

Spring 2010

**Becta** leading  
next generation  
learning



**Messages from  
the evidence:**  
Engaging  
with families

All schools know that engaging with families and communicating with parents is important. Evidence shows that the majority of parents want to be more involved in their children's education, but not all parents think that this is easy.

It has long been accepted that parents' engagement in their children's learning at all stages is one of the most important factors in the success of a child at school. It also influences parents' own relationships to learning and wider learning in the family.

When used effectively, technology makes a vital contribution to learning, teaching and management. It also supports effective communication across and beyond the school. Parents can be kept informed about key areas of their child's development and education. This helps them engage positively with their children's learning and allows them to have more information available to them to help in constructive ways.

Schools can also work with parents to manage continuity of learning during transitions and school closures. This works well when technology-based communication is established as part of the regular routine of school life.



Throughout this leaflet the word 'parents' is taken to include wider family members or carers who undertake a parental role or who support the young learner.

# How can schools better communicate with parents?

Schools work with parents most effectively when they consider specific parents' needs and the best ways of working with them. However, schools face many demands on their time and this can be difficult.

The findings outlined here will help schools review their practice and develop new strategies for more productive relationships with parents. The Department for Children, Schools and Families is currently undertaking further research on what practitioners and settings can do to support and encourage stronger parental engagement.

## Parental engagement

- focuses on parents' interest in their child's learning and development
- is about helping parents build their capability to support their child
- includes improving learning behaviours as well as educational achievement
- is an enabler of positive relationships and partnerships between families and schools.

Schools can now use what technology has to offer to improve parental engagement. To support this all secondary schools will offer secure online access for parents to information about their child's learning and school life by 2010. The same expectation will apply to primary schools by 2012.

## The challenge

Many parents expect regular communication from their child's school, including more information about:

- their children's progress
- the curriculum, teaching methods and terminology
- recommended learning websites and software including supporting children who are disadvantaged through learning or physical disability
- how they can support their child's learning
- how to help their children use technology safely.

Research shows that parents can face barriers engaging and communicating with their child's school, with some facing more than others.

## The context

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A recent Becta survey (see the Engaging with families link on page 8) found that:

- 81 per cent would like more feedback from their child's school on their child's progress, but
- 85 per cent of parents receive updates from their child's school on their progress four times a year or less
- 81 per cent are informed of their child's progress at the school's parents' evening, but
- 68 per cent would like their child's school to use technologies such as text messaging and emails to communicate with them more frequently.

### 'Why are some parents not engaging?'

Time is a barrier for parents who work, fathers, or single parents.

Social and cultural differences mean that some parents don't feel confident communicating with teachers.

Those parents who don't have access to the internet, or who do not feel confident using computers feel restricted in their communications with schools and in helping their child with their learning.

### **Developing policies for communicating effectively with parents**

- Online information can improve valuable face-to-face discussions between staff and parents and complement face-to-face meetings.
- No one-size fits all. Good communication includes a range of options to fit around parents' different needs and circumstances, including technology strategies and non-technology strategies.
- Providing parents with information directly gives them a really powerful tool to use to engage with their children's learning.
- Some parents find that schools are 'hard to reach' and do not have parental engagement policies that make it easy to communicate.
- Tapping into parents' knowledge and skills makes parents feel important and valued.
- Consultation with parents on what information they want and need, and how they want to receive this is important.
- Parents may need support when learning about technology-based information. This can take the form of family learning sessions, targeted workshops, DVDs or electronic information packages, or paper-based booklets.

## Developing policies for communicating effectively with parents

Technology can play a vital role in communicating with parents, if used effectively and appropriately. In designing these policies, the following pointers may help:

Schools have a wide range of technologies at their disposal. Some facilitate better management of communication, such as management information systems, portals and messaging systems that allow the integration and automation of email and text messages. Learning platforms can incorporate blogs, RSS feeds and newsletters. The internet can provide translation services for text-based communications.

The evidence tells us that parents are aware of some of these technologies, some of which are widely used in the workplace. Evidence suggests a set of practical steps that may help schools develop successful practice.



“You find almost conclusively if parents make good contact, children make good progress. So if you want to make the ones that aren't making good progress improve, one of the things is improving parent contact.”

**Headteacher,  
secondary school**



## Using a range of technologies

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### Using email and social software

Encourage more productive relationships between your school and parents with two-way communication between parents and schools. Make clear where parents should direct their emails or comment upon blogs.

Set out expectations about who will respond and any timescales. Set up email 'groups' or use school websites or online forums to provide a platform for common interests (such as form groups or after-school clubs), where parents and children are able to join in and communicate with others. This can be empowering and engaging. Make a member of staff responsible for parental engagement and liaison. Also ensure that communication systems are managed to meet both staff and parents' needs.

### Using text messaging

If text messaging is going to be solely one-way, from school to parent, use it for simple, timely and generic information. Use a different medium for more personalised information about specific children. Allow parents to respond to the school via text or send messages to other parents. Text messaging can be very inclusive as many people have a mobile phone, but mobile numbers change frequently. Encourage parents to keep their details up-to-date by sending them positive and useful information regularly.

### School websites

Divide the website into a clear public-facing area for prospective families and a secure area for current families linked to or contained within the learning platform.

Have a member of staff with knowledge of home-school liaison to oversee the secure areas of the site, and another with a good awareness of the school's overall image and values to oversee the public-facing areas.

Regularly update information and notify parents of updates using emails, text messages or microblogs like Twitter. Enable parents to book appointments and consultations online and facilitate web based conversations and co-operative development of policy using blogs and wikis. Include links to local council websites and safe educational websites.

### Using learning platforms

Create an interactive space for parents to communicate with staff or other parents (using email, instant messaging or blogs). Offer support to staff, pupils and parents to make simple and effective use of the school's learning platform.

Remember, not all families have home access to the internet. Make available alternatives for parents and children to use learning platforms to submit homework or access materials. If you have not recently done so you may need to establish current levels of home access at your school.

### Work together to improve communication using technology

Invite parents into school to experience what their child has been learning and how this can be supported at home using technology. This can raise parents' awareness of the extent of their children's technological skills and can initiate learning in families. Carry out a skills audit among staff and interested parents. Run informal sessions around particular topics that promote the simple and effective use of technology, for example at open days, after-school clubs, cyber cafés, etc.



## About this document

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### Research sources

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✎ <http://publications.becta.org.uk/display.cfm?resID=37348>

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✎ [www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/familyandcommunity/workingwithparents/everyparentmatters/](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/wholeschool/familyandcommunity/workingwithparents/everyparentmatters/)

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Hughes, M and Pollard, A (2006) 'Home-School Knowledge Exchange in Context', Educational Review 58(4)

### Useful links

Becta's Home Access Project

✎ [www.becta.org.uk/homeaccess](http://www.becta.org.uk/homeaccess)

The e-Learning Foundation

✎ [www.e-learningfoundation.com](http://www.e-learningfoundation.com)

Research into Parental Engagement at the DCSF

✎ [www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/publications/documents/laeparentalengagement/](http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/publications/documents/laeparentalengagement/)

The Institute for Policy Studies in Education

✎ [www.londonmet.ac.uk/ipse](http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/ipse)

The Family and Parenting Institute

✎ [www.familyandparenting.org](http://www.familyandparenting.org)

Becta's Engaging with Parents website

✎ [www.becta.org.uk/engagingparents](http://www.becta.org.uk/engagingparents)