



# Working in Partnership with Parents and Carers

*A quick guide to ensuring that schools work closely with  
parents and carers to meet the needs of children and  
young people with SEND*



First published in 2015 by nasen

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ISBN: 978 1 901485 84 4

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Registered Charity No. 1007023  
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A catalogue record of this publication is available from the British Library.

# Working in Partnership with Parents and Carers

A quick guide to ensuring that schools work closely with parents and carers to meet the needs of children and young people with SEND

## The policy context – SEND reform

In 2009, the Lamb Inquiry into ways to improve parental confidence in the special educational needs (SEN) system published its final report. It concluded that the system needed to refocus its efforts in securing better outcomes for children and delivering the support they need to make progress and achieve.

The report focused on four areas which, it concluded, were critical to addressing failures in the SEN system:

- Placing outcomes for children and young people at the heart of the system.
- A stronger voice for parents in decisions about their children.
- A greater focus on the needs of children and young people.
- A more accountable system that delivers better services.

This guide is for headteachers, SENCOs, other senior staff and class and subject teachers.



### This guide aims to:

- + remind school staff of the requirement to work in partnership with parents and carers
- + consider the benefits of engaging parents and carers
- + explore what effective engagement with parents and carers looks like
- + set out what schools and settings can do to improve their engagement with parents and carers.



Communication is at the heart of effective parental participation, and the Lamb Inquiry highlighted the importance of good communication as the basis for the development of trust:

*Good, honest and open communication is the key to the development of positive working relationships and requires practitioners who listen to parents and are trusted by them... The quality of communication both reflects and is a reflection of the working relationships between professionals and parents. The worst communication generates significant levels of hostility... The best communication engenders impressive levels of confidence and a sense of partnership.* (Lamb Inquiry, 2009)

### Communication in action

**Guiseley School is a mainstream secondary school in Leeds. Watch the following video clip, which shows the impact of effective communication between school and carers on the behaviour of Kelsey, a student in Year 9:**  
[http://y2u.be/1p\\_PUsDEWzs](http://y2u.be/1p_PUsDEWzs)

In 2012, the government's Green Paper, *Support and aspiration: A new approach to SEN and disability*, recognised that better communication and greater engagement with parents and carers are the keys to putting the child or young

person at the centre of provision to meet their needs, and it set the direction of travel for the relationship between parents and services.

The areas highlighted in the Lamb Inquiry then became the key principles underlying the 2014 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice, itself part of the 2014 Children and Families Act.

The SEND Code of Practice (2014) works from the premise that parents know their children best and makes it clear that children, young people *and their families* should be involved in decision making at every stage of the process.

## Engaging parents and carers

As far back as 2003, when Professor Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchaar carried out a review of parental support on pupil achievements, research evidence has demonstrated a large and positive impact of parental involvement on the learning of children and young people.

It must be a priority, therefore, for schools and settings to identify strategies that are effective in supporting parental engagement, particularly for those parents and carers who are not significantly involved in their children's education.



For all settings, engaging parents and carers of children and young people with SEND means putting them at the heart of the SEND process, including:

- working with them and encouraging their active participation in assessment, planning and service delivery for their own child
- ensuring that they have a voice in policy, strategic planning, decision making and commissioning and evaluating services.

The following principles should underpin the way in which schools and settings engage with parents:

- Focusing on the outcomes that children and young people and their families want to achieve, so that all decisions are informed by these aspirations.
- Supporting the participation of children and young people and their parents or carers through practice that places

children and young people at the heart of the system.

- Providing greater choice and control for parents, carers, children and young people over the support they receive.

## Aspirations and outcomes

The Lamb Inquiry (2009) reported that parents felt their child's school did little to enquire about their aspirations or to encourage high expectations. More than a third of parents (39%) said that the school

### Aspirations

In this clip, Ruth, Emma's mother, explains how a diagnosis of SEND affected her expectations and aspirations for her daughter: <http://y2u.be/CZ6GXPLoPU4>

had not discussed outcomes with them at all. Instead the focus was on provision. The SEND Code of Practice (2014) requires all those who teach pupils with SEND to have the highest aspirations for them, and for those who lead and manage the school to demonstrate an ambitious vision and plan of action to enable this to happen so that an identification of SEND does not result in excuses for lack of progress or a lowering of expectations.

### High expectations

In this clip, Gill, Alex's mother, talks about how Lymehurst Day Nursery's high expectations of her daughter, who has Down syndrome, have influenced Alex's approach to life: <http://y2u.be/qW3rxGIR3B8>

Although the format of education, health and care (EHC) plans will be agreed locally, they must reflect the principles set out in the Code, which means having regard to:

- the views, wishes and feelings of the child or young person and the child's parents
- the importance of the child or young person, and the child's parents, participating as fully as possible in decisions and being provided with the information and support necessary to enable participation in those decisions
- the need to support the child or young person, and the child's parents, in order to facilitate the development of the child or young person and help them to achieve the best possible educational and other outcomes, preparing them effectively for adulthood.

EHC plans must also contain 12 specified sections, including Section A which sets out 'the views, interests and aspirations of the child and his or her parents, or the young person'.

Keeping longer-term aspirations in mind for a child or young person, from the earliest age and at every stage, when planning and reviewing provision helps parents, carers and professionals to:

- maintain their expectations of high aspirations
- take a longer-term view of the journey that they will make together towards those aspirations
- tailor approaches to reflect those aspirations.



## Parental aspirations

'Recently my son told me and his father that he was going to live with us until the age of 37. I was not impressed. That's not in the bigger plan. No sense of aspiration in there for me or for him. What we want over the longer term is for him to be sufficiently well educated and skilled for life to get a job that he enjoys and can be productive in, that enables him to live an independent life – and ultimately to be happy, to have friends and a support system around him.' (Mother of a young person with SEND)

## Early action and positive aspirations

Follow this link to hear Ellen Atkinson from the Preparing for Adulthood team at the Council for Disabled Children discussing the importance of early action, positive aspirations and person-centred approaches in helping children and young people with additional needs to move on from school into a fulfilling and productive adult life: <http://y2u.be/Wv43nIPc6k>

## Putting children, young people and families at the heart of the system

Schools and settings are now using a number of approaches that seek to put the child and family at the centre of the planning process:

- Team around the child (TAC) – this is a collaborative approach to assessment and planning that is responsive to the needs of the family and the child. It operates in partnership with parents and carers, with a team of professionals around the child and a key worker co-ordinating services and working with the child's family.



## Team around the child

This video features Blake, a child with profound and multiple learning difficulties, and the multi-professional team that supports him. Blake's headteacher explains that parents and carers are an integral part of the team: <http://y2u.be/EOa92PSKrKY>

- Person-centred approaches – these have been used particularly successfully with young people approaching adulthood.

## Person-centred approaches

Follow this link to hear the deputy headteacher of a special school explaining person-centred planning and processes for children and young people with SEND: <http://y2u.be/lbsidAf43Kw>

- Structured conversations – one of the key elements of the Achievement for All pilot programme was training for professionals in structured conversations with parents. While the requirements for structured conversations were quite precise, in practice they were designed to establish a wider school culture of listening to the thoughts and aspirations of the parents and carers of children and young people with SEND.
- Creative ways of communicating with parents and carers – the SEND Code of Practice (2014) requires the SENCO to meet parents and carers termly to review progress. However, there are many ways of communicating with parents that





don't involve a face-to-face conversation, for example via telephone, text, email, or the school learning platform, and that communication need not always be with the SENCO, since every teacher is responsible for all the children and young people in their class.

Listening to the views of parents and carers and of children and young people themselves, then planning on the basis of those views are key elements in securing parental confidence and involvement in the processes adopted.

### Good communication

**'The relationship I have with my child's school is built on trust and I get regular reviews of my son's progress via class teachers because they are aware of his needs. Recently I received an email from his Year 8 English teacher giving me the heads up about some forthcoming poetry homework. My son has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and she knew he would struggle with it and would need some support. She gave me quick pointers to the outcomes that she would be looking for.'** (Parent of young person with SEN in a mainstream school)

### Greater choice and control for parents and carers

The SEND Code of Practice recognises that parents and carers know their children best of all and therefore provides greater choice and control for parents and young people over the support they receive. This includes greater choice of schools and colleges, along with personal budgets to tailor services, and will allow parents to access the best available educational option for their child based on:

- knowing and understanding their child's SEND
- having high aspirations for their child

- knowing what is available to them and deciding the best option for their child or young person.

A personal budget is an amount of money allocated through an EHC plan with a view to involving the parent and carer, or the young person themselves, in securing the provision set out in the plan. Parents and carers exercising their right to choice will be most effective when, with the school and setting, they are fully engaged in their child's learning. One example of using the flexibility offered by a personal budget is a parent with two boys with ASD who chose to have a trampoline installed in her garden during half term rather than two short periods of a care worker for one of her children, because it provided greater respite for her and involved both children.

You can hear Jane Friswell, nasen's Chief Executive, explaining more about personal budgets at: <http://y2u.be/zxkckrX5YOI/>

## Learning from the pathfinders

### Support for parental engagement

The pathfinder local authorities were commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to explore how to put into effect the vision that had been set out in the Green Paper. The pathfinders started work in 2011.

Throughout the pathfinder period and subsequent developments, the DfE has

supported parental participation through funding for local parent carer forums and for the National Network of Parent Carer Forums, which supports the local forums. This has enabled parents and carers to be involved in all aspects of the SEND reforms, from the development of EHC plans and the local offer in pathfinder areas, to influencing strategy at national level.

The reforms also recognise the importance of the information and advice that parents need in order to participate fully. The Children and Families Act (2014) builds on and extends parent partnership services to provide information and advice to children and young people as well as their parents and carers. The local, impartial information, advice and support (IAS) service will be an important source of support for parents to enable them to participate more effectively in decisions affecting their children.

## Working with parents

The themes of co-production, participation and consultation reoccur frequently in reports on the work of the pathfinders, in relation to their work with parents and carers. SE7, a collective of seven local authorities in the South East of England, offered the following definitions:

- Co-production is when all team members (including parents and carers) agree outcomes and co-produce recommendations, plans, actions and materials as a collective.
- Participation is when parents and carers are involved in meetings to share their



views and experiences and contribute to the debate.

- Consultation is asking parents and carers for their response to pre-set questions, strategies or services.

Another pathfinder, Brighton and Hove local authority, has devised a process to ensure that parents and carers are engaged and involved at all stages of

SEN planning and review in schools and educational settings. It has:

- developed a questionnaire for parents and carers and staff in schools and settings to inform an evaluation of current provision and identify areas for improvement
- analysed the results of the questionnaire jointly – with professionals and parents and carers



- co-produced an action plan with parents and carers.

An important outcome from this process was a request from parents and carers for more opportunities for them to support each other. As a result, education professionals have provided training for parents who can give effective support to other parents, for example parents and carers of children with autism supporting those whose child has been newly diagnosed with the condition.

Other outcomes from the Brighton and Hove pathfinder project include working much more closely with parents and carers, challenging some schools and

### **Welcoming parents into school**

Follow this link to hear Carrie Grant, a parent of four children with SEND, discussing the importance of schools thinking about the way that they make parents feel welcome:  
<http://y2u.be/sW-wy3JJ3qg>

## Planning an alternative curriculum

Follow these links to hear how one parent worked with her school to develop an alternative curriculum for her son, who has dyslexia and associated memory difficulties:

- Working with the school – <http://y2u.be/eDyfcP56Rrk>
- An alternative curriculum – <http://y2u.be/2TEv6gWSc6w>

settings to reflect on how they welcome parents into school. One school felt more confident to ask parents for their opinions when writing new SEND policies and for their input when planning the curriculum for their children.

A common theme all the parents identified was the positive impact of meeting other parents in a similar position to them. This helped to address the isolation that so many parents of children with SEND feel and also helped to increase their confidence.

Brighton and Hove plan to replicate this approach in more schools across the city to leave a legacy of partnership working.

## Key findings from the pathfinder project

Findings from the pathfinder project overall in relation to the participation of parents and carers show that:

- the participation of parents and carers and children and young people in the development of new SEND approaches and service planning adds clear value and helps professionals to focus on what is important and what really makes a difference
- improved outcomes are achieved when parents and carers and children and young people co-produce work with practitioners
- it is important to get it right from the start, with co-production and participation from the outset
- developing co-produced solutions can reduce potential conflict



- regular, honest and open communication is essential to support the development of trust
- working together effectively requires all parties to listen to each other, consider each other's views and respect them
- person-centred tools are effective to engage with the children and young people to ensure that their views are fully understood.

More information about the work of the pathfinders can be found at [www.pathfinder.co.uk/](http://www.pathfinder.co.uk/)

## What can schools and settings do?

The Code of Practice (2014) sets out a vision for engagement with parents of children and young people with SEND that is far-reaching and should result in a more collaborative and creative problem-solving approach between schools and parents and carers.

The changes are not just about a friendlier, more personal approach for the benefit of parents, carers and teachers because



it feels better. As we have seen earlier, the effective engagement of parents and carers has a beneficial impact on children and young people's achievement and progress.

An effective school and setting will be one in which the staff, children and young people, parents and community members are all working together and on the same team. The following points suggest ways in which schools and settings can improve their practice in engaging and working with parents and carers.

- Remember that a commitment to working with parents and carers should be led by the school or setting's leadership team and reflected in its vision and mission statements, with all staff signed up to these.

## Commitment from school leadership

Follow this link to hear a headteacher talking about the way in which his school works in partnership with young people with behavioural difficulties:

<http://y2u.be/HMt84WZpFI>

- Audit the ways in which your school engages with parents, prioritise areas for development and make an action plan to develop and improve parental engagement.
- Review progress against your action plan regularly. Do this in partnership with parents and carers to ensure that there is parental engagement and involvement across all aspects of practice, and that parents and carers drive improvement.
- Consider the visuals in reception and around the school – do they reflect the importance you place on parental engagement, for example photos of parents and staff working together, a calendar of events relating to consultation and involvement, good news stories celebrating partnership or parent-led projects?
- Include 'parental engagement' as a regular agenda item at staff meetings.
- Provide training for staff, to underpin the



cultural shift to a new way of working.

The training should:

- ensure that the skills of listening to parents are at least as well developed as the skills of talking to parents
- alert staff to possible barriers to effective parental engagement and how they can be broken down
- include practical examples and good practice guidelines
- offer a safe and supportive environment for staff to practise ways of dealing with difference.

The SEND Code of Practice identifies in-house training as a key role for the SENCO, and effective parental engagement will be a key training need for most schools and settings.

- Recruit a member of staff to champion parental engagement. Make sure it is someone whom parents trust – someone who will set the tone of the relationship between the setting and parents. The champion need not be a member of the teaching staff or a teaching assistant
  - look for someone who has the right qualities for the job. Parent champions meet parents and carers regularly to discuss relevant issues and represent the parental viewpoint in situations where parents and carers themselves are not present.
- Set up regular meetings with parents and carers. Working together effectively requires all parties to listen to each other and to consider and respect each other's views when there is disagreement. In one school, the SENCO hosts parent carer forums once a month where parents and carers discuss progress,

share information and raise any issues. Meetings are well attended. More recently, the SENCO has taken a back seat because meetings have become more 'parent-driven'. The SENCO acts as a parent champion, ensuring that the views of parents and carers are represented at all levels.

- Look at other creative ways of communicating with parents and carers, such as via telephone, text, email, forums etc. Regular, honest and open communication is vital to establish and maintain trust.
- Don't try to resolve a conflict using technology. This is best done face to face where there are opportunities for eye contact, empathy and appropriate tone of voice.

## Impact on the family

In these clips, Wilf's mother, Karen, describes the stresses on family and working life of having a child with SEND and the huge impact, beyond school, that good communication and effective provision can make:

- Impact on family life – <http://y2u.be/9jJp-KOvrPI>
- Impact on working life – [http://y2u.be/\\_LxATNHqOLM](http://y2u.be/_LxATNHqOLM)

## Resolving difficulties

Follow this link to listen to a parent explaining how a face-to-face meeting with the school helped to resolve a difficult situation for her son who has autism:

<http://y2u.be/iqECOML7dUw>





- Recognise the realities of life for parents and carers of children and young people with SEND when setting meetings and communication times and modes, for example consider rescheduling meetings held at 'traditional' times – between 3 and 6pm – or consider making more home visits.
- Use plain language as far as possible – cut out jargon and bureaucratic language.
- Consider ways of engaging harder-to-reach parents and those whose family circumstances make it more difficult to work with the school or setting; for example, utilise the skills of those who work with minority ethnic families, adopt more flexible approaches.

### **Working closely with parents**

Watch this video in which staff at Lymehurst Day Nursery and three parents talk about how the nursery works with families to include children with SEND and to support their emotional needs:

<http://y2u.be/j1Qbzt63Cys>

### **Breaking down barriers**

This video features Frederick Bird Primary School in Coventry, where an educational psychologist and a clinical psychologist work with some harder-to-reach parents to help bridge the gap between home and school:

<http://y2u.be/jYysBEI5fgI>

- Have a continuous programme of 'recruitment' so new parents and carers know how they can engage with the school and setting and access activities and services.
- Keep records of what you do to engage parents and carers and the impact it has had and let everyone in the school community know.
- Celebrate as an organisation what it is you do and achieve.

## Further information

- **Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice 0–25 (2014)** – [www.sendgateway.org.uk/resources.special-educational-needs-and-disability-code-of-practice-0-to-25-years.html](http://www.sendgateway.org.uk/resources.special-educational-needs-and-disability-code-of-practice-0-to-25-years.html)
- **SEND Pathfinder pack, Engagement of children, young people, parents, carers information pack** – [www.sendpathfinder.co.uk/infopacks/ep](http://www.sendpathfinder.co.uk/infopacks/ep)
- **Preparing for adulthood** – [www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk](http://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk)
- **Further videos featuring the voices of parents and carers of children and young people with SEND** can be found on nasen's YouTube site: [www.youtube.com/user/Nasenonline/playlists?shelf\\_id=29&view=50&sort=dd](http://www.youtube.com/user/Nasenonline/playlists?shelf_id=29&view=50&sort=dd)
- Search for 'parents' on the SEND Gateway at [www.sendgateway.org.uk](http://www.sendgateway.org.uk) for resources from a range of voluntary and community sector organisations.

## Self-reflection questions

- How does your school or setting demonstrate its commitment to engaging and working in partnership with parents of children and young people with SEND?
- How well does your school or setting use the knowledge, understanding and skills that parents and carers bring to improve provision for children and young people?
- How do you keep children and young people with SEND and their families at the heart of your practice?
- What steps has your school or setting taken to ensure that parents and carers make an active contribution to the design and review of SEN plans, policies and processes so that they meet the needs of children, young people and families?
- How do you involve parents and carers at a personal level – in plans, provision, reviews and assessments for their children?
- What steps has your school or setting taken to engage harder-to-reach and more vulnerable parents?
- What information, advice and support are available for parents and carers to enable them to participate fully?
- How will you improve engagement with parents and carers and what will be your priorities?



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ISBN 978-1-901485-84-4



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