

Parents' views on improving parental involvement in children's education



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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Background	1
1.2 Objectives of project	2
CHAPTER TWO: SUMMARY OF APPROACH	3
2.1 Scope of the exercise	3
2.2 Defining parental involvement	3
2.3 The sample	3
2.4 Recruitment	7
2.5 Methodology: focus groups and interviews	7
CHAPTER THREE: CURRENT PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF INVOLVEMENT	9
3.1 The perceptions of the silent majority	9
3.2 Varieties of perceptions	11
3.3 Parental expectations	12
3.4 The basis of parental expectations	13
3.5 Differences in expectations from parents in specifically targeted groups	13
3.6 Conclusion	14
CHAPTER FOUR: FORMS AND PATTERNS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT	15
4.1 Types of parental involvement	15
4.2 Parental involvement at home (less active and active)	16
4.3 Parental involvement outside the home	19
4.4 Informal and formal activities	20
4.5 Patterns of involvement	20
4.6 Conclusion	22
CHAPTER FIVE : PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION	24
5.1 Channels of communication	24
5.2 Patterns of communication	29
5.3 Information deficits	31
5.4 Group specific issues in communication	32
5.5 Conclusion	36

CHAPTER SIX : INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS AND HOW BEST TO MEET THEM	38
6.1 Information requirements	38
6.2 Style of language and terminology	41
6.3 Hard hitting messages that work	42
6.4 Conclusion	43
CHAPTER SEVEN : BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT	44
7.1 Challenges to involvement at home	45
7.2 Challenges to active involvement outside the home	46
7.3 Specific barriers faced by some families	50
7.4 Conclusions	52
CHAPTER EIGHT : IMPROVING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT	53
8.1 Improving the lines of communication	56
8.2 Improving what parents do at home	59
8.3 Practical suggestions to aid participation	60
8.4 Steps to overcoming perceived barriers at the school	61
8.5 Reforms to parental representation	64
8.6 Conclusions	66
CHAPTER NINE : EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE AND PARENTAL SUGGESTIONS	67
9.1 Best practice examples in communication between home and school	67
9.2 Best practice case studies to improve parental involvement in the school itself	70
CHAPTER TEN : CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD	74
10.1 Conclusions	74
10.2 The way forward	77

TABLES AND FIGURES

CHAPTER TWO

2.1	Silent majority groups	5
2.2	Non silent minority groups	5
2.3	Hard to reach groups	6

CHAPTER FOUR

4.1	Examples of parental involvement	15
-----	----------------------------------	----

CHAPTER FIVE

5.1	Summary chart: parents' perceptions of forms of communication	24
-----	---	----

CHAPTER SEVEN

7.1	Summary chart: barriers to parental involvement	44
-----	---	----

CHAPTER EIGHT

8.1	Summary chart: suggestions for improving communication and parental involvement	53
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

This report details findings from qualitative research addressing the issue of parental involvement in the education of their children. The need for the research derived from a growing recognition of the importance of the role of parents and home-school partnerships in improving levels of achievement and attainment in schools and the overall quality of the educational experience. The Scottish Executive is committed to improving the involvement of parents in their children's education and in the work of the school itself. This research explores the level of involvement that parents currently have in different types of educational and school related activities and aims to identify barriers to involvement, so that strategies can be introduced to overcome these and ultimately improve parental involvement.

Note that the term "parent" is used throughout the report to refer to the wide range of individuals who are responsible for the care and upbringing of children and young people across the country. Occasionally, the report makes use of other terms, but this is where the view expressed is attributable to a particular type of carer only – for example, foster carers or asylum seekers, refugees.

OBJECTIVES OF PROJECT

The specific objectives set for the research were as follows.

- To gather feedback and views from key parent stakeholder groups about their current involvement in their children's education.
- To include the opinions of groups who, in the past, have been reluctant or unable to provide appropriate feedback.
- To reflect the views of parent stakeholders from all parts of Scotland and include those individuals resident in cities, towns and rural areas.
- To help raise awareness of SEED's developing policy and contribute to the overall communication of the concepts among the target groups in the course of conducting the research.
- To identify actions and recommendations that will help to improve the quality of parental involvement.

KEY FINDINGS

Current perceptions and expectations of involvement

- There is a variety of perceptions and expectations about what parental involvement means, and the range of roles and responsibilities that parents expect the school to offer.

- Most parents recognise that they are required to offer some fundamental support and input into their children's learning, for example to help them be punctual, behave well and respect others. These are generally regarded as basic expectations that schools can reasonably expect of any parent.
- Parents have expectations for how the school interacts with them and their children, for example through the welcoming ethos, communications and responses to issues raised.
- The majority of parents currently have relatively low levels of involvement whilst perceiving that what they already do is all that is needed. Some parents are not satisfied with current levels of active participation and wish to change this.
- Many parents hold fixed assumptions about the division of labour between home and school and it may be challenging to overcome these.

There is a need for comprehensive information and support to overcome some existing mindsets, convince parents of the significance of their role and support them in helping their children to succeed.

Forms and patterns of parental involvement

- Parents are involved in many different ways. Parents are most likely to be involved in informal activities requiring a lesser amount of commitment and time. Few parents participate in active, formal and school based activities, such as membership of the PTA and the School Board¹.
- Pressure of time, due to work or family commitments was the most quoted reason for any lack of involvement.
- There are a number of key factors affecting variable degrees of involvement. The age and stage of the children is one such factor with parents being more involved when their children are younger.
- Parents are also primarily concerned for the welfare of their own child. The concern to keep track of their own child's educational experience is what motivates parents to participate in school events or formal bodies.

In any marketing or promotional campaign directed at parents, the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) should note that parents are more likely to participate if they perceive a direct positive impact on their **own child** as a consequence of their involvement. There are a number of **key messages** that illustrate the benefits of parental involvement that can be exploited in promotional activities.

¹ Parents interviewed used the term PTA / School Boards interchangeably and did not always distinguish clearly between them. For that reason, the report uses the term PTA / School Board or 'parental representation' as best suits the context.

Patterns of communication

- Parents depend on effective channels of communication to know where and how they can be involved. There are many different channels of communication between the home and the school.
- The effectiveness of each varies according to what type of information is to be conveyed, school and family specific criteria and the age and stage of pupils through or about whom communication is delivered.
- Parents feel that certain forms of communication can work well at particular stages in the education system. In general, the channels of communication work most effectively at the earlier educational stages (pre-school and primary) when children are young and parents have more opportunities to communicate with the school and teachers on an informal basis.
- As pupils progress to secondary school, communication becomes less effective and is also more formalised. Children become increasingly independent and try to distance their parents. Sometimes they become less communicative and may not always pass on information to their parents.
- As a result, some parents, especially those of older children, suffer from information deficits and find it extremely hard to keep track of what is going on at school both in terms of academic affairs, social events or parental representation.

There is scope for improving the channels of communication. Many that are currently used with success at pre-school and primary could be developed at later stages of the education system. Details and examples are provided throughout the report.

Language

- There is also an issue concerning the language used to communicate with parents by schools, local authorities and SEED. Without care, some terminology can imply that parents are not playing their role, or that very basic parental responsibilities are not being met.

Attention should be paid to the style and tone of language in all types of communication to parents to capture their attention in a positive and motivating way, and foster their interest and commitment.

Information requirements

- Parents have particular requirements concerning *the type of information* they wish to have, *the time of year* that they wish to receive it and *the format* in which the information should be conveyed.
- Parents' most important requirements are ongoing feedback about their child throughout the school year, feedback about performance and behaviour on a more regular basis, and immediate contact if there is a problem.

- In addition to receiving historical information about levels of performance and achievement, many parents believe that they need to be better informed, in advance, of what their children will or should be doing.
- Parents take particular notice of facts demonstrating that parent/child support activities can have a significant impact on learning and achievement. By helping parents to better understand how critical their actions can be, and what they need to do, they will be more likely to take steps to be more actively involved in different ways in their children's education.
- The form of communication that is best suited for one type of information transmission is not necessarily right for another, and certain forms of communication work better for certain families than others or at certain stages in the education cycle.

There is scope for improving communication and information requirements. There is a need for a more flexible approach to communication by using different mediums. Communication works best when it meets local expectations. Communication formats could, therefore, usefully be tailored to meet local circumstances.

Barriers to parental involvement

- Parents identify a range of factors that limit their ability to get involved in their children's education.
- It is significant that parents perceive the school to present a number of obstacles such as lack of encouragement, not informing parents of what they can do and too few flexible forms of involvement to fit in around busy working and family lives.
- Parents are reluctant to participate in formal bodies such as the PTA and School Board because they perceive these to be formal and closed, and they do not identify with the other parents who are members of such groupings. Some parents are intimidated by such bodies.

There is clearly scope for steps to be taken to overcome the barriers to parental involvement. Parents would benefit from advice and support that show them different ways of getting involved. Some families would appreciate services to overcome personal obstacles and enable them to attend events, such as child care or transportation and the availability of teachers outside standard school times. Parents with limited time wish for more opportunities for small or infrequent forms of support for the school itself. There is also a need for reforms to parental representation, both by working to overcome the current image of PTAs and School Boards, broadening Board membership, and offering alternative options for parents to voice their opinions.

Improving parental involvement

Parents we spoke to brought a number of suggestions and examples of best practice to our attention, and these are detailed throughout the report. We recommend that particular strategies that are used in some schools could successfully be developed in others. The provision of a **good practice guide** in chapter nine aims to identify the most useful examples and sets out a basis for further development by SEED and others.

To ensure the success of the introduction of new measures in schools across the country, SEED also needs to help parents understand fully the difference they can make to their children's education. A first step to bringing about change is to inform parents of the importance of improved involvement, explaining the particular benefits that involvement will have, and ensuring they have help in giving their children practical support. A campaign should aim to challenge the existing assumptions that are held by parents by using key messages which detail the ways that involvement impacts on the progress of their own child. This will encourage parents to realise the real significance of getting involved both at home, and at school.

Key messages and guidance for a campaign are provided in chapter six and in the recommendations.

SEED's developing policy broadly reflects the expectations, requirements and changes expressed by parents in the course of this research. This indicates that the developing approach is well placed to tackle the key issues and lead to improvements in parental involvement in education.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings from research into the involvement of parents in the education of their children. The research used a qualitative methodology consisting of focus groups and in-depth interviews which were conducted with parents from a range of social, economic and cultural backgrounds across Scotland, who have children of different ages. The interviews explored the nature of parents' relationships with the school attended by their children, the types and levels of involvement that they currently have in their children's education and perceived barriers to getting better involved. The research aimed to gather feedback and views from parents about their involvement and how they think it should be improved.

1.1 BACKGROUND

There is a growing body of research evidence to show that improving partnerships between schools and homes has a positive impact on the educational achievements of young people, at all stages in their education. The home environment and the input of parents at home play crucial roles in the educational development of children and young people².

The Scottish Executive has recognised the importance of parents and teachers exchanging information and working together to ensure a child reaches their full potential and has identified a need to strengthen links between the formal education that children receive at school and learning at home. Indeed, the National Debate on Education identified a need for increased parental involvement in their children's education. The importance of improving partnership between key stakeholders, and more importantly parents and schools, is identified in both "Educating for Excellence"³ and "A Partnership for a Better Scotland"⁴.

In line with this, the Minister for Education and Young People, Peter Peacock, recently announced his intention to help parents become better involved in their children's education. He intends to see parents and schools working together for the benefit of every individual child, recognising the expectations parents have for the ways they want to be involved and what, in turn, schools may expect of parents. As a key part of this, parents and schools will be encouraged to decide on local, workable arrangements to meet those expectations.

The Minister outlined his broad plans and commitment to improve parental involvement on Saturday 15 November 2003. Speaking at the EIS conference, the Minister said that parents want to be better involved in their children's education. But he stressed that parental partnerships would bring new responsibilities as well as rights for parents. The Minister said:

"Parents want to be valued and welcomed members of the school community. They want to know how to make their voices heard, to know that they will be listened to, involved in decision-making and sure that their views will be taken seriously."

² How can parents help their children's learning? A guide for parents, families and schools. University of Strathclyde/SEED. March 2002.

³ Educating for Excellence is the Scottish Executive's response to the National Debate.

⁴ "A Partnership for a Better Scotland" is a document which sets out the principle guiding partnership in developing and implementing policies for Scotland.

That's why I want to shift the balance from an institutional view of parental involvement towards making parents partners in the learning process. But in doing so, I want to be sure that we save the best of what we have already by way of parental rights to current involvement.

We need clear recognition of parents' wishes and expectations together with a flexible response to meeting them, appropriate to individual schools and groups of parents. Parents and teachers working together will deliver real and lasting results and ensure that all children get the education they deserve.

But there are two sides to any deal – parents must also know what we expect of them. Schools should be able to look to engage parents who are willing and better able to support all aspects of their children's learning - as well as ensuring they get to school on time, fit to learn and behave well.”

SEED are aware of the real need to inform groups of parents about the **benefits** of being involved in their children’s education in order to encourage their active participation. This need is particularly strong among groups who do not normally respond to invitations to express their views or even participate. SEED’s plans to improve parental involvement are more likely to be successful by engaging the willing involvement of a critical mass of parents.

This research project is a key element of SEED’s review process. The research was framed in response to a need to ascertain the current nature of links between schools and home environments and to explore the extent to which parents themselves perceive a need to be closely involved in the education process. There is also a concern to draw parents’ attention to the potential benefits of improved involvement and to identify the key messages that will appeal to parents to foster greater and better improvement.

1.2 OBJECTIVES OF PROJECT

The specific objectives set for the research were as follows.

- To gather feedback and views from key parent stakeholder groups about their current involvement in their children’s education.
- To include the opinions of groups who, in the past, have been reluctant or unable to provide appropriate feedback.
- To reflect the views of parent stakeholders from all parts of Scotland and include those individuals resident in cities, towns and rural areas.
- To help raise awareness of SEED’s developing policy and contribute to the overall communication of the concepts among the target groups in the course of conducting the research.
- To identify actions and recommendations that will help to improve the quality of parental involvement.

CHAPTER TWO: SUMMARY OF APPROACH

2.1 SCOPE OF THE EXERCISE

The research aimed to consult all types of parents across Scotland in order to establish the range of views and opinions on the issue of parental involvement. A key aim of the research was to speak to a wide range of parent stakeholders, particularly those who would not normally express an opinion on this type of issue. Hence the sample targeted parents from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds including parents with disabilities, low formal educational levels, foster carers and so on. The details of the sample are provided below. However, before discussing this further, it is firstly important to identify what is meant by the term “parental involvement”.

2.2 DEFINING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

For the purposes of this study it is necessary to distinguish between those parents that are **actively** involved in school events and affairs and have a heightened interest in the issue at stake, and those who play a less active role. Active involvement is, therefore, defined on the basis of certain activities that take parents into the physical environment of the school, interacting with members of the teaching staff and other parents. A list of activities was put together at the outset of the project and covered membership or involvement in any of the following:

- PTA or School Board
- Safer Routes to School
- Playground assistant
- Sports coaching
- Extra curricular activities
- Assisting on trips or excursions
- Fundraising activities

However, it should be noted that there are many different notions of what “involvement” means. Significantly, many parents regard the range of activities that they conduct **at home** in support of their children’s learning to constitute “involvement”. Thus, those parents who are not involved in the activities described above, still regard themselves as actively involved in their children’s education. Other parents, however, regard involvement to mean something more proactive such as membership of the PTA or School Board, helping at school events, or helping in the classroom or playground.

2.3 THE SAMPLE

The Silent Majority

It was proposed at the outset that the larger number of focus groups should be conducted with parents who do not have a heightened level of interest or involvement in the related areas. The reason for this was to reflect the majority parent population, who do not have a heightened involvement. Additionally, these parents tend not to seek opportunities to voice

their opinions and, therefore, are likely to be overlooked in the research if not specifically targeted.

Eighteen focus groups were conducted with silent majority parents and these were recruited across **four** local authority areas covering city, urban and rural environments.

The sample also included parents with children at different stages in the education system ranging from children aged 4 (attending local authority pre-school establishments) up to young people aged 19 (who had just left school) and all age groups in between. The age groups were classified as follows:

- Pre-school
- Primary 1-3
- Primary 4-7
- Secondary 1
- Secondary 2-4
- Secondary 5-6
- Post school.

Secondary 1 was dealt with separately as this is a time of major psychological, physiological and educational change for children and their relationships with their parents. This enabled specific issues relating to this key transition phase to come to the fore.

In addition, the groups consisted of a cross section of parents in terms of:

- Age of parents
- Gender
- Composition/ type of families (e.g. single parent, only child etc)
- Socio-economic group (SEG).

The geographic spread, location and content of each group are illustrated overleaf.

Table 2.1 Silent majority groups

	City/SEG	Urban/SEG	Rural/SEG
Pre-school	Glasgow/ABC1	Lanarkshire/C1C2	Dumfries +Gall /C2DE
P1-P3	Aberdeen /C2DE	N Ayrshire/ABC1	Highland/ABC1
P4-P7	Glasgow/C1C2	Lanarkshire/C2DE	Dumfries + Gall /C1C2
S1	Aberdeen/C1C2	N Ayrshire/C2DE	Highland /C1C2
S2-S4	Glasgow/C2DE	Lanarkshire/ABC1	Dumfries + Gall /ABC1
S5-Post-school	Aberdeen/ABC1	N Ayrshire/C1C2	Highland /BC1C2 *

* Note that the focus group planned in the Highlands for parents of S5 – post-school (BC1C2) in the rural context could not be recruited because the population is geographically dispersed in rural areas and it proved very difficult for people to travel to a single location, which was in many cases quite distant from their home. Instead, a series of face to face interviews were conducted.

Non silent minority

Four groups were also conducted with parents who have some form of **active** involvement as defined earlier. These groups were intended to balance the sample for comparative purposes, in order to access the views of parents who have a more heightened involvement in school affairs. Again, these were recruited across a spread of geographic areas, and consisted of a range of parents according to the same criteria listed above.

The following table illustrates the distribution and content of the four non silent minority groups.

Table 2.2 Non silent minority groups

P1-P3	Edinburgh ABC1	Dundee C1C2
S1	Ayrshire C1C2	Dumfries and Galloway C2DE

Specifically targeted groups

The research also aimed to target parents from “specifically targeted communities” who can be overlooked in research, as they suffer social exclusion or because they tend not to have the opportunities to voice their opinion. The specifically targeted groups covered the following types of parents:

- Parents with low levels of formal education
- Parents from minority ethnic backgrounds
- Parents with disabilities

- Foster carers
- Asylum seekers and refugees
- Gypsies/Travellers⁵

Twelve sessions were conducted with specifically targeted groups. In most instances these took the form of face to face interviews with two individuals together. Again, these were recruited from different local authority areas in Scotland, covering some additional areas to further broaden the geographic coverage.

Glasgow was used as a location for the asylum seekers and refugees as a known location for this particular group. Note that in the case of Gypsies/Travellers at one site, some of the potential respondents who had agreed in advance to participate had moved on suddenly and so were not available. However, additional parents were available at the second site we visited enabling us to make up the sample. Because Gypsy/Traveller children rarely continue their education beyond primary school, it was not possible to interview many parents of secondary school aged children in this community.

The table below indicates the geographic spread, location and age groups of the sessions conducted with specifically targeted groups.

Table 2.3 Hard to reach groups

	Parents with Disabilities	Foster carers	Minority ethnic	Gypsy/ Traveller	Asylum seekers & refugees
Edinburgh	2X2 Primary		2X2 Primary		
Aberdeen	2X2 Secondary	2X2 Secondary	2X2 Primary		
Glasgow					4X2 Primary & Secondary
Fife		2X2 Secondary			
Dumfries and Galloway				2X1 Primary	
West Dunbartonshire				1X2 Primary 1X3 Primary	

Note : 2x2 represents two interviews with 2 respondents

In addition, one group was held with parents with low levels of formal education in Dundee. This was defined as those who left full time education with no more than two standard grades (or equivalent qualifications).

⁵ Gypsies/Travellers are the traditional travelling communities who are descendants of the Romany who migrated to Britain from Eastern Europe many centuries ago. It is believed that European Romany originated from the Indus Valley in Northern India. There are other types of travelling communities in Britain, such as New Age Travellers and Circus and Fair ground workers, but these communities have a different history and are distinct from Gypsies/Travellers. We did not speak to these communities in this research as we made contact with Gypsies/Travellers through local authorities and specific associations that work with them.

2.4 RECRUITMENT

On the whole, the participants were recruited by traditional recruitment procedures with professional recruiters in each area contacting parents and administering a short recruitment questionnaire designed to screen out anyone not meeting the criteria for a particular group.

To gain access to some of the specifically targeted groups it was necessary to seek assistance from various bodies or organisations who work with these communities to identify appropriate routes to recruit respondents. Foster carers were recruited through the local authorities. Asylum seekers, refugees and Gypsies/Travellers were recruited with assistance from specialist organisations who work with these communities, who we asked to make initial contact with individuals conforming to the required criteria on our behalf, to invite them to participate.

2.5 METHODOLOGY: FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

The research process consisted of two main phases.

Phase one: Primary research using focus groups, and face to face interviews and paired depths.

Phase two: Monitoring, collating and analysing the findings from phase one, resulting in the production of the final report.

Each focus group consisted of between 7 to 10 participants and was moderated by an experienced researcher from George Street Research.

The specifically targeted participants were interviewed in pairs, except for parents with low levels of formal education (who participated in a focus group). There were a number of reasons for this approach. Firstly, it would have been difficult to recruit sufficient numbers in most of the categories to participate in a focus group because of the very fact that they are “specifically targeted”. Secondly, focus group participation could have been intimidating for some of the participants and in some cases simply impractical. For some of the specifically targeted participants it proved easiest to visit people in their own habitats or homes and, on occasions, to speak to them with a trusted friend in order to overcome the issues of fear and suspicion they might hold.

Where there was any possibility of a language barrier, interpreters were offered. Arrangements for parents with special needs (such as disabled parents, deaf or blind parents) were made where necessary, and venues with disabled access arranged for those in specific need of it.

Topic guides were prepared based on the full project briefing and a range of stimulus materials was used to help focus discussion on the key themes under review. This included drafts of a range of documents addressing the key themes relating to parental involvement, some of which were based on the findings of earlier research conducted by the Scottish Executive⁶.

⁶ How Can Parents Help their Children’s Learning? A Guide for Parents, Families and Schools. University of Strathclyde/SEED. March 2002.

All the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed and moderator notes were taken to contextualise the analysis. The recruitment questionnaires which indicate the profile of each respondent according to the stated recruitment criteria were also used to aid the analysis.

CHAPTER THREE: CURRENT PERCEPTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS OF INVOLVEMENT

This chapter discusses current perceptions and expectations amongst parents about what “parental involvement” means and where parents expect the balance of responsibilities between school and the home to lie. The discussion also considers the expectations that parents have of the school, and what they consider to be reasonable expectations for the school to have of them. The basis of parental expectations and assumptions is then considered.

3.1 THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE SILENT MAJORITY

The majority of parents perceive a fairly distinct boundary between the role of the home and that of the school. Parents expect the school and teachers to be the principal educators of their children whilst parents play a relatively minor but important supporting role.

“The teachers are there to teach the children... they are getting good wages and good holidays to do it and we pay our taxes...we are the parents who bathe, feed and clothe them, look after them and make sure they behave themselves...”
(silent majority, S1, C2DE, N Ayrshire)

Therefore, the average parent perceives a need for only a supportive involvement in their children’s education with principle responsibility lying with teaching staff.

The following types of activities represent the involvement of the majority of parents:

- Ensuring that children complete their homework and helping with it when they can
- Attending the parents’ night meetings at school
- Supporting their children when performing or playing sport
- Keeping track of their children’s academic progress.

This relatively limited range of activity, much of which is supportive rather than active, is nonetheless considered to be “involvement”. Clearly, this understanding of involvement varies from the definition described in chapter two, that was used at the outset, and which relates to more **active participation** outside the home. As such, “parental involvement” means different things to different people. This report has considered all types of parental involvement – whether active or less active - and seeks to identify ways in which to improve the quality of what is going on.

Moreover, the majority of parents assume that what they are currently doing is **adequate**, reflecting the particular needs of their own children, and that there is no requirement for more or better involvement.

*“You can be involved without being near the school. We **are** involved with their activities. We’re active parents in the home – you don’t need to go near the school.”* (silent majority, S1, C1C2, Aberdeen)

This is particularly the case if their child does not seem to have any problems and the school is fulfilling the parents’ expectations.

“If you’re happy with the report card, the teachers and that your child is getting what he or she needs or expects and is doing well, why get involved? If the school is doing a good job you want to just stand back and let them get on with it.” (silent majority, P1-P3, C2DE, Aberdeen)

In fact, some feel that there is danger of doing too much and being overly involved. They recognise that some parents tend to dominate too much, trying to have too much control.

“Too much interference from parents might rock the boat. Parents can’t expect to control everything.” (silent majority, P1-P3, C2DE, Highland)

Parents acknowledge that the principal reason to contact the school would be if their child was having a problem of some sort, such as bullying.

“It’s when things go wrong, that is the only time that parents really want to know.” (silent majority, S5 - post-schoolABC1, Aberdeen)

There is still also the assumption that the school will contact parents if there is a serious problem or issue, and for the most part this does appear to happen.

That said, the average parent also recognises that they have a basic responsibility to offer some level of support to their child’s learning. Indeed, parents are aware that their input at home has a positive impact on academic achievement as well as the emotional well being of their child.

In addition, parents recognise that they have some fundamental responsibilities to ensure that their child:

- Attends school in a fit state to learn
- Is punctual
- Is appropriately dressed and adequately equipped
- Behaves well
- Respects the rights and interests of others at the school community.

These are generally regarded as basic expectations that schools can reasonably have of any parent.

There is a need for parents to understand the importance of building on what they currently do and to be encouraged to improve the quality of their involvement, through a clear understanding of the potential benefits of everything that they do, both at home and at school.

In many families, parents do not share the responsibility for school affairs equally, as one parent (traditionally the female, but not universally) may be more involved in looking after the children than the other. Thus one parent devolves responsibility to the other, and themselves may have minimal involvement. This too is regarded as an acceptable and practical way of operating that sufficiently meets the needs of most families.

It also important to bear in mind that many parents have more than one child and their level of involvement is affected by the fact that they have to consider the needs of all their children.

3.2 VARIETIES OF PERCEPTIONS

Of course, there are variations in opinions about what constitutes involvement, and what the extent of parental responsibilities in their children's education should be.

Some parents are not at all satisfied with current levels of active participation and are keen for change. For example, a small number of parents emphasise the importance of developing a strong partnership with the school and the teachers, and see themselves working as part of a team to ensure that their children behave well, perform well and that their needs are met appropriately. These parents expect the school to keep them informed of their child's behaviour at school and will take action at home to punish their children for misdemeanours at school.

*"I think education is a **shared** responsibility...mainly because if a child doesn't have a stable background at home, I don't expect the child to be able to learn in school."* (asylum seeker, primary, Glasgow)

Usually, parents with this view are those who are the keenest to be actively involved in many different aspects of their children's learning. These are also the parents that are most likely to be found volunteering to help at school events or to participate in representative bodies.

Some of the respondents taking part in our research, perceive that there are a small number of "other parents," who fail to fulfil their minimal parental obligation and lay excessive emphasis on the role of the school. These parents are described as taking a back seat in the education process, expecting even greater input from the school than the average parent. It should be emphasised that this is a perception held by some of the parents we spoke to, and is not necessarily indicative of the real situation.

"I do think that parents want to pass the buck. Too many parents are working full time. (They are) too tired when they get home...and they think that the children are at school – and that the school is a safe haven and that the teachers' are in charge of discipline and everything." (parent with disabilities, secondary, Aberdeen).

Some respondents also perceive there to be some parents who do not care enough about their children and do not give them the attention and support that they need.

"There are parents who don't give two hoots about what the kids are doing – at home or at school... and they will remain not giving two hoots, no matter what you do with the rules; they're not going to be the slightest bit interested." (silent majority, S1, C1C2, Highland)

There are also perceived to be a very small number of parents who are utterly negligent, who do not look after their children properly and are not able to control their children. Very often, the reasons suggested for negligence are drug problems, extreme poverty, or because they are teenage or single parents.

“Some children bring themselves up. Some of them are just trying to survive. You know, they don’t have time for homework...you wouldn’t believe how some of them are living. They go home to feed mum and dad.” (non silent majority, S1, C1C2, Aberdeen)

There are also a small minority of parents who are hostile to the school and the teachers, and consequently they are disconnected from the social life of the school and take very little interest in their children’s learning. Such families are particularly adverse to any suggestions that they should be more actively involved. If anything, these parents tend to have been disassociated from the school when they themselves were a pupil and adopt an attitude of *‘it never did me any good...’*

3.3 PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

Although they may never formally have thought about this issue, parents do hold a number of expectations in terms of how schools will interact with them and their children. Firstly, in their relationship with the school, **parents expect the school** to communicate with them on a regular basis and to keep them informed of any issues or changes affecting their child. They also expect to be informed immediately if their child is facing any problems. Parents also expect to get feedback on the progress of their child in the form of an annual school report and bi-annual parents’ evenings. They also expect to be informed of events or activities going on at the school. The types of information that parents require are discussed in greater detail in chapter six.

Parents also have expectations about what type of relationship they should have with the school and these should include:

- **Being made to feel welcome and comfortable in the school**
- **The school responding quickly if they raise an issue about their child**
- **Knowing how to seek help, advice and support when things go wrong or they wish to make a complaint**
- **Receiving information specific to their child when they request it.**

Whilst most parents regard these as fundamental parental rights, some recognise that, in reality, teachers may struggle to provide these efficiently when there may be as many as thirty children in a given class.

“There’s no way. To have this information to hand for thirty children straight away... they’re not going to have time to do it.” (silent majority, P3-7, C1C2, Dumfries)

3.4 THE BASIS OF PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS

Parental expectations about the level and type of involvements reflect their own upbringing and experiences of schooling, and the level of involvement of their own parents. As mentioned earlier, those individuals whose own parents were not involved in school activities are less likely to perceive a need for their involvement in their own children's education. Parents who have had a negative experience at school are also less likely to be interested in getting involved or playing an active role in school events and activities.

It is also important to note that parental expectations of the school, and what it can feasibly do, are affected by a perception that teachers have excessive workloads and face limitations in the additional time they can offer to engage parents in the learning process, or foster links between the school and home. Some parents are, therefore, sympathetic to teachers and reluctant to make any suggestion that could put greater pressure on teachers' time.

3.5 DIFFERENCES IN EXPECTATIONS FROM PARENTS IN SPECIFICALLY TARGETED GROUPS

The expectations of most of the specifically targeted groups match the opinions listed above. In addition there are some group specific expectations and these are dealt with below.

Minority ethnic communities, asylum seekers and refugees

Parents from different cultural backgrounds, such as minority ethnic communities, asylum seekers and refugees seem to have differing views about the level of responsibility that the school should have. In some countries the boundaries between the school and the home are much starker, and the relationship between the home and the school is more formal. For example, a Nigerian parent told us that Nigerian schools have a clear set of educational responsibilities in which parents are not expected to get involved - to do so would be considered "interference".

In other countries parents are expected to be far more involved in comparison with Scotland. For example, parents from Lithuania and Russia emphasise the importance of parental presence and assistance in many different aspects of school life and this is considered to be a parental duty. Their involvement helps parents to become integrated into the local community.

There are also differing ideas about the limits of the school's responsibilities. For example, some parents have issues with the school providing sex education or drugs education for their children because they feel that it is "putting ideas into their head". An Indian father emphasised that he would like this responsibility to be placed back in his hands.

Several parents from different cultural backgrounds also mention what they feel is a lax attitude to discipline in Scottish schools, compared with the schools in their own country. They expect the school to play a stronger disciplinary role.

"I think there is too much freedom for the kids...even if they go in ten minutes late they are just signed down but it doesn't matter. They don't bother. In our country if the child is late today, then the next day he will get a punishment."
(minority ethnic, primary, Edinburgh)

Foster carers

Foster carers are more used to a partnership approach with the school which involves a range of personnel from different bodies who play a role in securing the welfare of a foster child. These carers can be involved in planning education for a child with social workers, psychologists and other local authority personnel.

Gypsies/Travellers

Gypsies/Travellers place less importance on education and therefore have lower expectations of what schools should provide for their children, as traditionally they have not used their services and prefer to be responsible for the care and welfare of their children themselves. There are fears for the negative consequences of children attending school such as bullying, racism or discrimination and these fears (whether realised or not) may lead Gypsy/Traveller parents to withdraw their children from school.

However, there is evidence of changing attitudes towards schooling. The majority of Gypsy/Traveller parents that we spoke to indicate that they wish their children to attend primary education to obtain basic literacy and numeracy skills that have become increasingly important for survival. In turn, this has necessitated an improved relationship with the local primary school, as parents want to keep an eye on their children and ensure that they are being treated fairly.

3.6 CONCLUSION

There are a range of parental expectations concerning the nature of the relationship they experience with the school and the range of roles and responsibilities they expect the school to offer, with some parents committed to a closer relationship with the school and the teachers than others. Most parents accept that they are required to fulfil some fundamental responsibilities and these are generally regarded as basic expectations that schools can reasonably have of any parent. Parents also have expectations about the type of relationship they should have with the school. However, for the most part, parents currently have relatively low levels of involvement, whilst perceiving that what they do is all that is needed.

Additionally, in two parent households it is often the case that one parent is more involved than the other. This again is considered to be adequate and is the most practical approach for many families especially if one parent is the breadwinner and the other the home-maker. There are some differences in expectations amongst parents from specifically targeted groups such as parents from minority ethnic backgrounds, asylum seekers and refugees and Gypsies/Travellers and these have been detailed in the text.

One of biggest challenges facing SEED is to overcome the fixed assumptions held by the majority of parents. It is very hard for parents, who have a deeply engrained mindset about their responsibilities, to visualise themselves playing a more active role. This report, therefore, aims to establish the key messages that are meaningful to parents that SEED can use in its future communication in order to bring about change.

CHAPTER FOUR: FORMS AND PATTERNS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

This chapter identifies the different types of parental involvement and the factors that motivate parents to become involved in different ways. It then goes on to discuss patterns of parental involvement at different stages in their children's education.

4.1 TYPES OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

There are many different ways in which parents are involved in the education of their children ranging from active participation in formal bodies such as the School Board and the PTA, to less formal involvement in school events, to coming along to watch a school concert or sport event, to activities that parents conduct in the home in support of learning. Distinctions can be made between informal, semi-formal and formal involvement, active and less active, and home based and school based involvement.⁷ There are logical reasons as to why parents are or are not involved in certain types of activity. These are affected both by personal or local circumstances impacting on a family, and certain barriers to involvement that parents perceive. The details of factors affecting involvement are discussed in chapter seven.

The following table summarises these different types of involvement. It should be noted that the table is offered as a rough illustration of the range of types of parental involvement. The shaded area indicates the types of active commitment that most parents **do not** partake in. These are the types of active participation that are the domain of the silent minority.

Table 4.1 Examples of parental involvement

At school	Example		At home	Example
Formal and Active	PTA School Board Parents evenings		Formal and Active	Reading PTA / School Board communication and keeping track of their activities and discussions
Informal and Active	Classroom assistant Helping out in playground, canteen Fundraising Sports coaching Helping at extra curricular activities Helping on school trips		Informal and Active	Helping with homework Encouraging children to learn Encouraging children to talk about their day Providing additional learning resources
Less Active	Watching children playing sport Sports day School concerts		Less Active	Listening to children talk about their day

⁷ These distinctions were not used by respondents themselves but have been identified by us based on our findings for analytic purposes.

4.2 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AT HOME (LESS ACTIVE AND ACTIVE)

The majority of parents participating in the research play a range of supporting roles in their children's education at home and as noted in the previous chapter, consider that these in themselves constitute an important form of involvement.

Parents are also aware of the importance of providing learning support and educational input at home. However, there is some surprise at the **degree** of impact that parental input in the home can have on subsequent levels of attainment. This is indicated by expressions of surprise in response to statistical facts. For example, many respondents are surprised to learn that, "*Doing homework through their years at school has roughly the same benefit as an extra year's schooling.*" This indicates that the significance of the home environment and parental input may not be accurately understood by many parents.

Parents support children's learning at home in different ways, and to varying degrees. The types of activities identified include:

- Helping with homework and school projects
- Providing learning resources and encouraging children to use them:
 - Books
 - Providing computer equipment
 - Educational games
 - Other resources such as paints, kite making, skeletons etc.
- Other learning activities:
 - Educational excursions
 - Children help with cooking.
- Encouraging children to learn:
 - Communicating with children and discussing problems
 - Pointing out the benefits of learning.
- Employing tutors.

However, there is variation in the level of input by parents at home and there is some evidence to suggest that socio-economic grouping is a key factor affecting this. Some parents from lower socio-economic groups are less aware about the importance of education in the home to help their children learn. Many parents also appear to face greater barriers in supporting learning at home for a number of reasons such as a lack of time as they are working to support the family financially. Additionally, parents facing severe poverty may not be able to afford to purchase additional learning resources to help their children.

Help with homework

Most parents are involved at home in actively supervising homework at primary school level, but less so as their children progress to secondary school. At primary school level, all the

parents we spoke to are aware that they have responsibilities to ensure children complete their homework each night and to provide help and support where required. School projects too are regarded as an area where parental input is required. Thus parents will sit with children when younger and listen to their reading or watch them complete tasks. Parents will also provide ideas in support of successfully completing homework or projects.

The parents of secondary school aged pupils are less involved in homework supervision in comparison, and involvement decreases progressively as their children get older. As children progress on to and through secondary education, parents feel less equipped to help them, as school work becomes more challenging, especially in subject areas with which they are not familiar. Some parents also point out that they are reluctant to get involved as teaching styles have changed since their day and it can lead to even greater confusion:

“Then, it’ll end in an argument.

‘That’s not how you do that.’

‘Well maths has changed since I was at school.’

You can’t win.” Parent (silent majority, S2-S4, ABC1, Dumfries)

While the feeling of not knowing how to help is widespread amongst parents of those with children at secondary school, it can also apply to younger children, where parents may feel unsure of what systems are being used to teach even basic skills such as reading or spelling. An example given was whether the phonetic alphabet is used when teaching sounds, reading and spelling.

Discussion revealed different views on the role of homework. For a majority of parents, homework supervision is regarded as one way of gaining a fuller understanding of what a child is doing at school. A less common view was that homework interfered with the quality time that parents had with their children and a few expressed a view that children should be able to complete their learning during the school day. In part, the way that homework is given out to children helps create an uncertainty about its importance. Where schools have clear homework policies or mechanisms for informing parents about homework requirements, this can be helpful.

In some cases, parents report having very little awareness of the level and frequency of homework their children ought to be doing. Their children do not keep them well informed about homework demands, even if parents ask them regularly about them.

A number of parents feel that their children are sufficiently independent to be responsible for fulfilling the demands of the school and do not require parental monitoring. This is especially the case when children reach secondary school, rather than at primary school. In fact, they believe that leaving their children to organise their homework themselves is a key part of maturing and as such they should not ‘interfere’. These parents assume that their children are meeting the requirements and expect that the school would contact them if the requirements were not being met.

However, some parents are concerned because they **do not know** what their children are supposed to be doing. Some parents point out that their children do not spend much time doing homework. Parents with children at different schools also note that there are marked differences in the amount, level and volume of homework set by different schools. Even those with children of different ages at the same school comment on the different attitudes of teachers in setting homework as their children progress through the school. Thus, in primary

3 one child may regularly get homework, but when the younger child reaches primary 3, the situation will be different.

In some schools, children have the opportunity to complete homework during school hours, making it harder for parents to know when their children need to spend additional time at home on homework. Parents would like to know exactly what is demanded of their children on a weekly basis, and whether or not their children are fulfilling such demands.

At present, the parents of children in some secondary schools do not appear to have many effective ways of tracking homework. The main medium of communication is the homework diary. However, as discussed in greater detail in chapter five, these do not always work effectively. There is clearly a need for an improvement in this area, and some suggestions are offered in chapter eight.

Providing learning resources

Most parents encourage learning in the home and purchase resources to help their children. Books are commonly bought for children from a young age and parents integrate reading opportunities into the daily routine, starting with bedtime stories when their children are young, to continuing to encourage reading at later stages.

Many parents also provide educational games and encourage their children to play them on a regular basis for example Boggle, Scrabble or Monopoly. In some households, parents supply their children with additional learning materials such as science kits, skeleton building, clay modelling, paints and kite making equipment and encourage their children to use them.

Computers and associated technological resources such as digital cameras, printers, and so on, are also regarded as valuable learning resources and provided by parents who are able to afford them. Many households are also online, enabling their children to have access to internet resources, which is often useful in support of school projects or certain homework assignments. However, some parents draw attention to the fact that some families cannot afford to buy technological equipment, and that setting homework that depends on the use of the internet discriminates against those families who do not have such resources.

They also draw attention to educational programmes on TV that they feel would be beneficial for their children to see.

Other learning activities

Some parents also encourage children to participate in a range of activities at home to foster learning including for example, cooking and baking, to help with reading, weighing and measuring, to help with numbers. Parents also integrate educational activities into day to day life for example pointing out features in the landscape in support of geography or the reading out of words on signage in public spaces to help reading, or naming items that they come across outside the home that their children might not have seen before.

Parents also take their children on educational excursions to visit museums, libraries, often in support of school projects.

Encouraging children

There are also a number of ways that parents encourage their children to learn, one of the most important ways is by keeping the lines of communication open enabling children to ask questions or tell their parents if they are struggling with some aspect of learning. Many parents also seek to motivate their children as often as possible by emphasising the benefits of learning and drawing attention to the need for qualifications for a successful future.

Providing tutors

In a few households, parents are keen to provide their children with private tutoring to support their learning. This is most commonly provided for children who are preparing for exams, and it is usually targeted at subject areas where a child is performing to a standard less than expected. Tutoring is often provided to ensure higher grades amongst pupils whose teachers might not have considered tutoring necessary but whose parents want to ensure their children achieve the highest possible grades. A few parents in one area in Aberdeen perceived tutoring, which can only be afforded by the wealthiest parents in up-market areas, to be partly responsible for good exam results at the local schools.

Learning additional skills

Some parents emphasise the importance of teaching additional things at home that children may not learn at school including ‘social’ and ‘personal survival’ skills. Those from specific types of backgrounds such as minority ethnic or Gypsy/Traveller communities may also wish their children to learn culture specific values and skills. For example, Indian parents were reported to consider it important for girls to learn to cook and keep house, whilst Indian boys go out with their father to learn about the family business. Similarly, Gypsy/Traveller children are encouraged to acquire additional practical skills in keeping with a travelling lifestyle.

4.3 PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT OUTSIDE THE HOME

Parental involvement also includes a range of activities that parents attend outside the home. Firstly, there are a number of activities that are **less active** in the way they engage parents. These include things like:

- Watching children take part in sport
- Attending school concerts or shows
- Attending social events held at the school.

Such activities are recognised by many parents to be an important opportunity to:

- Interact with teachers on a less formal basis
- Meet other parents
- Witness their children interacting with friends
- Witness their children interacting with teachers in a less formal setting.

Parents also recognise these as important ways of supporting and encouraging their children in a relatively unobtrusive fashion.

Such events play an important part in fostering a strong sense of community. They are also a less intimidating way of encouraging parents into the school. By witnessing the school environment in which their children function every day, parents feel less remote from the school and its activities.

It should be noted here, that these types of activities are particularly important to families who are newcomers to an area, a status often characterising minority ethnic, asylum seekers, refugees and some Gypsy/Traveller parents. These people may have few contacts with wider society, suffer significant social exclusion, and consequently the school may be one of the main means of access to the outside world. Where the school fails to offer an adequate route into the local community, the social exclusion and isolation faced by these families is very difficult to overcome. It should be borne in mind when organising these types of activities that they have this key role and should be made as accessible as possible to all. However, the situation is complicated by the fact that what is accessible to one will not suit another and so various options may be needed.

4.4 INFORMAL AND FORMAL ACTIVITIES

There are a number of activities that involve more active participation outside the home ranging from **informal** to **formal** activities.

There are many activities that are relatively **informal**. These cover activities such as helping at fundraising events like jumble sales and coffee mornings. They also include activities that involve direct contact with school pupils such as helping at school events, with extra curricular activities, on sports day and on school trips.

In some schools, parents also have the opportunity to help on a regular basis in the day to day operation of the school. Again, this covers activities involving direct contact with school pupils such as assisting in the classroom, doing playground duty or helping children with their food in the school canteen.

Attending parents' nights and other teachers meetings are **semi-formal** occasions. While ostensibly these are an opportunity for an informal discussion about their child, often they turn out to be highly formal meetings. While recognised as a chance for parents to meet teachers face to face, the subject matter and form of interaction is prescribed. The degree of information that is obtained on these occasions can be limited due to time restrictions and as such the role of teachers in these meetings is often described by parents as being a formulaic response of 'everything's fine'.

Formal activities refer to membership of organised bodies such as the PTA, the School Board and other committees and sub groups. The majority of parents are not involved in these bodies for a number of reasons that are discussed in chapter seven. Because of this, there is a strong sense that parents lack opportunities to give voice to their opinions, and there are no alternative representative bodies.

4.5 PATTERNS OF INVOLVEMENT

Patterns of involvement are influenced by a number of different factors including the age of children and their stage in the education system, the attitudes of parents, and the perceived benefits of involvement.

Age and stage of children

The age and stage of schooling of their children affects patterns of parental involvement. Parents tend to be more involved in school activities when their children are younger (pre-school and primary) and this drops off significantly when the child moves to secondary school.

“At primary school I could have been doing something every day. Not at the Academy.” (silent majority, S5 - post-school, ABC1, Aberdeen)

This reflects the changing needs of children as they progress through school, but is also attributed to the different nature and perceived ethos of primary and secondary schools. Parents understandably wish to keep a close eye on their children’s activities when they are young. They are keen to get to know the other parents, and other children with whom their children are mixing, in order to be assured that their child can safely visit other children’s houses. As children get older they become more independent and parents have less control over their activities.

Thus parents of primary aged children are more able to access opportunities for getting involved with school life through a mix of means aided by their more frequent attendance at the school. Parents perceive primary schools and pre-schools to be more receptive and used to parents being present.

At secondary school, children often ‘ban’ their parents from being present. Parents told us that their children will make them drop them within walking distance from the school, rather than allowing them to deliver them to the school gate. The secondary school is perceived to welcome parental involvement less. Parents said that they have fewer opportunities to offer assistance with sports coaching and classroom duty compared with primary school. The presumption is, amongst parents, that the larger school has sufficient resources to be able to cover these roles. Lack of regular contact with the school prevents parents from gaining an understanding from the school or other parents of how parents can be involved. Thus some parents spoke about being forced to give up activities that they had offered when their child was at primary school, while others continue a link with a primary school because they enjoy certain activities, when they no longer have children attending the school.

Attitude of parents

Where parents are involved to some extent, they are more likely to be involved in activities that place the least burden on them, thus less active forms of involvement that do not demand a great deal of time will have more takers than activities that require active input, effort and time. Thus a greater number of parents are to be found attending meetings or helping out in fundraising activities for the school. Some parents express a willingness to help out on the odd school trip, but note that the increasing need for disclosure checks is a hurdle that some may perceive too bothersome to overcome. Comparatively fewer would be willing to commit

themselves to more time consuming, high profile and formal activities such as membership of the School Board or PTA.

To benefit their own child

One of the main factors motivating parents to partake in activities at school is to enable them to keep track of how their child is coping, to get a closer impression of the atmosphere of the school their children attend and to get wind of issues that may be facing the school or their child.

“The reason we got involved with the PTA was to know about things in advance so that we can influence them...we have better access to the school. I can go up... I can talk to the Head Teacher.” (silent majority, P4-7, C1C2, Dumfries)

“The more you know what is happening in the daily routine and things going on at the school, the more you are able to talk to your children about them and see how they feel about everything.” (non silent minority, P1-3, ABC1, Edinburgh)

Child persuasion

Parents of pre-and primary school aged children especially are also badgered to participate in school events by their children who can be very persuasive. Children often prepare for such events well in advance, for example, school concerts, sporting events or fundraising events such as fetes or jumble sales and their enthusiasm and excitement will lead them to speak about it regularly at home and implore their parents to participate.

“My son and daughter insist that I to go to the events at the school. My daughter will say to me, ‘Can’t you be the Mum who comes and does the books?’” (non silent minority, P1-3, ABC1, Edinburgh)

Even some parents of older children are aware that their children like them to be present to support them at sporting events or school concerts or shows.

“It’s always good to go to watch them play sport, ... even if they are big... you just watch your child, if he is playing basketball and if he scores where does he look? He looks at where the family is. You know, it gives them the confidence to go further.” (Minority ethnic, primary, Aberdeen)

Thus, generating enthusiasm amongst children and encouraging them to get their parents along is an additional means of getting parents to attend school events especially amongst children of certain age groups.

In addition to the factors described above, involvement is also affected by different obstacles, hindrances and barriers, the details of which are discussed in chapter seven.

4.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the range of different types of parental involvement which have been grouped according to whether they are informal or formal, active or less active, at home or at school or some combination of each. Most parents are involved in some way by what

they do at home but many are unaware of the significance of home input. The greater the degree of commitment and time required in a given activity, the less likely are the majority of parents to get involved.

Key findings of this section are:

- Only a small proportion of parents get involved in active, formal activities which require significant input.
- Lack of time is highlighted as a reason for many parents not being more involved.
- Some parents are also put off by Disclosure Scotland checks, partly due to a lack of understanding of what these actually involve.
- Parents who are actively involved in school activities, do so primarily out of concern to do the best for their own child. Their main motivation is to keep track of what their own child is doing and get a more informed impression of the school and prior insights into issues that may affect their child.

This is a key message that can be taken forward by SEED in any marketing campaign to appeal to parents.

CHAPTER FIVE: PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION

This chapter discusses the forms of communication that are used between school and home, how effective each is considered to be and identifies specific problems that may be associated with certain forms of communication. This is followed by a discussion of how patterns of communication change as children progress through school, and information deficits that may be a consequence of communication break down at certain stages in the education process. Finally, the chapter discusses the particular information requirements that parents currently hold, indicating where there is scope for improvement.

The ways in which parents keep in touch with the school are significant as they have a direct impact on the quality and degree of involvement that parents have in the education of their children. Parents depend on effective channels of communication to know where and how they can be involved in school life, and to keep track of what is going on at school. Where channels of communication are not working effectively, involvement can be adversely affected.

5.1 CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION

There are many different communication channels between the school and the home. Some forms are generally considered to be more effective than others. Particular routes may work better in some schools than others, and certain modes of communication are favoured at particular stages in the education system.

The following chart summarises the principal modes of communication that exist at school, the level of effectiveness, specific problems associated and the stages of education where they are currently used most effectively. These are based on the views of parents themselves on which modes of communication are most effective, from their own experiences of using them. These are then discussed in greater detail overleaf, and the problems associated with each form of communication are highlighted.

Table 5.1 Summary chart: parents' perceptions of forms of communication

Form of communication	Level of effectiveness very good, good, fair or poor	Problems	Currently most effective at
Letters home	Good, if received	Pupils do not hand them on	Pre-School + Primary
Speaking to their children	Good, with certain age groups	Teenagers may be uncommunicative	Pre-School + Primary
Parent's evenings	Fair	Time limitation, Wrong time of year	All stages
Report Cards	Good	Not frequent enough, Wrong time of year	Pre-School, Primary + Secondary
Homework diaries	Good	Difficult to enforce at Secondary	Pre-School + Primary

Form of communication	Level of effectiveness very good, good, fair or poor	Problems	Currently most effective at
Phone calls/meetings	Very good		All stages
Newsletters	Fair	Irrelevant, do not contain pressing information	All stages
Notice boards	Fair	Not updated in some schools	Pre-School
When collecting children	Good	Requires teacher cooperation	Pre-School + Primary
Information evenings	Good	Not frequent enough	All stages
Surgeries outwith standard school hours	Good	Not widely spread There is a perception that teachers may not have the time	All stages, especially useful at Secondary
Careers meetings	Good	Parents not always invited	Secondary
PTA and School Board	Poor	Most parents do not participate	

Note that the level of effectiveness is based on our interpretation of the qualitative findings, and does not represent any quantifiable analysis. It should therefore be treated as a summary of the main reactions that we obtained during the focus groups and interviews.

Letters home with the pupil: This mode of communication is used at all stages in the education system but its reliability is variable. At primary school, parents will look into their children's school bags for any communication from the school, but once at secondary school some pupils do not pass on communication to their parents, or only pass on selected items. Some schools have successfully combated the problem by enforcing a tear off slip system which has to be signed by the parent and returned with the child the following day, or by mailing the most important communication. However, there are difficulties enforcing the tear off slip system in some schools, especially those which struggle to control the behaviour of their pupils and are not able to enforce the use of set procedures with great effectiveness, and the use of mail is costly.

By asking their children: Again, this strategy is most effective with children at certain ages, usually the pre-teenage years. Young children in pre-school or the early years of primary school may not be able to explain themselves very effectively. As such, often the response to asking what they did is 'I don't know' or 'I can't remember' and parents need to have some clues to be able to probe effectively to find out how certain specific activities went. When young people reach their teenage years they may be less willing to communicate with their parents and, therefore fail to keep them informed with what is going on at school. Many parents characterised communication with their teenage children as a series of grunts from which they had to deduce if things were going well or poorly. Verbal communication is a very important regular means of parents being involved in their child's education, but it can

take a degree of effort to make it work and there is a feeling amongst parents that the quality of what they learn is very variable. The method is also not foolproof as it is recognised that children can lie or exaggerate.

“You can approach the child, but it might be a pack of lies.” (parent with disabilities, secondary, Aberdeen)

Parents’ evenings. The majority of parents attend parents’ evenings which are usually held twice a year. Whilst recognised as a good opportunity to meet teachers and monitor progress, many parents feel that they are not frequent enough, nor are they held at the most useful time of year. Many state that they would rather know about any problems their children might be facing earlier in the school year in order to take steps to overcome them as soon they emerge. This was particularly important to parents whose children had just gone up to secondary school and who would like an opportunity to hear how their child had settled after a few weeks of attendance (as well as becoming more familiar with the school environment themselves).

Additionally, many parents complain that they do not have sufficient time with the teachers - the scheduled five minutes is often not enough time to discuss any problems their child might be facing and to learn what they are doing. Typically, they also have to wait in a queue for a long time to see each teacher and do not get individualised responses.

“I didn’t get to see half the teachers because the queues were horrendous. There were parents queuing up outside and talking for a good twenty minutes...and if you’ve got kids and you’ve got to get home you can’t do it... you’ve got to miss out a lot of teachers.” (silent majority, S1, C1C2, Highland)

Some parents also feel that the information they receive is not quite accurate or reflective of their own opinions about their child’s progress.

“Sometimes you think they are doing really well or they are not doing so well and you go up to parent’s night and you get a totally different story...my son will come home and he’ll say ‘I can’t do this’ or ‘I can’t do that’. You go up and the teacher says, ‘Oh, he’s doing really well!’ You think, ‘There’s something not right here.’” (silent majority, P4-7, C1C2, Dumfries)

Parents want more detailed information about their child’s progress than merely, “Fine” as they feel that there is always scope for improvement. This implies “average” performance that the teacher may find acceptable, but parents may have higher expectations of their child’s abilities and will want to find ways to offer appropriate encouragement. The outcome of the ‘everything’s fine’ response is that many parents feel they have wasted time in coming to the school as they have not really learned a great deal about their child. Furthermore, some parents leave such meetings thinking that they should not have attended in the first place and that the parents evening was really for those children / parents where there are problems – as their own meeting suggested that the teacher had nothing to say to them. One parent who has had four children going through the same secondary school has given up attending parent evenings for her third and fourth children on the basis that the same thing was said each year.

Some parents, who are not currently actively involved in the school reported that they felt “second class” because they were not on familiar terms with the teachers.

Several instances were reported where teachers had confused different pupils and reported to parents about someone else's child. This undermined the credibility of the whole concept. Parents who had experienced this did acknowledge the difficulties teachers faced in the current format.

Parents for whom English is not their first language were concerned that they got less out of parents evenings because the conversations were more difficult and pressure of time meant that they received less quality information. Interpretation services do not appear to be offered as standard by schools to those who might be needing it, although in special cases (such as asylum seekers and refugees) interpreters can be provided as part of general support services provided by the local authority.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, some parents find that such meetings are overly formal and prescribed, hindering really effective communication.

Report cards. These are also regarded as containing vital information about a child's progress, academic attainment and behaviour. Again it is felt that report cards would more effectively be provided earlier in the year to identify problems sooner. Monthly or termly progress reports which would supply continuous feedback to parents are also identified as desirable.

"Sometimes it's too late. What if the teacher says there's a major problem here, and they're about to do their Highers in two weeks time?" (parent with disabilities, secondary, Aberdeen)

There were also comments about report cards often being non committal as well and that it could be hard to deduce from the language used what the real opinion of the teacher was. There are often distinct differences in the level of detail by different teachers, which parents assume means that some teachers get to know their pupils better than others.

Homework diaries. These are diaries which contain details about the assignments for each subject and when they are due for completion. In some schools, pupils are expected to get their parents to sign the diary as evidence that they have completed the homework. The diary has space for teachers to write comments on a pupil's performance, for parents to read. Parents also have the opportunity to write messages back to the teacher if they so wish, though few use them in this way.

Homework diaries are not used in every school. They are generally regarded as a very useful way of maintaining communication between parents and teachers on progress, providing parents with an opportunity to draw the teacher's attention to any difficulties their child is having, or to ask questions and enabling them to keep track of homework and ensure their children complete it as required. However, in some schools homework diaries do not work as effectively as they could as they depend on both parents and teachers signing them each day and there is tendency for children, parents and teachers to get out of the habit of using them properly.

Phone calls/meetings. All parents with children at all stages in the education system are aware that they can ring up and speak to a teacher directly if necessary. Most do not have reservations about using this mode of communication if they need to and from their experience have found it to be a very effective way of communicating. This is generally regarded as a form of communication reserved for when there are specific issues or problems,

rather than for day to day communication. In addition, parents visiting the school to request a meeting can benefit from the same sort of flexible approach.

Newsletters. These provide information about past and forthcoming events that occur at the school. Some parents feel that newsletters are too late as sometimes they do not hear about an event until after it has occurred. Some feel that newsletters are rather bland and irrelevant, lacking the real information they need to know about.

“It’ll tell you who the captain of the hockey team is but (not) how your child is doing at school: that is my bottom line concern.” (parent with disabilities, secondary, Aberdeen)

Newsletters are often given to children to deliver to their home and this is one of the forms of written communication which often may not reach the parent. One school had adopted the practice of allowing parents to have newsletters posted home – with the parents paying a small sum for the service.

Notice board in playground. This is an important source of information for parents of younger age groups. Notice boards are used a great deal at nurseries or the early years of primary school and they enable parents to keep track of events at the school. They work because parents can read them when they are picking up their children at the end of the day. However, some parents complain that they are not kept up to date. Nurseries / pre-school establishments tend to be better at using this form of communication and use their notice boards as bulletin boards, updating them daily with a short list of the activities that the children have undertaken that day, or which are intended for the week ahead. These provide some of the important clues that parents need to be able to talk to their children about what they have been doing.

When picking children up. Most parents of children at pre-school and primary school have the opportunity to speak to the teacher informally whilst dropping off or collecting their child. This method of communication is valued as it enables continuous communication on a daily basis but it depends on the willingness and cooperation of the teacher to make themselves available in the school playground at the start and end of the day. However, this medium of communication does not work where parents have to wait outside the school gates for their children or they are not allowed into the playground and cannot get direct contact with teachers. This option does not exist when children move on to secondary school. Obviously such communication is limited by time constraints, but it does provide valuable chances to pass on key information and arrange a more in depth meeting.

Information evenings. Some schools have information evenings to inform parents about specific aspects of the education system or curriculum such as subject choices, qualifications, and exams. These meetings also tend to be used to introduce parents to a new school environment when children are about to commence pre, primary or secondary school. These types of events are particularly important at key transition points such as prior to entering secondary education, when making subject choices and so on. Where these exist, they are regarded as being useful sources of information enabling parents to visualise what is going on at the school. However, in some schools information evenings are not felt to be held frequently enough, or they are not held at all.

Surgeries outwith standard school hours. A small number of schools offer drop in surgeries outside school hours. These are held on a fairly frequent basis either fortnightly or

monthly. The particular drop in sessions that were described to us were intended to give parents an opportunity to talk directly with the Head Teacher, but it is equally possible that these could be expanded to classroom teachers too.

They are beneficial due to their flexible nature. There is no need for parents to make an appointment but they can drop in if they have a query or issue they need to bring up, meaning that problems can be dealt with as soon as they crop up, rather than delaying until parents' night. These are also useful for working parents who find it difficult to come to meetings at school during the day. However, some parents fear that teachers may be resistant to the introduction of such surgeries as they encroach on teachers' private time and it is generally felt that teachers already have heavy enough work loads and that this would be an additional burden that would not be welcomed.

Careers meetings. Each pupil has a number of careers meetings with the school careers adviser during their time at secondary school, to discuss plans for the future which will affect their subject choices at certain key stages. In some schools parents are invited to attend their child's careers meetings, but this is not universally the case. Many parents would like to be involved in these meetings due to the long term importance of issues discussed at them, and also to obtain a clear idea of the subjects required for particular career routes so that they can help their children make the most appropriate choice.

PTA and School Board. Membership of these bodies is a source of information as well as a form of parental involvement in school affairs. As discussed in greater detail in chapter seven, most parents are reluctant to play an active role in them. It should be noted additionally that some parents are not aware that they can attend meetings to voice their opinions or have subjects added to the agenda for discussion and some parents were even unsure if their school had these bodies or not. Therefore, the PTA and School Board are currently not regarded as useful mediums of communication with the school.

5.2 PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION

The next section reviews the factors that affect the efficiency of different forms of communication.

Age and stage

It is generally agreed that the lines of communication and the transfer of information between school and the home **decreases** in line with the child's age. There is a particularly marked transition between primary and secondary school, but as children progress on and through secondary school, there are greater barriers to the flow of information between school and home. This is partly due to the fact that young people tend to become less communicative with their parents as they get older. As one parent described it, conversation with their fourteen year old was reduced to a "...*Neanderthal grunt!*"

As there is growing resistance from young people to the presence of their parents at school events, they are less likely to inform them of activities that are going on at the school and may avoid passing on letters detailing events that they do not wish their parents to know about.

The relationship between home and the school also becomes more **formalised** as young people progress up to higher stages in education. At pre-school and in the early primary stages, parents have more opportunities to communicate with their child's teacher on an informal basis as they are in daily attendance, "settling" their child at school each morning and collecting them each afternoon. At secondary school there are fewer such informal opportunities and, therefore, there is greater dependency on formal communication such as letters home.

Most parents acknowledge that the changing character of communication is a normal and natural consequence of their children growing up and they respect their children's growing need for greater independence from parents and the home which results in a greater distancing of parents from school. Parents are sensitive to the needs of their children particularly as they enter their teenage years and recognise that their children prefer them to be more detached from their lives. There is also awareness that excessive interference could have a negative impact on their child, as a parent's presence at school can result in embarrassment within their peer group. Most parents aim to be sensitive to their children's own particular needs.

"I think with my son [there] is a degree of embarrassment if parents are either showing too much interest or being seen to be at school! Certainly, in primary 7, my son used to complain if I was to go the school, He would say 'Don't do that mum. I don't want you to make a scene' or whatever!" (silent majority, Dumfries, S2-4, ABC1)

There is a sort of detachment [when they go to secondary school]... They are becoming adults ...the kids themselves know that they are going to the big school now...They are becoming more independent ...and that's good... that's what you want for them isn't it?" (non silent minority, Dumfries, S1, C2DE)

Attitude of teacher

Some parents point out that the effectiveness of communication and the nature of their relationship with the school depends to a great extent on the personality of individual teachers. Some teachers are more approachable than others while some teachers are more committed to getting parents actively involved at the school.

"Not all teachers are that keen to accept parents' input. You can get the feeling that you are interfering." (parent with disabilities, secondary, Aberdeen)

Although it is standard practice for the parents of primary school aged children to communicate informally with the classroom teacher when collecting their child in most primary schools, the opportunity is not universal. Occasionally, parents point out that they find it extremely difficult to get access to their child's school class teacher as much as they would like to have this opportunity to communicate with them.

"The teachers stand at the top of the steps waiting to take the children in, but they do not come down to the playground, so we can't speak to them." (non silent minority, Dundee, P1-P3, C1C2)

Size of school

It is also recognised that the size of the school can have some impact on the effectiveness of communication and consequently the extent to which a sense of community is successfully fostered. Unsurprisingly, large schools tend to be more impersonal than small schools, whilst small schools have greater opportunities for informal personal communication. This is another factor accounting for the differences between primary and secondary. Likewise the size of a class is also a factor for consideration affecting the teacher's ability to know each child as an individual, and the quality and level of detail of information that is passed on at parents' night.

In rural communities there is a tendency for people to know each other more on a social level. Parents may know teachers outside the formal school environment and this can improve opportunities for communication.

5.3 INFORMATION DEFICITS

As we have seen, the different channels of communication have variable levels of effectiveness. Because of the problems associated with certain forms of communication, many parents do not currently have access to the level of information about aspects of the school life and their children's education that they feel would be desirable. This is particularly problematic for the parents of young people at secondary school because the lines of communication become increasingly less effective as children get older.

Many parents are not aware of alternative ways of accessing information, other than word of mouth, or by asking their child directly, but this is not a foolproof method.

A number of parents are consequently working on the basis of the assumption that "no news is good news." They have no option but to hope that the school will get in touch with them if there are any problems associated with their child's performance or behaviour at school. However, in some cases, the school has failed to inform parents of behavioural issues. For example, the school repeatedly failed to inform a foster carer that a child in his care was playing truant on a regular basis.

"A phone call would be handy. 'This is the school. Martin's not at school today. We've no idea where he is!' We are sometimes the last to know." (foster carer, secondary, Aberdeen).

Whilst some parents do not complain explicitly about this lack of information, others feel that this is problematic. Parents note that they are sometimes not aware of:

- **When children are being assessed and what the assessment criteria are**
- **Achievement and attainment levels of their children – either they do not understand the information given, they find it hard to interpret this as benchmark data is not provided, or they do not get the results at all**
- **Academic demands and homework requirements and whether or not they are being completed**
- **What is being taught and when**
- **Academic difficulties faced by their children**

- **Truancy or disciplinary issues**
- **Social events at the school**
- **Meetings and other opportunities for parental representation.**

This indicates a need for more effective forms of communication and better quality information.

5.4 GROUP SPECIFIC ISSUES IN COMMUNICATION

The parents in the specifically targeted groups also share the issues concerning communication discussed above. There are also additional issues specifically affecting foster carers, asylum seekers and refugees, Gypsies/Travellers, parents of children in a hostel and fathers or part time parents. These will now be discussed.

Foster carers

Foster carers have specific communication requirements due to the particular problems facing their foster children which include the following:

- Sporadic and shifting foster placements make it more difficult to keep track of a foster child's educational progress.
- The foster home may be geographically distant from the school attended by the foster child, as a result of the foster placements and this can make it harder for foster carers to have a day to day involvement in school affairs. They are more dependent on telephone communication.
- Teachers in the school may not be aware that a particular child is being fostered due to attempts to maintain confidentiality to avoid stigmatisation. This may mean that teachers fail to make allowances for specific complications faced by a foster child.
- Communication can be complicated by the continued involvement of a foster child's own parent. Children may visit their parents certain days of the week and information coming from the school on those days may be intercepted by the parent and never reach the foster home.
- Fostered children with troubled family histories tend to have greater behavioural problems. Truancy and drug related problems are issues that foster carers mention as being problematic amongst some of the children they foster, especially those at secondary school level. Consequently, there is often failure to complete homework and low levels of academic attainment amongst foster children. Because they may have behavioural problems, there is also a greater likelihood that they are marginalised in the classroom as most schools do not have the resources to give children with behavioural problems the continuous extra support and attention they require.

Because of these particular problems, foster carers are likely to require **additional** communication and contact with the school and the teachers, in order to more closely monitor the foster child's progress, behaviour, and to iron out problems as they arise.

There are special mechanisms in place to offer some form of additional support. Special meetings are held with foster carers and a range of personnel involved in the care and support of the foster child to discuss the child's needs and prospects particularly when settling the child in a new school. There can sometimes be as many as twelve personnel depending on the needs of the child ranging from the guidance teacher, social workers, local authority personnel, a psychologist and so on. As the foster child becomes more settled, the foster carer becomes the main point of contact with the school. There will also be formal fixed meetings with the foster carers over the long term, every six months or so.

Whilst some foster carers note that the school can be quite perceptive when there are problems, alerting them to problems as they arise, in other cases the mechanisms are not felt to be working as efficiently as they could. Whilst schools are deemed to be quite understanding and helpful, foster carers feel that the onus is on them to contact the school to ensure that no problems have arisen. Some foster carers note that the schools have failed to inform them of incidents of misbehaviour or truancy, and only by actively seeking feedback from the school do they learn of problems.

This indicates a need for greater flexibility in communication and greater efforts by schools to keep foster carers informed of incidents as soon as they occur. Like most parents, foster carers would also benefit from more information about the curriculum, assignments and exams.

Whilst foster carers often face more difficult sets of circumstances when it comes to the education of their charges, it is interesting that some foster carers note that the school treats them better in some ways. This is described as being different from how the school treats other parents, as foster carers are perceived to be less emotionally involved. Schools feel able to speak more bluntly and honestly about foster children. Moreover, some noted that it is easier to get feedback from the school about the foster children than their own children.

"I think they (the teachers) speak to you kind of differently- they know it's a job (for you). You're not personally involved- its more professional...to the point...they're not going around trying not to hurt your feelings." (foster carer, Fife, secondary)

"It's harder to get information about your own child. With foster children they are far more forthcoming because its part of your job." (foster carer, Fife, secondary)

Perhaps all parents would benefit from such frankness where teachers are not afraid to be completely honest about a problem or situation. Rather than teachers taking the "everything is fine" approach, suggesting that problems do not exist, parents would rather teachers worked to identify problems. This relates to a later finding that there may be a need for teachers to have some guidance on how to speak to and deal with parents.

Asylum seekers and refugees

Asylum seekers and refugees also face particular communication problems and have specific information requirements as newcomers to a country where they may not understand English, where the education system may be quite different from their own country and where they have limited rights of access to resources and services.

Although some asylum seekers and refugees speak English very well, the language issue can be a serious barrier to communication for those whose English is poor, and interpreters may be a requirement for some. This can slow down communication during parents' evenings and meetings at the school, and there is a need for additional time to be allocated to them to allow for this.

There can also be problems with written communication for those who cannot read or write English proficiently, indicating a requirement for communication in different languages. However, once they have learned English to a basic level, parents point out that they do not need communication in their own language so long as what they receive is in plain, accessible English.

Asylum seekers and refugees also have greater difficulty understanding how the entire education system operates, ranging from the curriculum, qualifications, subject choices and exams. There is often a lack of understanding of the different subject areas and the methods used to teach them bearing in mind that this may be quite different from their own culture. The lack of text books given with lessons makes this a greater difficulty to overcome as the parent can use text books to learn how a subject is being taught and then adopt the same approach themselves. Text books also help parents understand what else is being covered on the subject syllabus, but the fact that schools seem to use these less, or that pupils will be sharing them and do not get to take them home, has an impact on home support.

Although asylum seeker parents are able to access courses to help them learn about school subjects, due to their legal status they are not allowed to study beyond a basic level. Their children quickly surpass this stage, such that their parents are not able to help them any more.

The legal status of asylum seekers also affects their perceptions of the role that they can play in their children's education. Some asylum seekers spoke of being denied any choice in where their child attended schools – so that even basic needs such as attending a denominational school were not being met. This impacted on their propensity to volunteer to help at schools as there is a feeling that they do not have the same rights as others from the UK. In particular, these groups were unlikely to think themselves eligible for School Boards etc.

In summary, asylum seekers and refugees need more face to face contact with the school and more information about the education system, the curriculum and the subject areas being studied by their children. Day time meetings are also beneficial for those who are single parents, vulnerable to racial / other abuse, have difficulties with child care, or live in deprived areas and may not wish to go out alone in the evening.

Gypsies/Travellers

Gypsies/Travellers may also face barriers to information because high levels of illiteracy traditionally characterise this group. They may miss out on communication from the school, because they are unable to read it, or they may be delayed in accessing it if they are waiting for an opportunity to have a literate person read it for them.

Their mobile lifestyle also places challenges for continuity in information being received. Because their children tend to have irregular attendance, they may miss out on communication from the school, if they happen to be absent on the particular day that a letter is issued. This is particularly the case with regards to information that is only provided once

a year. For example school reports are issued once a year in the summer term, a time when Gypsy/Traveller families are often on the move. Switching schools will also result in a lack of continuity in feedback from any one teacher about progress and behaviour.

Gypsy/Traveller children often have breaks in their education which makes it difficult for teachers to keep track of what they have covered in the curriculum and to know where the gaps in their knowledge lie.

Gypsy/Traveller parents who themselves may not have had any formal education are not able to provide help with homework, even when their children are at an early stage in their education. This also means that Gypsy/Traveller parents are less familiar with the curriculum and the qualifications system. Because traditionally Gypsies/Travellers place a relatively low priority on education, they may not give their children the level of support and encouragement they require.

Like foster carers, the Gypsy/Traveller parents may require additional or special forms of communication to overcome the problem of social exclusion. More personal, face to face communication is also a requirement, and a level of understanding and patience of teachers is invaluable in schools that are local to Gypsy/Traveller sites. On some trailer sites, special provisions have been developed in the form of Traveller Education Units and specialist teachers who work one to one with Gypsy/Traveller children and where these exist they are working well. An example is provided in chapter nine.

Parents of children in a hostel

Particular communication issues may be faced by families who live at a distance from the school and whose children may have to live in a hostel⁸ during the week as is the case for a small number of families living in remote areas in the west coast and islands of Scotland and families whose children attend a national Centre of Excellence in music or dance. These problems are becoming less significant as very few children are accommodated in hostels these days.

There is a need for the lines of communication to be working effectively, as parents who are located at a distance find it much harder to keep track of what their children are doing both at school and during out of school hours, when they are the hostel's responsibility. Parents need to communicate with **both** the hostel **and** the school to know how their child is fairing, placing greater pressure on parents to make the effort to keep in touch.

At the transition between primary and secondary, parents report that although they are given detailed information in advance about the new school, the subjects and homework, they receive very little information about the hostel that their children are to be staying in, yet this is a very important aspect of their child's welfare.

In one area, the hostel is run as a separate establishment from the school and this can compromise the effectiveness of communication between the two environments. Parents feel that the teachers do not seem to maintain a relationship with hostel staff and do not aim to work together for the welfare of the children living in the hostel. In one case, the guidance teacher at the school did not know that a child was having problems with homesickness

⁸ At some independent schools, pupils are also accommodated in hostels but we did not speak to the parents of pupils residing in this type of hostel as our sample was primarily concerned with state sector education.

because it did not show up in his school work, and there was no formal way of the hostel informing the teachers of problems facing children whilst not at school.

In terms of communication, parents have to make the effort to travel **to** the school to visit teachers and so on, but teachers are not expected to travel to the parents to provide them with information. Parents in remote areas acknowledge that it could be useful for the teachers to visit them on occasion. There are also specific transportation issues and parents would appreciate having transportation laid on for them to enable them to attend parents' evenings and so on more easily. The suggestion of meeting the teachers at a half way point between their location and the school is also welcomed.

Others

We have commented already, that in multiple parent households, one parent often takes the lead responsibility for interaction with a school and that often this is the female figure in the household. However, fathers do get involved in school life and this is an increasing trend as parents share responsibility for pick up and drop off duties. Some parents reported, however, that fathers tend to be slightly marginalised by teachers and nursery leaders, simply through a lack of familiarity with male figures attending the school and, perhaps, a slight prejudice that the father will be less interested in what is going on. The main impact is in less verbal communication with the father.

Undoubtedly, this can be a temporary effect and with continued attendance and perseverance the situation can be equalised. The same situation will also impact on working mothers who may only visit a school to pick up or drop off a child sporadically and rely on grandparents and child minders etc to collect and deliver children. Because the parent is not a familiar face it can be difficult for staff at the establishment to make contact and pass on information. Furthermore, parents can suffer from a break in the chain of communication when information is passed on to others who may not report it back to the parent at the end of the day. Nurseries and primary schools that rely on verbal communication need to be sensitive to these issues and find other channels of communication above and beyond those accessible to regular and known attendees.

5.5 CONCLUSION

There are many different channels of communication which are exploited at different times for different purposes. As the preceding discussion demonstrates, some forms work more effectively than others. The effectiveness of any communication is affected by a range of factors including the age and stage of children, the type of school attended and the attitudes of teachers.

There are some barriers to effective communication and this means that important information sometimes does not reach parents. This is especially problematic for parents of older children as the transfer of information is less efficient as children get older. Certain socially excluded groups also face specific problems in obtaining information for a range of reasons which have been discussed above.

The research clearly indicates a need for information to be more effectively communicated to parents, particularly the parents of secondary school aged children and parents facing particular circumstances to overcome current information deficits. The following chapter

identifies the particular information requirements that parents have and discusses channels of communication that can be used to meet these needs most effectively.

CHAPTER SIX: INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS AND HOW BEST TO MEET THEM

In general there is a need for more information, and for information to be provided at more appropriate times. Listed below are particular types of information and feedback that parents consider to be important together with suggestions for the mediums of communication that are most suited to meet these needs and the time of the school year that they would be most useful. The details and benefits of each medium of communication are discussed in greater detail in chapter seven. This chapter also identifies factual information about the impact of the home and parental input on levels of achievement which can be exploited in any publicity campaign intending to encourage improved levels of parental involvement.

6.1 INFORMATION REQUIREMENTS

Continuous feedback

Many parents like to receive ongoing feedback to reassure them that their child is doing well and not encountering problems. They do not want to hear only when there are difficulties. This is especially important for the parents of younger children. At pre-school and the early years of primary school, the need for daily informal communication with the class teacher is emphasised. In most nurseries and primary schools there are various mechanisms for communication to occur on a daily basis and these appear to work well. However, the parents of older children would also like to have more continuous feedback and there is a need for change here.

The best methods of providing information to parents of this nature is by using:

- **Year planners:** most effectively distributed **at the start of the year**
- **Homework diaries:** throughout the year
- **Parents' evenings:** held in the middle of every school term
- **Regular reports:** on a monthly basis
- **Surgeries:** on a regular basis.

Immediate feedback

Parents also wish to be informed immediately if there are any issues or problems concerning their child so that they can take action to overcome them as soon as possible. By being regularly informed about a child's behaviour at school, and being told instantly about any disciplinary issues, parents can take steps to discipline their children at home and "nip it in the bud".

"I will ask the teacher how he was at the end of the week and if he has not been good, then we will take away his football training on Saturday morning." (non silent minority, P1-3, C1C2, Dundee)

Similarly, parents are extremely concerned about potential problems of bullying and drugs, and want to be informed immediately if their children are suffering problems relating to these

issues. Parents whose children have suffered these problems have not always got to know about them as quickly as they would have liked.

Parents also like to be informed of any planned changes that could affect their child, for example, a new teacher or a change of class.

The best way of providing information to parents of this nature is by utilising:

- **Phone calls:** as and when required
- **Face to face communication:** informal meetings or at drop in sessions
- **Text messaging:** as and when required, if preferred by parent
- **Email:** as and when required, if preferred by parent
- **Letters:** as and when required, for less urgent issues
- **Home school link workers:** as and when required, targeted where needed
- **Surgeries:** on a regular basis.

Information about key transition points

It is particularly important for parents to have information at key transition points in their children's education. Parents often find the period when their child is entering primary school for the first time to be quite traumatic. They are concerned that their child will be looked after properly, therefore, they wish to have the greatest possible information on the environment that their child will be entering. It is essential to meet and develop a close relationship with the prospective primary 1 school teacher before their children enter primary school.

"I was desperate to meet each teacher that my son had. I find it bizarre that you are handing over this most precious person in the whole world to a complete stranger you know nothing about." (non silent minority, P1-3, C1C2, Dundee)

Similarly, the move from primary to secondary is also stressful.

"I think we [parents] need more help during that transitional period from the last year of primary school to the first year of secondary...they expect them to make that jump...but [they] aren't mature enough to deal with it." (non silent majority, S1, C2DE, N Ayrshire)

On the whole, schools have developed excellent transitional procedures where children and parents visit the school and meet the teacher in the preceding months. However, some parents report that some schools are not able to tell them which teacher their children will be getting nor which class their child will be in. This can cause anxiety. Parents wish to forge bonds with the prospective teacher as soon as possible and both parents and their child are keen to know if their child will be in the same class as some of their friends from nursery.

This type of information is most effectively provided by utilising:

- **Information evenings** - held a couple of weeks before a particular change or event is about to take place
- **Summary handouts** - distributed at the information evenings for parents to refer to, or sent to parents who are not present at the information evening

- **Online** - post on the school website at the same time as the information evenings
- **Surgeries** - on a regular basis.

Information about how children learn

Parents also wish to have information about the learning process and the teaching methodologies that teachers use at different stages in their education, so that they can fit in what they do at home around what teachers are doing at school. Whilst this **may** be provided at primary school level, this type of information is, on the whole, not provided at later stages. Many parents would like to be informed on teaching methodologies at **all** stages of the education system.

Again, this type of information is most effectively provided utilising:

- **Information evenings** - held before the start of the new term
- **Summary handouts** - distributed at the information evenings for parents to refer to, or sent to parents who are not present at the information evening
- **Online** - post on the school website at the same time as the information evenings
- **Surgeries** - on a regular basis.

The curriculum, subject choices and homework

Parents also wish to have information about the curriculum, the subject areas that their children will be studying and the demands that will be placed on their children in the forthcoming year. This is to enable them to keep track of what their children are doing at school, to enable them to assess their own children's progress, to enable them to tailor home activities around the school calendar and to have some ability to help their children select subjects that are appropriate to their career plans.

"I would have liked more information on the curriculum and about the subjects they are doing". (non silent majority, S5 - post-school, BC1C2, Highland)

As noted in chapter four, parents also want clear information about homework i.e. when and how frequently their children will have homework and what it will consist of. Some parents complain that they also find it difficult to keep track of and assist with homework because children do not get the text books home with them, but have isolated worksheets. This makes it hard for parents to contextualise the particular task that has been set or to have access to explanations or examples which are provided in the text book.

"It would be useful to have an explanation of what they (their children) are doing and what you can do to help. If they're doing a project or whatever and they come home and they've got to find out about something... not everybody's got access to the internet. They don't always know what they're supposed to do. Sometimes they come home and they don't know where to get the information to write about". (silent majority, P1-3, C2DE, Aberdeen)

Again this type of information can be provided utilising:

- **Information evenings** - held before the start of each term.
- **Summary handouts** - distributed at the information evenings for parents to refer to, or sent to parents who are not present at the information evening.
- **Online** - post on the school website at the same time as the information evenings.
- **Surgeries** - on a regular basis.

Information about career planning

Parents generally wish to be informed about the direction that their children are taking and the long term planning relating to prospective careers. In some schools parents are invited to careers meetings but this is not always the case.

This type of information can be provided by inviting parents to attend careers meetings of their children and by providing some background careers information at the beginning of term enabling parents to prepare themselves appropriately.

- **Including parents in careers meetings** - so that parents can hear about their children's options and plans.
- **Information evenings** - held before the start of each term.
- **Summary handouts** - distributed at the information evenings for parents to refer to, or sent to parents who are not present at the information evening.
- **Online** - post on the school website at the same time as the information evenings.

Issues or problems facing the school

Parents also wish to be informed if the school is facing specific challenges or problems (for example, drug problems, and bullying) and, even more significantly, they wish to know if actions are being taken to overcome these.

This type of information is most effectively provided utilising:

- **Phone calls** - to inform parents immediately.
- **Face to face communication** - parents should be brought in for meetings as soon as a problem is evident.

Suggestions to more effectively meet parental information requirements are offered in chapter eight.

6.2 STYLE OF LANGUAGE AND TERMINOLOGY

Another aspect of communication concerns the style of language that is used by schools in their communication with parents. Parents dislike language that is excessively formal or verbose and certain styles of language are considered to be patronising.

Parents dislike having the obvious stated. If they feel that they are *already doing* a lot to support their children, such as asking them about their day, they will understandably be insulted by any insinuation that they are not good parents, for example, by telling them to,

“Ask your children about their day.” The latter part of the above example implies that parents are not doing these simple things when in fact, most parents do these things without even thinking that they constitute some special effort to improve their children’s education.

“I would be insulted if someone told me what I should do, you know?” (non silent majority, S5- post- school, ABC1, Aberdeen)

Similarly, the term “parenting skills” implies that there is a need for parents to learn how to do their fundamental parenting role. It would be more sensitive to describe such classes as “home activities” or “what to do at home” or use the subject to define the title such as “how we teach mental sums” etc.

6.3 HARD HITTING MESSAGES THAT WORK

There are also certain messages about learning and achievement that make parents sit up and take notice. These include statistical findings about the types of activities that have a significant impact on learning and achievement. These often include activities that parents may not have assigned any great importance to. These messages can play an important part in any educational campaign to stimulate better parental involvement.

We mentioned the following key facts to parents during the groups and interviews and there was often a great deal of surprise at the degree of significance that these types of activities have. The facts of how children learn, the age at which they learn and who children learn from are food for thought for many parents. Some parents also regard these facts as quite depressing as they reinforce how difficult it is for children who come from deprived family backgrounds, and who have missed on these opportunities as young children, to catch up. This view is evident amongst foster carers in particular because they often care for children who have come from deprived family backgrounds where they have not have the opportunity to develop the necessary basics from an early stage.

For example, parents are surprised to learn the degree of language that is already in place by the time a child goes to school.

85% of the language we use as adults is in place by the time we are five years old and 50% is in place by the time we are three years old.

Parents do not realise the degree of significance of home compared with school on the levels of achievement of their children at this stage.

Most differences in achievement by 14 year olds in English, Maths and Science is due to home influences rather than school differences.

Whilst most parents are aware of a requirement to support their children’s reading at home, especially during the primary school years, few are aware of the real significance of this activity.

When parents are actively involved in home reading schemes their children’s reading scores at home improve, on average, by between 12-18 months.

Again, homework is not perceived to carry this degree of importance.

Doing homework regularly through their years at school has roughly the same benefit as an extra year's schooling.

Parents are somewhat surprised and alarmed to learn the limited amount of time spent in formal educational environment and with this comes the realisation that a great deal of learning must occur out-with the classroom, and moreover that valuable learning opportunities outside school may not be being exploited adequately due to an assumption that schooling in itself is sufficient.

Between the ages of 5-16 children only spend 15% of their time in school.

This aspect of the research indicates that parents hold assumptions about how children learn and which environments have the greatest impact on learning which are not at all accurate and these assumptions do nothing to encourage greater involvement on their part. These notions can be challenged by drawing parents' attention to the significance of many different types of support in the home, as detailed above. With the realisation of the importance of their role, many parents are likely to take steps to change the current levels of involvement.

6.4 CONCLUSION

It is clear that parents value particular types of information at particular times of the school year. For example, feedback on academic progress and behaviour which is currently provided in the form of parents' evenings and report cards is required both earlier in the school year and more frequently. Thus, the appropriate timing of certain information is important. Another crucial requirement regarding the timing of information is for parents to be informed of important issues, problems and events **in advance** so that they have plenty of time to prepare for them.

The variability amongst contemporary Scottish families in terms of personal, economic, social and employment circumstances means that there are widely varying preferences about the format and style of information and the most ideal way of communicating it. This indicates a need for maximum flexibility, providing information by a variety of channels, enabling parents to utilise that which is most effective for them, in a language that is accessible. For example email might suit some but not all parents. It could be introduced as an optional medium to be used by those who wish it, whilst letters continue to go to those who do not wish to use email. Some parents have greater dependence on telephone as a medium of communication, for example, those who are distantly located from the school. In essence, schools could agree communication plans with individual families to ensure that key information is provided by the most appropriate means. Communication works best where it meets local expectations.

Hard hitting messages are also very important in drawing parents' attention to the importance of their input. By helping parents to better understand how critical their actions can be, and what they need to do, they will be more likely to take steps to get more actively involved in different ways in their children's education.

There is scope for improvements to be made to the content, format and timing of information as well as channels by which it is communicated to parents. These are discussed in chapter eight.

CHAPTER SEVEN: BARRIERS TO PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

*This chapter discusses the range of factors that parents identify as limiting their ability to get better involved in different aspects of their children's education. These factors range from limitations caused by **external** barriers that are beyond parents' control and **individual** obstacles, specific to a person's life circumstances. External barriers include those that exist at the school. Individual obstacles are a result of an individual's social and economic situation such as poverty, work patterns or social exclusion, as well as their own personal assumptions about what parental roles should consist of.*

The chart below summarises the different types of barriers to involvement that parents perceive. This is followed by further discussion about each of these barriers.

Table 7.1 Summary chart: barriers to parental involvement

Area	Type of Barrier	Details
Challenges to involvement at home	Lack of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Especially working and/or single parents • More than one child • Children need time to relax after school.
	Children's attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resistance in preference of leisure activities.
	Parental knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents lack knowledge about subject curriculum and teaching methodology • Parents lack provision of guidance on how to help and support learning at home.
Challenges to active involvement outside the home	Lack of time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Especially working and/or single parents • Preference to spend quality time with children • Weekly commitment considered too much.
	Child care arrangements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Especially working and/or single parents
	Fear of negative consequences for child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make young child too dependent • Embarrassment for an older child could lead to teasing or even bullying.
	Parental attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Not my job." • "My partner deals with school."
	Safety implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents lack special training • Implications of responsibility for other people's children • Put off by Disclosure Scotland checks.
	Barriers perceived to be created by school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents feel they are not convinced or informed of what they can do • Lack of opportunities offered by school • Infrequency of social events • Lack of opportunity for low levels of commitment • Teachers not always as welcoming as they could be

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical barriers such as locked gates, entry phones, poorly signed main entrance.
	Resistance of parents to formal groupings such as PTA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Parents feel they do not fit in Perceived to be dominated by the same people Intimidated by public speaking Feel that their views are likely to be ignored Perceived to be formal and boring.
Specific barriers faced by some families	Asylum seekers and refugees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Barriers to social integration due to discrimination and stigmatisation Lack knowledge on local systems and may not know where to get information Tend to be housed in deprived areas where links between school and community are poor.
	Gypsies/Travellers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less integrated into local community due to mobile lifestyle Cultural boundaries maintained Fear of discrimination Relaxed attitude towards education; secondary school not considered important.
	Foster carers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confidentiality requirement limits involvement Distance from school.
	Parents with disabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May impact on mobility or ability to function reducing willingness to commit to regular involvement.
	Parents remotely located from school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Transport requirement and time for travel.

7.1 CHALLENGES TO INVOLVEMENT AT HOME

Parents note that despite their best intentions to support children at home, it can be very challenging to provide as much support as they would like for the following reasons:

Time issues

- There is not enough time to devote to every child (especially in families with more than one child).
- Parents who work are particularly short of time.
- Some parents feel that as children have been at school all day, they need time for relaxation.

Children's attitudes

- Children resist homework/educational activities in favour of playing/going out with their friends/ watching TV etc; for some parents, getting children to do homework is a constant battle.

Parental knowledge

- Parents feel they lack knowledge of the subject areas and the larger curriculum making it difficult for them to help with homework, especially as children get older because they do not understand themselves or because different methods or approaches are now used compared with when they were at school. They fear that they could confuse their children if they try to help them.
- Lack of skills or guidance about teaching methodology and what parents should do to help their children learn at home at different stages.

7.2 CHALLENGES TO ACTIVE INVOLVEMENT OUTSIDE THE HOME

There are a number of factors that prevent parents from becoming more actively involved in activities in support of their child's education outside of the home. Some come under the same broad categories as identified above and these are discussed below:

Lack of time

Most parents emphasised that they lack sufficient free time to involve themselves in a regular commitment whether this be formal or informal in nature. This is especially difficult for households where both parents work, or single parent households. Parents also emphasise their desire to spend quality time with their **own** children at home at evenings and weekends rather than attending meetings at the school. Parents point out that a weekly commitment, for example, was simply too much for them to manage thus ruling out activities such as extra curriculum coaching activities or offering classroom help.

Child care arrangements

Parents often require child care arrangements should they commit themselves to involvement in activities outside school time. This is pointed out as a difficulty faced by many parents and is especially problematic for single parents or parents who are working. This also places an additional financial burden on parents.

Fear of negative consequences for their children

Some parents express concern that too much involvement in their child's education could have a detrimental effect, either by making their child appear different from their classmates or by making their child too dependent upon them. There are differing implications for children depending on their age. At primary school level, parents are aware that their presence in the child's school or classroom could make it difficult for their child to learn to be independent from them. At secondary school level, there is a fear that their children would be embarrassed to see their parent(s) at school or that they could be teased or bullied

as a result of it within their peer group. There is also often active resistance on the part of their children to parental presence in or near the school.

Parental attitudes

- **“Not my job.”** Some parents feel that active involvement and assistance is beyond the call of duty. It is seen as the responsibility of the school and the teachers to educate their children during the hours that their children are at school and with some it will be difficult to change this deeply engrained assumption.
- **“My partner deals with the school.”** Some parents offer the fact that their partner takes the greater responsibility for their children’s education, as a reason for their own lack of involvement.

Safety implications

Some parents pointed out that they lack the skills and training to look after or teach children. There are implications associated with being responsible for other parents’ children when helping at extra curriculum activities or school trips. The media hype surrounding child abuse incidents in recent years, has led to a real awareness of the requirement to go through the Disclosure Scotland checks before being permitted to work with children. Correspondingly, there is also awareness that other parents may not wish their children to be in the care of an untrained stranger which also contributes to a general lack of interest in helping out on school events. Again this is a perception more associated with secondary school than primary schools where parents and children tend to come from smaller catchment areas and have more opportunity to get to know each other.

Barriers created by the school

There are a number of ways in which schools are perceived to place barriers in the face of parents, thus discouraging them from greater involvement.

- **Failure to convince or inform parents of what they can do**

Many parents are simply not aware of where their help is required because the school has not advertised the opportunities adequately. Although some schools send out letters at the start of the year explaining the types of activity that parents can be involved in, this does not happen in every school. Similarly, many individuals are more likely to agree to participate in an activity if they are asked directly and personally to do a specific thing. There is also an assumption by some that other parents will do it, so there is no need for them to.

Similarly, parents are not adequately convinced that the skills they utilise in their jobs or daily lives can be transferred or are of relevance in the learning environment. The school could do more to appeal to their skills by illustrating how these are transferable.

- **Lack of opportunities offered by the school**

There is variability in the number and range of opportunities for parents to take a more active role in school activities, when different schools are compared. Some schools offer

very few opportunities to engage parents in active involvement. Indeed, some parents are eager to be active participants at the school, helping in the classroom and playground, yet the chances to actually do so are few and far between at the particular school attended by their child.

“I volunteered to go in every day between three and half past to help with after school activities and I was refused. It was only considered appropriate for one of the supply teachers to look after the children for half an hour, not a parent.” (non silent minority, P1-3, C1C2, Dundee)

- **Infrequency of social events**

There are also variations between schools with regards to the frequency of social events, bringing parents into the school in a relaxed and informal way. As one parent comments of her child’s primary school,

“They could do with more big events in the school year when parents get more involved. There could be four sporting events a year, and other social events in addition to what they do at Christmas.” (non silent minority, P1-3, C1C2, Dundee)

- **Lack of opportunities for low levels of commitment**

There is a lack of opportunities for parents to take on low amounts or infrequent forms of commitment which would suit parents with time limitations. Many parents state that a weekly commitment is too much for them, but that they would consider a level of involvement that was less demanding on time such as monthly or termly. However, many schools are not sufficiently flexible to enable variable levels of commitment to suit the differing needs of the parent body.

“I think a lot of people would do something monthly, but are scared if they put their foot forward they could be tied into doing something weekly and that would be too much for them”. (non silent minority, P1-3, C1C2, Dundee)

- **Attitudes of some teachers**

There is also variation within schools in terms of the attitudes of different teachers. In some instances, teachers are not as welcoming as they could be and do not encourage parents to be more involved. There is a sense amongst parents that some teachers are too busy and would rather parents did not interfere.

“The teachers did not really encourage it much...I always think it is a hassle factor for the teachers. They think very carefully about any approach or new suggestion because they have to think two steps ahead and consider how much trouble it will cause them.” (non silent minority, P1-3, C1C2, Dundee)

In contrast however, there are also reports of teachers who make a significant effort to get parents involved by organising a range of activities that bring parents into the school or by encouraging parents to take on active roles helping out in various ways at school. These are described in chapter nine.

- **Physical barriers**

Some parents also noted that they have to overcome physical barriers at the school before they can get into the building to speak to the teacher or participate. Nearly all schools now have an entry phone system, due to concerns for child safety, but in some cases this may not be answered very quickly. Parents find themselves behind closed doors or gates awaiting permission to enter. It is also sometimes difficult to find the main entrance to the school that should be used by visitors, as it may not be clearly flagged on all sides of the school and some schools have more than one entrance point.

While most parents would agree that this is not a deliberate attempt to exclude them from school grounds, it can appear unwelcoming to parents.

Resistance of parents to formal groupings

There are a number of issues associated with membership of the PTA and the School Board. For the most part, parents are extremely resistant to getting involved in such bodies. There are many negative connotations associated with these bodies which are described as “closed”, “elitist”, “cliquey” and “formal”. There are also negative perceptions of the other parents who are members. Parents express the following reasons for their lack of interest in involvement:

- **“I am not that type of person.”** Many parents feel that they are not the right type of person to be on a committee of this type and that they are unable to identify with the other members.
- **“It’s always the same people.”** There is a sense that these bodies are dominated by some people. Parents are aware that in some areas the same people are re-elected year after year, and this leads to an assumption that the committee is not willing to accept new members.

“Oh some of the people who go to them, quite honestly, over-involved... it’s a certain kind of person who wants to do it and they’ve always done it. It’s always the same names. Even some of those whose children have left school. They’re still on the PTA you know.” (silent majority, P4-P7, C1C2, Dumfries)

- **“I don’t like speaking in public.”** Many parents feel very intimidated by the thought of involving themselves in these formal bodies because they believe that they would be required to stand up and speak in front of other people. They also feel that they do not have the skills or knowledge required to be able to contribute usefully.
- **“My opinions will be ignored.”** Many parents feel that there is no point in attending PTA meetings to voice an opinion as they feel that the committee members have already made their decision and their suggestions would not be taken into account. Moreover, there are many parents who are not aware that these meetings are open to anyone who wishes to come along, nor that they can have items placed on the agenda and that they are an opportunity for parents to voice their views and have a means of representation.
- **“Too formal and boring.”** Parents perceive such meetings to be of little interest to them and to be overly formal in structure.

In one group discussion it emerged that parents with children at the same school faced a problem with bullying but due to a lack of mechanisms for them to work collectively, they were not aware that others were in the same situation, and therefore had not come together to deal with the problem by some form of collective action. This indicates that parents may lack the opportunities to organise their own informal groupings even if these might suit their needs more appropriately, such as dealing with shared problems.

This, coupled with the lack of interest in existing, formal mechanisms, means that the majority of parents are disenfranchised and have very little influence in school affairs.

7.3 SPECIFIC BARRIERS FACED BY SOME FAMILIES

The parents in specifically targeted communities also face the same types of barriers as other parents. Certain groups of parents, namely asylum seekers and refugees, Gypsies/Travellers, foster carers, parents with disabilities, and parents remotely located from school also identified barriers specific to their group. These are discussed below.

Asylum seekers and refugees

Asylum seekers face barriers to social integration due to their political status which places restrictions on their right to work and on the resources they can access. Asylum seekers and refugees find themselves in situations of poverty, and may suffer discrimination or stigmatisation. As newcomers they face language barriers. They lack knowledge on how local systems operate and very often they do not know where to go to access information. These factors combined result in extreme social exclusion and isolation.

Asylum seeker and refugees are likely to be housed in socially deprived housing estates, where the local schools face greater challenges to generate a strong sense of community and lack the resources to offer extra curricular activities. The families in the area are less likely to be involved in school activities because of the social problems and levels of deprivation they suffer. However, asylum seekers and refugees are frequently in greatest need of school activities and a strong community involvement to help them to overcome social exclusion, meet other members of the local community and obtain a better quality of life. There is a definite need for additional community facilities to be provided in areas where large numbers of asylum seekers and refugees are based. This would enable asylum seekers and refugees from different cultural backgrounds facing challenges as newcomers to the country, to develop friendships with each other and a much needed support network and community. The development of a multi cultural community locally would help to support the development of stronger relationships between families and the local school in deprived areas.

Gypsies/Travellers

Some of the aspects of the Gypsy/Traveller lifestyle that were discussed in chapter five that affect the receipt of information, also have an impact on Gypsy/Traveller's involvement in school activities. For example, the mobile lifestyle also makes it difficult for families to become integrated into the school community and to get to know teachers and other parents. Cultural factors also limit the extent to which Gypsies/Travellers wish to integrate into the local community. Gypsies/Travellers maintain cultural boundaries between their own

community and the larger world and they are wary of excessive contact with the world outside the Gypsy/Traveller community.

Gypsies/Travellers also suffer social exclusion and sometimes encounter discrimination by the larger society and this discourages them from getting closely involved in events at the school where they would have to interact with parents from outside their community. Even if discrimination is not suffered, there is constant fear that it could occur. Bullying, or the fear of bullying, is frequently stated as the main reason Gypsy/Traveller parents feel the need to extract their children from a school, or do not send their children to secondary school.

That said, Gypsies/Travellers have a fairly relaxed attitude to education and this affects the extent to which they are integrated into the community of the school or get involved in school affairs. Most parents are keen for the children to complete primary school education in order to obtain basic literacy and numeracy as it is recognised that these skills are required for the modern Gypsy/Traveller life. However, secondary school is not considered to be particularly important and very few Gypsy/Traveller children proceed beyond primary 7. By this stage, other priorities take precedence. Boys are expected to go out with their fathers to learn the skills required to earn money. Girls are expected to prepare for marriage and stay at home. Therefore, any participation that happens will occur only at primary school level.

Foster carers

Foster carers also may find it difficult to get involved for reasons specific to their circumstances. As mentioned in chapter five, it is often not widely known that a child is fostered, which means that foster carers may not wish to get very involved in case they breach the child's confidentiality. Foster homes are sometimes far away from the school, as a child may stay at their original school even if they change foster homes, making it difficult for foster carers to have day to day involvement. Transport assistance could, therefore, be of particular use to foster carers.

Parents with disabilities

On the whole, the parents with disabilities that we spoke to do not regard their disability to be a significant barrier to their involvement in school affairs except where the disability might affect physical well-being or their ability to function. In these cases, the disability might be a reason used to explain a reluctance to offer a weekly commitment, or failure to attend meetings at schools.

Parents remotely located from school

Parents who live at a distance from school, whose children live in a hostel also face greater difficulties getting actively involved in school events simply because of the distance at which they are located from the school. These parents point out that even just attending a parents' evening requires several additional hours travel time and it would certainly be more challenging for them to be involved in school activities on a more regular basis. Parents meetings are often more effort than they are worth because the information that they get when they arrive is quite limited.

“To have a long winter's drive to hear the teacher say, ‘Oh, he's really great and he's got no problems.’ There's not much point.” (parent with children in a hostel, silent majority, Secondary, Highland).

As mentioned in chapter five in the discussion about communication issues, parents in remote parts of Scotland could benefit from transportation assistance and child care facilities due to the distances they must cover to get to the school. Parents who have more than one child at the same school would also find it more useful to attend a single parents' night when they can discuss all children together rather than having to travel to a separate event for each child. One further suggestion would be for key staff to make visits to more remote communities and allow the parents to meet them there at a local hall, for example.

7.4 CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the factors that affect the ability of parents to get more actively involved in their children's education both at home and at the school. These cover socio-economic circumstances faced by some families, the assumptions and attitudes held by some parents, and specific barriers that exist at the school. The next chapter offers a range of different ways of overcoming these barriers.

CHAPTER EIGHT: IMPROVING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

This chapter discusses a range of different ways of improving parental involvement both by overcoming some of the communication problems identified in chapter five and overcoming the barriers to involvement described in the previous chapter. Some of these suggestions are already being used in some schools with great success and are identified here as they could be adopted by other schools.

This chapter also indicates parental views on a variety of suggested approaches, thus identifying the types of changes that parents wish to see and the extent to which various suggestions are likely to promote change.

The following table summarises suggestions for improving communication and parental involvement incorporating both best practice examples that exist in some schools, have been found to work well, and which could be rolled out to other schools, and other new ideas and suggestions.

Column 1 summarises the suggested actions. Column 2 summarises the problem that this action will tackle. Column 3 summarises the time of year that this type of information or action would be most usefully provided, where relevant.

The actions are divided into five principal areas. These are:

- Improving communication
- Improving parental input at home
- Practical solutions to aid participation
- Overcoming perceived barriers at schools
- Improving parental representation.

These are then discussed in greater detail below.

Table 8.1: Summary chart: suggestions for improving communication and parental involvement

Actions	Area tackled	Parents' views on timing and frequency
To improve communication		
Year planners	Provide information about academic demands, exams and homework requirements in advance	Start of the year with updates at the start of each term
Homework diaries	<p>Enable parents to keep track of homework requirements and whether their children are satisfying them</p> <p>Enable parents and teachers to communicate informally and identify problems immediately</p>	Weekly correspondence from the start of the school year onwards

Actions	Area tackled	Parents' views on timing and frequency
Information evenings	Keep parents informed on curriculum, subjects, systems of assessment, key transitional stages etc	In the term preceding a transitional stage or significant event (eg first year at primary or secondary; prior to exam stages etc)
Frequent progress reports	Provide feedback on a regular basis Pin point problems as soon as they occur	Once a month
Email	Offer an additional means of frequent, immediate communication that is easy to use Especially useful for working parents	Immediate response to queries or to inform parents of problems
Supplying information on line	Additional source of information for parents with access to computer resources Increasing flexibility of information provision	Ongoing with specific information provided at certain times of year
Surgeries	Increase opportunities for regular feedback to parents Greater flexibility to meet working parents needs	Regularly (weekly / monthly)
Hold parent's night more regularly	Increase opportunities for more frequent feedback	Twice a term (middle and end of term)
Home school link workers	Assist the flow of information between school and home for parents with children facing specific problems or needs	As and when required Targeted at families in specific need e.g. those suffering social exclusion
To improve parental input at home		
Provide guidance to parents on how to support learning	Improve parental support at home	At the start of the year, corresponding to year planner
Develop activities and materials for use at home	Improve parental support at home	Provide at the start of each term

Actions	Area tackled	Parents' views on timing and frequency
Practical solutions to aid participation		
Improve child care arrangements	Enable parents to attend meetings and events	Arranged in line with meetings, events at school etc
Provide transportation where needed	Enable parents who are remotely located from school or who live in socially deprived or high crime areas to attend meetings etc	Arranged in line with meetings, events at school etc
Make teachers available outside standard school times	Increase flexibility Meet needs of working parents	On a weekly basis
To overcome perceived barriers at school		
Increase opportunities for parents to help in different ways	Encourage parental involvement	Termly planning
Appeal to parents' skills	Convince parents of their ability to offer help	Information at the beginning of each year/term
Clarify safety and confidentiality requirements	Overcome misconceptions about Disclosure Scotland	Information at the start of the year
Clarify opportunities and inform parents of them	Keep parents informed of what they can do	Information at the beginning of each year/term
Develop opportunities for more flexible forms of involvement	Flexible involvement options	Ongoing
Hold casual social events	Improve sense of community	Twice a term
Develop and use additional community facilities	Improve sense of community	Weekly events
Modify style and tone of language used to communicate with parents	Avoid danger of offending or alienating parents	Ongoing
To improve parental representation		
Deformalise and broaden membership of School Boards	Make the School Boards more attractive and increase participation	N/A
Develop alternative forms of parental representation eg informal discussion forums		Termly
Consultation exercises		Termly

8.1 IMPROVING THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION

As chapter five identified, there is scope for improvements in channels of communication to more effectively supply parents with the type and volume of information they require at particular stages in their children's education. Parents have identified a clear need for more information on a more regular basis at all stages. A key finding of chapter five was that traditional and current communication channels are most effective at the earlier stages in the educational spectrum but effectiveness drop off as children progress. Certain mechanisms that are already being used in pre-school and primary school, and that are proven to work well, could be usefully reintroduced at later stages in the education system. Indeed, parents of secondary school children reacted positively when we told them about practices that are currently being used at pre-school and primary school. Two such examples are the **year planner** that the majority of nurseries use and **homework diaries** that are used with greater success in primary schools compared with most secondary schools.

Year planner

Year planners are used most often in nurseries to keep parents informed of the programme of events and activities for the forthcoming year. They are also used at some primary schools to indicate the learning areas that would be covered and what level the child should have reached at each stage of the year. The planner could be adapted for use at secondary schools. It could be used to provide parents with a wide range of information covering both academic areas to be covered per subject area each year and (less importantly) information about social events over the school year. The planner would detail the academic demands to be placed on children for each subject and would include information about the dates for homework assignments and exams. Information on the learning objectives for each subject area could also be included.

Benefit: provides parents with information in advance of homework requirements and academic demands for the year, enabling them to more effectively keep track of what their children are supposed to be doing at school.

Homework diaries

Homework diaries are used to a greater extent and with greater success in primary school than at secondary. It would be useful if secondary schools could tighten up on the use of homework diaries to maximise their effectiveness. This requires that head teachers take active steps to enforce their use, getting individual subject teachers and parents actively committed to making them work. This would exploit a tried and test model for exchanging information between school and home.

Benefit: keeps parents up to date with homework requirements, provides a medium of ongoing communication between home and school, informs parents about both academic and behavioural issues as soon as they occur and provides parents with an opportunity to provide their views.

Information evenings

Many schools already offer information evenings to inform parents about key issues relating to the education of their children. For example, at primary school level information evenings are held for parents of children entering primary 1, to explain how children learn and what

parents should do to support reading, numbers and writing at home. At secondary school level, schools hold information evenings to provide information on standard grade subject options, the curriculum and careers.

Where such information evenings already exist they are generally felt to be extremely beneficial. Many parents would like information evenings to be introduced (in schools where they do not already exist) or to be held more frequently throughout the school year. Information evenings could also target specific transitional phases for example, prior to children entering first year of secondary, or in relation to specific information needs for example exams and qualifications. There is a wide range of different subjects that could be dealt with in information evenings and it is important that the coverage and benefits of the topic are adequately explained to encourage parents to attend. For example, parents with children at the younger end of the school did not attend one talk about sex education at a primary school as it was assumed that the subject did not relate to their child. In fact, the talk covered different videos appropriate to children of all ages at the school.

Benefit: overcome the information deficits described earlier:

- How children learn and teaching processes
- Guidance on what parents should do to support learning
- The transition to secondary school
- Information about the curriculum and subjects
- Making subject choices
- Career planning.

This would also provide specific types of parents (such as those from specifically targeted communities) with the additional opportunities that they need to communicate with the school.

More frequent progress reports

Parents could be better informed on their children's progress with the provision of more frequent progress reports (in addition to the annual report card), which could be produced monthly or termly. At secondary school level these should be subject specific. This would keep parents up to date, on a more continuous basis, on the academic achievements of their children as well as drawing their attention to any behavioural or disciplinary issues.

Benefit: supply continuous and immediate feedback to parents on their child's academic performance and behaviour.

Communicating by email and supplying information online

A number of parents consider email a viable option which would enable a more efficient exchange of information between school and parent. The main benefit is that parents would be sure to receive communication as they would not be dependent on their children delivering it. It would also reduce the need for tear off slips or mail. Similarly, many parents also suggested a website on which information of direct concern to their child could be stored confidentially. Parents could log on to a password protected area to find out any of a range of issues concerning their own child including homework requirements, performance, marks and

exams. However, some parents pointed out that the use of ICT⁹ would exclude those who do not have access to a computer.

Benefit: greater guarantee of letters reaching parents, greater efficiency and speed of communication and offers parents an additional route to gain access to information about their own child themselves as often as they wish to without having to contact the school directly.

Communication in different languages

Parents whose first language is not English may find it helpful to have information in their own language, both for written communication and interpretation at parents' meetings and other school events. This is a requirement of some, but not all parents from minority ethnic backgrounds, as well as asylum seekers and refugees. Those who have lived for some time in the UK will have learned English to a level that enables them to understand both written and spoken communication from the school and do not have this requirement.

The provision, which is costly, should, therefore, be targeted at parents who are in particular need of it, namely those who have newly arrived in the country, or those who have not obtained a good grasp of the language. Some parents note that it would also be useful for grandparents whose command of English may not be as strong, but who play an important role in the care and upbringing of children especially in some cultures where extended families operate.

Benefit: overcomes language barriers faced by certain groups, integrates newcomers such as asylum seekers and refugees more effectively and includes non English speaking parents and grandparents in school communication.

New style parents' nights

By increasing the number of ongoing opportunities for parents to communicate with teachers throughout the year, the onus on parent's night as an opportunity to speak to teachers directly and find out about problems will be reduced. This in itself should help to overcome some of the problems that parents identify with parents nights such as not having enough time with the teacher, receiving impersonalised information that is not sufficiently detailed and having to wait in long queues.

In addition, parents' nights could be adapted to become less formal events. By holding them more frequently including some events earlier in the year, this would offer parents more opportunities to speak to teachers, at the time of year when feedback is most critically desired.

Another suggestion would be to allow some parents additional time to meet with teachers so that any fixed appointment systems can work a little better. This might be useful for parents whose children are new to the school and where the parent may have more questions and a need to discuss issues with the teaching staff than one whose child is already settled.

Benefit: provides parents with feedback sooner and on a more regular basis enabling problems to be addressed earlier in the year.

⁹ Information and Communications Technology

Home school link workers

These are an extra member of staff employed in some schools whose job is to liaise between teachers and parents, working closely with families to help them support their children's learning and overcoming any problems that occur. Some parents consider home school link workers to be useful especially when teachers are very busy and find it difficult to spare the time to speak to them. They are potentially useful to parents from specifically targeted groups who could make use of a specific contact point in the school to gain extra information. However, some parents have reservations about the effectiveness of speaking to a home school link worker rather than the teacher who has the most accurate view of the pupil in question.

Benefit: provides an additional medium of contact and communication and could be particularly useful for parents from communities facing specific difficulties who may require additional communication (such as Gypsy/Traveller, asylum seekers, foster carers and so on).

8.2 IMPROVING WHAT PARENTS DO AT HOME

Provide guidance on how to support learning.

Guidance on how to support learning is currently provided in evening sessions or classes, which are called "parenting skills classes". These provide parents with information on the procedures that are used to teach their children different aspects of the curriculum as well as being used to cover a range of general topics such as dental health at nursery school or sex education. Whilst they are useful opportunities for parents to know more about the teaching methodologies employed etc, the current terminology that is used to describe them is off putting because it implies that parents need to learn how to fulfil their basic function as parents. As such, many parents feel there would be some stigma attached to going to sessions with these titles. Yet their content is often exactly what parents would wish to know. These sessions should be given a different name, one that more accurately reflects what takes place at them, in order to overcome some of the confusion surrounding them. Our research reveals that once parents understood the intention behind these activities, they were open to participation in them.

Benefit: provides parents with guidance on what role they should take and overcomes some of the negative connotations attached to "parenting skills classes".

Develop activities and materials for use at home.

A number of activities have been developed in schools for use outside the formal classroom context and these could be introduced more widely. Two examples are **curiosity kits** and **literacy walks**, and both of these are activities that are currently used with great success at pre-school and the early years of primary school. There is scope for these to be adapted for use at later stages.

Curiosity kits: these are learning resources that are designed to encourage children to learn at home with parents. Each kit is based around a particular theme of contemporary interest and consists of a range of activities including a factual book, a related game, a word search puzzle and so on. Although these activities appear to have been used predominantly with

younger children at pre-school or early primary, some parents feel that there is scope for this type of activity to be used by older children too. Different themes could be used and a range of more challenging activities could be developed in line with the needs of different age groups.

Literacy walks: this is another activity that has been developed for children at pre-school level. It requires parents to integrate learning opportunities when they are out and about with their children, pointing out words and letters as they see them. It would be useful to develop a range of activities for parents to use with older children, which integrate learning into everyday activities in a similar fashion. It should be noted that most parents are already doing this type of activity as standard anyway.

Benefit: provides parents with resources to use at home to improve their input into learning outside school.

8.3 PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS TO AID PARTICIPATION

The research was used to identify practical ways in which schools might help remove obstacles to parental participation. Various ideas were developed from the earlier groups and a review of relevant literature on the subject and these were presented in the form of stimulus materials at the groups. Comments are provided below:

Improve child care arrangements.

Amongst parents with young children or infants, child care arrangements may be essential if they are to attend meetings or events at the school and it is generally agreed amongst this group that a range of flexible child care arrangements would increase the likelihood of participating in events at the school. Parents request that crèche facilities with qualified and registered staff be available for those with infants, and childcare options that engage children in activities and play would be welcomed for older children. Both would ideally be provided at the school or venue at which events or meetings are being held.

Benefit: Enables all parents with young children to participate more easily, particularly single parents, working parents, or parents located at some distance from the school.

Offer transportation arrangements where required.

There are mixed views about the need to improve transportation arrangements. Many parents do not regard transportation as a critical factor discouraging them from attending events at the school especially for primary school which is usually nearby. Transportation requirements affect those who are distantly located from their schools most significantly, for example, foster carers or parents in rural areas whose children may be residing in a hostel due to the distance of school. This is also more important in socially deprived areas where parents may feel wary of going out after dark alone.

Benefit: enables parents to participate in events more easily at the school especially those who are located at distance from it, or who live in socially deprived areas where they may feel unsafe going out alone after dark.

Make teachers available outwith standard school times.

There is interest in the possibility of teachers being available outside standard school times either first thing in the morning, at lunch time or last thing at night. This would provide parents with more opportunities to speak with teachers and would help to overcome the barriers faced by working parents. However, many parents are aware that teachers might not welcome this, and point out that teachers need to have a break themselves at lunchtime. Parents are also very respectful of teacher workloads and are sensitive to suggestions that might increase these. As such, parents' wishes could be accommodated within a planned programme of access that did not place too much onus or make too many demands on teachers.

Having a **weekend daytime** option occasionally would help resolve the issue of parents attending the school at less safe times.

Primary school parents welcome the opportunity to speak to class teachers in the playground when dropping or collecting their child and where this is not already functioning, this should be developed as standard practice.

On a similar line, **drop in surgeries** are also regarded as a more flexible option, enabling parents to speak to a teacher without making an appointment. This would also allow parents to communicate regularly with the teacher in a less formal way.

Benefit: increases opportunities for parents to visit the school in a flexible way to meet the needs of a wide range of parents including those who are working, who lack time or have other commitments at certain times of day.

8.4 STEPS TO OVERCOMING PERCEIVED BARRIERS AT THE SCHOOL

There are also a number of steps that schools could take to encourage wider participation by parents.

Increase the opportunities.

There is scope in many schools to broaden the range of activities that are open to parental involvement. The opportunities could be expanded to all schools and become the norm rather than the exception. The types of activities that are up and running successfully in some schools include:

- **Parent helpers:** parents could be usefully employed to help children in a range of practical ways both in and outside the classroom. For example in some primary schools, parents assist in the school canteen or in the playground, supervising games and putting on children's coats and shoes. These are often areas that teachers do not have a lot of time to devote to. Helpers are also used in the classroom doing reading, or art and craft activities. They are also used in the school library playing a practical role under the direct supervision of the school librarian engaged in tasks such as shelving books, organising materials and tidying up the library. They can also perform a range of voluntary tasks such as accompanying children on trips or running reading clubs or chess clubs.

- **Classroom assistant:** these are assistants who work under the direction and supervision of the classroom teacher to help in all aspects of the teaching and learning process. They receive appropriate induction training in health and safety, child protection and confidentiality. Many non-working parents would also be keen to offer some time as a classroom assistant, working alongside the teacher in the classroom.
- **Classroom talks:** these involve parents visiting the classroom to communicate with young people. Parents are invited into schools to give a talk on a subject of interest or relevance to school pupils, perhaps talking about their job or an interesting hobby. There are mixed views on how this would work in secondary schools. The biggest problem would be convincing parents to partake in the activity as most parents have never contemplated doing such a thing and they find it hard to imagine just how the activity could benefit the children. There are some fears that parental presence in the classroom could lead to ridicule of the child whose parent is participating. On the other hand, some parents regard this as a useful event to stimulate young peoples' interest in the world that exists outside the school gates. Indeed, there are some parents who would feel quite comfortable undertaking such a role, especially where their current job already involves them in giving advice or training on a regular basis – for example a chef or beautician. The use of such an approach could help to get youngsters accustomed to greater parental presence at school such that it would become the norm rather than the exception.
- **Appeal to parents' skills:** in order for the type of suggestion above to work, it will be necessary to make a direct appeal to parents' skills. Many parents are of the view that they have little to offer by way of constructive help in advising teachers or being involved in the running of a school. However, a small number of respondents point out that if it can be shown that the skills they use in their everyday work (running a business, managing people) can be transferred to a school environment, this might encourage greater participation from them.

Benefit: gives parents more opportunities to participate at school and acclimatises youngsters to greater parental presence in the classroom.

Clarify safety and confidentiality requirements.

For each activity that brings the parents into direct contact with young people, there is a requirement that certain safety checks and confidentiality clauses are adhered to. This is often cited as a reason **not** to get involved, especially as parents are unsure of what is required of them and is a residue of the approach of some schools when the need for disclosure checks was announced¹⁰. It is therefore important that schools provide parents with clear information about what exactly these checks will involve, and their significance for the protection of both the parent helper and the pupils.

Benefit: overcomes the confusion surrounding the requirements of Disclosure Scotland

Clarify the opportunities that are available and inform parents of them.

There is also a definite need to **advertise** the range of available activities effectively to the parent body. Some schools are already doing this by sending out a letter at the start of the

¹⁰ To allow staff already offering support in the school to be checked as quickly as possible, some schools only asked parents to volunteer for activities if they could make a substantial commitment.

term identifying the range of involvement options and inviting parents to participate in them. Parents are then required to complete a form indicating the types of activities in which they would like to be involved, the amount of time per week they would be willing to offer, and the times of their availability. This approach could be used by all schools at the start of the year.

Benefit: gives parents more opportunities to participate at school and make them feel welcome.

Develop opportunities for flexible involvement.

Because many parents are unwilling to commit themselves to a weekly commitment, it would be beneficial to offer opportunities for **less frequent** involvement on either a monthly or termly basis. For this system to work effectively, schools could introduce some sort of **rota system** whereby parents share a commitment between them. This would help to break parents in gently to a small amount of involvement in the first instance and this could be built upon gradually.

Benefit: gives parents more opportunities to participate at school.

Hold casual social events.

Parents note the benefits of sociable events where the objective is enjoyment rather than checking up on children's performance or behaviour. For example, events such as fashion shows or school concerts bring parents into the school where they can meet other parents and observe their children and the teachers functioning in a less formal way, communicating casually with their pupils. In some schools, such events are held frequently, as often as once a month and the benefits are welcomed:

"I think it's good to see them on a night like that, with the teachers. It's not all hard work at school; there's a friendly atmosphere." (silent majority, S5 - post-school, ABC1, Aberdeen)

Social events are a good way of bringing parents into the school and acclimatising them to being in the school. Being present in the school environment for a short time helps parents to feel less remote from it.

Benefit: makes parents feel welcome and fosters sense of community.

Develop and use additional community facilities.

There may also be a need for additional community facilities to be developed in the form of a community centre either utilising the school buildings outside school time (evenings and weekends) or purpose built facilities. We recognise that new community schools have been developed and are quite widespread. These give parents the opportunity to become more integrated into learning and school activities at the same time as their children and therefore already offer parents a means of overcoming social exclusion. Where these do not exist, we suggest developing a range of informal community activities to operate outside school time, functioning as a focal point for community relations. These could be attended by families on an informal basis offering them an opportunity to meet other families in the local area, for example coffee mornings, book clubs or badminton evenings. This requirement is

particularly needed by asylum seekers and refugees, new arrivals who are often housed in the poorest areas but with the greatest need to have facilities to help them meet other people.

Benefit: fosters community relations which in turn would enhance the quality of parent-parent and parent-school relations.

Modify language and tone.

There is a need for extra care to be taken with the style and tone that is used in the different forms of communication with parents. It is important to avoid the use of language that is patronising, simplistic, complex or formal. This point applies to all forms of communication including:

- Written communication e.g. letters that are sent out from the school or local authority, and marketing or promotional materials produced by SEED
- Spoken communication e.g. from teachers to parents. This relates to a point made earlier concerning a need for teachers to speak in a frank and honest fashion with parents rather than providing bland comments, in order to avoid conflict or extra work. It may be necessary to provide extra training to teachers or guidelines on how to speak to and deal with parents.

8.5 REFORMS TO PARENTAL REPRESENTATION

Parents interviewed used the term PTA / School Boards interchangeably and did not always distinguish clearly between them. For that reason, this section focuses on the general issue of parental representation. The feedback received indicates a clear need for reforms to parental representation.

Deformalise and broaden membership of School Boards.

Active steps are needed to broaden the membership of parent representative groups and get more parents involved, and this will be made easier if the connotations that are currently attached to PTAs / School Boards and the parents who participate in them are broken down.

A campaign could be launched with the aim of significantly challenging the images associated with PTAs / School Boards. A conscious effort to get new blood into any committee will be a key requirement of this. We believe it will firstly be necessary to convince parents that things are changing by widely advertising the new plans to reduce the formality of parental representation and broaden and diversify its membership to get a more representative set of views. Parents also need to be convinced that their views will count and that they will really be able to enact changes, as many parents currently hold the view that their opinions are not taken into account in school policy.

Then, new members could be drawn in by inviting a range of parents to an introductory meeting to the new style parent representative groups, and suggesting that they attend with a fellow parent friend.

By actively inviting parents directly and in a personal way (perhaps a phone call from a senior member of staff) to come along and see for themselves, parents are far more likely to take that first step.

To illustrate the importance of informality, one parent attending the focus group (which was a suitably informal setting, with a glass of wine) made the following comment:

“If [parents’] meetings were more like this evening, I’d be much more likely to consider being involved – this has been fun.” (silent majority, S1, C2DE, N Ayrshire)

A number of other parents endorse this with similar comments which indicates that if the PTA develops into a less formal occasion, where they know that interesting and relevant topics are dealt with, parents are more likely to attend.

Benefit: improves participation in parent representative groups.

Develop alternative forms of representation.

There is also scope for considering alternative forms of parental representation, to broaden the range and type of opportunity for parents to voice their opinions. Parents themselves have made a number of suggestions on alternative forms of representation:

1) Parent Representatives

One parent from a minority ethnic community suggested developing a system of parent representatives. One parent is chosen to represent ten families within a given school or area and liaise with the school on their behalf. Families go to their designated parent representative with any problems or issues that they wish to raise with the school, which the parent representative would bring up at specially designated school meetings.

This system is felt to be particularly effective for parents from minority ethnic backgrounds for a number of reasons. Firstly, parents who face language or cultural barriers could find a medium of communication through another member of their own community. Secondly, ethnic communities are often close knit, and families from the same cultural background already have good relations with each other, therefore, enabling them to choose a representative from their own community with relative ease. Thirdly, minority ethnic communities tend to use such a system of representation for many different aspects of their affairs, where one individual will voice the desires and opinions on behalf of the whole community.

2) Consultation exercises

Some parents would also welcome alternative forms of consultation where they have the chance to offer their views. For example, the use of questionnaires to gather parents’ views on certain aspects of school life would enable parents to offer their opinion with minimal effort. This would be especially welcomed by parents who lack confidence to speak out in public and are reluctant to participate in meetings.

Some schools have set up **consultation groups and forums** consisting of parents who are asked to discuss a particular issue and to report back their opinions to their school.

Benefit: gives parents an opportunity to express their opinions and overcomes parent disenfranchisement.

8.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has identified a range of activities, both those that are currently used in some schools, and some that are new parental suggestions as ways of overcoming some of the barriers to involvement and communication that currently exist.

CHAPTER NINE: EXAMPLES OF BEST PRACTICE AND PARENTAL SUGGESTIONS

The previous chapter has outlined a number of strategies and methods that schools can adopt to foster better communication, and overcome some of the barriers to parental participation. Many approaches are already being used actively across Scotland. The effectiveness of these strategies is illustrated in the following case studies drawn from across the country. We are sure that there must be many more examples of good practice in this area and variations on the way in which approaches are being implemented. However, in highlighting these examples, we hope to provide a basic understanding of some of the key approaches that exist which could be adapted for use in other situations.

These examples form the basis of a best practice guide which can be used by schools and local authorities.

9.1 BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES IN COMMUNICATION BETWEEN HOME AND SCHOOL

Flexible use of homework diaries

A flexible approach to the use of homework diaries has meant that schools are utilising them in a variety of ways in line with their particular communication requirements. Some schools have introduced modifications to the way that diaries are being used to improve their effectiveness, as there is a tendency for pupils to get out of the habit of using their homework diaries as the year progresses. These changes could be useful for schools which are also finding it difficult to enforce their use.

Example 1

In one secondary school, a significant improvement has been made by a new requirement that pupils sign the homework diary when each assignment has been completed satisfactorily in addition to parents and teachers. This has encouraged pupils to develop a sense of responsibility and control in relation to their own work. The head teacher has also made a concentrated effort to have diaries used properly by appealing to both parents and teachers to play an active part in enforcing the system by ensuring that pupils bring them for signing and regularly checking through them to see that their pupils keep them up to date. This is a means of offering three way communication between parent, child and school.

The result has been the successful re-enforcement of the use of homework diaries which in turn has meant that parents are better able to keep track of the demands placed on their children.

Example 2

Several secondary schools have integrated symbolic systems of evaluation with the homework diary which are quick and efficient for both parents and teachers to use and simplify the feedback process. In one secondary school teachers insert coloured slips into the homework diaries to indicate poor performance or misbehaviour, which is instantly noticeable to both pupil and parent. Different coloured slips are used to indicate differing

degrees of behaviour or performance. Another school has introduced a merit system. These are stamped into the homework diary if an assignment has been done well. As a pupil accumulates merits in their homework diary, they obtain a sense of pride for achievement and good behaviour.

Area tackled: poor communication between parent and home, and lack of parental awareness of homework requirements and their children's fulfilment of them.

Mini, termly or monthly reports

A secondary school in Dumfries and Galloway has started to provide brief reports for each child on a monthly basis which offer parents feedback on how their children are performing at school. These are particularly welcomed by parents because they are able to establish problem areas where they exist early on in the year, rather than discovering problems later, when there is less time to sort them out. At secondary school level, these are most useful if they cover each subject individually so that specific information concerning progress in each area is identified.

This is considered to have radically improved parental awareness of their children's progress and improved parental satisfaction about the quality of feedback obtained from the school.

Area tackled: infrequent feedback received too late in the year to enable parents to take action to overcome problems.

Direct forms of communication

A number of schools have found it useful to introduce direct ways of communicating with parents spontaneously as and when it is required. By finding effective ways of informing parents immediately of pupils' misdemeanours, it is felt that children are less likely to misbehave as they know there will be immediate repercussions.

Example 1

In a secondary school a head teacher has introduced the use of **text messaging** with certain parents to combat the problem of truancy as this enables simple, quick and immediate communication with those parents who have mobile phones. The parents of children with a known tendency to truancy would receive a text message from the head teacher if their child was not present at school to ascertain their whereabouts and determine whether or not their absence is legitimate. The embarrassment and direct approach of the text message encourages parents to make more effort to improve the attendance of the child.

Example 2

Another secondary school has developed a system whereby a computer system places an **automated phone call** to the parents whenever a child is absent from school. Like the text message system, this immediately alerts the parent to the possibility that their child is playing truant enabling them to take immediate action to establish their whereabouts.

Area tackled: the problem of poor communication between school and home and parental ignorance about their children's misdemeanours.

Feedback to parents

A nursery in Motherwell has introduced a computer to the reception area of the nursery through which parents can access examples of their children's work. Pictures and other achievements are scanned in to the computer each day. This enables parents to keep track of what their children have done that day, so that they can ask their children about it later. This is an example of best practice that could be usefully developed for use at later stages in the education process, enabling parents to view their children's academic progress on a regular basis.

Area tackled: keeping parents informed of their children's progress and performance at school

Person centred planning

A nursery in Glasgow has developed a system of person centred planning. This involves teachers and parents sitting down together to discuss the particular needs of the individual child. Together they identify the specific learning areas that need to be targeted. The teacher then draws up a programme of activities designed to develop certain skills or to overcome gaps in the child's knowledge. If there is a need for one-to-one tuition, this is identified and planned appropriately. Importantly, emphasis is placed on maintaining a positive attitude and using positive language when addressing a child's particular problems which prevents parents from feeling demoralised and motivates them to take a positive approach to tackling any issues facing their child. Each child has their own specially defined programme which is finely tuned to meet their learning needs.

A parent who has experienced person centred planning is appreciative of the approach:

"I find it extremely helpful. They don't use any negative language, which is superb. There may be an area that your child needs help with and you are made aware of that and you are working on it hand-in-hand with the nursery at home." (silent majority, pre-school, ABC1, Glasgow).

Area tackled: pupils being dealt with as individuals and trouble shooting difficulties specific to an individual child.

Parents' website

An Edinburgh parent who works in the field of ICT has taken it upon himself to establish a website for parents. The aim of the website is to function as an "information board" providing parents with information about what is going on at the school. The minutes of PTA and Board meetings are posted up for parents to access. There is scope for a wide variety of different types of information to be posted up, in line with the range of information requirements that parents have.

Area tackled: lack and infrequency of information provided to parents and feedback from PTA and School Board meetings.

Surgeries outside standard school hours

A secondary school has introduced drop in surgeries which are held on a monthly basis. The Head Teacher is available for a number of hours during an evening or a Saturday morning. Parents can drop in to the school to speak to the head teacher without having to make an appointment. If a problem or query crops up parents know that they will have an opportunity to take it up imminently. This enables them to overcome issues as soon as they occur. The flexibility of a drop in session means that parents need not make an appointment and the timing of the sessions enable working parents or parents with other commitments or child care issues to attend when it is most convenient for them. Parents can rest assured knowing that the opportunity to drop in to speak to the Head teacher within a month is always there should the need arise.

Area tackled: regular opportunities to have face to face communication with teachers other than parents night in a less formal way and flexible communication options to fit in with contemporary working lifestyles.

9.2 BEST PRACTICE CASE STUDIES TO IMPROVE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE SCHOOL ITSELF

Social events at school

By offering a varied programme of frequent social events this contributes towards improving the relationship between the school and the home. This is particularly necessary for families prone to social isolation.

Example 1

A primary school in a deprived area of Glasgow hosting a large percentage of families from asylum seeker and refugee backgrounds holds social events on a regular basis. One such event was a Scottish night at which children performed Scottish country dancing and Scottish cuisine was served. Parents were invited to attend this and the event was a perfect opportunity for parents to meet each other in an informal setting, make new friends and meet their children's teachers. The pupils themselves were excited by the event and talked about it a great deal to their parents for weeks in advance as they prepared for it at school and this not only informed parents that the event would take place but stimulated their interest in attending it. Therefore "pupil pester power" played an important part in getting parents along to the event. Another important factor was the provisions made by teachers to overcome additional obstacles to parental attendance at the event. For example, teachers made arrangements for child care and transportation for parents in need of it.

Example 2: Parent Teacher Social Club

In a nursery in Glasgow, a social club consisting of parents and teachers has been established. The club meet informally over a cup of coffee to discuss any of a range of issues surrounding school activities - both educational and social, such as fundraising activities, what children are doing at school, school events and so on. The club is an opportunity for parents to get to know each other and teachers at the school in an informal environment.

Area tackled: community relations amongst parents and an opportunity for parents to discuss issues relevant to the school outside the formality of parent representative groups.

Specialised schools and facilities

In some areas where there is a history of residence of a particular type of community, the teachers in the local primary schools have become accustomed to the needs of that local community so that they are able to accommodate it more effectively. This was found essentially in response to the needs of the Gypsy/Traveller community where we interviewed representatives of communities in fairly settled groups. There are some parallels that can be drawn from how the schools have adapted to accommodate Gypsies/Travellers and the needs of asylum seeker and refugee groups.

Example 1

A village in south western Scotland has experienced the presence of Gypsies/Travellers for many years as they have traditionally visited an area of land close to the heart of the village. A proper trailer site with water and electricity has been established for the use of the Gypsy/Traveller, close to the original camp ground, and very near the local primary school. Because of the long history of Gypsy/Traveller presence in the village, the teachers at the local primary school are very accustomed to Gypsy/Traveller children attending the school, and so too are the local parents. Teachers are aware of the lifestyle and cultural attributes of the Gypsies/Travellers that may affect attendance patterns, behaviour and performance at the school and understanding their needs, take steps to accommodate the children accordingly. They have also developed a flexible approach to communication in line with the needs of Gypsy/Traveller parents, for example providing face to face communication whenever required.

A specialist educational unit has been set up on the trailer site which employs a Gypsy/Traveller teacher whose role is to help Gypsy/Traveller children who have never attended school to make the transition into primary school. Supported learning is offered firstly in the trailer and later in the classroom as children acclimatise to the learning environment.

This resource, coupled with the sympathetic primary school, has been an excellent way of encouraging Gypsy/Traveller children to send their children to school, to develop improved levels of communication with the school and improve relationships with the local community.

Example 2

A travelling computer bus has been set up for Gypsy/Traveller communities to support learning in Dunbartonshire. The bus carries a range of learning resources including lap top computers with internet access, books and materials. A group of tutors are also attached to the bus offering educational support in literacy and numeracy to Gypsies/Travellers who require it. This is targeted at those whose learning has been interrupted and who require additional help. The bus also provides an opportunity for older children to continue their education and caters for some parents as well.

Example 3

One of the primary schools used by Gypsies/Travellers in Dunbartonshire, with a long track record of dealing with this community, offers parents the chance to take worksheets and lessons with them when they travel away from the site for any length of time. This is a specific response from the school reflecting the circumstances of this site. Because the school facilities are so good, many parents will stay at the site for years to maximise their children's schooling opportunities. However, their travelling lifestyle may require them to leave on a temporary basis – for seasonal work or to attend a family event, and so the school accommodates this by making home based lessons available for their time away. That way the child can return to the school, without having lost ground.

This school also accommodates integration by having books in the school library that deal with the Gypsy/Traveller lifestyle.

Area tackled: providing youngsters from Gypsy/Traveller communities with more flexible and informal ways of learning, which is adapted to the travelling lifestyle, thus increasing the likelihood of this community choosing to access learning opportunities.

Reforms to parental representation

A primary school in Edinburgh has introduced **parent forums** which aim to be casual, laid back events to which parents are invited to discuss key issues on which parent representatives are making a decision, such as school uniform policy or homework. The forum is posed as an open meeting that any parent can attend and a great deal of emphasis is laid on the informal character of the meeting and the fact that it is run by other parents, without any teachers present to distinguish from committee style events. The aim is thus to give parents a voice without attending formal meetings, at which parents tend to feel intimidated.

The parents who have been involved in establishing this initiative admit that it has been of limited success so far as it is very difficult to persuade parents to come along. They believe nonetheless that the key is convincing parents that it is an informal event that will not be intimidating in any way but which will be interesting and enjoyable and of potential benefit to their own children.

Area tackled: providing alternative forms of parental representation.

Offering parental access to classrooms

A primary school in Fife has introduced a series of sessions that allow parents access to their child's classroom on a regular and informal basis. The process began some years ago with children in primary 1 and many parents took advantage of the chance to spend 10 minutes each fortnight (at the start of the school day) being shown by their child where they sat and what activities they had to work on.

Gradually the idea has been introduced for older children and currently operates up to primary 3 although there are plans to extend it further up the school in the next year. It is accepted as the children are either familiar with the parents coming into class on a regular basis or see it working with the younger children in the school.

By staggering the times and days when each group of parents is allowed in, it is possible for classroom assistants and head teachers and depute head teachers to be present to meet the parents also.

This provides an opportunity for parents to see what their children are doing, examine their work and look at some of the resources being used by the children on a daily basis. There is also an opportunity to meet the child's teacher.

Area tackled: overcoming the remoteness from school experienced by some parents, improving opportunities for informal involvement, strengthening informal relations between parents and teachers, providing information on what their children are doing at school and how they are progressing.

CHAPTER TEN: CONCLUSIONS AND THE WAY FORWARD

10.1 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter sets out our conclusions and key points for further consideration. George Street Research recognises that the findings will inform developments in improving parental involvement. They are not directed specifically at SEED, education authorities, schools, parent bodies or Higher Education Institutions, but each may be able to identify their relevant roles in addressing key issues. A coordinated approach across all partners may deliver changes effectively.

The principal conclusions from the research are listed below. References are provided to indicate which chapter and section of the report each finding is discussed.

- **Parental involvement means different things to different people.**

What the term “parental involvement” refers to is variable and, therefore, covers a wide range of different activities. In this analysis these have been grouped according to whether they are active or less active, formal or informal and conducted in the home or at school. Our research has shown that the majority of parents engage in a limited range of activity covering mainly less active and informal forms of involvement, mostly conducted at home (see 3.1, 3.2 and 4.1).

- **Most parents perceive that they are doing all that is required.**

The majority of parents consider that what they are currently doing is all that is required. Parents have fixed assumptions about what level of input is required from them which are difficult to change. Parents have little understanding of how important their role is in supporting their child to do well at school and most labour under the idea that they are playing a secondary role to the teachers. However, any suggestion at national, local authority or school levels that parents are not doing enough and that they “must” or “should” be more involved, is likely to offend the majority of parents (see 3.1, 4.2 and 6.2).

Key Point: Rather than coercing parents to be involved by telling them what they “must” or “should” do, parents prefer the hard facts on what impact they can have and how important their input is. Then, it can be left to the parents to make their own decisions about what they do based on the evidence with which they have been provided. They are more likely to be encouraged to build on what they currently do if there is clear evidence to show that this will have a positive impact on their own children.

- **Parents are primarily motivated by the needs of their own children.**

The extent to which they get involved is directly influenced by the significance of involvement for their own child. For most people, their motto is “if it ain’t broke don’t fix it.” If things are going well at school and their children seem to be happy and are achieving well, parents prefer to let things continue without change. Only if a child has a problem will these parents get involved. Parents also recognise that their children are

resistant to their presence at school as they get older and become more independent and this is considered to be a normal and natural part of growing up (see 3.1 and 4.5).

- **The parents who are most involved do so because they believe it will benefit their own child in some way.**

Only if parents believe that involvement will specifically and directly benefit their own child, will they consider taking steps to greater participation in school activities and affairs (see 4.5).

Key point: Again, this emphasises the importance of clarifying to parents the impact that their role can have. There are **key messages** that can be used for this purpose. It will be important to spell out to parents that things like understanding what the goals of the schools are and becoming familiar with the way that the school operates can have an important benefit to their own child directly.

- **Some parents lack information that they feel is necessary for them to keep track of how their child is doing at school and how they can support them.**

There are many forms of communication but some of them work more effectively than others, meaning that some parents feel that they are not kept adequately informed. Parents require specific types of information in particular formats at specific times of the year or stages in their children's education. Certain forms of communication suit some families better than others depending on their specific circumstances. Where schools recognise and understand parents' varied expectations about what kind of arrangements and information are needed to help them get involved, parents respond positively, are more likely to get involved and be more interested in school life (see 5.1, 5.3 and 6.1).

Key point: In terms of communication it is clear that one size does not fit all. There is a need to provide information variety in a variety of formats to suit the differing requirements.

- **Parents can be distanced or even offended by certain styles and tones of language.**

Certain styles of language used by schools, teachers or local authorities in communication with parents may actively put them off getting more involved or make them resistant to proposals for change that the school or SEED present to them (see 6.2).

Key point: Avoid the use of language that implies that parents are not doing their job properly, that is patronising, simplistic, that states the obvious or that is overly complex.

- **There are a number of factors affecting parental involvement.**

Apart from not knowing the importance of their involvement, parents offer many reasons for not being more involved than they currently are. These include barriers that they face as a result of their social and economic circumstances, such as work patterns, family circumstances, and economic status, and external barriers such as those that are perceived to exist at the school. These may continue to preclude parents from greater or better involvement (see 7.1).

- **Parents perceive there to be barriers to involvement at school.**

Some parents perceive that barriers exist at the school. For example, parents feel that they are not told about the different ways that they can help; the opportunities for occasional participation tend not to exist, teachers are not always as encouraging as they could be, and there are fears concerning safety and protection issues as a result of working with children (see 7.2).

Key point: Introduce a range of strategies to improve parental involvement, to challenge the barriers that currently exist or to overcome the image that parents may associate with the school. Many of these have been discussed in chapters eight and nine and include measures to overcome some of the practical problems such as child care and transportation, and others to improve relationships between parents and the school, such as offering more flexible forms of involvement and clarifying the different ways that parents can get involved.

- **There are specific barriers faced by certain social groups.**

Often some of the barriers facing the majority of parents are exacerbated for certain social groups, or certain communities may face problems specific to their circumstances. These have been identified throughout the report, but a significant point to note is that socially excluded communities such as asylum seekers, refugees and Gypsies/Travellers may be in greatest need of community building facilities and structures, but often live in areas where poor facilities are in place (see 7.3).

Key point: Foster community building by creating a focal area for members of local communities to meet and hold community events throughout the year. This can be through the use of existing community facilities, by using school facilities in the evenings or providing new community facilities. This will be particularly important in socially deprived areas where some families suffer social exclusion.

- **Parents are reluctant to participate in the PTA and School Board.**

The majority of parents lack the opportunity to give voice to their opinions or to have any real influence over the policy and direction of the school. Current forms of representation are not working and although many parents are not terribly interested in being involved in this type of activity, there is a need for a more effective form of consultation and representation (see 7.2).

Key point: Broaden the membership of parent representative groups and develop alternative forms of consultation such that parents have a range of opportunities to give their opinions. Make parental representation less formal.

A key finding of the research is that there is clearly scope for improving parental involvement. Examples of a range of ways of doing so have been discussed in chapters eight and nine. However, before these new measures can be implemented, there is a need to challenge the existing mindsets of the majority of parents and convince them of the importance of improving the quality of their involvement. This will require an educational and informative campaign targeting parents throughout Scotland. Thus, our central recommendation is for parents to be better informed about what parental involvement means and how it can benefit their children.

10.2 THE WAY FORWARD

This section contains some suggestions of how these findings can be usefully applied. All parties could usefully consider the following.

- **Disseminate key, meaningful messages.**

One of the biggest challenges facing the Scottish Executive and key stakeholders is overcoming the established assumptions held by the silent majority of parents, that their level of parental involvement is adequate. There is firstly, therefore, a need to challenge the existing mindset of the majority of parents about what constitutes an acceptable and desirable level of parental involvement, highlighting the difference they can make. Messages can most effectively capture the attention of parents if they make use of key messages that are meaningful to parents and which will, therefore, trigger greater participation.

“Your own child will benefit.”

One of the most significant findings of this research is that parents are motivated primarily by the needs of their own children. If parents can, therefore, be convinced that greater participation will help their own child, they will be far more likely to get more involved. This is the message that the Scottish Executive and others can use in communication with parents.

A number of other hard hitting messages discussed in chapter six, usefully illustrate how the role of parental support in the home impact on educational achievements and progress. Parents would appreciate clear advice on how they can support their children (see chapter seven).

- **Raise awareness of teachers and other staff.**

The research highlights a range of issues that are important for all staff who work in schools, education authorities and other bodies to be aware of. Parental involvement components of training programmes, including Initial Teacher Education and Continuing Professional Development opportunities could usefully take the findings of this report into account.

- **Consult parents in a broader range of ways.**

Parents should be consulted about possible new initiatives using a broader range of channels and forums. These should both **inform** parents about the planned policies and offer them the opportunity to provide their **feedback** and **response** to these proposals. The range of ways should both complement the existing PTAs and School Boards but, more importantly offer alternative channels of information to include parents who do not usually have the opportunity to offer their views. We would recommend using an informal approach and emphasising this to parents to encourage their participation:

- Information evenings
- Panels
- Informal discussion forums

- Questionnaires
- Tear off slips.

Any advertising or educational campaign should use hard hitting messages to draw parents' attention to the importance and benefits of increased involvement.

- **Continue to improve the quality and availability of information.**

There are already many different forms of information that are disseminated to parents about the many different aspects of school life. This includes information about how schools operate, curriculum and subjects, exams and qualifications, homework, performance and what parents can do to help and support their children.

We recommend that SEED, schools and local authorities continue to develop and disseminate this type of information on a regular basis. In addition, there is scope for experimenting with new forms of publishing information and additional ways of disseminating information in line with the changing requirements of parents today. One way would be to experiment with the use of email and school websites.

- **Use flexible approaches to informing and communicating.**

It is also important to offer parents flexibility in the way that they give and receive information and communication with the school in line with their own requirements, thus respecting the social and cultural differences that characterise contemporary Scottish families.

- **Use language carefully.**

Another key issue concerns the style of language that is used in communication with parents. This applies to language that is used by the school and local authority, and language that is used at an overarching level by SEED.

There is often a tendency for some communication to be loaded with negative connotations or implications, which can be interpreted (or misinterpreted) in a variety of different ways. As we noted earlier in the report, the notion of “parenting classes” implies that parents are failing to do their basic parenting job properly. In fact, the very term “parental involvement” has its own set of problems as we also identified earlier, as parental understandings of what involvement constitutes are somewhat different from what it could be. The term does not stimulate the majority parents to conceptualise the wider range of active participation that SEED hopes to achieve.

There is thus a requirement for specific terminology that more accurately refers to the specific range of activities that SEED would like parents to be active participants in. Terms such as “commitment” or “active partnerships” might be more effective. It would also be helpful for any term when newly introduced to be followed by a clear set of definitions as to what types of activity it refers to.

Care needs to be taken in the style and tone that is used in communicating with parents. It should at all costs avoid being patronising or simplistic, as parents will be unlikely to pay heed to it.

- **Offer a range of opportunities for parents to share skills.**

In the attempt to get more parents actively involved in any type of activity, it should be noted that people are always far more likely to agree to participate if they have been asked directly and personally. Rather than asking them to sign up for a regular, term or year's worth of commitment, it helps to invite parents to a specific single event in the first instance. By offering them a "taster", they are more likely to agree to come along, and getting their foot through the door for the first time is an invaluable first step in fostering a longer term involvement. Sometimes parents are unaware of the skills that they have and there is a need to clearly point these out. There is also a requirement for the provision of more infrequent opportunities for involvement that do not require such a high degree of commitment, to make it easier for time pressured parents to get involved.

- **Explore and develop ways of sharing best practice.**

The research has also indicated that there are substantial differences between schools both within and across local authority areas. We have found many examples of useful strategies that are used in one school that others might equally find useful. There are also particular activities that are exploited at pre-school or primary school level that could be adapted and introduced at later stages of the education system. There is clearly a need to develop a system for sharing best practice between schools. A starting point for this could be the publication and distribution of a best practice guide which builds on chapter nine of this report.

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