Engaging Parents: A Practical Guide for Schools

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Who is Pearson anyway?

It’s a good question. And one that we wouldn’t blame you for asking. You may not even know it, but you’ve probably been working with us for years. We’ve kept our name in the background until recently, but you’ll have known us in Primary mainly as Heinemann, Ginn, Rigby and Longman – all companies with long and proud histories in education (in fact Longman was founded way back in 1724!). We’re the world’s leading learning company, with an international reputation for excellence in education, and our Primary division is home to some of the UK’s favourite primary educational resources, including the highly acclaimed Bug Club and Abacus Evolve. At Pearson, we believe that wherever learning flourishes, so do people. So we’re dedicated to giving teachers and parents the tools they need to help children reach their full potential, whether it’s through high-quality resources, support or professional development.

www.pearsonprimary.co.uk/learnathome
Engaging Parents: A Practical Guide for Schools

At Pearson, we know how important parental involvement is to a child’s education. In a recent survey we found that 72%* of teachers attribute developed language skills and higher reading levels to those children who regularly enjoy reading time with parents at home. And it doesn’t end there, the research supporting parental engagement and involvement is extensive. Worryingly though, a massive 98%* of teachers said they are either very or quite concerned that reading for pleasure does not take place often enough in some homes. Which is why here at Pearson, we’ve developed Learn at Home.

Created to support the home–school partnership, Learn at Home gives parents a helping hand in getting to grips with their child’s development at school, as well as tips and support for schools on engaging and involving parents. We believe that this kind of support is crucial and should be accessible to everyone, which is why all our Learn at Home information and advice is all provided free.

About this guide
We created this guide to highlight the importance of parental involvement in a child’s education, and to help you engage parents in their children’s learning. In it, teachers and headteachers share their experiences, practical support, and tips. We hope you find it useful and that it inspires you with ideas that you can roll out in your own school.

*Survey by Opinion Matters, commissioned by Pearson and The Booktrust, 2011
Parents are children’s first and most important teachers. They also spend considerably more time with their children than teachers do; some 75% of a school child’s waking hours are spent outside school. When parents really engage in their children’s learning, attainment improves significantly. But more than this, with the right kind of support young people develop as resourceful, creative, resilient and collaborative learners able to cope with whatever life may throw at them.

That parents are really important was finally acknowledged in the USA with the No Child Left Behind Act in 2002 and in England by the Every Child Matters legislation a few years later.

It’s extraordinary to reflect that little more than a generation ago parents were frequently required to wait at the school gates or stop at a line in the playground marked ‘no parents beyond this point’. For too long the roles of teacher and parent existed in separate universes.

Parents expected teachers to educate their kids and teachers expected parents to make sure that pupils were properly dressed and equipped, and that they completed their homework on time.

Yet despite the recognition of governments that parents really matter, large numbers of parents still do not know what to do in practice to help their children succeed.

What the research says

The research evidence underpinning this argument is compelling. In terms of attainment, the benefits to children’s literacy are the most powerful. But there are studies showing benefits in maths and science too. Of all the things that parents can do which impact on pupil attainment, setting high expectations has the largest effect. Overall, researchers have shown that, once social and economic factors are removed – a difficult and complex task – parental engagement has a more significant impact on attainment than almost everything else.

The younger a child is, the stronger the impact. At age 5 it is some five times the impact of school. At 11 it is about the same strength as school. And in secondary phase its impact wanes somewhat although it remains significant.

It is in the home that the young learner picks up habits that will shape the way they behave throughout their life and hugely impact on their potential success at school. Three areas are particularly important – self-regulation, empathy and persistence. Without these habits, children are unlikely to achieve their full academic potential.

Parents (alongside teachers) have a key role here. They are shaping a young learner’s self-concept. Are they going to be the kind of child who gives up at the first sign of difficulty or the type that learns to relish challenge and see it as an essential part of becoming a more powerful learner? Are they going to be selfish and introspective or empathic and generous with their peers?

Parents can cultivate persistence in their children by, for example:
- Modelling and talking about it themselves: ‘I am finding the project I am doing at work really hard, but today I think I found someone who might be able to help me.’
- Not jumping in when their child gets stuck but instead offering support: ‘Have you asked Kate? Shall we look it up on the web? What does the book say?’
- Not always answering questions but responding with a question ‘How do you think you could solve this?’

School leaders must ensure that all teachers recognise that it is fundamental to their job that they see themselves, with parents, as co-educators. As soon as this symbiotic relationship is really understood an entirely different relationship can be developed.

Engaging with parents is a leadership issue and requires teachers to address two fundamental issues.

1. Mindset – School leaders must ensure that all teachers recognise that it is fundamental to their job that they see themselves, with parents, as co-educators.

2. Communication – Inform all parents what their children are being taught on a rolling one month or half-terminy basis, always suggesting two or three practical things parents could do to support their child’s learning. Rethink every aspect of parent communication – reports, homework diaries, letters home, website, parent evenings etc – so that they are designed to enlist parents’ support and use jargon-free, respectful language.

Steer clear of ‘edu-babble’

Other practical suggestions include:
- Lay on workshops for parents to explore ways of supporting their children at home and learning about how most effectively they can praise their child
- Regularly invite parents to observe and take part in lessons, especially for younger children
- Create a parents’ room full of useful resources about family learning
- Produce a map of useful local resources – libraries, museums, sports venues, historic sites etc – and display it in the school’s reception area.

What can schools do?

What can parents do?

Parent can do a number of important things to help. But the most important message for parents to hear is that it is what they do at home that matters most.

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The following approaches are most beneficial:
- Consistently set high expectations.
- Establish routines which promote questioning, reading, exploration, practising, problem-solving and study.
- Talk to children in ways which demonstrate interest in both their progress and development and the wider world.
- Read regularly yourself and talk about your own enjoyment of reading.
- Visits to museums, historic places, films, gardens, sporting events.
- Play the fullest possible range of games with the whole family and see the value of play as a vital part of learning.
- Praise your child in ways which specifically acknowledge the effort and hard work which has led to any particular success, partial success or failure.
- Require children to undertake household tasks and take responsibility for looking after other people (a younger sibling, a grandparent, a visitor, for example).
- Encourage children to learn to care for and look after the world (pets, plants, etc).

As Professor Carol Dweck says:

If parents want to give their children a gift, the best thing they can do is teach their children to love challenges, be intrigued by mistakes, enjoy effort and keep on learning. That way they will have a lifelong way to build and repair confidence.

Schools can play a critically important role in ensuring that they have good answers when a parent asks: ‘What can I do at home to support my child?’
Primary school children in the UK spend around 5–5½ hours in the classroom for 190 days a year; they are in the care of their parents/carers for the rest of the time. Common sense backs up the extensive research which says that children make the best progress when their school and families work well together.

Some schools find it hard to engage parents: parents may be too busy working; they may have had bad experiences of school and not want to come in; there may be a language or culture gap. In spite of all of these factors, many schools have found a way around the barriers – and those schools are generally highly regarded in their communities as well as being academically more successful. All of the schools in the Ofsted publication Twenty Outstanding Primary Schools – Excelling Against the Odds* have excellent home–school links and good relationships with the local community.

I work in a cheerful school on a council estate where there is a high level of unemployment and rural deprivation. Many of the parents came to the school themselves and didn’t have good experiences there. The general perception embedded in the school staff has historically been that the parents don’t care and are uninterested. The evidence they cite includes parents’ evenings which have been poorly attended; no-one has come to information talks for parents; many parents don’t listen to their children read or even look in their book bags; we didn’t have a PTA because we couldn’t interest the parents. Over the past 5 years, senior leaders in school have been battling to address this misconception, but it has been an uphill struggle.

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The insight moment came when we stopped looking at what the parents didn’t do, and started considering what they did do. They get the children to school, generally on time and mostly wearing uniform; school performances and class assemblies have always been well attended; class projects which involve making things (castles, space stations, etc.) have always been well supported; individual parents, often with children who have additional needs, have always been supportive. As part of our new way of looking at our community, we also started to think about what parents might like from the school, rather than what the school might like from the parents. Thus began our ‘charm offensive.’

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The single most successful thing we have done is to take the teachers and school leaders out into the playground before and after school. From our perspective we learn who our parents are, how they feel about the school, whether there are issues at home that impact on the children, and what’s going well for them. We are able to follow up informally with things we said we’d do, or to catch up with things that families agreed to do. The parents like us being out there because they find us more approachable and less intimidating. We also started to organise ‘family fun days’ at weekends where we booked coaches for trips to the seaside, to the theatre, to London. These are not school trips – the teachers have no responsibility for the children. The children are with their parents and the families share experiences that they wouldn’t otherwise be able to access.

Through these informal meetings with parents, we began to create interest in a PTA. Now our community links are blossoming: we’re listening to our parents, and they are beginning to listen to us. Now that the PTA is attracting parents into school through social events, they are beginning to come in for other events, too. For the first time, our parents’ evenings are well attended. We’re putting on information events (What is phonics? What do we do about headlice?) during the school day when parents are more able to come to them. Our nursery teacher has started to do home visits before the children join the nursery. We’re even getting parents volunteering to come in and help in the classroom.

Now that we’re working with our parents, we’re finding curriculum enrichment benefits as parents come and make presentations to the children: they’re coming in to share their cultural heritage through reading in their home language, explaining customs, involving children in art projects. We have working parents coming in to demonstrate their skills. We have parents offering to run after-school clubs. We’re also being invited out into the local community: will some of the children perform for the elderly? Will we help to celebrate the opening of a new shop, or attend the switching on of Christmas lights? Yes, of course we will!

Parental perception of these changes is interesting: they feel that we have become more approachable: they always wanted to help and to be involved in their children’s education but didn’t know how, and were afraid to ask. Is it coincidence that during the past couple of years, while we’ve been actively working with our parents, the academic standards in school are beginning to rise? It’s too soon to tell, but it’s a promising beginning!

*www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090170
Westerton is an unusually large primary school based in South Leeds. We currently have 734 pupils on roll most of whom come from supportive home backgrounds reflective of a mixed socio-economic community. The majority of housing is owner-occupied but we do have pockets of deprivation and there is a growing number of pupils who receive free school meals. We also have a growing percentage of ethnic minority pupils but this is still comparatively low.

Parent surveys indicate very high levels of satisfaction. We communicate well with parents and they have provided positive feedback about their relationships with school and the support they receive. We are fortunate to work with parents who are generally very keen to be involved in their children’s education and who appreciate the hard work of the staff and governors.

Transition is supported by an informal ‘Meet Your Child’s Next Teacher’ in July while September information talks (also available electronically) set out the curriculum and expectations for the year ahead. Electronic communication (about 30% of parents receive email newsletters) provides regular updates. Parent–teacher consultations involve pupils in three-way conversations and are consequently clear and productive. We use home–school diaries, reading logs and email to supply specific information to parents. We use texts to remind or alert parents. On a wider level our parent helpers and an active PTA group contribute significantly to school life.

Staff are approachable and fair in dealing with children and the head teacher is available in the yard every morning to parents. We run parental helping in school courses and have an active PTA group contribute significantly to school life.

For those parents who are less confident in engaging with school, our learning mentor and family support team work hard to help them feel more confident...

Case Study 1: Westerton Primary

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Staff are approachable and fair in dealing with children and the head teacher is available in the yard every morning to parents. We run parental helping in school courses and have an active link with the local college to promote NVQ courses for would–be teaching assistants. We have parent volunteers in every year group and many go on to work for us as teaching assistants. For those parents who are less confident in engaging with school, our learning mentor and family support team work hard to help them feel more confident through ‘Share’ workshops and family day experiences in the holidays. Our SENCO meets some parents on a half-termly basis to update them on their children’s progress and interventions are only initiated after consultations.

Top Tips

✔ Try to help parents plan ahead – for example, issue an annual calendar in the first week of the school year.

✔ Use a variety of communication methods to get the message out – pupil post is not always reliable – technology can really promote positive school life.

✔ Be consistent and fair when there are issues and follow up concerns so that parents are reassured.

✔ If you get it wrong, apologise – parents appreciate we are only human!

✔ Listen and reflect on feedback – turn it into positive actions.
Case Study 2: Working with parents

Will's mum had always been supportive and Will was a loving, hardworking child in Year 2, so his teacher was surprised to hear that comment. We have ‘How to Read with your Child at Home’ leaflets which we hand out each year; we offer some badly attended reading workshops for parents; teachers are always available to talk to at the end of the day. Will's mum had never approached his teacher to say she had a problem.

Unfortunately, Will’s reading attainment had plateaued for three terms, and we couldn't seem to move him forwards. His decoding was consistently accurate – at the level of books he was reading – but he had little understanding of the text.

The meeting between the teacher, Will's mother and me had been set up to see if we could agree a strategy to move Will on. This comment, 20 minutes into the meeting, changed the conversation. If Will's mum was unintentionally sending him negative messages about reading, was Will picking up on that feeling and losing interest himself?

The agreed action at the end of the meeting was that we would change Will onto a different reading scheme with fresh books and characters. The key aspect of this new scheme is that it has notes for parents on the inside front cover so that Will's mum would have a better idea about how she could help him.

For her part, Will's mum agreed that she would make reading with Will a special time each day after school, as well as agreeing to read to him every night at bedtime.

That meeting was key to our understanding of how we could help Will. Up until that point, we had been looking for reasons for Will's lack of progress, exploring the possibility of an underlying learning difficulty. But instead, we focused on building Will’s motivation and reading confidence. Almost immediately, we started seeing an improvement in his reading and within a term he had regained his enthusiasm and nearly caught up with the levels we predicted for him before he plateaued.

The whole experience with Will and his mum brought back to us the question of what we needed to do to engage our parents in their children’s learning in a way that they found helpful, rather than in one which we found expedient. We were lucky, in a way, that it was Will’s mum who brought this issue to our attention: she is articulate and recognises that we do our best for the children. If she was feeling this way about reading, how were other, often less well educated and less articulate, parents feeling? Our reading results are just below national average and we can’t seem to improve them. But the conversation with Will’s Mum may provide a way forwards for us. Perhaps it isn’t a matter of what we need to change in school, but of what we should change to support our parents to help their children at home?

Our next steps

- Talk to more parents: what kind of help and support would they appreciate?
- Find out from other schools what they have done to engage parents.
- Look at the National Literacy Trust Website. They have lots of competitions and ideas to engage families with reading.
- Make links with the local library. How can we work together with them?
- Create opportunities for bringing parents into school to share books with their children.
- Make more of our own school library.
- Look online at publishers’ websites. What do they have that might help our parents?
- Set up family reading challenges.
- Look more carefully at the reading books we send home. Can we ensure that the majority have notes to help parents?
- Build relationships with parents and ensure that we listen carefully to what they say.

*names have been changed.
Brimington Junior School is a three form entry junior school on the outskirts of Chesterfield. The school serves an area of high deprivation with two thirds of families in the area living in the 30% most deprived areas nationally. There is a high incidence of domestic violence and hospital admissions related to alcohol and substance misuse. Almost a quarter of young children live in households where no one is working. Many of those in employment are unskilled and low-waged. There are two feeder infant schools which serve quite different areas demographically. Significant efforts are put into ensuring transition operates smoothly and the children are confident about starting their new school.

One of the key aims of our school is to ‘Reach out to the Local Community.’ We are firmly of the belief that if learning is to be effective we have to work in close partnership with parents but we appreciate that we need a differentiated approach if we are to truly reach all our parent community, particularly our most hard-to-reach families.

Experience has shown that the traditional methods of engagement with parents are successful for most. These include open days, parents’ evening, performances, PFTA events as well as newsletters, parent texting services and progress reports. Through our curriculum we now link these events so that parents can use a visit to the school to gain information about a whole range of activities. These are published a year in advance so that parents have plenty of notice.

For our most hard-to-reach parents we have developed the Brimington Lead Community Teacher. This member of staff has time to visit parents at home, accompany them to appointments where necessary and to build a relationship with parents that starts to break down barriers to engagement. The scheme has been running for three years and has been very successful in starting to meet the needs of these families. There are no quick wins and often the academic and social impacts are felt way down the line. However, for the child and often the parent, the chance to have someone to talk to who can offer practical support is often the initial step they need to start to make changes and engage with other services.

**Case Study 3: Brimington Junior School**

If learning is to be effective we have to work in close partnership with parents, but we appreciate that we need a differentiated approach if we are to truly reach all our parent community.

**Top Tips**

✔ Start from where the parent is at.
✔ Keep the child at the heart of the discussion.
✔ Provide different types of opportunities for parents to engage with the school.
✔ Be open and transparent.
✔ Change your approach if it’s not working!

You can learn more about the Brimington Lead Community Teacher by scanning the QR code or visiting www.pearsonprimary.co.uk/blct
Learn at Home: supporting the home-school partnership

Carrie Longton, co-founder, Mumsnet

As a parent myself, I can relate to the parents out there who feel the need for more information about what happens in their children’s schools and how best they can go about helping and supporting them at home. I can also relate to those that just don’t know where to start. Sometimes it can feel like a real minefield! Saying that, here at Pearson we spend a lot of time in schools so we also understand the struggle you can face trying to engage some parents in the first place.

We have created Learn at Home to tackle the home-school partnership on both sides. We want to support parents in getting to grips with their children’s learning and development, and give them tips and advice on ways they can help at home. And we want to support schools with getting parents on board and actively involved in their children’s learning.

We’ve done this in the following way:

Free support for schools

Our online support bank contains free resources, information and tips for schools to use to engage and involve parents. There are letters for downloading and sending home to parents, information for adding to school websites or VLEs, ideas for parent evenings and more. You’ll also find an online version of this guide for sharing with staff and colleagues.

Free support for parents and carers

The Learn at Home FAQ bank contains answers to some of those frequently asked questions parents may have around choosing schools, supporting children at school, and even ways they can go about supporting their schools.

For answers to more specific questions around children’s learning and development, we’ve teamed up with Mumsnet, the UK’s most successful parenting website, to create Mumsnet Learning. It’s full of help and advice to support parents with their child’s learning at school. We cover topics like phonics, maths, reading, science and more, and as well as regularly updated educational articles, there are also videos, free eBooks and activities.

You can visit www.pearsonprimary.co.uk/learnathome to find out more about all of the above.

All the best,
Sarah

Sarah Warbrick, Head of Home Learning, Pearson

But we don’t do it like that at school!

Carrie Longton, co-founder, Mumsnet

If Mumsnet’s education talk forums are anything to go by this is a refrain echoing through the kitchens of Britain. It was Mumsnetters’ many problems navigating today’s primary topics that prompted us to create Mumsnet Learning in partnership with Pearson – experts in helping parents help their children at home.

Packed with answers to the crucial questions (What are phonics anyway? How do children learn times tables these days), the aim of Mumsnet Learning is to arm parents with school-savvy advice to help them – and their children – navigate the primary years.

And we wanted to empower Mumsnetters like SwallowedAfly (not her real name!) who posted:

Many of us don’t have a clue about phonics because we learnt a different way and need practical advice and guidance on how to support our child’s literacy learning. And if I feel like that as an educator and someone with post-graduate level education, then I think it’s clear that the vast majority of us need guidance.

We’ve also asked Mumsnetters and their children to put some of Pearson’s learning materials through their paces – and, happily, it’s not just the parents who give them the thumbs-up:

I particularly liked the writing sheet. I struggle to get DS [Mumsnet-speak for dear son] to practise any writing, but he liked that the sheet was really big and he could spread it out across the table.

- Aimster, Mumsnetter

As a mum of three myself, I know how hard it is to keep up with what’s happening in primary education. I’m delighted that we’re working with Pearson to make helping our children to learn less stressful and more fun for all. We hope Mumsnet Learning will continue to prove useful to schools, children and parents alike.

All the best,

Sarah
Select Bibliography

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