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Report

Rapid Review of Parental Engagement and Narrowing the Gap in Attainment for Disadvantaged Children

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Executive summary

This rapid review explores parental engagement in education, with a particular focus on closing gaps in attainment for disadvantaged pupils. A wealth of previous "narrowing the gap" research across a wider age range was identified and synthesised in a review recently completed for the Department for Education (Goodall *et al.*, 2011). In light of this, the present review aims to augment the evidence base by examining research published in the last two years.

The review seeks to concentrate on:

- the key messages from research on the links between parental engagement and narrowing the gap in attainment for disadvantaged groups; and
- the practitioner audience, distilling what it is important for them to know about engaging with disadvantaged families to improve achievement.

We had also intended to focus exclusively on the primary phase of education in our reporting, but the evidence base's cross-phase focus has not enabled us to do this. We have instead identified where findings are phase-specific. A summary of our evidence base is appended to these findings. It includes twelve items of research literature and fourteen practice examples.

Key findings from evidence examined for the review

The Goodall et al. review (2011) grouped the parental engagement evidence it considered into three categories: studies of school–home links, support and training for parents, and family- and community-based interventions. Our review follows a similar structure, with the key findings arranged within those three groups. While reviewing the literature, strong evidence emerged that a number of key factors encourage all types of parental engagement interventions to succeed. Schools should take these success factors into account when: deciding which approaches to parental engagement to use; during implementation; and when reviewing their effectiveness. We list them below.

Features of successful interventions

- They are based on the best available evidence
- They state explicitly what change they anticipate achieving, and define their criteria for success or failure
- The planning of activities is informed by research into local needs and circumstances
- They are properly resourced, with sufficient capacity to develop the intervention
- Senior staff are engaged with and committed to the intervention
- Measures are taken to overcome potential participants' barriers to accessing the intervention
- A robust evaluation design is built into the programme from the outset
- They are sustainable; development should not cease when a specific piece of work concludes.

School–home links

- Primary schools make more use of parents' specialist expertise than secondary schools.
- Schools' evaluation of their parent engagement work is often poor.
- Schools whose home-school liaison practices have been adjudged 'outstanding' or 'good' by Ofsted take the approach that no family, however hard-to-reach, is unreachable.
- It is important for parents to be consulted and to feel that their opinions are valued; communications can be tailored to suit parents' individual circumstances.
- Parents' greatest expressed need is for advice and emotional support. They prefer services to be offered universally rather than targeted, to reduce stigmatisation; they like to feel they have a choice.
- The participation of ethnic minority parents can be increased by making cultural adaptations to programmes, such as providing interpreters or language classes. Sensitivity to the background of intervention participants was also emphasised in sources of evidence about parent support and training, and interventions with families and communities.
- Reported outcomes include improved academic performance; improved relationships between parents, teachers and schools; and increased parental involvement in schools.

Support and training for parents

- Research indicates that a number of parenting characteristics are statistically associated with children's levels of achievement, including parental promotion of reading and learning, parents' relationships and interactions with the child, and disciplinary practices.
- Robust evidence was found for the improvement of child literacy resulting from an intervention targeted at behaviour and relationships.
- Few interventions aimed at aspirations, attitudes and behaviour (AABs) have specifically sought to raise attainment.
- Poorer children and families often have high aspirations, but lack social capital. They therefore need access to better information about the options open to them, and appropriate support and advice.
- Parents appreciate follow-up activity to reinforce the learning gained from participating in interventions.
- Reported outcomes include greater parental confidence in managing children's behaviour and supporting children's learning, and parental perceptions that their children's reading ability had increased. Evidence for these outcomes was found across seven of the twelve items of literature reviewed.

Family and community based interventions

- Holistic interventions involving strong engagement between parents, schools and the wider community are necessary to narrow the attainment gap.
- Community-based services are best delivered by a multi-agency team that has a good relationship with service users.
- Schools have a key role to play as the coordinators and deliverers of services to improve outcomes.
- Partnership working between a range of local services offers more opportunities to reach the most vulnerable families, as any service with which they are in contact can refer those families to supportive interventions.

- Cross-agency communication can be facilitated by having a single contact person to work with parents.
- Many interventions focus mainly on mothers, though fathers are also important; father involvement in the early years correlates with later educational achievement. A gender-differentiated approach may be more effective for some fathers.
- It can be helpful to use support workers from the same cultural, linguistic or socio-economic background as the parents. This may be especially beneficial in areas of disadvantage, where parents may be unfamiliar with engaging with family support services.
- Specialist third sector expertise is valuable when devising and implementing an intervention.
- The home learning environment can be improved through parental engagement, leading to increased parental confidence in supporting children's literacy at home and a major impact on achievement.
- Interventions that are intended to improve children's outcomes can also improve outcomes for the parents themselves, such as widening their employment opportunities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Aims

Oxford University Press commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake a rapid review of parental engagement in education, with a particular focus on closing gaps in attainment for disadvantaged primary pupils. The review seeks to concentrate on:

- the key messages from research on the links between parental engagement and narrowing the gap in attainment for disadvantaged groups; and
- the practitioner audience, distilling what it is important for them to know about engaging with disadvantaged families to improve achievement.

1.2 Methods

A literature review of best practice in parental engagement in education has recently been completed for the Department for Education (Goodall *et al.*, 2011). This identified and synthesised previous research on parental engagement interventions across a wider age range of 5–19. In light of this, the present review aims to augment the evidence base by examining research published since 2011.

We carried out database and website searching in March 2013 to identify literature for the review. We then screened all the selected literature and excluded those items that did not meet the review parameters based on their abstracts. Next we considered the remaining items' quality and relevance to the review, selecting 12 items of research literature for appraisal and 14 practice examples. We then appraised the full text of each item of research literature, using a template which was structured to enable us to replicate the organisation of findings in the Goodall *et al* report. We have drawn on all of the 12 items of research literature in writing our review, illustrated with case studies exploring the 7 most pertinent practice examples. Further detail is available in Appendices 1 and 2.

1.3 Evidence base

We had intended to focus on the primary phase of education in our reporting, but the evidence base's cross-phase focus has not enabled us to do this. However, we have identified where findings are phase-specific. A summary of our evidence base is appended to these findings. It includes the 12 items of research literature and 14 practice examples. The latter consist of:

- local practice examples validated by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO)
- school case studies accessible on the Achievement for All (AfA) website
- a school case study featured in the Times Educational Supplement (Maddern, 2012).

Goodall *et al.* (2011) presented their findings in three groupings, exploring school–home links, support and training for parents, and family- and community-based interventions. We

have continued with this method of organising evidence, though several of the items of literature provided evidence relevant to more than one of the groupings. The evidence base on school–home links consists of six pieces of research literature, and that on family- and community-based interventions consists of seven pieces, while there are three pieces on support and training for parents. Although that chapter draws on the fewest sources, all provide strong evidence and much of it is highly relevant to the aims of the review. One of these, Beckett *et al.* (2012), is also the only item studied which focuses solely on the primary phase.

The evidence base incorporates research reviews and summaries, case studies and project evaluations. Several studies use mixed methods. Beckett et al (2012) follows a randomised controlled trial design and is registered as a clinical trial. O'Mara et al (2011), whose study is a C4EO knowledge review, indicate a lack of national datasets linking children and young people's outcomes to interventions with their parents and carers. The authors also report that most research studies look at a specific intervention, while research comparing different approaches to engaging parents is scarce.

2. School–home links

2.1 What does this chapter cover?

This chapter emphasises the importance of engaging parents, especially those who are deemed "hard-to-reach", a description often used of people living with disadvantage. Good practice involves schools valuing parents' opinions, meeting their needs and helping equip them to support their children's learning. We provide examples of ways in which schools have engaged parents, both within and outside the classroom. We also explore the need for schools to evaluate the impact of their work with parents, along with some of the outcomes of parental engagement identified in the reviewed evidence.

2.2 Key findings from earlier research

Features of successful interventions

- They are based on the best available evidence
- They state explicitly what change they anticipate achieving, and define their criteria for success or failure
- The planning of activities is informed by research into local needs and circumstances
- They are properly resourced, with sufficient capacity to develop the intervention
- Senior staff are engaged with and committed to the intervention
- Measures are taken to overcome potential participants' barriers to accessing the intervention
- A robust evaluation design is built into the programme from the outset
- They are sustainable; development should not cease when a specific piece of work concludes.

2.3 What is the evidence base for this section?

Six pieces of research provide evidence for this chapter: Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012; Egan, 2012; Goddard, 2011; Menzies, 2013; Ofsted, 2011 and O'Mara *et al.*, 2011. The sources provide evidence of high to medium relevance and of high to medium strength. In addition, ten case studies and practice examples provide evidence of school–home links.

2.4 What does the evidence say?

The evidence emphasises that it is important for schools to **engage with parents in a variety of ways**, rather than restricting contact to formal parent–teacher meetings. Ofsted's (2011) research sought to identify good practice in parental engagement through visits to 47 schools (including 18 primaries) in varying socio-economic circumstances. All the schools used **new technologies** to a greater or lesser extent to communicate with parents. The authors noted that schools demonstrating the best home-school liaison practice took the approach that no family, however hard-to-reach, is unreachable. Schools used sensitive **phone calls, home visits and meetings at unthreatening, neutral locations**, and there

were many instances of individual staff “going the extra mile” to engage with parents. Similarly, O’Mara *et al.* (2011), who reviewed the effect of family and parenting support interventions on children’s achievement and whose work features further in the following chapter, recommend that schools tailor their approach to the individual parent. Likewise Menzies (2013) writes of meeting parents “on their own terms”, making them feel comfortable, understanding their needs and interests, and involving other members of their communities (a topic which also features in chapter 4).

It is vital for schools to consult parents, and for parents to feel that their opinions are valued. Ofsted (2011) discovered that most schools consulted parents by questionnaire every year or two, and that the considerable variance in response rates largely depended on how much the parents felt that the school valued their opinions. One primary school visited ran regular surveys and published statistical analyses of the results and key messages arising from parents’ written comments in its newsletters. Parents said that they felt that the school trusted them and appreciated gaining knowledge of how other parents viewed aspects of the school’s provision.

When asked what would help them engage with their children’s education, parents’ greatest expressed need is for advice and emotional support. O’Mara *et al.* (2011) found that, while parents of children in the lower years of school felt more confident in their ability to help with homework, those who were less confident included non-resident parents, parents with English as an additional language, and parents who had themselves left school early. Goddard’s (2011) investigation of the factors leading to above-average achievement in both National Curriculum tests and public examinations in Tower Hamlets describes how the local authority (LA) provides advice and support to parents. Tower Hamlets has the highest rate of child poverty in England and involving parents has been a crucial part of the LA’s strategy, exemplified by the establishment of a **Parental Engagement Team** which offers workshops and courses to encourage parents to connect with children’s learning. Schools give **advice on how parents can support their children’s learning**, even if they face language or literacy barriers themselves, such as by creating a study area for their child at home. Menzies (2013) also concludes that schools need to develop parents’ capacities to support their children’s learning, and help them understand what meeting their children’s aspirations will involve.

The evidence provides a range of examples of ways in which schools involve parents in the classroom or in extra-curricular activities, and Ofsted’s (2011) research found that practice in primary schools in this regard is more extensive than in secondary schools. Parents are typically involved in class activities such as listening to pupils’ reading, helping them choose books or supporting guided reading, and assisting with practical lessons such as in art, design and technology, science, and information and communication technology. Out of the classroom, they are present as volunteers on school visits, help with the organisation of school drama productions, and support before- and after-school activities. Furthermore, good practice in **using parents’ specialist expertise as a means of engaging them** went beyond the above, and Ofsted found examples of parents with particular skills leading school choirs or drama groups, and parents who were qualified sports coaches managing school sports teams. Some curricula were enhanced by visitors speaking in lessons about events

they had witnessed, such as grandparents who had been evacuees, or by bilingual speakers leading sessions in community languages, or translating. Menzies (2013) similarly reports instances of parents from ethnic minorities telling stories in class in their community's home language, or attending school themselves for language and literacy classes. The provision of such programmes, along with **cultural adaptations to existing programmes**, can increase the participation of ethnic minority parents.

While Ofsted notes that inspection data for 2009-10 indicates that 80% of schools inspected were graded either "good" or "outstanding" in the area of working in partnership with parents, its 2011 research found that schools' own evaluation of their parent engagement work is often poor. The success criteria stated in school improvement plans often failed to identify clearly what impact was anticipated from involving and engaging parents and so it was hard to measure whether these had been met. While schools could demonstrate having taken an action, or put a system in place, they could not always evidence the impact that was consequent upon that change. Ofsted recommended that schools should better evaluate what impact parental involvement and engagement has made on pupil outcomes and use this information to guide further improvements.

One method of gathering evidence is the construction of a portfolio such as is involved in the Investors in Families (IiF) programme, which Egan (2012) describes. IiF aims to involve families as partners with schools in their children's learning, and to close the achievement gap resulting from social disadvantage. Five LAs in south-east Wales have participated in developing the programme, which requires schools to submit a **portfolio of evidence** for assessment every three years. At Egan's time of writing, 83 schools had received the IiF award and a further 100 schools and services were working towards accreditation.

Where evidence is available, the reported outcomes of parent engagement work include improved academic performance, better relationships between parents, teachers and schools, and increased parental involvement in schools. O'Mara *et al.* (2011) report that the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme (which is described in the next chapter) has been found to improve academic performance, along with enhancing family functioning and reducing families' experience of stress. Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) judge that there is a "reasonable case" that parental involvement in children's education has a "causal influence" on children's school readiness and subsequent attainment. They cite the Family Literacy Initiative, an intervention involving several family literacy programmes in England and Wales for parents and their three- to six-year-old children. A 12-week course incorporated **accredited basic skills instruction for parents**, **early literacy development for young children** and **joint sessions encouraging pre-reading and early reading skills**. The initiative demonstrated evidence of impact on raising attainment: the children made gains made in vocabulary, reading and writing which were still evident two years later, and parents became better equipped to support children in reading and writing.

2.5 Comparing the evidence on school–home links

Goodall *et al* (2011) found that parents need clear, specific and targeted information from schools. Information and opportunities to engage can be provided by the use of ICT. Schools need to take a whole school approach to engaging parents, and adopt an outward-facing strategy which makes use of information and expertise from other local schools. Among the challenges Goodall *et al* identified were insufficient data collection by schools, and the logistical barriers some parents face in accessing initiatives pursued by the school.

Parents' need for information, and especially for advice and support, was likewise a recurring theme in our evidence base. Parents valued the school consulting them and respecting the views they expressed. Our evidence recommended the tailoring of communications to suit parents' individual circumstances, and there are opportunities here for employing ICT. Parents can attend an intervention more easily if it is held at a convenient venue, or if transport or childcare can be provided.

Schools' evaluation of their parent engagement work can currently be poor, though the inference drawn from Ofsted (2011) is that this can be due to what is or is not done with collected data, rather than a failure to collect the data. Ofsted also makes a recommendation which may address some schools' failure to recognise how parents already engage, which Goodall *et al* reported: consider auditing parents' skills and specific expertise and using them more widely as a school improvement resource.

2.6 Case study and validated practice evidence

Case study 1: Bromesberrow St Mary's Primary School, Gloucestershire

Bromesberrow St Mary's is a small, rural primary school drawing a third of its intake from a local Romany Traveller site. Many of the children have gaps in their education and have experienced different schools. Historically, the Romany Traveller pupils have not attended school beyond the age of 11.

Over time the school, and especially the head teacher, has developed an excellent working relationship with the Romany Traveller families. Aiming to develop parents' academic aspirations and change their outlook on learning, especially for their daughters, the school held conversations with parents, some of which took place on the Romany Traveller site as necessary to facilitate access. Pupils and their mothers attended family literacy classes to strengthen parental engagement with the school. Parents and children were aware of the expectations for regular attendance, and of the school's efforts to reduce absence, which was regularly a theme in parental assemblies.

Families have become more engaged with their children's learning, and are pleased to be offered the chance to improve their own literacy levels. Past pupils sometimes come back to school to use computers for research. For the first time, a child in Key Stage 2 is considering the possibility of going on to secondary school, although overcoming a historic pattern may take some time.

Case study 2: Westwood Primary School, Oldham

All of Westwood's pupils live in the most deprived ward in Oldham, which is also in the bottom 1% of wards in England. All pupils, most of whom are of Bangladeshi heritage, are learning English as an additional language; many parents are unemployed and a high percentage of them, especially mothers, have little or no expressive English. Attainment upon entry is well below national expectations.

The school has employed a variety of methods to engage parents, from communicating via text messages to holding a parents' forum every half term and extending to them an open invitation to assemblies and celebrations. A dedicated Teaching Assistant provides lifelong learning classes for parents and the school facilitates access to other agencies, such as hosting a monthly medical drop-in supported by the school nurse, and arranging for visiting speakers.

Attendance figures are above the national average throughout the school, and many pupils have made substantial gains in both English and maths by the end of Key Stage 2. Parents are making progress with their own learning and all engage with the "Learning Conversations" that have replaced traditional parents' evenings. All parent governor positions are filled and the school regularly features in the fortnightly local Bengali newspaper.

3. Support and training for parents

3.1 What does this chapter cover?

Providing parents with the support and training to enable them to parent positively is crucial, as evidence reviewed in this section demonstrates the links between positive parenting and children's educational achievement. The chapter compares the impact of two interventions which trained parents to use strategies that encouraged improvements in their children's literacy and behaviour, and a separate programme of research that investigated the impact of training parents to espouse certain attitudes, aspirations and behaviours relating to education. Our practice examples include a parent support initiative.

3.2 Key findings from earlier research

Goodall *et al.* (2011) reported the following benefits accruing from the provision of support and training for parents:

- parents acknowledge that problems exist
- parents gain knowledge, skills, confidence and empathy
- children bond better with school or setting staff and engage in the activities provided
- parenting styles improve.

In addition they reported that:

- There is a large volume of evidence on the impact of parental engagement programmes on children's literacy, but much less for other curriculum areas.
- Interventions focusing on both academic outcomes and parenting skills are more effective than interventions addressing either aspect in isolation.
- Needs analysis and cultural sensitivity are important to gaining an understanding of parents and to the targeting of initiatives at particular groups.

3.3 What is the evidence base for this section?

Literature evidence for this section is drawn from three research studies, Beckett *et al.,* 2012; Carter-Wall and Whitfield, 2012 and Kiernan and Mensah, 2011. While this chapter draws on the fewest sources, all provide strong evidence and much of it is highly relevant to the aims of the review. Beckett *et al.* (2012) is also the only item studied which focuses solely on the primary phase.

In addition, six case studies and practice examples provide evidence of support and training provided for parents in a range of primary schools and local authorities across the country.

3.4 What does the evidence say?

Kiernan and Mensah (2011), in a data analysis which aimed to assess the extent to which positive parenting mediates the effects of poverty and disadvantage, identified a number of parenting characteristics that are statistically associated with children's levels of achievement. These included **parental promotion of reading and learning**, **parents' relationships and interactions with the child**, and **disciplinary practices**. This association persisted across all levels of family resources, suggesting that the potential benefits of positive parenting are evident for children regardless of their socioeconomic circumstances. Providing parents with the support and training to enable them to parent positively is therefore crucial.

Beckett *et al.* (2012) found robust evidence for the improvement of child literacy resulting from an intervention targeted at **behaviour and relationships**. Their research involved over 200 families with children aged 5–7 who were at risk of anti-social behaviour. In a project which, unlike others studied, involved comparisons between interventions, their randomised controlled trial assigned the participants to receive either one or both of two interventions, or to a control group which was provided with a telephone helpline and did not participate in either intervention. The programmes used were the **Incredible Years (IY)** behaviour and relationships intervention, and the **Supporting Parents on Kids' Education in Schools (SPOKES)** literacy improvement programme. Incredible Years aims to help parents build better relationships with their children and develop skills to manage difficult child behaviour effectively, using social learning and cognitive and behavioural principles. SPOKES combines the "Pause, Prompt, Praise" approach to reading, which trains parents in techniques to encourage their children's application of problem-solving to their reading, with a "whole language" approach focusing on discovering meaning. While both programmes reduced the risk of anti-social behaviour, it was IY for which robust evidence of improved child literacy was obtained within the time span the researchers measured.

Both of these pieces of research thus suggest that working with parents to form **positive ways of managing children's behaviour** can in itself be important for improving children's achievement.

Carter-Wall and Whitfield's (2012) paper synthesises the findings of a wider programme of cross-phase research undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which examined whether the development of children's and parents' attitudes, aspirations and behaviours (AABs) with regard to education affect attainment and considered whether interventions focused on a specific set of AABs can reduce the achievement gap. They identified that in fact few interventions aimed at altering AABs have specifically sought to raise attainment. In their experience, poorer children and families often have high aspirations, including university attendance and professional, managerial or skilled employment, but lack the social capital which would help achieve them. What is needed, therefore, are not interventions to instil aspiration, but to **facilitate better access to information** about the available options, and appropriate support and advice.

When identifying the factors which they find to lead to successful interventions, Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) stress the need for a genuine **collaboration between parents and facilitators**, with a two-way exchange of information. Programmes should be well-structured and capable of flexible operation in different contexts, such as making use of a variety of settings, not only the school and home, and using facilitators from the same community as the parents. For their part, parents must be willing and able to commit the necessary time and effort. Beckett *et al.* (2012) suggest ways of enabling parent participation; providers could offer sessions at a range of times to enable parents to reconcile attendance with their other commitments; and different approaches may encourage the involvement of different individuals. Some parents, for example, find group participation discouraging and may respond to a home-based approach.

In common with several items of literature whose findings are incorporated in the previous and following chapters, the outcomes reported by participants in the interventions studied by Beckett *et al.* (2012) and by Carter-Wall and Whitfield (2012) include greater parental confidence in managing children's behaviour and supporting children's learning, and parental perceptions that their children's reading ability had increased. At the same time, Beckett *et al* report anecdotal evidence that parents would favour some form of "booster" activity to reinforce the skills they have learned from participating in interventions, to help them negotiate new challenges that arise in their families' lives. Making such provision would enhance the sustainability of an intervention past its initial duration.

3.5 Comparing the evidence on support and training for parents

Goodall *et al.* (2011) reported that parenting styles improve as a consequence of receiving support and training, and parents gain knowledge, skills, confidence and empathy. They found the most effective interventions to be those focusing both on academic outcomes and parenting skills rather than either aspect in isolation, and discovered much greater evidence on the impact of parental engagement programmes on children's literacy than for any other curriculum area. Needs analysis and cultural sensitivity were found to be important in gaining an understanding of parents.

Our evidence strongly supported these findings. More than half of the studies recorded an increase in parental confidence as a result of participating in a support or training intervention. The research of both Beckett *et al.* (2012) and Kiernan and Mensah (2011) suggests that working with parents to form positive ways of managing children's behaviour can in itself be important for improving children's achievement, pointing to the benefits of a holistic approach to intervention. Where we found evidence of impact on academic outcomes, this concerned literacy rather than other subjects. Our evidence base repeatedly stressed the importance of cultural awareness; behaviour and relationships also recurred as a theme.

3.6 Case study and validated practice evidence

Case study 3: Parent Support Workers Project, Staffordshire County Council

Staffordshire has pockets of multiple deprivation in each of its towns and significant numbers of people in rural areas living with “medium” deprivation. The LA perceived a low level of aspiration and engagement with children’s learning among some parents, and in 2009 consulted them about their needs to inform the development of its Parenting and Family Support Strategy. Parents reported difficulty in accessing advice and support services, and schools a lack of service provision at Tier 1/Tier 2 offering swift and easy access to support and guidance. These factors influenced the development of the Parent Support Workers (PSW) project.

PSWs receive an initial induction programme and ongoing CPD opportunities. Their role involves responding to early indications that children and families could benefit from additional help. The focus is on prevention and early intervention activities, where presenting needs are below the thresholds that trigger the involvement of specialist services and other agencies. Each PSW provides parenting support courses and classes and one-to-one parenting support for parents across a cluster of primary and/or secondary schools. Where a need for outside help is identified, the PSW provides signposting and access to the relevant specialist services.

73% of referrals to the project come directly from schools, with the main reasons for initial referral being non-attendance at school, child behaviour, and parenting skills.

The project defined its anticipated outcomes, which included improving the engagement of parents and carers with schools, increasing multi-agency family support work and supported learning at home, improving children’s settling into school routines and raising expectations. Impact analysis was embedded into the development of the new roles from the outset, with outcomes continuously monitored through reflective working and review of practice and service delivery.

An evaluation conducted with parents and carers in 2010 found that 95% were “very satisfied” with the input received from their PSW, and the remaining 5% were “satisfied”. 96% reported positive change including increased parental confidence, self-esteem and a greater overall understanding of their child; better awareness of available support; and improved child behaviour. In addition, the LA collated data, feedback from other agencies and users, and case studies

Case study 4: The Structured Conversation, Achievement for All

The Achievement for All (AfA) programme is available across England and involves a framework which aims, among other goals, to improve pupils' progress and parental engagement. A key aspect is the use of the "structured conversation" to facilitate communication between school staff and parents. This focusses dialogue about the specific needs of pupils and their parents and enables more personalised approaches to teaching and learning. Many AfA schools are developing evaluation tools to further customise structured conversation to their context, and report enhanced data collection and tracking of pupil progress and attainment.

Case study schools making use of the structured conversation include:

Tredworth Junior School, Gloucester, where teachers received training in preparation for holding "structured conversation days" where they spoke with each parent focusing on pupil learning plans and formulating targets. Arrangements were made to help parents attend, e.g. the provision of crèche facilities. Attendance was better than at previous parent consultation events, and parents gave positive feedback. The school intends to extend its use of the method and has also scheduled parental training, to include literacy, numeracy and listening skills, in response to views expressed in the conversations.

Dormanstown Primary School, Redcar and Cleveland, which created a whole-school project involving pupils and parents from each year group collaborating in different activities upon a theme and culminating in a celebratory tea-party. During structured conversations, many parents had explained that they were keen to support their children but were unsure how to do so; some perceived themselves as having poor literacy and numeracy skills and/or had had negative experiences when at school themselves. Following the activities, parents have reported that they are keen to attend further sessions in school and that they are now clearer about how to support their children.

4. Family and community based interventions

4.1 What does this chapter cover?

This chapter addresses the importance of multi-agency working in delivering family- and community-based interventions, and the key role that schools can play in co-ordinating and providing them. This type of intervention has the potential to reach the most vulnerable families. We also look at involving fathers, whom interventions do not always target, and we explore the sustainability of interventions – both in terms of capacity to deliver them, and of maintaining the learning gains that participants enjoy once the interventions are complete.

4.2 Key findings from earlier research

Goodall *et al.* (2011) found that:

- There is robust evidence of the impact of family learning, literacy and numeracy (FLLN) programmes.
- FLLN impacts positively on disadvantaged families.
- The benefits of FLLN outlast the duration of the intervention.
- Partnership and multi-agency arrangements are essential, and enable a range of external expertise to be drawn upon.
- Information-sharing between schools and other local services is likewise important.

However, they also reported the following challenges:

- Information is not always shared.
- There can be a lack of communication at transition points.
- There is a lack of impact data on academic outcomes.

4.3 What is the evidence base for this section?

The evidence for this section is drawn from seven research studies: Egan, 2012, 2013; Goddard, 2011; Lindsay *et al.,* 2011; McCoy, 2011; O'Mara *et al*., 2011 and Potter *et al*., 2012. The evidence base consists of a mixture of strong, modest and more impressionistic evidence, drawn from sources demonstrating high and medium relevance to the research questions.

In addition, five case studies and practice examples provide evidence about family and community-based interventions.

4.4 What does the evidence say?

The evidence makes a strong case for the importance of **multi-agency working** for family and community-based interventions. This involves not only schools, parents and their wider local community – though the engagement of all these is vital (as stressed by Egan (2012), in a study exploring the causes and extent of the "poverty gap" in educational achievement in Wales) – but also **partnership with a range of local services**. O'Mara *et al* (2011), who examine "what works" in delivering improved outcomes for 7–19 year-olds via interventions involving parents and carers, observe that community-based services are best delivered by a multi-agency team that has a good relationship with service users. They highlight the **key role that schools can play as the coordinators and deliverers of services** to improve outcomes; for example, they can act as the central location for the provision of a range of services. Goddard (2011) likewise describes the provision of extended services in schools in Tower Hamlets, involving collaborative working and information-sharing between different schools. Whatever the method of service delivery, O'Mara *et al.* (2011) found that parents prefer services to be offered universally rather than targeted, to reduce stigmatisation; they like to feel they have a choice about participating.

McCoy (2011) explores how local authorities participating in the National Literacy Trust's "Partners in Literacy" project formed partnerships and adjusted their offer to better meet the needs of local families, and what impact this had on local support for literacy. The author concludes that partnership working between a range of services offers more opportunities to reach the most vulnerable families, as any service with which those families are in contact can refer them to supportive interventions. When many players are involved, cross-agency communication can be facilitated by having **a single contact person to work with parents**.

Successful Partners in Literacy pilots tended to appoint a named lead officer with designated time to spend on the work, as a means to creating sufficient capacity to launch and run their projects. They also considered sustainability, to ensure the improvements enjoyed did not come to an end when the funded pilot phase concluded. Several participating LAs found that developing an **overarching literacy policy** helped to give status to literacy locally, and was a practical enabler for work with partners. Others have **embedded their literacy support** within a wide variety of local strategies, such as their Child Poverty Strategy, Early Intervention and Prevention Strategy or Sustainable Community Strategy.

Whichever approach they took, the successful Partners in Literacy pilots collected evidence to inform their provision and to enable evaluation and recording of impact. However, Egan (2012) reports that the Welsh inspectorate, Estyn, judged that there was a lack of evaluation of many programmes provided in Wales using the Welsh Government's Community Focused School funding.

Many interventions focus mainly on mothers, though fathers are also important; Potter *et al.* (2012) report, for example, that father involvement in the early years correlates with children's later educational achievement. This research evaluates the Fathers Transition Project, a one-year pilot run in an area of multiple deprivation in northern England which sought to **engage fathers and male carers** in their transition from an early years setting to

formal schooling. The authors found that a **gender-differentiated approach**, which did not altogether exclude mothers but focused on involving fathers, may be more effective for some men. One of the fourteen regular participants in the project explained, 'Everything's for mams isn't it – you know there's nowt for fathers' (p. 218).

The Fathers Transition Project involved a series of activities designed to appeal to males, which were attended by fathers and children, some before the move to primary education and some at primary school after the children had entered. Face-to-face contact was reported as the most effective means of persuading fathers to take part initially, and during the intervention they received intensive follow-up contact via mobile phone.

Key to the success of the scheme was the use of a dedicated Fathers Transition Worker who came from a similar background to the participants. This individual was able to **forge relationships and build trust** with fathers despite the area being one where "services" were often viewed with suspicion. The authors' conclusion that practitioners with an intuitive understanding of local cultural beliefs may be more effective in areas of disadvantage is reflected in other research, such as that of Goddard (2011), who highlights the work done by Tower Hamlets LA with local faith communities to instil in children an appreciation of the importance of education. This led to significant increases in school attendance in the LA.

O'Mara *et al.* (2011) offer suggestions for how harder-to-reach fathers may be engaged: use hands-on activities (as in Potter *et al.*'s example), employing male practitioners to work with them (as before), and scheduling interventions for evenings and weekends. Potter *et al* (2012) recommend developing a continuing programme of activities, so that when one has happened attendees know what to anticipate next; this aids the retention of participants in the intervention or programme.

As with Partners in Literacy, the Fathers Transition Project considered sustainability. While LA financial support, such as the funding of a dedicated worker and subsidised activities, was vital in the establishment of the project (as was **third sector expertise in devising and implementing the programme**), there had to be succession planning for when the specialist post is no longer funded. Permanent staff in schools and children's centres needed training to enable them to continue delivering similar activities in future. It is very important that such continuity should be made possible; Lindsay *et al.* (2011) urge that interventions helping parents to engage with children's early learning should be a universal entitlement in deprived neighbourhoods.

Potter *et al.* (2012) recommend that providers should look beyond the "deficit model" of fatherhood and instead take a "generative" approach which involves conviction that men are both willing and capable of nurturing the next generation. This may involve building their self-esteem, as was the case with several fathers before they would contemplate proceeding to the post-transition element of the programme, especially those who had had difficult school careers themselves.

Building confidence among parents and carers – of either gender – can boost their ability to provide a quality home learning environment, a factor which can have a major impact on

literacy levels and achievement. The impact 'is stronger during the child's early years but continues throughout their school years' (McCoy, 2011, p. 6). Egan (2012) likewise notes that the home learning environment can be improved through parental engagement, and considers that improving schools' communication with parents is a prerequisite to this. Meanwhile, interventions that are intended to improve children's outcomes can also improve outcomes for parents themselves, such as widening their employment opportunities (O'Mara *et al.*, 2011).

As in the previous chapter on support and training for parents, where it was found that parents would favour some form of "booster" activity to reinforce the skills they learned from participating in interventions, such activity could likewise benefit those involved in family and community-based interventions. O'Mara *et al.* (2011) recommend providers running "reunion" sessions for intervention participants, and Lindsay *et al.* (2011), who reviewed the Families and Schools Together programme summarised below, suggest that parents could be invited to participate on a voluntary basis in an ongoing peer support network after course completion.

4.5 Comparing the evidence on family and community based interventions

Goodall *et al.* (2011) found robust evidence of the impact of family learning, literacy and numeracy (FLLN) programmes, which impact positively on disadvantaged families and bring benefits that outlast the duration of the intervention. Partnership and multi-agency arrangements are essential, and enable partners to draw on a range of external expertise. Information-sharing between schools and other local services is likewise important, but does not always happen, especially at transition points such as the preschool to primary or primary–secondary transfer.

Our evidence also placed emphasis on partnership working and the development of multi-agency teams. Schools have a key role to play in co-ordinating the provision of services and can act as local hubs from which interventions are delivered. The more different services are involved, the more opportunities there are to reach the most vulnerable families, as any service with which they are in contact can refer those families to supportive interventions. A single contact person working with each family can facilitate cross-agency communication.

4.6 Case study and validated practice evidence

Case study 5: Duncombe Primary School, Islington LA

Virtually all of Duncombe Primary's 461 pupils qualify for free school meals, and more than three-quarters speak English as an additional language, yet the school's test performance is above local and national averages and it has received a "good with outstanding features" rating from Ofsted. A number of factors have contributed to Duncombe "bucking the trend" and these include:

- Staff have high aspirations for pupils and encourage them to aspire highly themselves.
- The school focuses strongly on its local community and on involving parents. It employs a home support worker and a community support worker.
- The school uses its links with other local services to guide parents with problems (housing, domestic violence, immigration status, health) to sources of help, and is trusted by parents to act confidentially.
- Leadership is strong and consistent.
- Teaching is high quality.
- The school has used its Pupil Premium funding to introduce "partnership teaching", whereby up to three teachers are employed for the two classes in each year group. This allows them to work with smaller groups of children or to "team teach" pupils, enabling more adult attention for each child.

Case study 6: Families and Schools Together (FAST) – Save the Children

FAST is an evidence-based family skills programme which stresses the importance of parent and community engagement and the home learning environment to children's early achievement and development, and the importance of this early achievement to their later life chances. It has gained international recognition and has a 20-year track record. Save the Children supports the use of the programme within the UK.

During 2009 Save the Children established FAST for 3-5 year old children and their families in five locations across the UK; then from 2010-11 it supported 15 FAST projects in 14 schools. 80% of the 330+ families involved in the latter projects showed a high rate of attendance.

The scheme offers an after-school, multi-family group programme which is offered to all children and their families in a school year group. The course runs for eight weeks and participants are encouraged to take part in a peer support network, "FASTWORKS", for at least two years more. The programme goals are to:

- strengthen the family and the parent-child bond
- increase the child's achievement at school
- reduce family stress and social isolation
- improve family–school communication and relationships.

The results have been encouraging:

- teachers report greater academic competence among participating children
- relationships between parents and schools improved and parent engagement in school increased
- parents' satisfaction ratings for FAST averaged 9.4 out of 10.

As reported by Egan (2013), Save the Children has introduced FAST into a number of areas in Wales, working with targeted schools to improve the engagement in education of groups of disadvantaged children and families.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Our rapid review of parental engagement in education has focused on the key messages from research on the links between parental engagement and narrowing the gap in attainment for disadvantaged groups. We took as our starting-point the review conducted by Goodall *et al*. (2011) for the Department for Education and considered our evidence under the three headings of school–home links, support and training for parents and family- and community-based interventions. While the time-scale for our review necessarily entailed that our evidence base would be less extensive than that of Goodall *et al.*, our findings concur with theirs in a number of areas.

School–home links

Goodall *et al.* (2011) found that parents need clear, specific and targeted information from schools and further that information and opportunities to engage can be provided by the use of ICT. Their review noted that schools need to take a whole school approach to engaging parents, and adopt an outward-facing strategy which makes use of information and expertise from other local schools. Parents' need for information, and especially for advice and support, was likewise a recurring theme in our evidence base. Parents valued the school consulting them and respecting the views they expressed. Our evidence also recommended the tailoring of communications to suit parents' individual circumstances, and there are opportunities here for employing ICT.

Schools' evaluation of their parent engagement work can currently be poor, though the inference drawn from Ofsted (2011) is that this can be due to what is or is not done with collected data, rather than a failure to collect the data. Ofsted also makes a recommendation which may address some schools' failure to recognise how parents already engage, which Goodall *et al* reported: consider auditing parents' skills and specific expertise and using them more widely as a school improvement resource.

Support and training for parents

Goodall *et al.* (2011) reported that parenting styles improve as a consequence of receiving support and training, and parents gain knowledge, skills, confidence and empathy. They found the most effective interventions to be those focusing both on academic outcomes and parenting skills rather than either aspect in isolation, and discovered much greater evidence on the impact of parental engagement programmes on children's literacy than for any other curriculum area. Needs analysis and cultural sensitivity were found to be important in gaining an understanding of parents.

Our evidence strongly supported these findings. More than half of the studies recorded an increase in parental confidence as a result of participating in a support or training intervention. The research of both Beckett *et al.* (2012) and Kiernan and Mensah (2011) suggests that working with parents to form positive ways of managing children's behaviour can in itself be important for improving children's achievement, pointing to the benefits of a

holistic approach to intervention. Where we found evidence of impact on academic outcomes, this concerned literacy rather than other subjects. Our evidence base repeatedly stressed the importance of cultural awareness; another recurrent theme was behaviour and relationships.

Family and community based interventions

Goodall *et al.* (2011) found robust evidence of the impact of family learning, literacy and numeracy (FLLN) programmes, which impact positively on disadvantaged families and bring benefits that outlast the duration of the intervention. Partnership and multi-agency arrangements are essential, and enable partners to draw on a range of external expertise. Information-sharing between schools and other local services is likewise important, but does not always happen, especially at transition points such as the preschool to primary or primary–secondary transfer.

Our evidence also placed emphasis on partnership working and the development of multi-agency teams. Schools have a key role to play in co-ordinating the provision of services and can act as local hubs from which interventions are delivered. The more different services are involved, the more opportunities there are to reach the most vulnerable families, as any service with which they are in contact can refer those families to supportive interventions. A single contact person working with each family can facilitate cross-agency communication.

Key messages for the practitioner audience

The overall message from both reviews is that parental engagement can improve outcomes for children, and that schools and other services can contribute significantly to enabling engagement. We anticipate that both the intervention specific evidence and the more generic literature on the features of successful interventions will be relevant and useful to practitioners. We recommend that schools consider the following key messages when engaging with disadvantaged families to improve achievement:

- Use evidence to choose the best parental engagement strategies for your school
- Give your parental engagement strategies the best chance of working, by putting the features of successful interventions in place (those on page 3 of this report)
- Evaluate the success of your parental engagement strategies
- Use a whole school approach for engaging parents
- Prioritise communication
- Maximise choice, minimise barriers
- Provide advice, emotional support and training to enable positive parenting
- Work with others (develop partnership and multi-agency arrangements)
- Don’t forget fathers!

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Appendix 1: Search strategy and the review process

Search strategy

As the rapid review needed to be conducted to a tight timescale, our literature search was necessarily restricted to a limited number of sources that were judged most likely to yield pertinent results on engaging with disadvantaged families to narrow the gap in attainment. Our starting-point was the
Goodall *et al* review (2011) and the literature to which it refers, along with relevant reviews published by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). This was supplemented by a search of a range of bibliographic databases for any additional relevant literature published from 2011 to early 2013, focusing on the UK:

- British Education Index
- Idox Information Service
- Social Policy and Practice

In addition, we searched practice websites for practical examples of what works in engaging parents and improving attainment with particular reference to disadvantaged groups. These websites included:

- Achievement for All
- C4EO Validated Local Practice area
- Coalition for Evidence-based Education
- Department for Education
- Institute for Effective Education
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- Oxford School Improvement – parental engagement section and Oxford Owl
- Sutton Trust–EEF Teaching and Learning Toolkit

Review process

We used a three-stage process to filter the search results, so that only the most relevant and best quality studies available were included within the review. The three stages were i) screening; ii) appraising; and iii) synthesising. These are explained below.

i) Screening the literature

The review team first screened the identified literature based on a thorough analysis of the abstracts, seeking to exclude all items that did not meet the agreed inclusion criteria. The review team then selected the most relevant and best quality items to appraise and synthesise. We selected 11 items of literature and a total of 14 case studies and practice examples.

ii) Appraising the literature

We then appraised the full text of each selected item of literature, using a template, to extract the key research question(s) and findings from each study, as well as assessing the quality and relevance of each item. At this stage we included one additional study identified in the reference list of one of our selected documents, bringing the total number of literature items included to 12.

iii) Synthesising the literature

Having appraised the key literature items, the review team synthesised the findings. This involved analysing the reviewed evidence to draw out emerging themes and key messages. For the synthesis, we rated each item's quality and relevance to determine the weight given to each piece of literature (the most weight has been given to the best evidence available on each review question). A table summarising the different pieces of literature, case studies and practice examples included in the evidence base follows in Appendix 2.

This appendix provides a brief summary of the items of literature included in the review, together with the review team's rating of the quality and relevance of each item. Descriptions of the ratings appear below the table.

Appendix 2: The evidence base for the review

Literature (Full details of these documents appear in the reference list)	Relevance			Strength of evidence			Coverage of evidence			
	Highly relevant	Mostly relevant	Slightly relevant	Strong	Modest	Impressionistic	School / home links	Support and training for parents	Family and community-based interventions	Other
Beckett (2012)	✔			✔				✔		
Carter-Wall (2012)	✔			✔			✔	✔		✔
Egan (2012)		✔			✔		✔		✔	
Egan (2013)		✔			✔				✔	
Goddard (2011)		✔			✔		✔		✔	
Kiernan (2011)		✔		✔				✔		
Lindsay (2011)	✔			✔					✔	
McCoy (2011)	✔			✔					✔	
Menzies (2013)		✔			✔		✔			
Ofsted (2011)		✔		✔			✔			
O'Mara (2011)	✔			✔			✔		✔	✔
Potter (2012)		✔				✔	✔		✔	✔

Definitions of relevance ratings used above

High: very relevant to all or most questions
Medium: at least moderately relevant to most questions
Low: at least slightly relevant to some questions

Definitions of strength of evidence ratings used above

High: large scale quantitative study; or in-depth case studies that cover a range of institutions and a wide range of stakeholders, where views are triangulated; or a meta-analysis or systematic review.
Medium: quantitative or qualitative studies with smaller sample sizes, or covering only a small number of institutions. Qualitative studies that do not cover a full range of stakeholders. Non-systematic reviews.
Impressionistic: e.g. based on observation or opinion, or on one school case-study, or the views of one person.

Case studies/practice examples	Coverage of evidence		
	School / home links	Support and training for parents	Family and community-based interventions
Beeston Fields Primary, Nottinghamshire	✔		
Bromesberrow St Mary's, Gloucestershire	✔		✔
Christ Church Primary School, Camden	✔	✔	
Dormanstown Primary School, Redcar and Cleveland	✔	✔	✔
Duncombe Primary School, North London	✔		✔
Early Learning with Families Project (ELF), Blackpool Council			✔
Families and Schools Together (FAST), Save the Children	✔		✔
Parent Support Workers Project, Staffordshire County Council		✔	
Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinder (PEIP), Tower Hamlets		✔	
Pen Green EBP: Making Children's Learning Visible, Northants	✔		
The Child's Journey: Sure Start CCs Supporting Parents, Kirklees		✔	
Parents Involved in their Children's Learning (PICL), Northants	✔		
Tredworth Junior School, Gloucester	✔	✔	
Westwood Primary, Oldham	✔		

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