

Remits of, and relationships between, schools and the local authority need to be clearly communicated to parents so they have confidence that each will fulfil its own designated functions and responsibilities.

Parents' forums present opportunities for parents to receive information and raise issues about the SEN process and the support they have received. By responding to issues raised, the local authority can increase parental confidence in the process.

SEN teams ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised through embedding and maintaining a child-centred approach to the process. Staff need to ensure that they communicate this culture of working to parents and try to involve them throughout.

Local authority monitoring of the support provided by schools can convey to parents that the provision accessed by their children is regularly reviewed.

Areas for further development include a continued focus on developing effective communication with parents, involving a high degree of face-to-face interaction, and demonstrating understandings of the family's perspective when working with parents.

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You can download the full report at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAM01/



research summary local authorities' experiences of improving parental confidence in the special educational needs process

Introduction

The House of Commons Education and Skills Committee (2007) highlighted that parental confidence is a key issue in making provision for children with special educational needs (SEN). The Lamb Inquiry brought together a group of expert advisers and a broader reference group of professionals and parents to investigate how parental confidence in the SEN assessment process might be improved. The Local Government Association (LGA) commissioned this research to examine the ways in which local authorities work with parents in order to feed the findings into the Lamb Inquiry. The overarching aim of the research is to provide insights into the approach and practice of local authorities' work with parents of children with SEN. The main focus is on the period prior to formal assessment.

The findings are based on telephone interviews with the head of the SEN service (or equivalent) in 26 local authorities. They were selected for evidence of good practice, taking into account, for example, the number of SEN tribunal appeals registered, website accessibility and information from Ofsted reports.



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They were also selected to represent a range of authority types and sizes. It must be recognised, however, that this research only involved a small number of interviewees and that the pursuit of other/wider perspectives on SEN and parental confidence was not within the remit of this particular study.

Key findings

The referral process

Parents' experiences of the SEN process prior to contact with SEN services are highly variable. Some parents have good relationships with school staff and, as a result, have a high level confidence in the system.

The negative experiences of parents are something all local authorities mention but, most frequently, they report that these occur for the minority of parents with whom they work. Parents' negative experiences can result in an 'adversarial or contentious' stance and an expectation that parents are going to have a battle on their hands.

Parents who are dissatisfied are usually dissatisfied with the outcomes of the process and provision that has been put in place, rather than the process itself. These parents can present to SEN services with 'fighting talk' or feel 'battle weary'.

Early identification and intervention

In the majority of local authorities work on the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) is in its infancy and therefore could not yet be aligned with the statutory assessment process. Information within the CAF can be useful for contextualising the needs of the child, especially when statutory assessments are being made in relation to behavioural difficulties.

Local authority and school responsibility for SEN

Most interviewees thought that parents were not aware of the distinction between the roles and responsibilities of schools and those of local authorities. Similarly, it was suggested that parents may not realise that funding may be delegated to schools and perceive it to be solely the responsibility of the local authority.

Parents' understanding of the different roles and responsibilities can be improved by holding regular open meetings for parents of SEN children and actively involving them in the process. Parent partnership services can play a key role in this. Their location within children's centres can make them more accessible to parents whilst maintaining their independence.

With most SEN children supported in mainstream school, it is important to acknowledge and resolve any issues between school and local authority as a basis for increasing parental confidence.

Supporting parents

Information is supplied to parents in a variety of formats, such as information packs, leaflets, websites and through face-to-face verbal communication. There are concerns that parents may have varying capacities to adequately access this information. Proactive attempts to widely disseminate information, including the use of children's centres, community centres and schools are seen as particularly effective.

Schools are generally parents' first point contact in navigating the SEN system. Parents are more effectively involved in the process if they are supported by the professional with whom they feel most confident. Hence, all professionals need to be suitably empowered and equipped to effectively guide and advise parents. SEN team officers play a vital role in maintaining a relationship with parents and ensuring that they are kept informed and engaged in the process.

Ensuring appropriate provision and outcomes

Local authorities ensure that the needs of the child are prioritised by placing the child at the centre of decision making and involving parents and young people in reviews. These discussions are open and transparent and parents have opportunities for contributing.

Close monitoring and review of provision by the SEN team may help to ensure that schools are actively providing the most appropriate support. Child tracking systems may be effective in ensuring that progress is identified and mapped against provision to ensure that what is offered is producing the desired outcome.

Regular and ongoing consultation with parents and a flexible approach to provision may increase their confidence that outcomes will be achieved through the provision in place, and if not, alternative support will be sourced.

Local authority SEN team capacity and expertise

The majority of SEN teams are very confident that they can offer schools the support they require and are not considered to be lacking in their ability to provide or source the necessary expertise. SEN teams see themselves in an advisory/facilitating role rather than as direct providers.

There was some divergence between those who believed that building constructive relationships with parents results from experience and individual skills, and a roughly equal proportion of interviewees who believed that there is also a professional development issue and that training could be beneficial.

Good practice in developing relationship with parents

There are barriers and challenges to the development of constructive relationships with parents, including those associated with parents' perceptions and level of understanding (the most frequently cited), schools and other agencies, the statutory process, funding and capacity issues, and government policies/targets.

Strategies to counter these challenges include the SEN team's ethos and way of working, which prioritise accessibility, interaction and effective communication with parents. They convey the message that the SEN team's focus is to meet the needs of the child.

Key points for parental confidence

There is a need to ensure that parents have good quality, face-to-face contact with SEN professionals at the earliest possible stage in the process. Parents should be encouraged to engage in a collaborative and consultative approach to their child's development within school. Some parents have specific needs of their own; schools and local authorities can be proactive in reaching these groups.

It should be clear that professionals and parents are talking a common language, in which the needs of the child are central. Parents must be able to identify the roles and responsibilities of the SEN team, so that they are able to seek out the most appropriate support and advice.

The support for multi-agency working should be expanded, including the co-location of teams and the development of virtual teams around the child. Children's Centres have been particularly effective in providing parents with access to a wide range of support.

Closer integration of the CAF and statutory assessment for SEN could increase parental confidence that all agencies and services are operating in a coordinated and complementary manner to meet the needs of the child holistically.