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Effective parental engagement practice

How can secondary schools engage effectively with parents and carers? In this Best Practice Focus, **Matt Bromley** looks at tenets of good practice, offering lots of ideas, tips and advice for communicating effectively and building strong relationships with your school's families, handling conflict and disagreement, using technology well and more...



How to engage with your parents and carers



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When my eldest daughters transitioned from primary to secondary school, I think I was more nervous than they were.

While they were at primary school, I felt fully informed in their academic and pastoral progress. In fact, if I'm honest, I sometimes felt a little too informed. I was bombarded by daily emails and texts, weekly newsletters, PTA flyers, invitations to quiz nights and barn dances, and... well, you get the idea.

My daughters' primary school regularly invited me over the threshold for assemblies, charitable events, discos, open evenings, sports activities, you name it. It got to the point where I saw my daughters' teachers more than I saw some of my closest friends.

But when they transferred to secondary school, I felt abandoned. I had become accustomed to and reliant upon the daily deluge of information about my daughters' education. Yes, when they moved to

secondary school, I attended my daughters' induction evenings and received bi-annual progress reports, and of course I attended parents' consultation evenings once or twice a year. But most of the contact I had with my daughters' secondary school was in the form of demands for money.

Of course, schools have less need to contact parents as children grow older and become more independent, and so secondary schools should not try to emulate the parental engagement policies of their primary partners.

But many secondary schools may be able to do more to engage their pupils' parents and carers and to ensure that they are involved in, not just informed about, school life.

It is in a school's best interests to ensure staff make regular contact with parents because when pupils' families become partners in the education process, they are more likely to support the school when times get tough, as well as stand shoulder-to-shoulder with teachers in celebrating the good times. Put simply, if schools and parents work as a team for the

Why parental engagement matters

Evidence suggests that, when schools work effectively with parents and carers, pupils benefit from higher academic

achievement, good attendance and punctuality, and better behaviours and attitudes to learning (Butler et al, 2008; Haynes et al, 1989; Henderson, 1987).

Butler and Haynes also find that effective parental engagement leads to increased rates of pupil attendance. Becher (1984) and Henderson et al (1986), meanwhile, find effective parental engagement can have a positive effect on pupils' attitudes to learning and on their behaviour in class.

Research also shows that improving parental engagement can lead to an increased level of interest among pupils in their work (Rich, 1988; Tobolka, 2006), increased parent satisfaction with their child's teachers (Rich, 1988), and higher rates of teacher satisfaction (MetLife, 2012).

Let's take a closer look at what the research literature has to say on the subject...

Literature review

Researchers have found evidence of the positive relationship between parental communication and pupil outcomes (Fan & Williams, 2010; Rumberger, 2011; Sirvani, 2007). A multitude of studies shows that pupils' engagement in school is continuously shaped by their relationships with adults and the quality of their learning environment.

So, what can secondary schools do to ensure they fully engage with parents and carers? In this *Best Practice Focus*, I will explain why parental engagement matters and outline a two-way process of communication. I will examine how best to communicate with parents, including in written and verbal forms. And I will explore the role that technology can play in this process. I will also look at ways of dealing with complaints from parents and at resolving conflict when it arises.

A quick note on Covid – the elephant in the room! This *Best Practice Focus* is focused on general effective practice and as such does not talk about specific approaches during the pandemic.

They found large and immediate effects of communication on homework completion rates, classroom behaviour and

participation in class. The willingness and ability to complete homework, to be on-task and to be active participants in lessons are, they argued, key mediators of academic achievement in school.

So parental engagement can improve pupils' motivation and engagement in school life. And motivation, in turn, is a powerful predictor of academic outcomes.

There is a significant body of research documenting the strong positive relationship between pupil engagement and learning outcomes (Connell et al, 1994; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci et al, 1992; Finn & Rock, 2007; Klem & Connell, 2004; Marks, 2000; Skinner et al, 1990).

There is an equally large body of research suggesting that pupils' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, along with their sense of efficacy, are malleable and are likely to influence their levels of engagement in school (Bandura, 1997; Connell, 1990; Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2000; Gillet et al, 2012).

In short, improving parental engagement can, in turn, improve pupil outcomes.

Starting principles

Before we delve into some specifics, let's consider a few starting principles:

Start early

Parental communication needs to start early and continue throughout a pupil's secondary school journey. The parents of pupils moving from nursery to primary school, or from primary to secondary, will not want to receive information halfway through the summer holiday at which point it will be deemed too late. Schools need to engage with parents early and clearly set out their expectations and requirements.

Kraft & Dougherty (2013)

meanwhile, in a paper entitled *The effect of teacher-family communication on student engagement*, estimated the causal effect of daily teacher-parent and teacher-pupil communication on pupil engagement during one week of a mandatory summer academy for entering 6th and 9th grade students at MATCH Charter Public School.

One way to do this is to create a frequently asked questions (FAQ) page as well as a Q&A facility and a parents' forum on the school website. This will need to be monitored carefully, of course, or perhaps pass through a

"gatekeeper" in order to be vetted before comments are published. In order for it to be viewed as worthwhile, the school will also need to communicate its response to parental comments and suggestions, perhaps through a "You Said, We Did" page.

Timing and relevance

Parental communications need to be appropriately timed, relevant and useful. One way to do this is to utilise the experience and expertise of pupils and their parents. For example, the parents of current year 7 pupils will be able to share their thoughts on what information they needed when they went through the transition process with their child not so long ago, as well as when they needed it. Current year 7 pupils, meanwhile, will be able to offer their advice about how to prepare for secondary school by, to give but two examples, providing a reading list for the summer and sharing their advice on how to get ready for the first day of school.

Technology

Parental communication should take many forms and embrace new and emerging technologies. The use of technologies such as email, texting, websites, electronic portfolios and online assessment

THE SECED PODCAST: EFFECTIVE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT



An episode of the *SecEd Podcast*, hosted by Matt Bromley, interviews four school leaders to find out about effective parental engagement work in

secondary schools, including innovative practice, the future of parents' evenings, handling conflict, and what positive engagement looks like. Listen via <https://bit.ly/3pVRbKR>

and reporting tools have – according to Merkley et al (2006) – made communication between parents and teachers more timely, efficient, productive and satisfying.

Protecting workload

Of course, doing all of this well takes time and yet it is important to balance the needs of parents and carers with the needs of hard-working teachers. You do not want the unintended consequence of adding to teachers' already busy workloads.

So, how can you ensure you remain mindful of workload concerns while meeting the needs of parents?

In workload guidance to schools, the Department for Education (DfE, 2018a) advises the following when it comes to communication practices:

- Consider why you are communicating. Think about all the communications you make in the day and review if they are making a difference – if not, stop.
- Establish and publish a communications policy or protocol planned around pinch points in the year.
- Find out which areas of the school generate the most paper, slips or forms and consider if they are necessary, or if alternative systems can be used.
- Consider running a communications workshop.
- Use a variety of communication channels with parents and carers. Add frequently asked questions or "decision tree" options to the school website to direct users, e.g. a short email may be as appropriate as a phone call, or a phone/video call could replace a face-to-face meeting.
- Apps and software can be used to send letters and reminders home, as well as collecting forms, making payments and booking appointments.
- Consider use of email. Set out times after which staff should not check, send or reply to work emails (while being mindful of urgent needs, such as safeguarding).
- Use distribution lists and functions such as out of office messages and delayed delivery. All emails should have a descriptive heading with a ➤

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status assigned to it to signify its urgency.

- Consider a daily/weekly bulletin using cloud services, and alternative messaging tools to reduce emails or categorise messages.

● Review the number and effectiveness of parental events. Consider the impact on pupil progress of each event as well as attendance from parents, and balance the range of events on offer. Monitor staffing at events – decide on the supervision required and create a rota to reduce the number of events that staff are required to attend.

● Agree with staff what is a reasonable number of out-of-hours events (taking into account directed time) and prioritise your programme around the capacity you have.

● Review your approach to written reports. Assess the time and impact of current practice. Explore alternatives to written reports. Compare your current approach with the

requirements for reporting to parents and the considerations in the *Making Data Work* report (DfE, 2018b). Consider how reports could be made more succinct (e.g. limiting word count) and meaningful (e.g. focusing on key strengths and areas for development), as well as how the right technology can help to automate reporting where possible.

A pragmatic policy

There is a growing trend for parents to be given teachers' direct email addresses and for teachers to make a set number of phone calls to parents each week.

While it is undoubtedly helpful for parents to have easy access to their child's teacher and regular contact between the school and home is a good thing for pupils, it is important to consider the possible unintended consequences of this approach, particularly on a teacher's workload and wellbeing.

I heard a story recently that brought this into sharp focus: a teacher had opened her work email on a Sunday evening just before returning to school after half-term to find a very long email from a disgruntled parent. This had left her feeling stressed and struggling to sleep.

Of course, we want parents to work in partnership with us; for them to be involved in – not just informed about – our schools. So, in addition to the DfE advice I shared above, how might we improve parental engagement without it adversely affecting teachers' workload and wellbeing?

First of all, school leaders need to remember that they are the gatekeepers: for example, in the case of face-to-face meetings, they should protect their teaching staff and should not let an angry parent see a teacher until there is a noticeable reduction in their aggression (and even then it may not be the best course of action).

Here, it is worth adopting a clear policy regarding meetings with teachers which has the following caveat at its heart: a teacher's first duty is to teach his or her classes and not to meet with parents; appointments, therefore, have to be arranged in advance and parents without prior appointments will not be seen.

Honesty in the best policy

An effective and clearly understood parental engagement policy can solve a lot of these issues. Such a policy should set out what you expect parents to do. For example:

- We encourage parents to:
 - Be supportive.
 - Be informed.
 - Maintain a direct involvement in their child's progress.
 - Understand what the school is trying to achieve for their child.
 - Take a positive position – contribute to initiatives like home visits and information-gathering events such as parents' consultation evenings.
 - Visit school and be informed about issues and initiatives.
 - Support events that promote the school's efforts.
 - Be aware of and support any home/school agreements.

Your policy should also outline how your school intends to communicate and consult with parents on key decisions. It is useful to start with a statement of intent. For example:

Our school, in order to be effective, must acknowledge, appreciate and respond to the views of parents. It needs to take informed decisions following consultation.

And your policy might include the following:

Our school will communicate with parents in a variety of ways, including:

- Parents' consultation evenings.
- Open evenings.
- Information meetings.
- Parents' workshops and discussion forums.
- Parents' associations or committees.
- Formal questionnaires and market research products.
- Regular newsletters.
- The school website.
- Online reporting and the parents' portal.
- Text messaging.
- Email.

Your school will need a clear strategy for communicating effectively and expediently in each of these circumstances.

As well as writing letters (your school should have a policy dictating your "house style" and letters should be checked and formatted by the admin team), it is likely you will use email and text messaging to communicate with parents.

Before relying on email and texts to impart important information, it is vital you understand access arrangements: do all parents have internet and mobile phone coverage and do all parents have the financial means to utilise it? Will you disadvantage some parents if you rely solely on email and texts? You may need to adopt a "belt and braces" approach to communication by sending a text and/or email to indicate that a letter is on its way.

And what of the school website? Your school should have a policy

Information requests should be followed up and all promises kept.
This means being more realistic about what can be achieved in set timescales rather than promising the earth

explaining how it will use its website to aid communication. It is likely it will be used for publishing news articles, celebrating school successes and reproducing the school calendar.

You may also – and to be an outstanding school which extends the boundaries of learning, you should – use the website for setting work and for providing help and advice to pupils.

The website may provide an overview of each course and syllabus being taught in school and may have links to homework tasks and extension tasks should pupils and parents wish to do extra work in order to secure the learning or to revise.

As well as a policy for how your school communicates with parents, you will need a policy for how staff use these means of communication to ensure accuracy, timeliness and appropriateness.

Informing and involving

As we have already seen, effective communication with parents can improve pupils' academic achievement, attendance, punctuality, and their behaviour and attitudes towards school.

In order to be effective, parental communication needs to be two-way, allowing parents to communicate with the school as well as helping the school to communicate with parents. And parental engagement must transcend information-sharing and ensure that communication leads to parents being both informed and involved in school life.

I would like to explore some mechanisms you could use to ensure communication is two-way and enables parents to become involved in the running of your school. Two-way communication might include:

- Parent conferences or forums.
- Parent-teacher associations or school community councils.
- Sending home portfolios of pupil work every week or month for parents to review and comment.
- Phone calls from teachers and school leaders.
- Emails or updates via the school website.
- Text messages.

Face-to-face communication, including in the form of forums, conferences, home visits, open



evenings and information evenings are often the most effective form of communication and help to avoid misunderstandings and the escalation of conflict.

However, parental engagement has become increasingly complex as society has changed and as communication methods have evolved and expanded.

This means it is no longer feasible to rely on a single method of communication that will reach all homes and all parents and carers with a single message. Rather, it is essential that a variety of strategies and means of communication, adapted to the needs of particular families and their schedules, are utilised. Some such strategies might include:

- Parent newsletters.
- Annual open days or evenings.
- Curriculum information nights.
- Home visits (where applicable).
- Meetings in a neutral location such as community facilities.
- Phone calls, text messages, emails.
- Annual school calendars.
- Inserts in local newspapers.
- Governor letters.
- Meet the governor events.
- PTA letters and leaflets.
- Homework helplines or emails.
- School website.
- Workshops for parents.

Positive praise

Parental communication can be

improved by making a habit of positive praise. For example, weekly "good news" telephone calls to parents by teachers and leaders can help build rapport and establish a strong partnership.

When a phone call from school conveys good news, rather than always being about poor behaviour, attendance or progress, the relationship between the home and the school will improve.

Making phone calls home
Sometimes, particularly for new teachers, it can be difficult to make that first phone call to a parent or carer.

Preparing the call will make it easier and rehearsing the opening lines can alleviate some of the anxiety. For example, before making a call, the teacher could write down the reasons for the call. Here are some more suggested guidelines to help teachers prepare a phone call:

- Introduce yourself – what's your name, what's your role in school and what's your relationship to the pupil?
- Tell the parents what their child is studying in class – what's the current topic, how does this fit into the wider curriculum?
- Teachers could text parents at the end of the day on which a pupil has done something particularly well or shown

have they improved over time, what do you predict of their achievements this term/year?

- Comment on their child's behaviour and attitude to learning – are they attentive, keen, hard-working, polite, helpful towards others, etc?
- Inform them of their child's achievements – have they won any awards, received any house points, etc.?
- Inform them of their child's main strengths or share an anecdote about their performance in class.
- Ensure the parent knows they can contact you to discuss their child any time in the future and remind them of the ways in which they can stay in touch with school.

Using technology

As we have discussed, there are to my mind four cornerstones of effective parental communication. Allow me to recap:

1 Communication needs to start early and continue throughout a child's schooling.

2 Communication needs to be a two-way process: as well as the school staying in touch with parents, parents also need a means of keeping in contact with the school.

3 Communication needs to be appropriately timed, relevant and useful to parents.

4 Communication needs to take myriad forms.

And one of the best ways to achieve all four of these aims is to embrace new and emerging technologies.

Here are a few suggestions for how technology could be used to help you communicate with parents and, indeed, vice-versa:

- Parents could send teachers an email to let them know when the home learning environment may be (temporarily or otherwise) holding a pupil back.
- Likewise, teachers could send parents an email to let them know when issues arise at school which may have a detrimental effect on the pupil, such as noticeable changes in behaviour or deficits in academic performance.
- Teachers could text parents at the end of the day on which a pupil has done something particularly well or shown

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real progress or promise. Instant and personal feedback like this is really valuable and helps make a connection between the teacher and a child's parents.

- Teachers could send half-termly or monthly newsletters via email to parents to inform them about which topics they are covering in class in the coming weeks, what homework will be set and when, and how parents can help.

The school could use text, email and the school website to keep parents updated on forthcoming field trips, parent association meetings and other school activities.

● Teachers could use email to send out regular tips to parents on how they might be able to support their child's learning that week/month. For example, they could send a list of questions to ask their child about what pupils have been learning in class. They could also send hyperlinks to interactive quizzes or games.

● The school could use the school website to gather more frequent and informal parent feedback about specific topics. For example, they might post a short survey after each open evening and parents' evening.

● The school could provide an online calendar via its website to allow parents to volunteer to help in class, say as reading mentors or helpers at special events.

An online calendar could also be used as a booking facility to enable parents to make their own meetings with school staff rather than having to phone the school, which many people find daunting.

● The online calendar could prove useful for booking slots at parents' evenings and other open evenings and events, enabling parents to be in control of the times at which they attend school rather than relying on a child and their teachers to agree suitable slots.

Conflict and complaints

Now let us turn our attentions to when parental engagement goes wrong!

No matter how effective our parental engagement policy and

procedures are, there will be times when parents wish to complain or when we have to deal with conflict. So, how can we best resolve disputes? It starts by understanding why conflict might arise...

The human brain is locked in a perpetual fight. In the red corner, we have the limbic system – the primitive "fight or flight" part of our brain that responds intuitively and emotionally to situations we regard as potentially threatening (whether they be physically or emotionally threatening). And in the blue corner, there's the frontal lobe which is more logical and rational than the limbic system.

The limbic system is often referred to as "the chimp" because it is a part of the brain we developed early on our evolutionary journey and first utilised when we had to battle for our daily survival by attacking or out-running our predators or competitors.

The frontal lobe is often referred to as "the human" part of the brain because it developed much later as we acquired the art of logic, of thinking through situations rationally, predicting a range of possible outcomes and making informed decisions.

The problem is, it's not a fair fight. The frontal lobe has its hands tied behind its back. The limbic system – because it is instinctive – is far quicker to act than the frontal lobe and so, by the time the "human" starts thinking logically about how best to respond to a situation, weighing up the pros and cons of various possible actions, the "chimp" has already entered into "fight or flight".

Before we evolved, in the fight for our daily survival, the fact the limbic system is fast was a very good thing. But in the modern world, the limbic system is not always helpful.

Conflict management

In terms of dealing with parental conflict, then, it is important we remember this internal battle between our limbic system and our frontal lobe.

When a parent threatens us in some way – by, for example, vocally disagreeing with us or refusing to do as we have asked – our limbic system kicks in and we respond emotionally. We take it personally, as a slight on our good name and as an insult to our hard

work and good judgement. We regard the dissent as a threat to our professional standing and feel angry and hurt.

As well as being alert to our own limbic system, it is important that we also remember that the nature of the attack – and sometimes even the substance of it – is likely to be down to our attackers' own inner chimp.

For example, they may be attacking us because they feel threatened by something we have said or done and have therefore responded emotionally rather than rationally because they are in fight or flight mode. Perhaps they are scared of failure. Perhaps they don't understand something but are too embarrassed to say so.

So, what can we do about it? How can we take control of our own chimp and how can we manage parents' chimps?

First, although we cannot prevent our limbic system from kicking in first, we can actively

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acknowledge its existence and make it a habit, when conflict arises, to pause before responding to it. There is a reason we are counselled to "count to 10" whenever we are irritated or angered, after all.

Second, we can divorce the personal from the professional. We should never confuse an attack on our decisions as an attack on us as a person

We should remember that any ostensible attack on us is – at worst – an attack on the office we hold, on our job title and role, and not on us as a human being. More likely, it is not an attack at all but, as I say above, a symptom of someone who would like to point out here:

First, trying to change someone rarely results in change. Change is



Third, we can apologise when our limbic system does get the better of us – as it inevitably will from time to time because we have human and fallible – and acknowledge the way we responded was inappropriate and unhelpful.

By doing this, we are showing others that we are human and make mistakes, and yet we are willing to acknowledge, accept, apologise for and learn from those mistakes rather than dig our heels in. By modelling all these things, we are also setting a good example for others to follow. We are, albeit retrospectively, being professional and rational.

The road to breakdown

Often, conflict with an angry parent doesn't erupt suddenly and without warning; rather, it is the result of a slow-burning problem that slowly and incrementally bubbles up towards the surface before exploding.

Conflict might start with a discussion, which leads to a debate then to an argument, before things finally break down.

This "road to breakdown" is characterised by a desire for one person to change the other, or by one person blaming the other. There are a number of things I would like to point out here:

First, trying to change someone rarely results in change. Change is

more likely to come from understanding. Wanting to change someone implies there is something wrong with that person and, naturally, this only leads to them becoming defensive and argumentative.

Seeking to understand, however, suggests the other person's point of view is valid and reasonable. This is the approach that creates collaboration and mutual problem-solving.

Second, trying to blame someone is reactive and looks to the past, attempting to discern who was right and who was wrong. A better approach is to focus on the future and on how the situation can be resolved. This is the difference between arguing who left the stable door open after the horse has bolted and going out to try and find the horse. One approach is reactive, futile and damaging; the other is proactive and solution-oriented.

Third, you should remember that your aim is to identify any underlying problems, establish rapport and then find, where possible, a resolution. You can do this by personalising your language: use names and refer to your relationship. You can also reassure the other person: offer them praise where possible.

Exploring problems Active listening is a useful skill –

give the parent your undivided attention, use eye contact and nod your head to signal you are paying attention. Paraphrase and summarise their points of view by repeating key statements back in your own words and then seek clarification, check your understanding.

Comment on your feelings and their feelings. Use open questions – such as "Tell me about..." – in order to invite further exploration of the problem.

If a problem persists and an argument escalates, you may need to de-escalate and limit the problem. You can do this by withdrawing your compliance with phrases such as: "Please stop doing that."

You could also try to redirect and/or re-engage the other person's thinking by keeping the person talking or, conversely, by allowing silence to create the space needed for the other person to regain control.

If the meeting is face-to-face, you could sit down which might remove the power disparity but, if so doing, take care not to put yourself at a disadvantage.

You could also encourage a pattern of positive responses: the more "yes" answers you can obtain, even to less important requests, the more likely it is that the other person will comply with your requests for them to stop

difficult behaviours. You could stay calm which will diffuse the aggressor's anger. Or you could use self-disclosure, reminding the other person that you are human too, not just a job title.

Here are a few more tips to help disarm someone's anger:

- Listen to what they have to say, don't interrupt and don't jump to conclusions. Stay silent if necessary.
- Make empathetic statements where possible. Try to establish rapport.
- Try to maintain rapport by using open and friendly body language and a calm, considered tone of voice.
- Feedback and clarify what you hear, perhaps by listing the key points as you understand them. Take notes if necessary. Check your understanding and be prepared to be corrected. Don't get defensive – apologise and admit mistakes.
- Remain focused on finding a solution throughout.

Try and use what we might term bridging language, such as:

- Us, We, Our.
- Can, May, Might, Could.
- Let's talk.
- Appreciate, Understand.
- Alternatives, Options, Perspective.
- What do you need/think?
- How can we? Help me understand.
- What would you say to...?
- How do you want things to be?
- I want to resolve this with you.

Avoid using what we might term barrier language, such as:

- Me, I, Everybody.
- Should/need/have/got to.
- Waste of time.
- Your problem is.
- You always. You never.
- Opinion.
- Yes, but...
- Why are you...?
- Out of the question/that's my final word/non-negotiable.
- You don't understand, listen.
- I've heard all this before.
- You wouldn't understand. SecEd



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