your children helps them to:

“Learn challenging vocabulary before they are able to read it on their own. And at a faster rate. When they encounter words in their independent reading, they will have the benefit of knowing more of the words they are trying to read. This will help them to succeed in decoding them. And, as they get older, knowing vocabulary that is more advance will push the margins of what they can read on their own.”

Supporting your child with their reading:

One of the best things you can do to support your child’s reading is to show them how much you value reading. You can do this by:

- reading yourself and modelling your own enjoyment;
- reading with your child; and,
- showing an interest in what they are reading and asking them to tell you about it.


Supporting your child’s learning:

Asking your child specific rather than general questions about their day is a really easy way to help with their learning and communication skills.

This encourages children to reflect on what they want to say, to put their words into a logical order, and find the vocabulary to communicate their thoughts.

Research has found that children who talk to their parents about their day and their experiences regularly from an early age learn to process and communicate information more effectively by the time they are 15.


You don’t need to know everything to support your child’s learning:

If your child has a question that you don’t know the answer to it’s okay for you to say “I don’t know – but let’s find out!”

Parents and carers don’t need to have all of the answers to support their learning.


Find out about what your child is learning at school:

Look through some of your child’s school books with them and ask them to tell you about what they are learning. This is an effective way to get them to reflect on what they are learning at school and an easy way for you to show your child how much you value their education.

Supporting your child’s writing:

Writing neatly is dependent on manual dexterity. Baking a cake is an effective way to help with mark-making and writing because it uses large and small motor movements which help to control our hand movements.

- Stirring the batter uses large motor movements
- Sprinkling the decorations on top uses small motor movements


Supporting your child with their reading:

Children love to hear a good story again and again. Repetition actually helps to build your child’s language, so don’t worry if they’re hooked on one book.


Supporting your child with their reading:

You don’t need to read with your child for a long time to have an impact. A good ten minutes is better than a difficult half hour.


Supporting your child’s writing:

Making different objects and playing with play-dough is a really effective way to develop the muscles in our hands that are needed for writing.

Play-dough is easy to make at home: https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/howto/guide/playdough-recipe
Secondary nudges

You don’t need to be a subject expert to support your child’s learning:

Research shows that parents and carers really worry about being able to ‘keep up’ with what their child is learning and won’t be able to support their learning at home.

But you don’t need to have subject expertise to support your child with their learning!

Some of the most useful things you can do are:

■ helping your child organise their time and putting a plan together for completing homework or for studying;
■ supporting and encouraging your child to complete their schoolwork, homework or exam revision.


General support and encouragement:

Research shows that children who speak to their parents about films, books, music, television shows, and current affairs develop effective skills to summarise the information they have acquired through reading, develop informed opinions, and develop critical thinking skills. Conversations that support effective learning don’t have to be about learning!


General support and encouragement:

Research shows that what teenagers value the most is their parents and carers showing an interest in their education, and supporting and encouraging them to do their best.

You don’t need to be a subject expert or have a PhD to be able to be able to support them in this way.


General support and encouragement:

If your child has a question that you don’t know the answer to, it’s okay to say “I don’t know – but let’s find out!”

Parents and carers don’t need to have all of the answers to support learning.


General support and encouragement:

Many people think that parents can’t influence a child’s success at Secondary school, as their studies become more complex and specialised. This isn’t true — research shows that when parents that take an active interest in the child’s schooling at any age, learning outcomes are positively affected. Parents are one of the most powerful influences on academic success!

Attendance:

Research shows that ensuring that their child attends and is on time to school is one of the most important things that parents can do to support achievement in learning. This sends a consistent message to the child about how important school is to their future and how much the parent values learning.

Supporting your child to build and maintain the habit of reading:

Building and maintaining the habit of reading is as important at secondary school as it is in the primary school.

One of the most effective things you can do to support your child’s reading is to show them how much you value it yourself. The best way to do this is to make sure they see you reading and by taking an interest in what they are reading by asking them specific questions about the book.

Nudge advice postcards

Primary nudges

Did you know?

When your child is reading to you a helpful strategy to use when they get to a tricky word is ‘pause, prompt, praise’.

You can support them by:

- Pause to let your child work out the word they are stuck on
- Prompt them if they need help by giving them a clue or if they are really stuck tell them the answer
- Praise them when they concentrate and get the right word

The more you praise your child’s effort when reading, the more they will enjoy it.


Did you know?

Writing neatly is dependent on manual dexterity. Baking a cake is an effective way to help with mark-making and writing because it uses large and small motor movements which help to control our hand movements.

- Stirring the batter uses large motor movements
- Sprinkling the decorations on top uses small motor movements

Asking your child specific rather than general questions about their day is a really easy way to help with their learning and communication skills. This encourages children to reflect on what they want to say, to put their words into a logical order, and find the vocabulary to communicate their thoughts.

Research has found that children who talk to their parents about their day and their experiences regularly from an early age learn to process and communicate information more effectively by the time they are 15.


You don’t need to be an expert in maths to help with your child’s numeracy.

You can support your child’s maths skills by doubling the amounts of ingredients in recipes while you are cooking.

One example is:

- “The recipe makes 8 biscuits. I want to double the amount of biscuits and make 16 biscuits. What should we do? The recipe says 2 eggs. How many do I need if we are making 16 biscuits?”

- “The recipe says 150 grams of flour. How much do I need now if we are making 16 biscuits?”

You don’t need to be a subject expert to support your child’s learning. Research shows that parents and carers really worry about being able to ‘keep up’ with what their child is learning and won’t be able to support their learning at home. But you don’t need to have subject expertise to support your child with their learning! Some of the most useful things you can do are:

- helping your child organise their time and putting a plan together for completing homework or for studying
- supporting and encouraging your child to complete their school work, homework or exam revision


Did you know?

Research shows that children who speak to their parents about films, books, music, television shows, and current affairs develop effective skills to summarise the information they have acquired through reading, develop informed opinions, and develop critical thinking skills. Conversations that support effective learning don’t have to be about learning!

Did you know?

Research shows that what teenagers value the most is their parents and carers showing an interest in their education, and supporting and encouraging them to do their best. You don’t need to be a subject expert or have a PhD to be able to support them in this way.


Did you know?

If your child has a question that you don’t know the answer to, it’s okay to say “I don’t know – but let’s find out!” Parents and carers don’t need to have all of the answers to support learning.

Nudge advice PowerPoint slides

Primary nudges

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