

The National Parent Forum of Scotland 'Let's Talk' Resource

What does a welcoming school look like? How do we support our children's learning? How best can we work together to benefit our children?

We are inviting everyone's answers to the questions above – and we will continue to add to this resource. We have been asking teachers, parents, carers and families for their ideas and their experiences over the last few months. This has resulted in the checklist of pointers below for parents and schools to develop. We hope that, with your input, this list can grow and that it can inspire innovation along the way!

The only way to build strong school-family links, which envelop our children, ensuring that they are supported and nurtured regardless of their home setting, is to build relationships and communicate effectively with one another.

There are many simple but effective examples of good relationship-building and effective communications going on across the country. We think that if everyone did almost everything on the checklist, we would really be capturing the good will and enthusiasm that we all share!

Starting with Strategy?

It can be helpful to take a strategic approach to developing and improving home-school partnerships, first of all by auditing what is already being done, then consulting on what else parents, pupils and school staff might like and finally by incorporating this in a strategy with an action plan. Parent councils can take a strong lead in developing and initiating these.

Some strategic tools might be:

- A Home-School Partnership Strategy or a Parental Involvement Plan
- A Community Partnership Plan
- A 'Communicating with Parents' Plan
- The School Handbook Review
- 'Our Welcoming School' Protocol or Plan
- 'Our Inclusive School' Framework or Plan
- A 'Learning Together' Plan
- A Health and Wellbeing Strategy
- A 'Celebrating Success' Plan
- A Transitions Strategy
- 'Our Shared Values' Policy and Plan, with regular consultation and dialogue with pupils, staff and parents about what the values are and what they mean in action

Working Together for the Benefit of All: The Role of Parent Councils

Partnership working succeeds when all partners are mutually respectful and focus on meeting the needs of children and young people, in an inclusive and nurturing way. Parent councils have a crucial role to play in positive partnership working, using national and local resources (see Additional Resources below), and sharing ideas with other local parent councils. Gathering the views of the Parent Forum (all the parents in a school) is key to effectively involving and supporting families in children's learning and in school life. Consultation can be undertaken in a variety of ways – questionnaires, surveys, online with SurveyMonkey, tear-off feedback slips, focus groups, one-to-one interviews. Some parent councils report success in engaging harder-to-reach parents when they pro-actively approach parents at school events such as parent consultation evenings - initial conversations can lead to informal focus groups with particular themes.

A Welcoming School

A 'welcoming school' looks and feels like anywhere else that successfully hosts members of the public in general and families in particular. A warm welcome for children and young people is crucial! See Perth Grammar School's YouTube welcome: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QKTLklrh3EM>

- ✓ Clear signage in school in different languages/formats as appropriate
- ✓ Photo board of staff
- ✓ Easy-to-find reception
- ✓ A friendly welcome when we visit
- ✓ Friendly telephone manners and a 'no problem' attitude
- ✓ Clear protocols (eg child absence reporting)
- ✓ Ideally a 'family/parent space' in the school with toys for younger children
- ✓ Visible staff and parent reps with legible name badges at every event, formal or informal, to 'meet and greet' us
- ✓ An attractive, welcoming parent information board
- ✓ An attractive, welcoming parent area of the school website
- ✓ A School Handbook which is reviewed by parents and staff, and is reissued regularly and contains everything that parents need to know
- ✓ Clear information on complaints procedures
- ✓ Clear information on the school values and ethos and regular reviews of this so that we can all contribute actively to creating the ethos and supporting shared values
- ✓ Visiting the school during the normal school day or holding a mock 'school day' one evening, so that we can see what our children's lives look like eg 'Take your parent to school' days – it is a while since we went to school!
- ✓ Community open day
- ✓ Community access to facilities
- ✓ Clear and easy to find information on Additional Support for Learning provision and entitlements
- ✓ Accessibility for all
- ✓ Health and Wellbeing delivered holistically for each child
- ✓ A stated and demonstrated commitment to inclusiveness whereby all achievement and effort is valued with equal respect eg a 'tree of

achievement' displayed in a primary school provides recognition for out of school activities

- ✓ Outdoor learning opportunities
- ✓ A designated 'parental involvement' member of staff with special responsibility for reviewing home-school partnership arrangements and a designated member of the parent council with the same remit
- ✓ Family-friendly guidelines for homework
- ✓ Jargon-busting explanations of key education words and descriptions
- ✓ Meaningful pupil reports with action points and discussion opportunities
- ✓ A family focus on school organisational and support structures eg siblings allocated the same Pupil Support teacher; children are invited to visit the classes of their older siblings
- ✓ Inviting parents to their children's year group assemblies

Effective Communications between home, school and community

There are many different types of communication available to families and schools. Research shows that parents prefer face-to-face communications on important matters. Thereafter, to engage as many parents as possible, schools often used a 'mixed' approach to communicating (social media, emailing, websites plus hard copies of information or talks to supplement this). Parent councils can work with schools to find out from parents what is most effective. Providing lots of information that people can choose to access is better than assuming no-one is interested and not bothering at all! A 'Communicating with Parents' plan might be a useful tool, to map out who does what, and when, and to fill in any gaps, in consultation with parents.

- ✓ Transparency, a genuine partnership with parents and pupils, and openness built into the decision-making processes are essential to instill confidence
- ✓ A school blog which updates with news on a daily basis (see Preston Lodge High School http://pipes.yahoo.com/pipes/pipe.info?_id=63f1f4ab0517230b3a8203e6f30457cf)
- ✓ Weekly emailed bulletins of school news and achievements, including photos
- ✓ Regular good news about our children from staff (eg certificates, achievement notes, progress comments, informal feedback, emails)
- ✓ Using the internet as a back-up for posting homework given in class so that parents can see what has been set and when it is due
- ✓ Open afternoons and/or evenings so that parents and children can see learning in action and take part in hands-on activities
- ✓ Concerns about our children raised quickly with us and followed up by an agreed action plan and scheduled review
- ✓ Parent drop-in sessions at designated days and time
- ✓ Dedicated phone line/voicemail for each member of the pupil support staff and the member of the senior management team with responsibility for pupil support, promoted widely and repeatedly
- ✓ Newsletters
- ✓ Email addresses of teachers so that concerns and compliments can be shared promptly
- ✓ Seeking parent feedback regularly and acting on it, then reporting back
- ✓ A named school contact who will be our first port of call

- ✓ Weekly school news, events and achievements distributed via Twitter and Facebook posts (invite senior pupils to help with this!)
- ✓ School news is shared via community newsletters and websites
- ✓ Children are encouraged to join in community events which are promoted through the school

Children's Learning

All the international evidence demonstrates that children do better when parents and families are involved in their learning. That often means showing supportive interest and encouraging children to try their best. We need help in making the connections between the learning that children do in their daily lives and the learning that children experience in school. By high school, children's learning often has outstripped that of parents in some, if not all, subjects. So we need to have information about what they are learning, so that we can show we really care about their progress, by asking our children, as 'the experts,' to explain their experiences.

- ✓ Clear explanations of educational words and phrases
- ✓ A clear schedule of assessment and 'reporting to parents' procedures in parent-friendly formats
- ✓ Regular communications about what our children are about to learn – we need conversation openers, especially in the early and teenage years! This can be done by whole class email or by information sheet on a termly basis eg Learning Journeys are shared with parents in advance, information is given on how children can be supported on that journey and the journey is then reviewed collectively at an evening event hosted by the children
- ✓ Formal and informal feedback (see Communications)
- ✓ Subject information evenings and/or information sheets so that we are better informed about what, when and how our children will be learning
- ✓ Parent consultations that work for us and for our children's learning: different models work in different schools, but the effectiveness of parent consultations for all participants needs to be carefully monitored and evaluated eg early and ongoing targeted relationship-building initiated by schools through informal meetings and dialogue with families who do not feel positive about school; home visits. Parent consultations need to include all parents/carers and pupils to be effective
- ✓ The open offer of one to one meetings with our Named Pupil Support or Support for Learning contacts if there are new and ongoing concerns
- ✓ The use of GLOW so that we can see what our children are learning and can support them
- ✓ Clear, relevant and visible homework tasks – we need to know what these are and when to expect them if we are to support, nag, persuade and cajole! eg homework grid; termly schedule; information on how we can help
- ✓ Homework clubs for parents/carers and children; video/YouTube homework support information
- ✓ The opportunity to see our children's class work on a regular basis so that we understand their progress and can support it
- ✓ Curriculum nights and detailed information on the school website
- ✓ Having a wide definition of what 'success' in school learning looks like. Children with lower attainment levels and their families are more likely to

become disengaged with their learning if they feel 'unsuccessful'. Who wants to come into school only to hear 'bad' news about their child?

- ✓ Diverse learning opportunities, with partners as appropriate, in the context of a strong school ethos of celebrating wider achievement, are essential to encouraging learning
- ✓ 'Wider Achievement' events to celebrate and establish a culture of respecting diverse kinds of success
- ✓ Parent volunteers come in and support children with paired reading and reading aloud and with subject learning where skills can be shared or a spare pair of hands offered

Supporting Families

Parent councils and schools can collaborate to ensure that parents and families can access the support and information that they need. The national 'Getting It Right for Every Child' initiative places responsibility on partners to work together to deliver positive outcomes and experiences for children and their families. The Health and Wellbeing aspect of Curriculum for Excellence offers excellent opportunities to enhance and support family life and to improve outcomes for children. This might include a range of positive offers as well as interventions.

- ✓ Is your school developing a Health and Wellbeing Strategy or a Social and Emotional Wellbeing Plan in which your Parent Council and Parent Forum can participate?
- ✓ Parenting and parent craft courses can be organised and delivered in early years or school settings eg parenting toddlers or parenting teenagers; talking and listening to children
- ✓ Is there clear information for parents/carers about where they can go to access more information and support if they need it? Can those support agencies be introduced to all families, and therefore be familiar to the school community?
- ✓ Are key partners (eg the Health Visitor, the educational psychologist, the school nurse, the local dentistry practice) known to parents and can your parent council host a 'marketplace' or a 'Meet the ...' event for them?
- ✓ Home visits early on and regular telephone/email communication with vulnerable families by a known and named member of school staff
- ✓ Organising breakfast clubs and/or afterschool clubs and/or holiday clubs
- ✓ Organising a wide range of afterschool activities
- ✓ Information courses requested by parents (eg sleeping well, eating well; managing behaviour positively; risk-taking behaviour such as smoking, drugs and alcohol; internet safety; sexual health; mental health; supporting learning; additional support for learning; dealing with bullying)
- ✓ Setting up a parent support group such as support groups for particular aspects of parenting and/or particular transitional changes (additional support for learning; challenging behaviour; life after school; gifted and able children)
- ✓ 'Including All Our Families' Policy to ensure that not-at-home, corporate parents, surrogate parent/carers, and diverse family arrangement such as prisoner families or travelling families, are included in information-sharing and relationship-building
- ✓ Arrangements for looked after children – how can the parent council help?
- ✓ Meeting the diverse needs of families (survey parents to see what is needed)

- ✓ Provision of physical and recreational activities for children and families in your area (What is available? Is it accessible for all? Can provision be extended and enhanced? Does it meet local need?)
- ✓ School food provision – does it meet the needs of children?
- ✓ Work and career information

Transition

In our families, children are always in transition – they change and develop every minute of every day, which means our families are always in transition too! Whether it is starting a new school, moving classes or having a different teacher, changes at school (such as moving from Broad General Education to the Senior Phase or post-school choices) can be very momentous in the lives of children and their families. We all want to make these as successful as possible for children and young people. A key aspect of this is ensuring that adults feel as positive about the changes (or transitions) as possible, so that they can reassure children and avoid ‘over-hyping’ the change to children. Many children are very adaptable and live in the moment and adults are the anxious ones!

- ✓ Transition plan with details of all related events, information-sharing and learning progression, including a timetable of events and opportunities, shared publicly for all year groups and the wider community to see
- ✓ High school ‘road-show’ attends cluster primary parents’ evenings and community events, with staff, pupils and parents from the high school available
- ✓ Primary school ‘road-show’ visits early years centres and community events, as above
- ✓ Whole family events at schools eg Eco School event to which the clusters are invited as well as the wider community and partners
- ✓ Opportunities for visits for children and their families to the new ‘destination’ whether it is a new classroom, a new school or a new post-school opportunity eg invite P7 parents to whole school high school assemblies; induction day/evening for parents and pupils to see the new school/college/university/workplace in action; open days/evenings; pupil visits to gym halls, assemblies, after school activities
- ✓ Shared breakfast clubs
- ✓ Opportunities to welcome visitors from the new destination into the current establishment and to meet and greet parents/carers eg high school teachers come and meet P7 pupils and their parents; P1 teachers come and meet nursery children and their families for snack
- ✓ Sharing of consistent learning methods by schools with parents and pupils to demonstrate continuity of learning and care eg maths techniques; health and wellbeing; learning support
- ✓ Clear explanations of educational progression, of any changes and of what remains consistent
- ✓ Information sessions between staff of the two establishments, with parents and pupil invited and a discussion about pupil profiles or transition records
- ✓ Review of transition and settling-in early in school year (eg a settling in report or pupil transition review meetings, with follow-up information sent to parents)

- ✓ Transition from the Broad General Education to the Senior Phase – consultation with parents and pupils on the format, on the “offer to pupils” and on the pathways for pupils of the Senior Phase.
- ✓ Clear information about the Senior Phase (eg YouTube video of Preston Lodge High School <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8VARI4k7kE> and course choice information <http://edubuzz.org/prestonlodge/2013/02/28/where-now-2013-14-senior-phase-course-choice-booklet/>); presentations at information evenings;
- ✓ Clear information and options early on for post-school choices
- ✓ Shared information and support for pupils and parents about ALL of the post-school options, to ensure that options are given equal attention and respect
- ✓ Inter-cluster sporting events hosted at the high school
- ✓ Opportunities for parents and pupils to see or experience wider achievement activities on offer at the new school eg invite P7 pupils to join after-school activity clubs and ask parents to collect the P7s so that staff and parents can meet one another informally

Learning and Caring Communities

Children’s lives and learning are embedded in, and are enriched by, their communities as well as in and by their homes and schools. Wider achievement is a key aspect of Curriculum for Excellence and a recognition and respect for the wider achievements of children and young people will be reflected in children’s school profiles. Parent councils, particularly if they have community representatives co-opted onto them, have a very strong and important role to play in developing community relationships and provision.

- ✓ Sharing school and parent council information regularly with the wider community and partners to build relationships with partners
- ✓ Creating lots of positive news about our schools
- ✓ Joint meetings of high school and cluster primary parent councils
- ✓ Area or regional meetings of parent councils to share good experiences
- ✓ Inviting cluster primary parents and pupils to informal high school events
- ✓ Circulating information on behalf of partners (eg Scouts, Guides, sports clubs, parks, health centres) to ensure that families are aware of local opportunities and local support
- ✓ Encouraging partners including local authorities to hear parent voices and encouraging parents to make their views known (does your local authority education committee have parent and pupil representation on it? How are parent views conveyed in local democratic structures?)
- ✓ Outdoor learning in the community (what and where are the local opportunities?)
- ✓ Ensuring that community partners and families can feed into young people’s ‘wider achievement’ records on pupil profiles in P7 and S3. These are key to showing how every child and young person achieves, whether in school or in the wider community
- ✓ Sport and physical education in the community (promoting these opportunities)
- ✓ Working with Community Learning and Development to deliver holiday clubs or youth clubs for children and young people

Sharing Parent/Carer Skills

Parents and families share their skills and their time very generously with schools in a wide range of volunteering roles, including representing views, fundraising, careers information, being a helping hand in school. Many school staff also take on volunteering roles, giving up their time and energy to enhance opportunities for children and in doing so, developing the community ethos of the school.

- ✓ A database of parent volunteers and their skills is set up, maintained and developed with good communications and participative opportunities
- ✓ Parental representation: the parent council communicates with the Parent Forum regularly, and consults and keeps the Parent Forum fully informed. Meetings are arranged at different times and in different formats to ensure the multiplicity of views is sought. Online tools are used effectively such as blogs, websites, Twitter, Facebook and SurveyMonkey. The Parent Council connects with decision-makers (the school, the community council, the local authority, partner agencies) to ensure that parent views are heard
- ✓ Parental volunteering: events-organising, fundraising, skills-sharing, time-giving
- ✓ Parents as careers advisers eg World of Work speed-dating event for cluster parent volunteers and S3 pupils
- ✓ Evaluation: this is an ongoing and cyclical means of improving the experience of children and families. Parents and children can be encouraged to offer feedback both formally and informally, and parent councils can ensure that they are involved in the school's evaluation procedures. The improvement agenda is never-ending but directly benefits all who commit to it.

And the Fun Part....

Underestimated but crucial opportunities for developing good school-home relationships are the informal, celebratory and social events that happen in schools, usually with input from staff, pupil and parent volunteers. These 'team' events are often the most memorable part of the school lives of families; positive 'memory-making' is an essential part of growing up for families and young people and of community-building.

- ✓ Lots of informal opportunities to meet school staff at celebratory events such as concerts, shows, coffee mornings, exhibitions, fundraising sales. Ensure participants have clear name badges – parents and visitors need to see how much staff, pupil and parent volunteers are contributing!
- ✓ These are great informal networking opportunities for senior school staff and teachers to mix with and to celebrate achievement alongside families
- ✓ Parent volunteers work alongside school staff during school hours and beyond to deliver a wide range of opportunities for children eg sport, modern languages, art and crafts, paired reading. How are these partnerships promoted and celebrated?

Additional Resources

The National Parent Forum of Scotland: www.parentforumscotland.org

Education Scotland's Parentzone:
www.educationscotland.gov.uk/parentzone/index.asp

Scottish Parent Teacher Council: www.sptc.info

Enquire (the advisory service for Additional Support for Learning): www.enquire.org.uk

Useful links to information on Home-School Partnerships

http://www.csos.jhu.edu/P2000/nnps_model/school/sixtypes.htm

Let's Talk! More Often...Please contact the National Parent Forum via enquiries@parentforumscotland.org with your ideas and examples of good talking.